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Required civics courses, civics exams, and voter turnout[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Despite attempts at using civic education to increase the civic engagement of young people, education policy is slow to adopt the recommendations of research and great variation exists within the United States in how schools deliver civics instruction. We hypothesize that when states make civics requirements more uniform and demanding, statewide civic participation among young people increases. Using state-level data about civic education requirements and voter registration and turnout from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), we find no evidence that a mandated civics course increases registration or turnout, but we do find a positive relationship between having a state-mandated civics exam and both registration and turnout among young people. We conclude that accountability policies could make a difference in the delivery of civic education at the state level.

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1. Introduction

The presidential election of 2016 in the United States took many by surprise. Despite winning a majority in the popular vote and numerous reputable polls forecasting an election victory up until the last week of the campaign (Bomey, 2016), political veteran Hillary Clinton lost the Electoral College vote to political newcomer Donald Trump, an outcome that not only shed light on political cleavages in the U.S. but also reminded Americans of the importance of political opinion within each of the fifty states in determining the winner of presidential elections. According to exit polls conducted by a consortium of news organizations, young people were Clinton's strongest supporters. Among 18 to 29-year-olds, Clinton received 18% more votes than Trump, a difference twice that of her lead among 30 to 44-year-olds. For voters 45 and older, Trump was the more

popular candidate (Huang, Jacoby, Strickland, & Lai, 2016). Had more young people turned out to vote in states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, or Wisconsin, the Electoral College vote might have gone the other way.

States vary widely in their patterns of voter turnout. In Colorado, Maine, and Oregon, for example, young adults have voted in the last four midterm elections at rates of 30% or more. In those same four elections, turnout among young voters in Texas, West Virginia, and New Jersey never exceeded 22%. In each of these cases, older voters turned out in much higher numbers: over 60% in Colorado, Maine, and Oregon and about 40% in Texas, West Virginia, and New Jersey. Among these six states, two gaps are apparent. One is the gap between older and younger voters, a topic that has received considerable attention in the literature on voter behavior not only in the U.S. but in other countries as well (Bouza, 2014; Esser & De Vreese, 2007). The other is the gap between states that previous scholarship has argued reflects differences in state culture and policy (Leighley & Nagler, 2013).

The age gap in voter turnout is often attributed to differences in stage of life. Voting is correlated with home ownership, marriage, parenthood, geographic stability, and

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professional status – all characteristics that become more likely with age (Galston, 2001). The young are less likely than their older counterparts to possess the resources required to learn about an election, make decisions about candidates, and get to the polls (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). They may also be less familiar with how voting works (McDonald, 2009). Finally, young people may be more geographically mobile and thus less familiar with the procedures and candidates in their new communities each time they move (McDonald, 2008). As individuals progress into new stages of life, voting becomes more likely, and once someone votes for the first time, suggests Plutzer (2002), the inertia of personal habits can take over and he or she may become a voter for life. Other scholars have likewise found evidence for the importance of an individual's first vote (Gerber, Green, & Shachar, 2003; Geys, 2006).

Of all these factors that influence civic participation, civic knowledge may be one over which policymakers have the most control. Such is the philosophy among several organizations working to boost civic knowledge, and, by extension, civic participation, among the young. The Center for Civic Education and iCivics both offer free instructional materials to educators and students that are designed to develop deeper understandings of citizenship and civic participation (see Blevins & LeCompte, 2016). The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) maintains state and national databases of civics instruction and voter turnout. The Joe Foss Institute is best known for its involvement in the movement to adopt the U.S. civics test taken by applicants for citizenship as a requirement for high school graduation, an idea that caught on in Arizona and North Dakota at the start of 2015 and in eleven more states since then (Zubrzycki, 2016). Using tests to boost knowledge remains controversial and the leadership of iCivics has criticized the strategy (Wong, 2015). Tests also imply a model in which the teacher imparts knowledge rather than making the student an active participant, an experience that may be important to the development of engaged citizens (Haste, 2010).

That testing requirements alter the behaviors of schools, teachers, and students has been well established by studies that show both benefits (Dee & Jacob, 2011; Hanushek & Raymond, 2005) and costs (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Jacob, 2005). In this study, we examine state policies for civics education and the accompanying differences in voter turnout and registration. The manuscript proceeds as follows: we begin with a review of the literature on civics education and then describe our research design and results. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of those results.

2. Previous research

This review of the literature on civic education and voting is organized into four parts. The first addresses theoretical explanations for the age gap in voter turnout. We go on to discuss education's possible effect on that gap. The discussion then proceeds to address studies of civics education programs. Finally, we zoom in on the matter of states' civic education policies and young voter turnout.

2.1. Voting and the course of life

Adolescence may be a crucial time for inspiring people to value civic participation. While a longitudinal study by Prior (2010) found that interest in politics is relatively stable during adulthood, adolescence is a period during which such interest can increase substantially (Levy, Journell, He, & Towns, 2015; Neundorf, Smets, & García-Albacete, 2013).

Multiple theoretical constructs support the notion that personal development resulting from maturation and life experiences in adolescence and early adulthood influence civic engagement. Erikson's (1994) theory of psychosocial development describes crises occurring at each stage of life including the formation of identity during the period of adolescence. One potential outcome of successful navigation of this period is an understanding of the possible roles one could play in society, including civic matters. Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory emphasizes self-efficacy resulting from external experiences. In Kohlberg's (1976) theory of moral development, the individual gradually develops the capacity to make decisions in morally ambiguous situations, such as those found in many political issues. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory suggests that the multiple layers of context in a person's life and the ways in which they interact with each other affect the development of the individual's engagement with his or her surroundings. From this perspective, schools can be microsystems of citizenship as students engage with their peers and authority figures (Torney-Purta, Barber, & Wilkenfeld, 2007).

Wilkenfeld, Lauckhardt, and Torney-Purta (2010) argue that each of these theories points to self-efficacy as an important factor in shaping an individual's voting habits. Additionally, sociopolitical theory from Watts, Armstrong, Cartman, and Guessous (2008) argues that at each stage of development, the individual achieves a deeper awareness of inequality and oppression in society and moves closer to the decision to act in response to it. The effect of social analysis on one's own social action, according to the theory, increases when self-efficacy and capacity to act increase (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). The transition from youth to adult, therefore, may indeed be the ideal time to absorb the lessons that will inspire a life of civic engagement (Malin, Ballard, & Damon, 2015).

2.2. Education and civic participation

Early researchers were skeptical of the existence of any connection between civic education and political socialization (Langton & Jennings, 1968). Decades later, scholars have found substantial evidence of a link between education and civic participation. For example, a student's educational path is related to his or her later political ideas and behaviors, as found by Hoskins, Janmaat, Han, and Muijs (2016) in their mixed-methods study of graduates from different educational tracks in Germany and England. In both countries, the students enrolled in the less competitive academic tracks were less likely to demonstrate civic engagement. Another study found that adding civic education into the school curriculum increases students' intentions to vote (Berson, Rodríguez-Campos, Walker-

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