



The Relationship between Secondary Education and Civic Development: Results from Two Field Experiments with Inner City Minorities

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ABSTRACT

By and large, scholars of electoral behavior and civil society consider education to be the key predictor of civic participation. Indeed, civic education is held to be a fundamental institution of all deliberative democracies. Yet after decades of empirical research, we still know little about the causal mechanisms through which education fosters political participation, and more generally, "good American citizens."

Recently, scholars and educators have suggested that practical lessons about local politics and participation in extracurricular activities – collectively referred to as service learning – are the most promising educational tools for enhancing civic development (Niemi and Junn 1998, ch. 7; Galston 2001, 228-229; Carnegie and CIRCLE 2003, 6). I use two field experiments with inner city high school students to test whether these activities actually affect civic knowledge, attitudes and behavior. The primary advantage of an experimental approach is that it creates the conditions necessary for unbiased causal inference. Accordingly, my results speak to certain issues of cause and effect in civic education with greater certainty than previous research.

This study is additionally novel in the measures it uses to gauge civic engagement. Many scholars have characterized minority students as possessing less political knowledge and participating less in civic organizations than their white counterparts (Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1997, Niemi and Junn 1998, Lake et al. 2002). These findings may partially reflect the inability of researchers to measure a broad spectrum of extra-electoral behavior in urban areas. To test this hypothesis, I incorporate more comprehensive and culturally sensitive indicators of civic involvement than those used by prior research.

Contrary to the hopes of recent theorists, my findings show the effects of local service learning to be small and elusive. On the other hand, my refined measures of participation reveal some previously neglected, but potentially inspiring sources of civic engagement in the inner city. Only time and future experimentation will tell whether these popular activities represent a more successful means of mobilizing urban youth for political activism.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Civic Descriptions: comparisons between my students and those sampled for national studies of civic education bear out several conclusions. [Note: my sample included 260 non-magnet-program juniors and 207 non-magnet-program seniors at Long Beach Polytechnic High School].

- With regard to different types of civic knowledge, local politics is just as appealing to students in the inner city as it is to suburban and rural students. Subjects in my study knew more about local politics than they did about constitutional politics or contemporary politics. Nevertheless, my results suggest that blacks and Latinos in urban schools probably possess less civic knowledge than students of the same ethnicities nationwide.
- Inner city juniors and seniors are less tolerant of divergent opinions and less confident in their civic skills (i.e. public speaking, letter-writing) than students nationwide. To be sure, black students in my sample are more confident than other ethnicities about their participation skills and their families' influence in government. This finding may strengthen the prospects of black civic leadership in urban areas.
- While rates of traditional political behavior (voting, letter-writing, etc.) are very low in my sample, inner city minorities are engaged in other – less traditional, but still meaningful – forms of civic engagement. Specifically, my findings provide evidence of extensive civic ties and ethnic association in urban communities.
- Black students, in particular, possess the largest of these communal networks, maintaining an average of 9 out of 13 possible civic ties (i.e. relationships with family members, neighbors, coworkers, etc). Other ethnicities at Poly are also actively engaged in community life: white, Asian and Latino students each sustain approximately 8 civic ties, on average.
- As part of maintaining their civic ties, students' participation in and out of school provides additional evidence for active civic engagement in the inner city. Nearly two-thirds of adolescents sampled at Poly participate in student organizations. Half of these juniors and seniors are regular attendees, taking part in 9 or more club activities per year. Youth participation in the community is even more robust, despite very low levels of political involvement. Over 80% of Poly students take part in some community association or event during the academic year. Even more impressive, nearly 70% of this subgroup participates on a regular basis.
- Whether on campus or in the community, students in my sample tend to gravitate toward ethnic-oriented associations. The most frequented clubs in my surveys were Asian organizations (such as the "Chinese Club" and "South Asian Awareness"), black clubs (such as "Black Onyx" and "Young Black Scholars") and intercultural clubs (such as the "Human Relations Club" and "Interact"). Asian and black clubs also have the largest number of regular attendees.
- Similar to participation on campus, the most well-attended community organizations and activities are also ethnic-oriented or religious in nature. Of these, the most popular is involvement in a church, synagogue, mosque, temple or other religious institution. This is the only activity that a majority of students (55%) take part in at least once a year. Religious activities also draw the highest proportion

of regular attendees, with 21% of the sample participating 9 or more times annually.

- After religious activity, the most prevalent mode of community involvement is through cultural events and celebrations, particularly those with Asian and black themes. Like ethnic clubs at Poly, these activities also attract the largest number of regular participants (after religious events). The community associations least appealing to inner city students were political in nature; including volunteering for elected officials, neighborhood governance and even civil disobedience (i.e. protesting or boycotting).
- In addition, the ethno-religious participation described above is not entirely homogenous, providing some opportunity for interaction among students with different backgrounds and beliefs. For example, 20-30% of students who participate in single-ethnicity organizations, whether at school or in the community, are from a different ethnic group than that advertised by the association.
- Thus, in one sense, it does not matter if students are ill-prepared for political activism, if we are concerned only with the vibrancy of civic communitarianism in America's inner cities. I am sure this observation comes as no relief to scholars who are committed to mobilizing marginalized youth for political action. To this group of researchers, I offer my experimental results below. These unbiased estimates provide some indication of how effective civic interventions need to be in order to successfully empower urban youth.

EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS: JUNIORS

- When we examine changes in club participation over the academic year – i.e. posttest participation minus pretest participation – it is clear that my treatments (letters of invitation to join school clubs) were successful. At the end of the year, treatment juniors reported increased involvement in 5 out of 6 club categories: business clubs, speech/debate clubs, ethnic-oriented clubs, general service clubs and all clubs combined. The control group's attendance in each of these categories decreased on the posttest survey. [Note: Two-stage least-squares regressions using assignment to the treatment group as an instrumental variable were conducted in order to control for self-selection biases related to incomplete contact rates. In other words, I used certain statistical procedures to control for the fact that students who are easy to mobilize for club-going may also be more apt to engage in civic behaviors such as letter-writing.]
- In sum, the effects of club participation and related community service appear to be small and elusive in an urban milieu. With regard to civic knowledge and attitudes, the most generous confidence intervals suggest that 5 more attendances in Poly clubs will result in one more question answered correctly on my 9-item civics exam, and a half-point increase in political understanding (measured on a 4-point scale). Moreover, the only statistically significant effects observed in my experiment with juniors were a 7-10% increase in letter-writing to the media and a quarter-point increase in attention to news, on scale of 1-4 ($p < 0.05$, one-tailed tests). One would expect a similar proportion (5%) of my findings to be significant due to random chance alone. In addition, a third (8/25) of my treatment effects were not even in the expected direction (i.e. they were negative).
- It appears that practicing democratic governance in popular student clubs, and to a smaller extent, working on "real world" problems through community service, do not significantly enhance civic

development in inner city youth. Recent findings by Markus (et al. 1993), Niemi (et al. 1999, 2000), and Morgan (et al. 2001) may only apply to affluent students; or perhaps they pertain to different types of clubs with more frequent attendance. Theoretically, "activities in school government or school clubs develop communications and organizational skills [for] later political activity (Verba et al. 1995, 425)." At Poly, these skills are being applied to social situations first. And, because there is no shortage of social events for teenagers, the value added by club participation is minimal.

EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS: SENIORS

- Findings from my experiment with seniors cast doubt on other recent recommendations for strengthening civic education in high schools (Niemi and Junn 1998, 150-154). These proposals call for a greater emphasis on local politics and neighborhood involvement to increase political interest, efficacy and knowledge in American adolescents. Furthermore, related research on civic development suggests that these lessons should be delivered to students via practical, hands-on training for specific political behaviors (Verba et al. 1995, Ceaser and McGuinn 1998). In the jargon of this literature, curricular interventions would directly transmit civic skills and resources to budding political participants.
- My second experiment provided a 1-hour seminar to randomly-selected inner city seniors that demonstrated in detail how they could register to vote, research ballot issues and candidates, cast their ballots, contact local representatives, participate in collective action, and get involved in neighborhood organizations. Besides participating in several role-plays and filling out practice forms, treatment students received a 24-page packet entitled "The Insider's Guide to Getting Informed and Getting Involved in Long Beach." My findings reveal no statistically significant relationship between these lessons and subsequent changes in civic knowledge, attitudes or behavior.
- With regard to civic knowledge and attitudes, the most generous confidence intervals suggest that practical seminars about local politics can result in 1 more question answered correctly on a 9-item civics exam, and a half-point increase in civic tolerance (measured on a scale of 1 to 4). Furthermore, the only statistically significant effects observed in my experiment with seniors were a 7% increase in letter-writing to the media and a 3-4 hour increase in community service ($p < 0.05$, two-tailed tests). As before, one would expect a similar proportion (5%) of findings to be significant due to random chance alone. Moreover, 42% (14/33) of my treatment effects were not even in the expected direction (i.e. they were negative).
- Voter Turnout. As of February 3, 2003, all 207 seniors in my study were at least 18 years old. County records show that 16 out of 112 control seniors (14.3%) and 17 out of 95 treatment seniors (17.9%) had registered to vote by this date. This 3.6% difference in registration rates is not statistically significant (χ^2 , $df=1$, $p=.480$). In addition, 5 control seniors (4.5%) and 2 treatment seniors (2.1%) voted in the November 5, 2002 midterm election (χ^2 , $df=1$, $p=.349$). No students in my sample voted in the March 5, 2002 primary election, the April 9, 2002 local election, or the June 4, 2002 local runoff election.
- It is ironic that my lessons about local involvement prompted treatment students to register but not to vote. This finding supports recent research by Huang and Shields (2000) and Briens and Grofman (1999, 2001). These scholars suggest that registration is not as significant a barrier to voting as

many consider it to be, especially in the inner city.

- A poignant outcome of my second experiment is the fact that treatment students spent more time volunteering in their communities, but continued to steer clear of political activity. This trend bolsters recent findings that American teens will gladly engage in civic activity as long as that participation is apolitical (Niemi et al. 2000, Lake et al. 2002).
- The educational message conveyed by my findings is clear: exposure to practical civics lessons is not enough. When explaining their “exposure-selection-retention” model of civic learning, Niemi and Junn (1998, 55) argue that students are more likely to select certain kinds of information for retention. Specifically, they contend that a greater emphasis on local politics and neighborhood involvement in government courses will result in more retention of civic knowledge; and subsequently, higher political interest and participation (Niemi and Junn 1998, 150-154). Results from my second experiment provide some indication of how substantial this emphasis needs to be if educators hope to bolster civic development in the inner city.
- Akin to the difference between club participation and actual political involvement, there remains a large distinction between learning how to contact a representative and actually picking up the phone. Being exposed to practical information about government is probably a necessary, but insufficient step towards political engagement. Students may need to apply their lessons in the field before we can expect any significant improvements in civic development. Of course, this is just one more untested assumption that needs to be rigorously evaluated. The only way researchers will ever convincingly answer the question of what works in civic education will be to collect more experimental evidence.

CONCLUSIONS

- Regardless of what intervention a researcher chooses to study, it is important to remember that field experiments offer the best method for accumulating unbiased evidence in civic education. My study, however limited in scope, represents an initial step towards more rigorous evaluation of educational initiatives. Although some may find my results disheartening, I do not. On the contrary, I view this research as part of a scientific process of elimination towards “what works” in urban classrooms, whether our goal is political activism or extra-electoral involvement.
- Although future experiments may prove certain kinds of civic interventions to be effective, we will likely need to consider other, more meaningful forms of mobilization if we hope to spark a political renaissance in our inner cities. Civic development in the ghetto is beset by obstacles more significant than boring lesson-plans – a reality any educator can attest to. Among other problems, structural impediments like socio-economic segregation and a narrowing distribution of income will need to be addressed before we can discern any real gains in urban empowerment. Inner city Long Beach is rich in social capital – the challenge remains for us to translate this civic engagement into political activism. America’s future as a representative democracy depends on it.

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