

Citizenship Education and Political Interest: Is there a Connection?

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SUMMARY

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Introduction

Research suggests that young people know less about politics and participate less intensively than their parents and grandparents did when they had the same age (Putnam, 2000; Zukin et al., 2006). Citizenship education projects try to make adolescents more knowledgeable and participation-oriented in preparing them to take up their role as active citizens in society. There are few studies available, however, that confirm that civic education efforts are successful in this regard. Some skeptics have even argued that citizenship education might alienate young people from politics, instead of kindling their interest in the topic (Markus et al., 1993; Murphy, 2007). In most educational systems, the explicit goal of citizenship education is to promote political and civic engagement among young people (Torney-Purta, 2001; IDEA 2004). However, we also know that political interest is a crucial variable in determining levels of political participation: it is almost tautological to claim that those who

are interested in politics will also be more inclined to participate in political life (Verba, Scholzman & Brady, 1995). Hence it becomes important to determine the exact relation between citizenship education and political interest.

Can citizenship education be expected to boost political interest, and thus also the likelihood of civic and political engagement, or is it the case, as a more skeptical view would have it, that citizenship education cannot make all that much difference, since the likelihood of participation is largely determined by pre-existing levels of political interest among young people. We also know that there are strong and structural differences in political interest, e.g., with regard to gender. If citizenship education efforts do not succeed in reducing these differences, citizenship education might just lead to a reproduction of already existing inequalities among the youth population (Schmid, 2003).

In this chapter, we test these assumptions about the role of political interest by distinguishing variations in the causal reasoning about citizenship education and political interest. Can we expect that citizenship education projects actually boost political interest, and thus indirectly also participation? Or should we expect rather that, once political interest is given, citizenship education will no longer have an independent effect on political participation?

(...)

Data & Methods

The analyses presented in this paper are based on the McGill Youth Survey (MYS) conducted in 2005 and 2006 (Stolle et al., 2006) of 3,334 16 or 17-year olds (10th and 11th grade) in 81 schools. These were located in seven matched cities of different sizes in the two largest Canadian provinces, Quebec and Ontario. The response rate for schools was only 54 percent, as several schools declined to participate; despite this, the MYS data provide a representative sample of high school students in the two provinces.

The analysis proceeds in two steps: first, we look at the effects of citizenship education on political interest; then we assess the effect of citizenship education on political knowledge and political participation, controlling for political interest.

Variables included in the model

As dependent variables, we focus on three different possible outcomes of citizenship education. First *political knowledge* is measured by including three questions on knowledge of politics in Canada and generally. The questions proved to form a reliable knowledge scale (see appendix II). To measure *intended future participation* we used the factor scores for conventional future intended participation (See appendix I). Intended future participation seems a good dependent variable in our quest to investigate whether citizenship education or only individual level characteristics like interest stimulate students to go to the polling booth in later life. The final dependent variable in our analysis is political interest itself. To operationalize this latent concept we use one question allowing respondents to indicate how interested they were in public issues and politics (see Appendix III).

An overview of all three dependent variables can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Dependent Variables in the Analysis

<i>Variable</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>
Political Knowledge	.48	.53	.46	.46	.51
Intention Participation	.00	.18	-.10	-.09	.11
Political Interest	.46	.47	.45	.46	.46
N	3246	1174	2057	1803	1432

Entries are scale means. Source: MYS 2006.

Among independent variables we are concerned in particular with those that indicate direct, indirect and mixed efforts at citizenship education. The extent of direct efforts at citizenship education at school was operationalized in the number of topics discussed during citizenship education classes. On the indirect side we use the factor scores reflecting the social and the affective school environment. These factor scores are derived from items assessing the school climate, an indicator used in other citizenship education studies getting at indirect efforts of citizenship education (Torney-Purta, 2002). To make mixed citizenship education efforts operational, community service is used. These indicators are all measured at the individual student level. In the regression analysis that follows, various individual characteristics that in earlier research have been shown to affect political knowledge and/or participation are included.

The first such explanatory variable is gender. In previous research it has been shown that boys perform better on political knowledge tests than girls, and that there is a clear gender bias in (intended) political participation (Verba et al., 1995; Hooghe and Stolle, 2004). In addition,

we also expect that the socio-economic status (SES) of the individual has an effect on his/her propensity to acquire political information or to participate in political life. While in surveys among adults, questions about family income can be used to assess the socio-economic status of the family, this is not the case in research among adolescents. (In this survey 38 per cent of all respondents could or would not indicate their family's income.) In line with earlier research (Torney-Purta et al., 2001) we therefore opted to include an estimation of the number of books in the home as a proxy variable for the SES of the home environment (Wößmann and Peterson, 2007). Because adolescents who regularly watch television news are known to have higher levels of political knowledge than those who do not, the variable watching television news is also taken into account (Hooghe, 2002).

Finally we include two variables that are intended to measure the most important parental and peer influences: if parents regularly discuss politics with their children, it can be assumed that this will contribute to their political knowledge and intention to participate. In the same way we assume that if respondents regularly discuss politics with their friends and peers, this too can strengthen their levels of political knowledge and participation (Niemi and Junn, 1998; Hillygus, 2005). All the independent variables are listed in Appendix III.

Results: Regression

We begin thus with political interest (Table 2). The model looks impressive, with an explained variance (R^2) of .38. It should be noted, however, that most of the variance indeed is explained by family and peer group variables: those who often discuss politics with their friends are more interested in politics and public life. Still, school experiences do show a significant relation with political interest, especially when it comes to the direct form of citizenship education (i.e., classes about politics). Interestingly, although it has long been taken for granted that there are significant gender differences with regard to political interest, in this model, we do not observe any significant differences between women and men in our sample.

Table 2. Explaining Political Interest

	<i>Political Interest</i>	
	B (SE)	Beta
(Constant)	-.061 (.017)	
Gender	.003 (.009)	.005
SES	.052 (.017)	.046**
Discussing Politics with Peers	.396 (.020)	.317***
Discussing Politics with Parents	.218 (.018)	.193***
Watching News on Television	.318 (.017)	.290***
Community Service	.013 (.012)	.016
Classes about Politics	.078 (.018)	.068***
Social School Environment	-.001 (.004)	-.004
Affective School environment	.004 (.004)	.013
R²		.38

*p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01 ***p < 0.001

This first model confirms that political interest is a variable that should be included when considering the effects of citizenship education. But the causal reasoning about the relationship among citizenship education, interest, knowledge and participation is still unclear. Could it be that the expectation of citizenship education to stimulate knowledge or future participatory acts is too ambitious? To investigate this we need to look into more complex models that take these into account. In table three we present a series of regression analyses, both with and without the political interest variable on the independent side of the spectrum.

Table 3. Explaining Knowledge and Intention to Participate

	Political Knowledge				Future Intended Participation			
	Model I		Model II		Model I		Model II	
	B (SE)	Beta	B (SE)	Beta	B (SE)	Beta	B (SE)	Beta
(Constant)	.097 (.022)		.112 (.022)		-1.041 (.066)		-.964 (.062)	
Gender	.045 (.012)	.068***	.043 (.012)	.066***	.195 (.035)	.098***	.193 (.033)	.097***
SES	.075 (.023)	.059**	.065 (.023)	.051**	.196 (.069)	.051**	.124 (.065)	.032
Discussing Politics with Peers	.138 (.027)	.099***	.043 (.028)	.030	1.246 (.080)	.293***	.724 (.080)	.170***
Discussing Politics with Parents	.119 (.024)	.094***	.066 (.025)	.052**	.257 (.072)	.067***	-.023 (.070)	-.006
Watching News on Television	.222 (.023)	.181***	.145 (.024)	.118***	.353 (.067)	.095***	-.069 (.067)	-.019
Interest in Politics			.245 (.024)	.218***			1.313 (.069)	.386***
Community Service	.090 (.016)	.100***	.088 (.016)	.098***	.118 (.047)	.043*	.098 (.045)	.036*
Classes about Politics	.099 (.024)	.077***	.077 (.023)	.060**	.127 (.070)	.032	.037 (.067)	.010
Social School Environment	-.004 (.006)	-.012	-.004 (.006)	-.013	-.079 (.017)	-.079***	-.075 (.016)	-.075***
Affective School environment	.022 (.006)	.066***	.021 (.006)	.064***	-.041 (.017)	-.041*	-.049 (.016)	-.048**
R²	.13		.16		.17		.26	

OLS Regression. *p< 0.05 ** p<0.01 ***p<0.001

Looking at both models we can see that the political interest variable explains a large part of the total variance of the model. We see moreover that other single level variables (the parental and peer characteristics) appear to be ‘taking over’ this variance in the analyses when the political interest variable is not included. This result serves to emphasize the importance of individual level variables, including the interest variable, in citizenship education research. Furthermore, in the knowledge models there seems to be a shift of the variance in interest toward the citizenship education measure ‘classes about politics’ in the model that includes the interest variable. To assess this claim in further detail, in Table 4 we introduce an interaction effect between classes about politics and political interest in the political knowledge model. As we can see, the interaction effect between interest and classes about politics proves insignificant. Hence the shift of the variance in interest to the citizenship education measure ‘classes about politics’ cannot be substantiated.

Table 4. Explaining the Interaction of Classes about Politics and Political Interest

	Political Knowledge		
	B	Std. Error	Beta
(Constant)	,125	,026	
Gender	,043	,012	,065***
SES	,065	,023	,051**
Discussing Politics with Peers	,041	,028	,029
Discussing Politics with Parents	,067	,025	,053**
Watching News on Television	,146	,024	,119***
Interest in Politics	,211	,043	,188***
Community Service	,088	,016	,097***
Social School Environment	-,004	,006	-,013
Affective School environment	,021	,006	,063***
Classes about Politics	,045	,041	,035
Classes about Politics * Political Interest	,070	,073	,046
R²		.16	

OLS Regression. *p< 0.05 ** p<0.01 ***p<0.001

Overall, thus, the regression analyses lead us to conclude that political interest is an important but not predominant variable in citizenship education models, since other single level indicators seem to do the trick as well.

Conclusion and Discussion

At a time when education systems place more emphasis on citizenship education efforts, it becomes all the more crucial to determine the effects of various citizenship education models. Do they really succeed in making adolescents “better” citizens? Or can we support the sceptical view of James Murphy and some other authors that school-based efforts to strengthen political awareness can only be counter-productive?

We certainly do not claim to have provided a final answer to these questions, as this ideally would require longitudinal or panel data. For the McGill Youth Survey, and the corresponding Belgian Youth Survey, these panel data will be available for analysis in the future.

What we have made clear, we hope, is that the effects of citizenship education should be placed in perspective. Political interest, media consumption and discussions with peers and parents in most cases rank higher in explaining political knowledge. This does not mean, however, that the effects of citizenship education are insignificant.

The skeptical view is further weakened when we include the role of political interest. While it is no surprise that political interest boosts political knowledge and the intention to participate, our analyses indicate that citizenship education has a direct impact on political knowledge and the intention to participate, even after controlling for the effects of political interest. Or to put it slightly differently: even if students are not particularly interested in politics in the first place, they still tend to learn about politics in their classrooms. This would imply that the “Murphy view” is plainly wrong: citizenship education does promote political interest, political knowledge and political participation. The effect may not be as strong as we sometimes hope, but it is there.

The first purpose of this chapter was to determine how citizenship education interacts with political interest, not to identify which kind of citizenship education effort is most effective. If we return to this latter question, we find that our analysis implies that there is no unequivocal answer to this question. With regard to the cognitive outcomes, one can observe that traditional classes about politics still seem to matter, and therefore should not be neglected in the citizenship education curriculum. If one wants to encourage young people to become engaged in civic and political life, however, community service seems more promising. In noting this, the question shifts from the empirical (“which kind of education is most effective?”) to the normative question (“what do we consider as crucial outcomes for citizenship education?”). If we place an emphasis on an informed and enlightened citizenry, this will require a different citizenship education approach than if one wants to promote an engaged citizenry. Where scepticism is justified, then, is toward the notion that there is a single form of citizenship education that will attain the divergent desired outcomes.