

## CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research on  
Civic Learning & Engagement

## The Effects of Civic Education on Civic Skills

Melissa K. Comber<sup>1</sup>  
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Civic skills enable citizen participation in the democratic process. Civic skills originate from a number of sources, such as one's home environment, participation in groups, general education, and civic education. Civics courses are a source of civic skill development, yet not all American students receive civics instruction. This fact sheet reports evidence on the effect of civic education on civic skill levels.

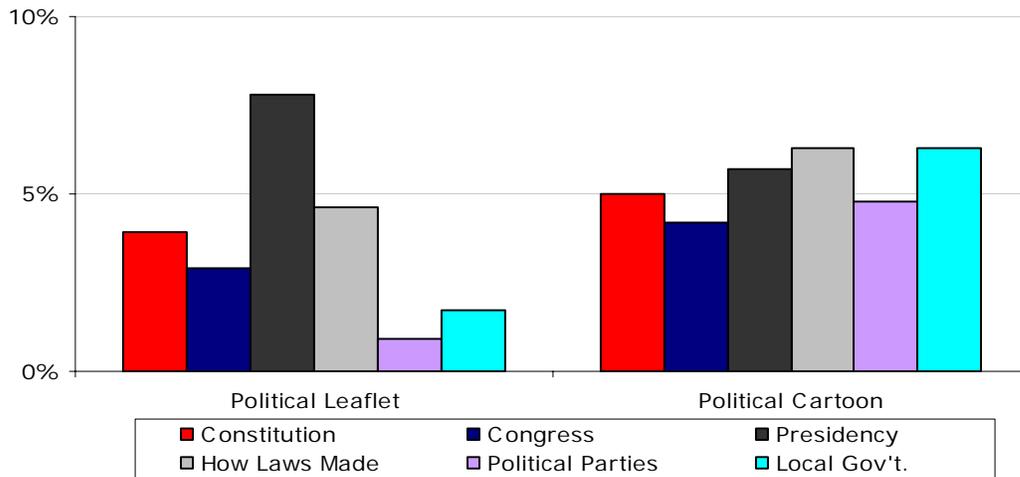
This fact sheet uses "average treatment effects" to report the effects of studying various civics topics on civic skills. An average treatment effect is an estimate of the impact of an experience or treatment on a particular outcome for both "treated" and "untreated" individuals in a population. The average treatment effect is calculated from a multivariate model that controls for variables such as gender, age, attitudes, and experiences. While the method is rigorous, possible sources of error include students' misremembering what they have studied (these analyses rely on student self-reports of participation in civics courses); survey questions that fail to capture real skills; unobserved variables that influence outcomes and are correlated with participation in civics courses; or an unrepresentative sample.

### ***Cognitive Skills***

The skill of interpreting political information is a cognitive skill that is important for political participation.<sup>2</sup> The IEA Civic Education Study<sup>3</sup> (IEA/CivEd) asked American ninth-grade students to interpret political leaflets and cartoons as a measure of political interpretation skills.

Graph 1 shows that studying certain civics topics has a notable average treatment effect on being able to interpret political information correctly.<sup>4</sup>

**Graph 1: Average Treatment Effects of Studying Civics Topics on Political Interpretation Skills, Ninth-Grade Students**



Source: IEA/CivEd Study. Political leaflet requires interpretation of which political party issued a leaflet. Political cartoon requires interpretation about a political leader.

### **Communication Skills**

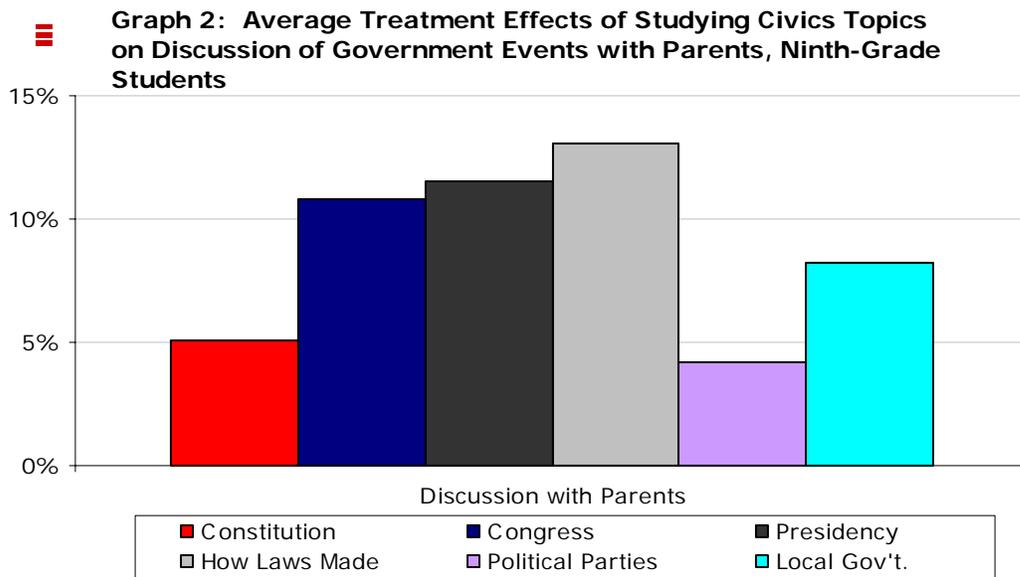
Civic communication skills include the ability to write an effective letter to an elected official and the ability to make a statement or speech in a public forum.

- Among tenth and eleventh-grade students, civic education has a stronger effect on confidence in writing an effective letter than on confidence in making a public statement (National Household Education Survey, NHES).<sup>5</sup> The average treatment effect of studying civic education on confidence in writing an effective letter to an elected official is almost 4 percentage points. However, the average treatment effect of studying civic education on confidence in making a statement at a public meeting is less than 2 percentage points.
- Among older (18 to 30-year-olds) respondents, however, civic education has a stronger effect on confidence in making a public statement than on confidence in writing an effective letter (American Citizen Participation Study, ACPS).<sup>6</sup> For example, the average treatment effect of studying civic education on confidence in writing a convincing letter to someone in government is a little over 11 percentage points. However, the average treatment effect of studying civic education on confidence in making an effective statement at a public meeting is almost 18 percentage points.
- The different results between these two data sets may be due to the age of survey respondents; communication skills may strengthen with age.

### **Group Discussion Skills**

Group discussion skills are necessary to make decisions in a group, understand multiple perspectives about an issue, and aid in collective decision-making. Group discussions provide exposure to diverse viewpoints and populations.<sup>7</sup>

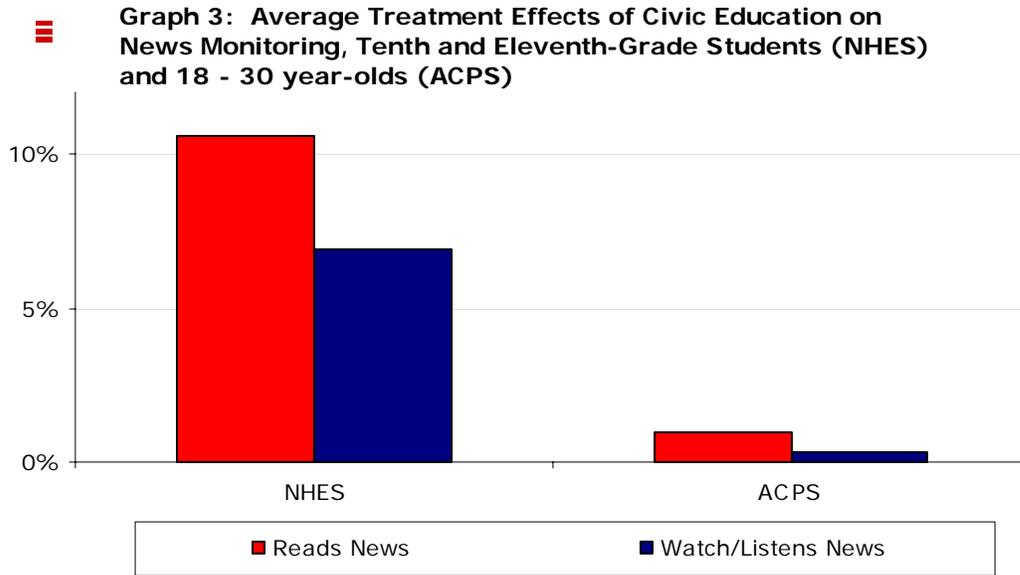
- Studying civics topics has a strong effect on the frequency of discussing political affairs with parents, peers, and teachers. Graph 2 below shows the effects of studying civics topics on discussing political affairs with parents among American ninth-grade students (IEA/CivEd).
- The ACPS also shows strong effects of studying civic education on frequency of discussing political events with peers. For example, the average effect of civic education on discussing local political affairs with others is over 15 percentage points. This same effect on discussing national political affairs with others is over 17 percentage points.



### ***News Monitoring Skills***

Monitoring public events and issues is another capacity necessary for political activity.<sup>8</sup> I treat students' actual frequency of monitoring the news as a proxy for their willingness and ability to monitor public events (a skill).

- Overall, studying civics topics has moderate effects on frequency of monitoring news sources among ninth grade-students (IEA/CivEd).
- Moderate effects of civic education on news monitoring frequency are also found among tenth and eleventh grade-students (NHES) and adults (ACPS). Graph 3 below details these results.



### ***Heterogeneous Effects of Civic Education***

Civic education has different effects on civic skill levels for different subgroups of the population. For example, the effect of civic education on civic skill levels is stronger for African-American and Latino students than it is for non-Hispanic white students.

- The study of any civics topic leads to a greater average effect of correctly interpreting which political party issued a political leaflet for African-American students than for all other students (IEA/CivEd). For some civics topics, the effect is very large; e.g. studying the Constitution results in an over 25 percentage point increase in the ability to interpret which party issued a political leaflet for African-American ninth-grade students.
- Similar results are found for Latino students: studying civics topics has a stronger effect on political interpretation skills for Latino students than for all other students.
- With respect to communication skills, the average effect of civic education on confidence in writing an effective letter or making a public statement is approximately equal between African-American tenth and eleventh grade-students and all other tenth and eleventh grade-students (NHES).
- While both female and male students experience positive effects of studying civics topics on their political interpretation skill levels, the effects are stronger for males (IEA/CivEd).
- Similarly, the effect of studying civic education on frequency of monitoring news sources is greater for males than for females (NHES and ACPS).
- The study of civic education topics has stronger effects on the frequency that female students discuss government events with their peers than for male students.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> See "The School's Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-Eight Countries," by Judith Torney-Purta, *Applied Developmental Science*, 6 (4) pp. 203-212.

<sup>3</sup> Torney-Purta, Judith, Lehmann, R., Oswald, H., Schultz, W. 2001. *Citizenship and Education in Twenty-Eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen*. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. <http://www.wam.umd.edu/~iea>.

<sup>4</sup> Average treatment effects (in percentage points) portrayed in the graphs are calculated using propensity score matching methods. Civic education topics are the treatment. Controls used in calculating average treatment effects in the IEA/CivEd study (Graphs 1 and 2) include: classroom climate measures, immigrant status, student government participation, number of books in the home, expectation of completing a four-year college degree, group participation, and feelings of political efficacy. Controls used in calculating average treatment effects in the NHES study (Graph 3) include: immigrant status, private school attendance, student government participation, other group participation, and political efficacy. Controls used in calculating average treatment effects in the ACPS (Graph 3) include: political orientation, education level, private school attendance, group participation, marital status, and immigrant status.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2001. *National Household Education Surveys, Civic Involvement Youth Survey*. <http://nces.ed.gov/nhes/>.

<sup>6</sup> Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry E. Brady, and Norman Nie. 1990. *American Citizen Participation Study* [Computer file]. ICPSR version. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, National Opinion Research Center (NORC) [producer], 1995. Ann Arbor, MI:

<sup>7</sup> See "Students' Precollege Preparation for Participation in a Diverse Democracy." By Hurtado, Sylvia, Engberg, Mark, Ponjuan, Luis, and Landreman, Lisa. 2002, in *Research in Higher Education*, 43 (2) pp. 163-186.

<sup>8</sup> See "Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation," by Brady, Henry E., Verba, Sidney and Schlozman, Kay Lehman, 1995, in *American Political Science Review*, 89 (2) pp. 271-294.