

Civic Education and the Voting Behavior of
College Students

by
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The Political Behavior of Young People
Final Paper

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Young people are not voting. Vast majorities of college kids aged 18-25 are not even registered to vote. This phenomenon can be seen across the United States, with many college kids taking a back seat when it comes to signing up for and casting their ballot in local, regional, and national elections. This was not always the case. When young people first received the right to vote, they took advantage of it. Yet each subsequent year, except for the 1992 election, voter registration and turnout declined. It was not until the 2004 election that a slight increase could be seen. There are several compounding factors that caused this drop, with the absence of civic education in today's college curriculum being the biggest causation. Conventional history shows that throughout the 1960's and early 1970's there was a strong presence of civic education in the curriculum of colleges. Unfortunately, this existence deteriorated over the subsequent years. Not until late 2002 was there a push for civic education to be re-introduced to America's core curriculum, when President Bush enacted three new initiatives supporting the teaching of civic education in America's schools.

Throughout the following paper, I will examine civic education's role on college-aged people's voting behavior. I look at civic education under the context of it being a class or part of a curriculum that requires a college student to pay attention to government, politics, and/or national issues in various ways. I then look at that young person's voting behavior as whether or not official state records would say that he/she is registered to vote. If he/she is registered, I then look if he/she voted in the 2000 presidential election. With this information, I examine several cross tabulations to see if having civic education does lead to higher rates of voter participation of college kids.

Central Questions

The question I am examining, at large, is quite broad. Attempting to find a conclusion as to why college kids do not vote at higher numbers is very complex. There are numerous variables that compound to produce this answer, many of which cannot be tabulated for evidence. The range of answers as to why a young person does not vote is equally difficult to look at and produce a single conclusion. Yet, it is my belief that there are only a few particular underpinnings in why college-aged kids do not vote. Once we establish what these basic reasons for not voting are, I believe that we can formulate a plan to combat the negative, and make it into a positive element that will promote college kids to vote. Once this is done, any person concerned with the topic of youth voting will be able to direct their forces to one particular area, instead of having a trail-and-error way about figuring out what causes young people to not vote. In this paper I seek to find whether or not civic education is one of those underpinnings, and later, discuss actions that could be taken based on my results.

Civic education is one of the bases as to why a college-aged person does or does not vote. I have come to this conclusion by looking at the data and explanations given by college kids as to why they do not vote, and seeing that their answers were rooted in their lack of knowledge and understanding of the realm of civics. Furthermore, after looking at the declining rates of young people voting in elections, I fully believe there is a correlation between the declining rate of voting and the lack of civic education being taught in schools. Giving attention to this question in particular is important to see how America can help foster young people to take part in elections. If it is found that more civic education leads to higher voting records, then an increased amount of education should be put into our schools. Yet, if it is found that current civic education does not lead to more voting participation, there should be a reevaluation as to

how America is teaching civics, and what needs to change to get the desired outcomes. Both of these findings could also lead to studies on the different reasons as to why civic education is effective or ineffective. It is this initial analysis that will help and set a base for why one must look and see if civic education is effective in getting college-aged kids to vote.

Thus far, there has been little to no conclusive evidence about this correlation. Throughout the semester it could be seen that there is a minute amount of information and research about how civic education relates to voting specifically. There is a good amount of research done on the correlation between civic education and civic participation, but that seems to be the extent of it. Moreover, civic education seems to be the gateway to both civic participation and political participation. When college aged kids become aware of what is going on and what they can do in both of those realms, being civically educated, they are much more likely to take action, possibly by voting. This is another reason as to why the correlation between civic education and college-aged people's voting behavior is so vital to establish.

Most of the other articles and surveys that were looked at did nothing more than scratch the surface of the questions I was looking for. It seems as though my analysis is the first to explicitly ask any questions that are related to civic education in school, with there being a difference of mandatory civic education and voluntary civic education. This is an element that has been left out of the numerous other surveys and articles that we came across throughout the semester. In each one we looked at, there was no clarifying question to separate those who had done something voluntarily or if they had done it because it was required. This was usually most pertinent to the questions that involved civic or political participation. All asked if a young person had participated, but none sought out to see if this participation was forced or not. My intention is then to differentiate this for my analysis. I seek to separate whether or not mandatory

civic education is effective in getting college kids to register and vote. It is important to see if the increasing attention to having mandatory civic education is a worthwhile cause, or if young people who take civic education and who vote are the sole ones who are taking it voluntarily.

Hypothesis

It is this information that has allowed me to come up with my hypothesis for the correlation between civic education and the voting behavior of college-aged kids. I believe that young people who have civic education in college will register and vote at higher rates than those whom do not have any civic education in their curriculum. Furthermore, young people who voluntarily take a civic education class, those whom do not take the class as a mandatory part of their curriculum, will register and vote at the highest levels. I explained previously how I defined both civic education and voting participation to be, and use those same definitions to elicit my hypothesis. I am confident that this correlation is true based on previous statistics and articles that were read for class. More specifically, how civic participation has been shown numerous times in the past as a way to gauge young people's likelihood to vote; the more they participate, the more they will vote. More over, people who participate politically, by doing such actions as volunteering for a campaign or signing a petition, are also more likely to vote. As mentioned before, both civic and political participation are heavily related to having civic education. Thus, it can be inferred that since more civic participation results from more civic education, it will be true that more civic education will lead to more voter participation.

Relating to this, people who take civic education classes voluntarily will participate at the highest levels for their self-selecting processes. The people who choose to take a civics course will already have a disposition to participating, especially when it came to an action such as voting in an election. These people will have a tendency to want to learn more about the

government, the nation, etc..., and will then be more informed and able to make a decision in casting a ballot. This notion is slightly contrary for those whom take a civic class only as a requirement. These college kids will generally not have an interest in learning about those same things, and will thus be less likely to vote than those who take the class voluntarily. Yet, some of the kids who take the class as a requirement will potentially become interested enough in civics to start voting on a regular basis. Within their classes, they may form opinions about our nation and government that were previously absent from their lives, and to express those opinions, they may vote. Thus, the college kids who have no civic education at all, whether mandatory or not, will not have the opportunity to become aware of their beliefs, and will then have less of a reason to vote.

Methodology

To test and examine my hypothesis, I will be using specific survey questions from The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: National Youth Survey of Civic Engagement 2002. This survey was conducted between January 29 and February 25, 2002. There were 1,166 participants between the ages of 15-25, whom were chosen as a random sample. I use this survey because the questions asked in it best match the questions I asked. Like previously mentioned, not one of the surveys that we looked at addressed much in the realm of civic education, and did not differentiate mandatory and voluntary happenings. This was the first survey that I came across to explicitly ask college students about their history of civic education and whether or not it was mandatory. On the same lines, I look whether or not those college students are registered or not to vote. Many times, this is the only question asked surrounding this subject. There is rarely, if ever, a question on if a student exercised his/her right to vote. The Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey actually does ask this question, allowing a

further analysis to see if those kids who are registered do in fact go out and cast their ballot. This survey went further than any previous one, allowing my analysis to be much more in depth and fully encompassing in finding a conclusion for my hypothesis.

The sample of people who participated in the survey was an additional reason why I picked it. All of the respondents were between the ages of 15-25, which is considered to be a 'young person'. Furthermore, this survey differentiated between the different subsets of these young people, including people in high school, college, etc... For my analysis, I focus solely on the college-aged subset for a few reasons. The first was that they are still able to receive civic education. This group of people is the most likely to take a civic education course, whether it is voluntary or not. All those young people who are out of college are the least inclined to take a course, considering they are done with school. Those who are in high school, although are likely to take a civics course, are most likely unable to vote. Thus, there would be no analysis that I could make from the given data.

The questions I will be focusing on for my analysis are straightforward to my hypothesis. There are a total of five questions used, producing a total of six cross-tabulations. As explained previously, the dependent variable involves voting, while the independent variable for my analysis deals with civic education. I use two specific questions for the dependent variable. The first is VP1, which asks, "many are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around often. Would official state records show that you: (a)Are now registered to vote in your precinct or election district, (b)Are *not* now registered to vote in your precinct or election district, (c)Don't know what records would show". This question is specific to whether or not a college person is registered to vote. The second question I used for this variable gets more in-depth for my analysis. Instead of just seeing if the college kid is registered, this question goes on to see if

they took part in the election. There is a large difference between being registered and actually going out to cast your vote. This is question VP2 and it asks, “in the 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore: (a)Did you vote, (b)Did you *not* vote, (c)Or can’t you recall whether you voted?, (d)Not eligible to vote”.

The first independent variable question I use is C6 and asks, “do any of your classes require you to keep up with politics or government, either by reading the newspaper, watching TV, or going onto the Internet? (a)Yes, (b)No, (c)Don’t Know”. The second question used is C3 and asks, “Last year, or while you were in college, did you have any courses that required you to pay attention to government, politics, or national issues? (a)Yes, (b)No, (c)Not in school last year”. Both of these questions relate to civic education in college. I included both these questions to get the largest portion of respondents to analyze, along with distinguishing between two different ways to have civic education in college, it being part of a curriculum and it being a class. The third question I use is C4 and asks, “Were any of these courses required for graduation? (a)Yes, (b)No, (c)Don’t Know”. This question goes off of C3, and is the question that will allow me to analyze if young people who voluntarily take civic education classes vote more than those who take it as a requirement.

Analysis and Results

The following are the cross tabulations for each of the questions from the survey. Every independent variable was cross tabulated with each dependent variable. The program used to analyze each of the cross tabulations was SPSS.

**Table 1:
If classes had a civic education component and whether or not the college person is
registered to vote.**

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decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

This table shows that 61.7% of those who had a required civic education component of their education were also registered to vote. This is opposed to the 27.7% who did not have civic education are not registered to vote. There is also the 54.5% percent who did not have any education, yet are still registered, and 25.9% who did have a mandatory civic education component and are not registered. Also, there is a large percent of people who do not know if they are registered, with 12.3% having some education and 17.7% having no education.

**Table 2:
If class was a mandatory civic course and whether or not that college person is registered to
vote.**

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Table 2 shows that when young people had civic education courses, 50.3% were registered to vote while 21.5% of them were not registered. When those same young people did not have a course, 50.7% were still registered while 33.3% were not registered. Again, a fairly large percent were not sure if they were registered, with 18.2% having civic education and 16.0% no having any education.

Table 3:
If a civic education course was required for graduation and whether or not the college person is registered to vote.

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It is shown here that 56.5% of those who had a required course were registered while 68.2% did not have it as a mandatory requirement and were still registered. 26.1% who had a required civic class were not registered while only 4.5% of those who had a civic course that was not required were not registered. Still, there was still a high percent who did not know what records showed, with 17.4% having a requirement and 27.3% having no requirement.

Table 4:
If classes had a civic education component and whether or not the college person voted in the 2000 election.

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Table 4 shows the statistics of only those who are registered to vote. 81.3% of those young people who had a civic education component did vote, while 74.5% of those who did not have a component also voted. When these college kids did not vote, 16.7% had a civic education component while 24.5% had no component.

Table 5:
If class was a mandatory civic course and whether or not that college person voted in the 2000 election.

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It can be seen here that when a young person had a class that required civic education, 77.9% of them voted versus 76.6% of young people who voted but did not have a civic education course. 22.1% did not vote who had a course, while 20.3% of college kids who did not vote did not have a class.

Table 6:
If a civic education course was required for graduation and whether or not the college person voted in the 2000 election.

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Table 6 provides an analysis of the people who had civic courses, whether or not they were required and whether they voted. 92.9% of young people who did not have a required course did vote, while 78.7% of those who voted also had required civic education. Only 7.1% did not vote who did not have required education, which is a contrast to the 21.3% who did have civic education, yet did not vote.

From my results, I will accept my hypothesis. On the whole my analysis shows that when a college-aged person has civic education, that person is more likely to be registered and vote. In addition, my analysis supports the second part of my hypothesis, that when a young person takes

civic education voluntarily, and not as a requirement, he/she will be the most likely to be registered and vote. In both table 1 and 2, it can be seen that when a young person had civic education, he/she was more likely to be registered to vote. The opposite is also true, that when a person had no civic education, they were less likely to be registered to vote. Table 3 also supports my original hypothesis by showing that when a person takes civic education courses voluntarily, he/she is more likely to be registered to vote than if that same person was forced to take civic education as a requirement. It is also interesting to note the results of the other variable, if the young person did not recall if he/she was registered. In table 1, 2, and 3 there were fairly high percentages of people who could not recall, no matter if they did or did not have any civic education curriculum. Tables 4, 5, and 6 only included only those who responded that they were registered to vote in question VP1. In tables 4 and 5 my hypothesis held to be true further by showing that those who did have civic education not only registered, but also actually cast their ballot. In table 4 the opposite is again true, where those who did not have civic education were more likely to vote than those who did not vote but did have some type of education. Now, table 5 goes slightly against my hypothesis. In this table it is shown that there was a higher percentage of respondents who had civic education and did not vote than those who did not vote but did not have civic education also. In table 6, the percentages were extremely correlated to my hypothesis, and were extremely high when it came to those who voted. For the young people who took a civics course voluntarily, there were astonishingly high percentages of young people that also voted. There was also a large percent that voted but were required to take civics. In this table the opposite was true again, with the percent of people who did not vote and who were required to take a class being greater than those who did not vote, yet voluntarily had civic education. In all, I feel as though my hypothesis has been confirmed through the above

cross tabulations, with the 'did not vote' results in table 5.

The results of this analysis strongly suggests that when a college aged person has civic education included in their curriculum, they will be more likely to register to vote and actually cast their ballot. As discussed above, in each table dealing with civic education and registration it can be seen that the percentages of people who voted when they had civics and who did not vote when they did not have civics, were larger than their opposite analysis. This pattern does suggest that a young person's voting behavior is influenced by the presence of civic education in their curriculum. Whether it was mandatory or not, this pattern still held true. Furthermore, the same higher percentages were seen when civics was voluntarily taken, suggesting that people who already have an interest in this field will go further to also be the one's casing their vote. This is logical, considering the predisposition that many of the voluntary college kids will have, thus making them want to vote without being prompted first by a mandatory civic education curriculum. On the reverse, this fact helps to establish the notion that these people are a separate group who are already primed to go out and vote, and are not the young people who should be targeted by other's to become registered and vote. Despite this, the differences between the percentages of each separate group of people, was not very different. On average, the percentages only differed by around 10%. This does still suggest civic education is effective, yet it also does show that it may not be as effective as many people would like to believe.

When it came to looking at whether or not young people actually went out and voted, the results were a slightly different story. Although they were all supportive of my hypothesis, there was a discrepancy in table 5, where the percent of people who had civic education and did not vote was higher than those who did not have civic education and did not vote. In theory this goes against my hypothesis, although there is only a 2% difference between the results. It does

seem to suggest that in this case there was not a positive correlation between civic education and increased college kid voter participation. Although, this result in table 5 was the only one that did not match the others. Despite this, the percentages of people who voted and had some type of civic education was much higher than the previous three tables, again showing that when a college-aged person has civic education, they will go out and vote. One reason for this could possibly be that when a person is exposed to civic education they are able to learn about the problems and issues that they may unknowingly be involved in. This new knowledge may allow them to form opinions, resulting in their want to vote and express those opinions. Looking at those whom took civic education voluntarily, it is not surprising to see that they voted at the highest levels of anyone. As stated previously, these are the people who are already interested in the realm of civics, which includes political participation. Thus, it makes sense that they almost voted at a rate of 100%. Even those who took civic education as a requirement, voted at the very high levels compared to the other statistics.

On an additional note, there was one surprising statistic concerning those whom did not recall if they were registered. I initially thought these percentages would be almost zero, but as can be seen, that is not the case. This was especially surprising for those who took civic education courses, yet did not remember if they were registered. Those whom did not have any civic education and did not remember are relatively self-explanatory, as they have nothing to allow them to care or remember for one way or another. Yet, it may be that those who did not remember yet had some civics, were those that were completely forced and had no interest in the subject at all. These may be kids who had their civic education go in one ear and out the other. These also may be young people who, because of their civic education, know the importance of voting, yet were too embarrassed to admit that they were not registered. In essence, it may have

served as a scapegoat to those who had some sort of voter efficacy, yet did nothing about when they knew they should have.

Conclusion

I feel confident in the support that the results and analysis have provided to confirm my hypothesis. For the most part, each element of the survey fit with what I wanted to look at, such as being all young people, and provided me with a basis to calculate the cross tabulations. Although, there were a few elements that could have been tweaked to better suit the exact outcome I was looking for. Concerning the survey itself, the sample size was a little small. Although it started off as a large number, the questions I chose to include in my analysis pushed the number of respondents down considerably. In some cases, there were only 61 total people for an entire cross tabulation, which is not an adequate size of a general populace. It can give a general idea, but the lower number allows there to be less of a chance the correlation is always true. In addition, some of the wordings of the questions were slightly restrictive. The first was VP1. This question asked if one was registered in his/her precinct. This is restrictive for those who are in college, because they may be registered in the opposite place of where they are living. Some may have assumed this meant their precinct at home or at their school, which if they were living in one and registered in the other, may have caused them to answer no. This would have negatively impacted the results, giving lower percentages. C6 was the other question that was limiting. This question asked if people's civic education component came from either the Internet, watching TV, or reading the newspaper. This question basically cuts out all other ways for a person to get civic education, such as attending lectures, reading civic-related magazines, etc... If it had not been limited to these three facets I do believe there would have been a larger percent of people who said yes, resulting in better results for the rest of the cross-tabulations. All

of these could have possibly yielded higher percentage rate differences between the results. If there had been more than 8% differences between some of the results, possibly as a result from changing the above about the survey, the support for proving my hypothesis would have been stronger.

In this paper I have shown that civic education leads to a higher percent of college-aged people registering to vote and actually casting a ballot. Furthermore, the analysis provided suggests that those young people who optionally have civic education will be the ones who register and vote at the highest rates. Having this information allows an argument to be made that there needs to be an increased amount of civic education in schools. The correlation that civic education, mandatory or not, has with having people register and vote more, suggests that civic education does influence the voting behavior of a college person in a positive way without doubt. To primarily focus on increasing this percentage of people, there needs to be additional research on what is effective in civic education on the topic of getting people to register and vote. There is a need for more focused and concise civic education of voting, as can be seen by the relatively high percentages of people who had civic education, yet were still not registered to vote. In addition, there should be a push for mandatory civic education in colleges across the nation. Since the positive correlation between civic education and voting is seen here, it would be beneficial for the nation to support the increased education of future citizens in the realm of voting. This would allow for a nation of people who are aware of the choices they make, and who have opinions about those choices. This would increase the voter turnout rate of college-aged people tremendously, hopefully ending the current trend of young people not voting.