

Strengthening Democracy by Increasing Youth Political Knowledge and Engagement

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Abstract

Even though the United States had historically high voter turnout in 2008 and 2012, there remains troubling patterns pertaining to political engagement and knowledge among its least educated youth. The literature and theory suggests that if the United States educational systems increase the amount of civic education courses, extracurricular activity, and youth volunteering opportunities in high schools, especially among the most disadvantaged youth, it will lead to an increase in political knowledge and engagement. I test this idea with data from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) post-2012 election youth survey. The CIRCLE data set looks at 4,483 cases and takes 511 variables into account. Tentative results show that civic education does have an effect on varying demographics, including different racial and ethnic groups, along with those with low socioeconomic statuses as well. These results confirm that civic education enhances democratic values most dramatically among more disadvantaged groups.

Introduction

Even though the United States had reached historically high voter turnout in 2008 and 2012, there remains undesirable numbers pertaining to political engagement and knowledge among its citizens. The problem with this is that in order for the US democracy to operate at its full potential, it has to have an engaged citizenry. Increasing civic knowledge and engagement among youth voters will result in the presence of a stronger democracy. In order to increase knowledge and engagement, the United States has to start by expanding civics education courses in its educational system, including classes, volunteering opportunities, and increasing extracurricular participation within its high schools. We must also address the socioeconomic issues that magnify the engagement discrepancies.

There are four parts that that affect civic knowledge and engagement among youth. The first part I look at is how civic education is defined. There are a variety of sub fields that fit into civics, and there are different ways to interpret this concept. The second part that I look at is volunteering and extracurricular involvement. Research has been done to see if volunteering and extracurricular activities affect civic engagement, and I will critically examine that research. The third part that I believe effects civic engagement is socioeconomic status. The last part that I will examine includes looking at political socialization.

Literature Review

Defining Civic Education

In the past decade schools have increased their focus on the STEM programs; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. With a technologically advancing society, it is believed that programs such as these are important in developing the workforce (Godsay, 2012). These types of programs, however, fail to address the consequences of leaving out classes such

as civics, which include American government, US history, and other social studies classes as well.

What is civics education? First, civics education is meant to develop three fundamentals of democratic citizenship. These include civic disposition, knowledge, and skills (IFES, 2014). Civic disposition involves citizens developing confidence in order to participate civically and becoming civically engaged. It helps citizens better understand their roles in government and the rights and responsibilities they have as a citizen of a democratic system. It also helps them to become open and tolerant when exercising their rights and responsibilities (IFES, 2014). The second fundamental is civic knowledge. This means that citizens understand their political context, social and economic rights, and political and civil rights (IEFS, 2014). The third fundamental is civic skills. This means that, by developing their skills, citizens are gaining the ability to evaluate, analyze, explain, defend a position, interact and understand political outcomes (IEFS, 2014).

Together, these 3 fundamentals accomplish five results. First, they develop confidence in participation in civic life and they increase engagement in the political process. They allow for the acceptance of rights and responsibilities of a citizen in a democracy. The fundamentals achieved include knowing social, economic, and political rights. Students would be able to participate informatively in the political process (IFES, 2014). To avoid a decline of democracy, developing these three fundamentals through education is necessary (Boundless, November 2014).

Research by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) shows key educational policies on a state by state basis (CIRCLE, 2014). They found a substantial variation in civic education requirements and assessments by state (CIRCLE, 2014).

Some states required three credits of high school social studies for graduation, some require five, while others do not require these classes at all (CIRCLE, 2014). As education policies involved with civic education continue to vary, the basic civic knowledge will continue to change while skills for a competent democracy will continue to decline (Hart, 2001).

Volunteering and Extracurricular Involvement

Community service can have a variety of meanings for different people and participation occurs for many reasons. Some are forced into it while others have experienced the benefits of volunteering. Service-learning has been shown to be important in developing a more politically aware and active participant in civic duties (Hart, 2007). If an individual is participating in community service, they are becoming involved in political issues rather than going about it abstractly (Hart, 2007). Hart's 2007 study shows that community service and extracurricular activities lead to an increase in voting and volunteering among adults.

Extracurricular activities develop skills in public speaking, influencing others, holding meetings and writing formal documents (Hart, 2007). They also help develop a better understanding of and relationships with people from various backgrounds. They help engage people in discussions with adults that can act as mentors or role models. These are types of studies and skills that increase the likelihood of civic engagement (Hart, 2007).

Socioeconomic Status and Political Socialization

I also examine how socioeconomic issues that relate to political socialization effect participation rates among American youth. Examining the issues that come with low socioeconomic status (SES) will lead to showing how low SES negatively affects educational opportunities, and how that leads to inequalities in representation. Lastly, I look at the

importance of increasing the representation of disadvantaged groups and how civics education leads to disproportionate gains in participation rates among disadvantaged groups.

SES measures a combination of education, income and occupation (APA, 2014). If an individual has low educational attainment, low income, is unemployed, or working at a low paying job, their SES is low. Research indicates that children from low SES households and communities develop academic skills more slowly and have lower educational attainment than those who come from high SES groups (APA, 2014). SES affects places of education as well. Schools within areas of low SES have minimal resources, which negatively impacts students' progress in academia. Those students are at higher risks of dropout or obtaining low educational attainment, and maintaining low SES (APA, 2014).

Those with low SES face more inequalities than those with high SES. Those that are more privileged have more resources and are more able to become politically engaged. According to Brad, Verba, and Schlozman's (1995) research on looking beyond SES, they analyzed four resources. They included time, money, civic skills, along with SES as resources that drive political participation. Using the resource model, (Brady et al, 1995) found that these activities affect participation in that an increase in one, such as time, will increase participation. I theorize that individuals who have ordinary changes in their lives, such as an increase in free time, will likely raise their political participation.

Addressing SES issues is necessary in order to mobilize disadvantaged populations, including racial minorities, or those from different ethnic backgrounds. It is important to note what attempts have been made to mobilize these groups and how civics education helps increase their participation rates.

Understanding that low SES negatively affects disadvantaged groups is important. This understanding shows the need for increasing civics education can lead to positive outcomes, such as increasing their representation and increases their participation rates, which in turn strengthens democracy.

By addressing these issues and increasing civic knowledge and engagement, it will make the political socialization process more beneficial. I will discuss what the political socialization process is and its primary agents for political transmission. Then, it will discuss how important family transmission is for the socialization process, followed by showing that increasing civics education along with socialization factors increases participation rates.

Political socialization is "the learning of social patterns corresponding to social positions as mediated through various agencies of society (Dudley & Gitelson, 2002)". The primary agents of this process include family/parents, schools, and peer groups. Family is the first agent, which includes parents, siblings, grandparents and extended family members. These are the agents that teach a child what they need to know through teaching and learning a variety of ideas, (Boundless, July 2014). Schools are the next agent in the socialization process. While in school, children develop a sense of understanding of how the system works by using teamwork, books or going on a set schedule (Boundless, July 2014). Last are peer groups. These groups include people from around the same age, who share the same interests, and typically share a similar social status (Boundless, July 2014). Socialization through peer groups is analogous to the family socialization process, but their views and socialization occurs from their peers.

Looking at the concept of family transmission will help to understand the importance of political socialization in increasing civic knowledge. Intergenerational transmission is "the movement, passage, or exchange of some good or service between one generation and another

(Jennings, 2009)". In this case, the transmission of political views and how they shape the political socialization process. Research shows that parents/guardians that are more consistent with the transmission of their political beliefs and attitudes to children will come from more politicized family environments (Jennings, 2009). Active transmission of political beliefs is positively viewed because families with high SES will be more capable of obtaining this than those with low SES. Therefore, increasing civic engagement and participation in more disadvantaged groups will increase participation and will increase the quality of socialization through family transmission.

Summary

The socialization of civic engagement through family transmission strongly correlates with having a civically engaged head of household. The process is carried out more efficiently if the parent/guardian who is politically knowledgeable and engaged themselves. Youth that come out of high SES families are more likely to experience success in the transmission process than those that come from low SES families.

Increasing civics education among disadvantaged groups increases their participation rates. It will also decrease the inequalities among disadvantaged groups, and increase their opportunity and capability of becoming politically engaged. Through the rise of political participation, communities with low SES can improve the quality of education and the amount of resources available to them. And from this, it will result in better representation from elected officials, allowing for proper representation of their interests and views.

Increasing the opportunities that school-aged youth have to become involved in their communities through service learning projects and community service options will add to their socialization process, ultimately increasing the rates of civic participation. Those that come from

low SES families and do not experience the full potential of family transmission socialization, they can learn from their peers. And those who have civics courses in high school and an increased opportunity to become involved in their communities will be more likely to become civically engaged and knowledgeable than those without the same opportunities.

I have made it clear that it is important to increase civics education in the US education system. Previously I have only looked at a comparison of three variables, two of which include if the respondent voted and if they took a civics course. Just because a young person has voted does not necessarily mean that they know what they are voting on or how the voting process works. I believe that in a comparison of individuals, those that participated in more class activities within their civics courses in high school will be more likely to become an informed voter than those that did not take part in as many activities.

Throughout my analysis, I look at a generalized civics course, yet there is more to it. Earlier in the paper, I mentioned that some states may not require civics credits and some require six credits. These can be different forms of civics courses as well, such as US history, US politics, or classes that require community service projects. Those that have more classes that expand on these different topics will be more knowledgeable than those that go to schools that in states that don't require such courses. Further, disadvantaged groups will benefit more than advantaged groups from having different fundamentals within civics education.

Methods and Analysis

Hypothesis I

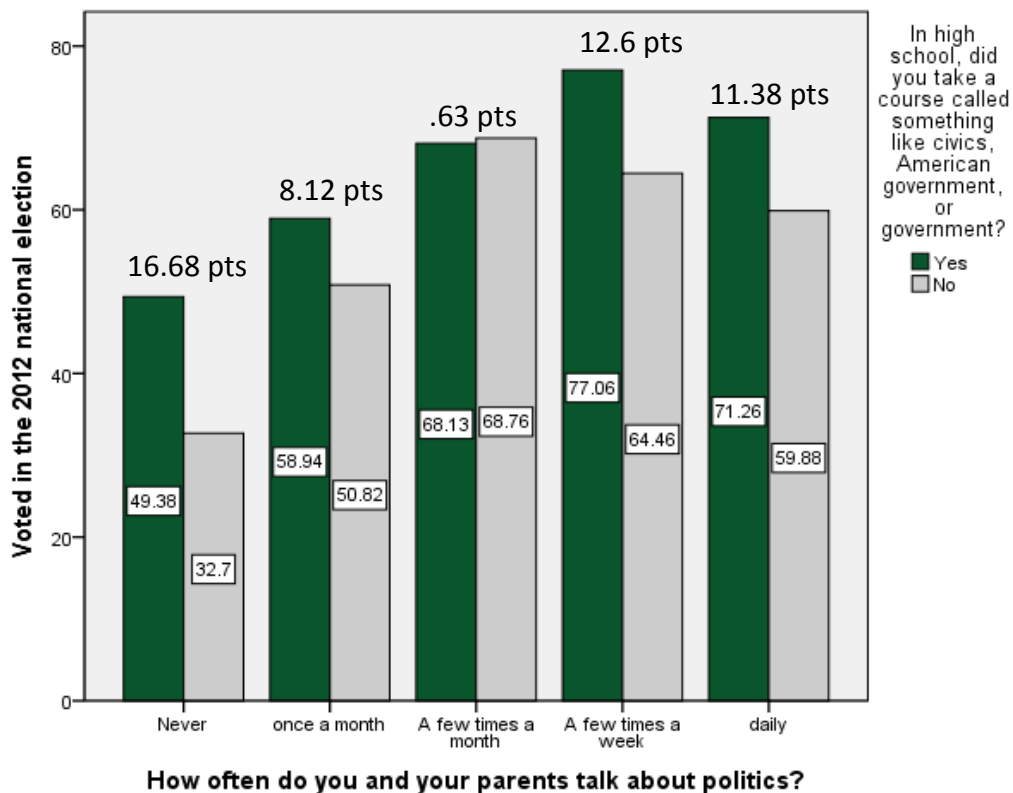
Looking at factors that increase civic engagement, the socialization process has been an area of focus that has caught my attention the most, after looking at disadvantaged groups. From the literature, I developed the following hypothesis: in a comparison of individuals, those that do

not discuss politics with their parents often will be more likely to benefit from having a civics course in high school than those individuals that discuss politics with their family.

Figure 1 compares the independent variable of how often respondents discussed politics with their family. The dependent variable looks at the respondents that did vote in the 2012 national election. The graph controls this comparison by looking at those respondents that did or did not have a civics course in high school.

Looking at the results, I found that those who never talked about politics were more likely to vote if they had a civics course than those that did not. The results also show that those that talk about politics more with their parents are more likely to become civically engaged than those that do not discuss politics.

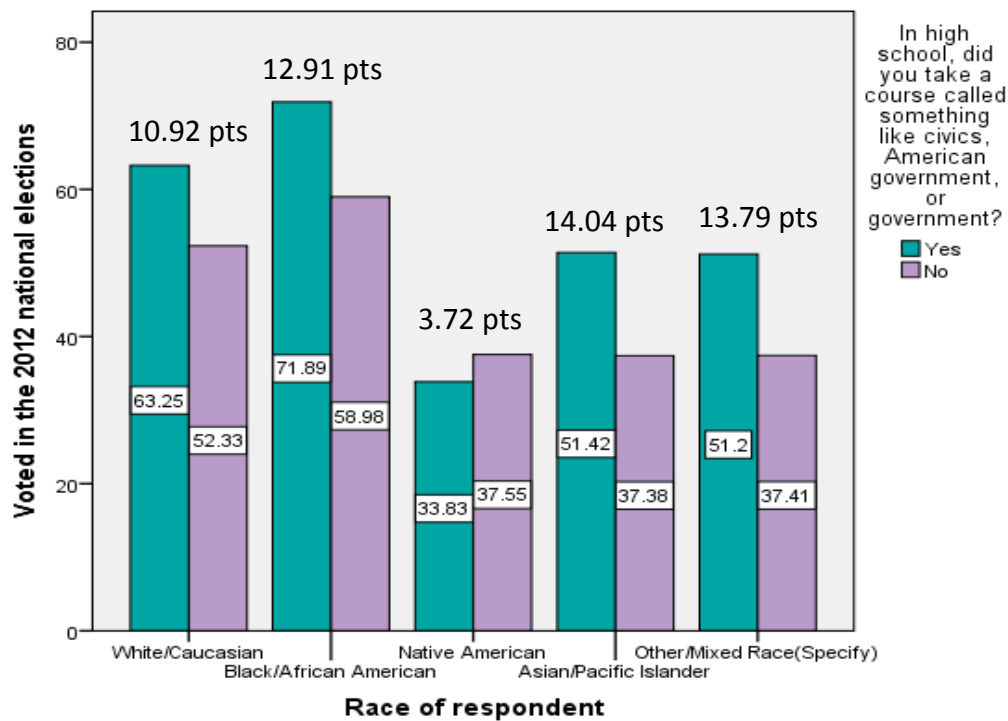
Figure 1: A comparison of those that voted in the 2012 national election, how often they discussed politics with their parents/guardians, and civics courses



Hypothesis II

The next hypothesis I analyzed looked at a comparison between civics education, likelihood of voting and respondents race. My hypothesis states that in a comparison of individuals, those who are disadvantaged are more likely to benefit from civics education than those who are more advantaged. Figure 1 shows this comparison. The dependent variable looks at how many respondents voted in the 2012 national election. The independent variable is the respondent's race, while the control variable looks at whether respondents had a civics education course in high school or not.

Figure 2: A comparison of individuals that voted in the 2012 national elections based on respondents race and if they took a civics education course in high school



What I found was expected, with the more disadvantaged races benefiting more from civics education than those who are less disadvantaged White/Caucasian only differed by

10.92% between those that did and did not have a civics course in high school. Black/African differed by 12.91%, Asian/Pacific Islander differed by 14.04%, and other/Mixed race differed by 13.41%.

What I found the most interesting was the difference between Native American respondents. The other groups had higher percentages in those that did have a civics education course and lower percentages in those that did not have civics education. Native American respondents had lower percentages in the yes category and higher percentages in the no category. Upon further research, I first noticed that they only had a total of 86 respondents. All of the other races had well over 100 respondents each.

Hypothesis III

While researching civics education and its effects on civic participation, I developed the following hypothesis: in a comparison of individuals, those that participated in extracurricular activities are more likely to become civically engaged than those that did not participate in extracurricular activities. Also, those that did not participate in extracurricular activities but had a civics course in high school were more likely to become civically engaged than those that did not have the civics course in high school.

Table 1 shows the cross tabulation between the independent variable, which looked at how many of the respondents participated in organized groups or clubs at school. The dependent variable shows how many of the respondents voted in the national election in 2012. The control variable asked the respondents if they took a civics course in high school or not.

The Chi-Square for yes is significant while the Chi-Square for no is not significant. This means that if it is significant, that the relationship between the independent and dependent variable did not happen by chance. Because the relationship between the dependent and

independent variable for no is not significant, shows that the relationship happened by chance, providing little predictive power. The Cramer’s V for yes shows a weak relationship between the independent and dependent variable. Cramer’s V for no shows a weak relationship between the two variables as well.

Looking at those that were in at least 1 group and took a civics course in high school, 60.2% of the respondents voted in the 2012 national elections. Looking at the same group and those that did not take a civics course in high school, only 42.9% of the respondents in the category voted. As group participation goes up, the wider the gap between those that took a civics course and those that did not, gets. Also, looking at all the categories, it can be seen that group participation has an effect on voting. Those individuals that did not take a civics course but did vote, saw an increase in voting as group participation went up

Table 1: Cross tabulation between Voting and Civics Course and Level of Group Participation

Did you take a civics course in high school?			How many groups did you participate in during high school					
			1 group	2 groups	4-5 groups	6-9 groups	10 or more groups	Total
Yes	Did you vote in the 2012 National Election?	Yes	203 60.2%	276 64.5%	255 76.8%	76 78.4%	16 66.7%	826 67.8%
		No	134 39.8%	152 235.5%	77 23.3%	21 21.6%	8 33.3%	392 32.2%
	Total		337 100.0%	428 100.0%	332 100.0%	97 100.0%	24 100.0%	1218 100.0%
No	Did you vote in the 2012 National Election?	Yes	21 42.9%	50 59.5%	25 61.0%	9 69.3%	3 75.0%	108 56.5%
		No	28 57.1%	34 40.5%	16 39.0%	4 30.8%	1 25.0%	83 43.5%
	Total		49 100.0%	84 100.0%	41 100.0%	13 100.0%	4 100.0%	191 100.0%
Total	Did you vote in the 2012 National Election?	Yes	224 58.0%	326 63.7%	280 75.1%	85 77.3%	19 67.9%	934 66.3%
		No	162 42.0%	186 36.3%	93 24.9%	25 22.7%	9 32.1%	475 33.7%
	Total		386 100.0%	512 100.0%	373 100.0%	110 100.0%	28 100.0%	1409 100.0%

Chi-Square: [YES-Value] 28.287 [Approx. Sig.] .000
 [NO- Value] 5.773 [Approx. Sig.] .217
 Cramer’s V: [YES- Value] .151 [YES - Approx. Sig.] .000
 [NO – value] .174 [NO – Approx. Sig.] .217

Hypothesis IV

There is more to simply taking a civics course in high school. This leads to the development of the following hypothesis: those that had a variety of aspect in their civics courses in high school are more likely to become an informed voter than those students that did not have the same variety. From this, I developed an independent variable that, when compared to how informed voters are, shows the importance of having a variety of activities within the civics education courses. Such aspects includes discussing current events, teachers encouraging discussion on different political views, researching different social, political, or community issues, participating in community service projects, or following the news in order to stay aware of politics and the government.

I then used the dependent variable called informed voting, which looks at a section of questions that tested the knowledge of respondents based on the voting process. If they did not get any of the 6 questions right, they received a 0, if they got one right, they received a 1, two right and they received a 2, and so on. Table 2 shows the results from this cross tabulation.

Looking at the Chi-Square for these two variables, it shows that the cross tabulation is significant, as it was reported at .000. This means that the relationship between the dependent and independent variables did not happen by chance. Lambda shows that the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable is weak because it is less than .1, and provides little predictive leverage between the two variables. Cramer's V is a weak relationship as well. If the relationship is weak, it means that the findings are likely to happen by chance.

Looking at table 2, the data shows higher numbers in the 4-6 questions answered right and 4-6 different class activities, with lower numbers in the 0-3 questions answered right and 1-4 class activities. Looking at the results, it can be shown that respondents that answered more

questions right had more class activities when they took civics in high school. This is helpful in showing the importance of different types of activities within a civics course that increases civic knowledge.

Table 2: Informed voting and class activities cross tabulation

		Class activities						Total
		One activity	Two activity	Three activity	Four activity	Five activity	Six activity	
Informed voting	0 questions	16 13.1%	18 10.7%	22 8.6%	21 4.8%	28 4.3%	12 3.4%	117 5.9%
	1 question	14 11.5%	19 11.2%	22 8.6%	59 13.5%	74 11.4%	30 8.5%	218 11.0%
	2 questions	21 17.2%	31 18.3%	51 19.9%	68 15.5%	86 13.2%	57 16.2%	314 15.8%
	3 questions	23 18.9%	28 16.6%	48 18.8%	85 19.4%	123 18.9%	53 15.1%	360 18.1%
	4 questions	20 16.4%	31 18.3%	55 21.5%	72 16.4%	122 18.8%	76 21.7%	376 18.9%
	5 questions	20 16.4%	28 16.6%	32 12.5%	83 18.9%	137 21.1%	76 21.7%	376 18.9%
	6 questions	8 6.6%	14 8.3%	26 10.2%	50 11.4%	80 12.3%	47 13.4%	225 1.3%
Total	122 100.0%	169 100.0%	256 100.0%	438 100.0%	650 100.0%	351 100.0%	1986 100.0%	

Chi-Square: [Value] 62.320 [Approx. Sig.] .000

Lambda: [Value] .011 [Approx. Sig.] .174

Cramer's V: [Value] .079 [Approx. Sig.] .000

Hypothesis V

The last hypothesis that I analyze states the following: in a comparison of individuals, those that are among minority races will be more likely to become informed voters from having a variety of activities within their civics curriculum than others among majority races.

Measuring this hypothesis, my dependent variable is informed voting and my independent variable is class activities. The control variable is the race of the respondent including White/Caucasian, Black/African American, and Hispanic.

Table 3: **Informed voting, respondents race, and class activities cross tabulation**

Respondents race			Class activities					
			1 activity	2 activities	3 activities	4 activities	5 activities	6 activities
Black/ African American	Informed	0 correct	4	5	4	8	6	4
			14.3%	12.2%	5.9%	6.9%	4.1%	4.5%
	correct	1-2	5	10	21	31	24	25
		3-4	13	20	29	45	66	34
		5-6	6	6	14	32	49	26
			21.4%	14.6%	20.6%	27.6%	33.8%	29.2%
		Total	28	41	68	116	145	89
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%		
White/ Caucasian	Informed	0 correct	11	11	15	9	18	5
			16.2%	11.1%	9.4%	3.8%	4.7%	2.5%
	correct	1-2	19	29	42	65	100	47
		3-4	20	28	65	82	131	71
		5-6	18	31	37	82	137	76
			26.5%	31.3%	23.3%	34.5%	35.5%	38.2%
		Total	68	99	159	238	386	199
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%		
Hispanic	Informed	0 correct	1	1	3	5	4	4
			4.0%	3.7%	11.1%	5.9%	3.5%	6.6%
	correct	1-2	11	10	10	31	37	14
		3-4	9	11	8	30	45	23
		5-6	4	5	6	19	29	20
			16.0%	18.5%	22.2%	22.4%	25.2%	32.8%
		Total	25	27	27	85	115	61
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%		

Chi-Square:

Black/African American [Value] 32.560 [Approx. Sig.] .342
White/ Caucasian [Value] 60.680 [Approx. Sig.] .001
Hispanic [Value] 28.396 [Approx. Sig.] .549

Lambda:

Black/African American [Value] .018 [Approx. Sig.] .561
White/Caucasian [Value] .002 [Approx. Sig.] .070
Hispanic [Value] .065 [Approx. Sig.] .043

Cramer's V:

Black/African American [Value] .259 [Approx. Sig.] .342
White/Caucasian [Value] .230 [Approx. Sig.] .001
Hispanic [Value] .288 [Approx. Sig.] .549

Looking at table 3, I found that among the three races, as class activities increased the more questions the respondents answered correctly. However, looking at the Chi-Square for each race shows if the relationship between the independent and dependent variable is significant. The number reported, at .001, shows that it is significant, meaning that it did not occur by chance.

The other two races Chi-Square show that there is not statistical significance and that the

relationships have occurred by chance. The Lambda scores show a weak relationships among all three races, which provides little predictive leverage between the independent and dependent variables. Looking at Hispanic, however, shows the strongest relationship of the three.

Conclusion

Civics education has a significant impact on increasing the likelihood of voting by filling in areas of school-aged youth that have disadvantages that keep them from becoming politically informed and engaged. I found that, after doing the necessary research and examining data, there are a variety of ways to increase civic knowledge and engagement.

I found that those that are more advantaged compared to their peers, that they see little effect in increasing civic education in the US education system. It is those that are disadvantaged, those that have little resources or come from low SES backgrounds that benefit the most from increasing civics education. Those that are seen as disadvantaged youth, and are participating in different civic activities at their school, may benefit by becoming more politically informed. I cannot, however, say that this is the only cause that disadvantaged youth become politically informed. In order to do so, more research would need to be carried out. If the US government were to begin to focus more on increases in civics courses in the education system, it would increase turnout rates, ultimately leading to the strengthening of democracy.

I can say, that those that have less resources while growing up and don't experience family transmission of political views, will benefit more than those that do have such resources. These disadvantaged youth can gain civic knowledge and become more involved if there is other ways to go through the political socialization process. In order to increase the civically engaged and knowledgeable American youth, all factors must be addressed, including increases civics education, volunteering opportunities and extracurricular participation within the United States

high school education system. And not only that, but we must address socioeconomic issues that magnify engagement discrepancies to increase civic engagement among American youth.

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