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Learning to Vote:

Informing Political Participation among College Students

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Learning to Vote: Informing Political Participation among College Students

To inform universities' capacity to encourage student political participation, we examine associations between four civic influences—civic instruction, deliberative course-based discussion, community service, and service learning—and youth participation during the 2008 presidential election. These four influences were selected because they are commonly integrated into higher education environments. Using an original survey, we employ a broad definition of political behavior to explore ways college students express themselves politically and to examine potential influences on their participation. We hypothesize that students exposed to civic influences are more likely to vote and engage in other participatory activities than those who lack such exposure. Findings reveal that educationally based civic influences that specifically address political content are more strongly associated with political behavior than is service-based activity. This supports an ongoing reform discourse that targets civic education as a promising avenue for increasing youth participation in American elections and suggests a key role that universities can play during election years.

***Key words**: 2008 presidential election, civic education, civic instruction, community service, deliberative course-based discussion, service learning, volunteerism, electoral reform, political interest, political activism, youth political participation*

Decades of research have shown that young people are consistently less likely to vote—or to engage in any of the other civic or political behaviors that often precede voting—than are other age cohorts in American politics (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Wattenberg, 2008). Yet, youth participation in presidential elections has steadily increased during the 21st century (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2008). Higher education institutions can implement strategies to advance this growth in political participation among youth.

In fact, higher education institutions play a critical role. Indeed, college-educated youth participate more actively than counterparts who lack college education. For example, in 2008, 62% of college-educated youth voted in the presidential election, but only 36% of non–college-educated youth did so (Nover, Godsay, Kirby, & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2010). Yet, there is still substantial room to increase engagement even among youth in college. To expand participation, reform efforts should influence youth political knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Berinsky, 2005; Hanmer, 2009). Higher education institutions have not always prioritized undergraduate political learning (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007); however, educationally based civic influences that are rooted in civic education and volunteer service may, in fact, further increase political engagement among college students (Flanagan, 2009; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Wattenberg, 2008; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

To inform future efforts to increase youth participation in politics, we systematically examine the extent to which exposure to a variety of civic influences in a higher education setting is associated with an increased likelihood of engagement in political activity among college students. Using an original survey, we examine multiple forms of election-year political participation among undergraduate students at a private, midwestern, research university. Civic education in higher education settings can take a variety of forms, including classroom-based civic instruction,

deliberative course-based discussions about politics and current events, participation in community service, and academic-based service learning in which coursework is paired with community service. We investigate the extent to which these four forms of civic education are associated with undergraduate student political participation. Prior research has not examined the relationships of each form of civic education with distinct avenues for political behavior.

Higher Education–Based Civic Influences

Research consistently finds that education is directly associated with youth political participation (CIRCLE, 2010; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). As young people advance in education beyond high school, they increase political interest and community engagement through volunteer activity (Finlay & Flanagan, 2009). Policy makers, educators, and researchers have highlighted the important role that higher education institutions can play in encouraging civic engagement (e.g., Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich, & Torney-Purta, 2006; Callan, 2004; Colby et al., 2007; Galston, 2001; McBride, 2008). Educationally based civic influences, including civic instruction, deliberative course-based discussion, community service, and service learning, are key ways that youth in a higher education setting may learn to become more active and politically engaged citizens (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Finlay & Flanagan, 2009; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; McMillan & Harriger, 2002). Specifically, courses and cocurricular activities that seek to promote "responsible political engagement" have been linked with increases in political participation among students with no prior political interest (Colby et al., 2007, p. 8).

Civic instruction refers to courses through which students gain knowledge about government and processes of influencing government. There is, however, substantial disagreement about the extent to which classroom-based civic instruction affects political interest and the likelihood of political activity (e.g., Galston, 2007; Niemi & Junn, 1998). *Deliberative course-based discussion* refers to direct student engagement in thoughtful discussions around political and current events. Such discussions involve "citizens voicing rational reasons for their preferences, listening to one another, exchanging information and thereby moving towards decision making on the contentious issues facing society" (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002, p. 23). Classes across disciplines can enable political deliberation if instructors foster open inquiry into a wide array of issues (McMillan & Harriger, 2002). Through deliberative discussion, students learn to understand and tolerate diverse opinions, ultimately "reexamin[ing] their notions of citizenship" and engaging in their communities (McMillan & Harriger, 2002, p. 250; see also Callan, 2004;). Compared with counterparts who lack such an experience, students who experience classroom-based deliberative discussion are more likely to exhibit political interest, whether through attention to the news or sharing political opinions in conversation, and to report intent to engage in civic activity (Campbell, 2005; McDevitt & Kiousis, 2006; Niemi & Junn, 1998).

In terms of service-oriented civic influences, *community service* typically is offered outside of the classroom and is not directly linked to classroom content. In this way, it differs from the three other civic influences discussed above. Volunteer opportunities may be arranged formally by university staff or student organizations but also may occur informally with other students. For example, students can participate in an alternative spring break experience or regular sorority-sponsored visits to the local Ronald McDonald House. Community service is central to the construction of youth's civic and moral identity. It increases students' ties to their communities and is expected to have long-term impacts on their political behavior (Yates & Youniss, 1998). However, students are most

likely to gain civic benefit from service projects that they find to be meaningful (Galston, 2001; Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003).

Service learning tends to be based in the classroom. It features structured volunteer service that is linked to educational objectives and systematic reflection on the service experience. Service learning can enable students to transfer knowledge and experiences between the classroom and a real-world setting. Through it, students can develop habits of participating in community life. Compared to their noninvolved counterparts, college students involved in long-term service learning exhibit greater participation in such civic activities as raising awareness about social and political issues via the Internet, solving community problems, and engaging in consumer political activity (Keen & Hall, 2008, 2009). A longitudinal, collegiate service-learning study indicates that continued community engagement is a key outcome; rates of postcollege volunteering are more than twice the national average (Tomkovick, Lester, Flunker, & Wells, 2008). It should be noted that youth volunteerism has been linked to a *substitution effect*, whereby students opt for future volunteer service in lieu of political engagement (Walker, 2000). The concern that service activities might replace political activity is illustrated by research findings that 94% of 15- to 24-year-olds identify helping others as the most important civic responsibility (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999).

Defining Political Behavior

Our definition of political behavior captures a variety of the ways in which young adults engage politically (Beaumont et al., 2006; Verba et al., 1995; Zukin et al., 2006). Existing research is limited because it neglects the diverse forms of active political participation that American youth engage in beyond voting. A generational shift in political inclinations may be occurring; this shift may be due to growing impacts of globalization and social media innovations (Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009) or to an evolving desire to influence policy makers more directly than in the past (Dalton, 2008). For today's young people, a more expressive, "self-actualizing" politics—one incorporating political consumerism, social activism, and volunteering—may take precedence over voting (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 106). Zukin et al. (2006) also note a growing importance of expressive political behaviors among youth. They distinguish traditional electoral behaviors and nonelectoral political voice behaviors, which involve expression of political opinions in a variety of ways. Encouraging these areas of engagement can present an opportunity for increasing youth political participation in the years ahead.

In the literature that examines relationships between civic influences in higher education and youth participation, measures of participation tend to vary based on the influence under study. Service-learning and community-service research prioritizes the forms of engagement that Bennett et al. (2009, p. 106) term "self-actualizing"; namely, those studies prioritize volunteering, working with others to help one's community, and participating in consumer politics. Studies on civic instruction and deliberative discussion, however, typically measure effects on traditional political behaviors, such as voting.

We examine how each of these four structured civic influences—civic instruction, deliberative course-based discussion, community service, and service learning—are linked with a broad set of student political behaviors. In accordance with prior research that establishes a substitution effect (e.g., Walker, 2000), we expect influences that specifically address political content—civic instruction

and deliberative discussion—to be strongly associated with traditional behaviors (e.g., voting and participation in campaign activities) and service-based civic influences to be strongly associated with nontraditional behaviors (e.g., social activism and political consumerism). Furthermore, we seek to confirm a meaningful distinction between traditional electoral behaviors and expressive behaviors in this sample of college students (Bennett et al., 2009; Zukin et al., 2006).

Research Design and Methods

The authors conducted a two-part panel survey of students at a private, midwestern, research university. The survey, an online instrument created specifically for this study, asked about students' political participation and exposure to four education-based civic influences during the 2008 presidential election. The questions used in this study are available in Table 1.[1] We implemented the survey through StudentVoice, an online survey tool regularly used by student organizations and the administration at the university. At two time points (Time 1, Time 2), we sent students an invitation to participate in the study and a link to the survey. We sent both messages to the students' university e-mail accounts. The Time 1 survey was administered in mid-September 2008, prior to the first presidential debate, and the Time 2 survey was administered just after Election Day in 2008.[2]

Sample selection and characteristics

At Time 1, the study e-mailed 1,991 18- to 25-year-old undergraduate students who are U.S. citizens, inviting them to participate and providing a hyperlink to the online survey. We oversampled African American and Asian American students (approximately 35% of the student body). At Time 1, 767 students completed the survey (a 39% response rate). The shorter Time 2 survey included questions focusing specifically on candidate preferences and political behavior between the first presidential debate and Election Day. Only students who completed the Time 1 survey received invitations to participate in the Time 2 follow-up, which 460 students completed (a 61% cooperation rate). After limiting the sample to include only students who were registered to vote, we identified samples of 764 students at Time 1 and 456 at Time 2. The voter registration requirement excluded a minimal number of potential participants, as almost all respondents (95.5%) reported being registered to vote at Time 1, nearly 2 months prior to the general election.

The Time 1 and Time 2 samples share similar demographics and political affiliation with the student body. At Time 1, more female students were in the sample (60%) than in the university's student body (approximately 50%), while the percentages were similar for white students (61% of Time 1 participants, 59% of the university's student body). Due to oversampling, the African American (17%) and Asian American (16%) percentages exceed their representation at the university (6% and 14%, respectively). Just 3.1% of the sample was Hispanic. As Table 2 suggests, respondents were predominantly from suburban areas (76%), and the mean age was 19.56 (SD = 1.23). Compared with young voters and 4-year-college students across the United States, substantially more of the students in this study self-identified as Democrats (63%) and liberal (56% liberal or very liberal);

[1] The complete set of survey questions is available from the lead author.

[2] Respondents received $2 for participating and were eligible to enter a drawing to receive one of three prize incentives in the amount of $300, $200, or $100. Prior to implementation of the survey, the university's Institutional Review Board accepted the study's request for exemption from a full human subjects review.

Table 1. Description of Variables

Variable Name (*N*)	Measure	Possible Responses
Age (721)	"In what month and year were you born?"	
Gender (741)	"What is your sex?"	0 = *male*, 1 = *female*
Race (741)	"What racial or ethnic group best describes you?"	African American, Asian American, Hispanic, White, other
Grew up (726)	Where did you grow up mostly?	Rural, suburban, urban area
Party identification (730)	Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or something else?	Republican, Democrat, independent, other
Political ideology (722)	Generally speaking, how would you describe your political ideology?	Very cons., cons., moderate, lib., very lib.
Presidential choice (440)	Who did you vote for in the presidential election?	Obama, McCain, other
2008 general election (456)	Did you vote in the 2008 presidential election?	1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*
Political interest (439)[a]		
Campaign endorsement (452)	Wear a campaign button or shirt, put a campaign sticker on your car, or place a sign in your window or in front of your residence	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Social networking tie (451)	Friend or join a group related to a presidential candidate or political party on a social networking site	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Pay attention (448)	Pay attention to political campaigns	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Internet research (450)	Use the Internet to research a candidate's positions or speeches by a candidate	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Personal advocacy (451)	Try to talk to people and explain why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Attend event (451)[b]	Attend any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners, or things like that in support of a particular candidate	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Political activism (445)[a]		
Contribute (453)[c]	Contribute money to a candidate or party	1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*
Work or volunteer (450)	Work or volunteer on a political campaign for a candidate or party	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Web site, blog, or chat room (452)	Express your views about politics on a web site, blog, chat room	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Contact media (452)	Contact a newspaper, radio, or TV talk show to express your opinion on an issue	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Protest participation (452)	Participate in political activities (protests, marches, or demonstrations)	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Contact representative (453)	Contact or visit someone in the government who represents your community	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Solve a community problem (449)	"Work with a group to solve a problem in a community"	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Consumer politics (446)	"Make a purchasing decision based on the conduct or values of a company"	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Variable Name (*N*)	Measure	Possible Responses
Civic instruction (452)	"At a college or university, have you taken a class on government, politics, or civic education?"	1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*
Deliberative course-based discussion (445)	"At a college or university, have you had discussions in any of your classes about the Presidential election?"	1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*
Service learning (690)	"Have you participated in a service learning project or program?"	1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*
Community service (748)	"Have you every participated in any community service or volunteer activity?"	From *never* (1) to *very often* (5)
Parental engagement (706)	"My parents encourage me to express my opinions about politics and current events even if they are different from their views"	From *strongly disag.* (1) to *strongly agr.* (5)
Peer engagement (717)	"My friends encourage me to express my opinions about politics and current events even if they are different from their views"	From *strongly disag.* (1) to *strongly agr.* (5)
Personal contact (442)	"In 2008, were you contacted by someone personally to work for or contribute money to a candidate, party, or any other organization that supports candidates?"	1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*
2008 encouragement (454)	"In 2008, were you encouraged by anyone to vote in the 2008 Presidential election?"	1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*
Specific encouragement (451)	"In 2008, were you encouraged by anyone to vote for a specific candidate in the 2008 Presidential election?"	1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*
Vote before 2008 (753)	Not including the 2008 primary and general elections, have you ever voted in a local, state, or national election?	1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*
Vote 2008 primary (760)	Did you vote in a 2008 primary or caucus?	1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*

Note: cons. = conservative; lib. = liberal; agr. = agree; disag. = disagree.

[a] Construct.

[b] The *Attend event* item is cross loaded on *Political Interest* and *Political Activism* factors.

[c] Two separate variables measuring contributions to Republicans and Democrats combined into a single dichotomous contribution variable.

fewer identified as Republican (11%), independent (27%), or conservative (7% conservative or very conservative; CIRCLE, 2008; Harvard University Institute of Politics, 2008).

At Time 2, almost all respondents reported voting in the 2008 general election (97%). In contrast, 90% of all registered voters in the United States voted in that election (File and Crissey, 2010). The percentage of students who voted for Barack Obama (84%) is much higher than the two-thirds share of the vote he received from 18- to 29-year-olds in the general population (CIRCLE, 2008). Not unexpectedly, substantially fewer sampled students reported voting in elections prior to 2008

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable Name	%	Mean	SD
Age		19.56	1.23
Male	40.1		
Female	59.9		
Race			
African American	16.6		
Asian American	15.5		
Hispanic	3.1		
White	60.7		
Other	4.0		
Grew up			
Rural area	9.0		
Suburban area	75.5		
Urban area	15.6		
Party identification			
Republican	11.0		
Democrat	62.5		
Independent	26.6		
Political ideology			
Very conservative	.3		
Conservative	6.9		
Moderate	36.4		
Liberal	43.1		
Very liberal	13.3		
Presidential choice			
Obama	84.1		
McCain	15.0		
Other	.9		
Voted in 2008 general election	96.7		
Political interest[a]		17.27	5.65
Campaign endorsement	54.2	2.36	1.52
Social networking tie	49.9	2.22	1.46
Pay attention	99.3	4.02	1.06
Internet research	94.7	3.69	1.19
Personal advocacy	78.7	2.80	1.34
Attend event	53.2	2.11	1.26
Political activism[a]		9.38	4.39
Contribute	24.1		
Work or volunteer	22.9	1.57	1.19
Web site, blog, or chat room	26.8	1.50	.97
Contact media	10.6	1.19	.62
Protest participation	27.4	1.53	1.01
Contact representative	15.0	1.29	.81

Table 2 (*continued*)

Variable Name	%	Mean	SD
Solve a community problem	54.1	2.14	1.28
Consumer politics	55.6	2.15	1.27
Civic instruction	39.4		
Deliberative course-based discussion	71.2		
Service learning	40.1		
Community service	99.6	3.74	.89
Parental engagement		3.94	1.24
Peer engagement		3.77	1.11
Personal contact	60.6		
2008 encouragement	99.3		
Specific encouragement	95.1		
Vote before 2008	37.3		
Vote 2008 primary	35.4		

[a] Construct.

(37%) or during the 2008 primary season (35%). These rates are likely due to age constraints as well as to patterns of midterm- and primary-election participation; as participation rates in those elections tend to be lower than the rates in general elections. The 2008 primary (or caucus) participation rate is equivalent to the rate identified for U.S. college students by Harvard University Institute of Politics (2008), but it exceeds the 2008 rate of primary voting by young voters under 30 in all states except for New Hampshire (Kirby, Marcelo, Gillerman, & Linkins, 2008). Although our pre-2008 findings are limited, youth in the sample report voting prior to 2008 at a rate that is higher than that (25%) found among 18- to 29-year-olds who voted in the 2006 midterm elections (Marcelo, 2008).

Measures

Participation measures

We include 14 behavioral items in our analyses, and all use a 5-point Likert scale to capture responses.[3] Posed at Time 2, each question asked about participation "between the first 2008 Presidential debate and Election Day 2008." Table 1 lists the specific wording for each of these questions and for others fielded in the two surveys. Results from a confirmatory factor analysis do not support the two-factor structure we initially expected; we posited a distinction between behaviors that are electoral in nature and expressive "political voice" behaviors that occur outside the electoral realm (Zukin et al., 2006). However, we conducted a principal components analysis using a varimax rotation, and the analysis yielded two new factors: *political interest* and *political activism*. These factors offer a meaningful distinction among possible participatory behaviors; they focus on the level of commitment required rather than on the orientation of the behavior.

[3] Unfortunately, we dropped the *Voted in the 2008 general election* variable from the analysis due to low variability among respondents. We asked a dichotomous (1 = yes, 0 = no) question: "Did you vote in the 2008 Presidential election?" We received an affirmative answer from 96.7% of respondents.

A composite *political interest* factor score (α = .81) is created from six items (see Table 1). It measures expressions of attachment to, and desire to learn more about, a specific candidate (or candidates). A composite *political activism* factor score (α = .80), created from seven items, measures committed political involvement on behalf of an issue or a candidate. One item, "attend any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners, or things like that in support of a particular candidate," is cross loaded on both the *political interest* and *political activism* factors. We considered deleting the item but decided to employ it in both factors because it shares conceptual meaning with both constructs and inclusion increases Chronbach's alpha for both factors. We treat two additional items as separate dependent variables in multivariate analyses. One examines working with a group to *solve a community problem*, and the other, *consumer politics*, examines purchasing decisions made in light of a company's conduct or values. These two items reflect the "self-actualizing" lifestyle-politics behavior that Bennett et al. describe (2009, p. 106).

Rates and average participation frequency for the four dependent variables—political interest, political activism, solve a community problem, and consumer politics—are presented in Table 2. At least 50% of students engaged in political interest behaviors during the 2008 general election season. Among students represented in this category of political participation, the most common forms of engagement are paying attention to political campaigns and using the Internet to research a candidate's positions or speeches. Students solve a community problem or engage in consumer politics less frequently than they participate in many of the political interest behaviors but more so than they participate in any of the political activism behaviors. With the exception of attending political events (the Attend event variable is cross loaded onto the political interest factor as well), fewer than 30% of respondents participate in each political activism behavior, and the mean frequency is below 1.60 on a 5-point scale. Particularly low involvement is shown in results from two measures of activism: contacting media to express an opinion and contacting a representative in government.

Civic influences

Our analysis includes measures of four education-based civic influences: civic instruction, deliberative course-based discussion, community service, and service learning. A dichotomous civic instruction measure captures student enrollment in courses with an explicit civic purpose at Time 2 (see Table 1). The single-item measure asked, "At a college or university, have you taken a class on government, politics, or civic education?" A dichotomous deliberative course-based discussion measure captures exposure to classroom-based discussions of current events, also at Time 2. This item specifically asked students, "At a college or university, have you had discussions in any of your classes about the Presidential election?"

At Time 1, a community service frequency measure asked, "Have you ever participated in any community service or volunteer activity? By volunteer activity, we mean actually working in some way to help others for no pay." We measure this item with a 5-point scale; possible response options range from "Never" to "Very Often." A dichotomous service learning measure included at Time 1 asked respondents, "Have you participated in a service learning project or program? By service learning, we mean volunteer activity in conjunction with your coursework or other academic studies."

Control variables

Ten demographic and politically oriented variables are included as controls in the analyses. *Age*, *gender*, and *race* each have been associated with youth participation (e.g., Lopez & Kirby, 2005; Marcelo, Lopez, & Kirby, 2007; Schlozman, Burns, & Verba, 1994; Taft, 2006; Torney-Purta, Barber, & Wilkenfeld, 2007). *Parental engagement* and *peer engagement* may also help foster youth political knowledge, identity, and behavior (McDevitt, 2005; McIntosh, Hart, & Youniss, 2007). Direct mobilization may have a particularly salient influence on students' political participation (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Three dichotomous variables capture specific outreach to seek students' political participation. The *personal contact* item asked respondents, "In 2008, were you contacted by someone personally to work for or contribute money to a candidate, party, or any other organization that supports candidates?" The *2008 encouragement* variable asked respondents, "In 2008, were you encouraged by anyone to vote in the 2008 Presidential election?" The *specific encouragement* item asked respondents, "In 2008, were you encouraged by anyone to vote for a specific candidate in the 2008 Presidential election?"

Finally, the model includes a control for prior voting activity, as initial political activity may be linked with subsequent activity (e.g., Plutzer, 2002). A dichotomous measure, *voting before 2008*, asked, "Not including the 2008 primary and general elections, have you ever voted in a local, state, or national election?" It should be noted that this variable introduces some error into the analysis, as 25.5% of the sample was 18 years old at the time of the November 2008 election. A final dichotomous question measures *voting in a 2008 primary election*.

Results

Separate multiple regression analyses (see Table 3) assess the strength of each dependent variable's relationships with the four educationally based civic influences. Control variables are entered into each regression model. Because of missing responses to integral variables, sample sizes across the four models range from 336 to 344.

Regression results indicate that the political interest model explains 26% of the model variance ($F[17, 318] = 7.766$, $p = .000$). Two civic influences are associated with increased political interest frequency: civic instruction ($B = 0.355$, $p < .01$) and deliberative course-based discussion ($B = 0.296$, $p < .01$). Two other variables also are significantly associated with political interest frequency: parental engagement ($B = 0.180$, $p < .001$) and personal contact mobilization ($B = 0.600$, $p < .001$).

The political activism model explains 20% of the model variance ($F[17, 323] = 5.924$, $p = .000$). Two civic influences are associated with increased frequency of engagement in political activism: civic instruction ($B = 0.418$, $p < .001$) and deliberative course-based discussions ($B = 0.264$, $p < .05$). Additionally, student mobilization through personal contact ($B = 0.462$, $p < .001$) and voting in a primary or caucus ($B = 0.358$, $p < .01$) are associated with increased engagement in political activism.

The model for solve a community problem explains just 9% of the model variance ($F[17, 326] = 2.883$, $p < .000$). Community service involvement is significantly associated with an increased frequency of engagement in efforts to solve community problems ($B = 0.442$, $p < .001$). No

Table 3. Associations between Civic Influences and Political Behaviors

	Political Interest (*n* = 336)		Political Activism (*n* = 341)		Solve a Community Problem (*n* = 344)		Consumer Politics (*n* = 342)	
Variable	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β
Civic instruction	.355**	.170	.418***	.198	-.011	-.004	.051	.019
Deliberative discussion[a]	.296**	.131	.264*	.115	.043	.015	.174	.061
Service learning	-.035	-.017	.166	.078	.061	.023	.003	.001
Community service	.044	.038	.095	.082	.442***	.304	.076	.052
Parental engagement	.180***	.218	.050	.060	-.032	-.031	.047	.045
Peer engagement	.019	.020	-.023	-.023	.012	.085	.063	.052
Personal contact	.600***	.284	.462***	.216	.208	.078	.354	.132
2008 encouragement	.044	.002	.275	.014	-1.851	-.077	-.058	-.002
Specific encouragement	.371	.072	-.013	-.003	-.005	-.001	-.159	-.024
Vote before 2008	.095	.045	.085	.040	-.022	-.008	.083	.031
Vote 2008 primary	.188	.090	.358**	.169	.031	.012	-.052	-.020
Age	-.020	-.024	-.060	-.071	.052	.050	-.025	-.023
Gender (female)	.089	.042	-.001	-.001	-.062	-.023	.217	.081
Race (African American)	.113	.038	-.026	-.009	.230	.063	-.184	-.050
Race (Asian American)	-.027	-.009	-.053	-.018	-.050	-.014	-.309	-.084
Race (Hispanic)	.106	.016	.205	.030	-.320	-.035	.274	.030
Race (other)	-.088	-.018	-.007	-.001	.116	.018	-.051	-.008
Adjusted R2	.256		.198		.085		.007	
Model fit								
F	(17, 318) = 7.766		(17, 323) = 5.924		(17, 326) = 2.883		(17, 324) = 1.151	
p	.000		.000		.000		.304	

[a] Deliberative course-based discussion.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

significant association is found between consumer politics and any of the four civic influences (F[17,324] = 1.151, p = .304).

Discussion

These results suggest potential avenues through which universities might encourage student political behavior, and they provide insight into how students behave politically. As discussed below, we find that three of the four educationally based civic influences—civic instruction, deliberative course-based discussions, and community service—may be linked with college student civic involvement. It should be noted that the research design precludes identification of causal relationships. Civic-minded students may, in fact, be more likely than other students to seek out civic education opportunities. In fact, the level of political participation among students in this sample, a level higher than that among youth in the general population, suggests that the sample members may be more civically inclined than their counterparts in the general population.

Civic influences

Higher education institutions may be able to help shape student civic involvement through both classroom-based and extracurricular activity. Structured opportunities for civic instruction and deliberative course-based discussions may be particularly beneficial in efforts to strengthen the extent to which students pay attention to candidates' words and actions, actively demonstrate support for candidates, and engage in political activism. Classroom content that is explicitly political may elicit committed political action; however, such opportunities should not be limited to political science classes that may only serve a subset of a university's student population.

Although classroom-based civic influences are linked with political interest and activism, the influences do not appear to be associated with the frequency of working with others to solve community problems. Consistent with a hypothesized substitution effect (e.g., Walker, 2000), the results indicate that community service is linked with increased community participation. Integrating service opportunities on campus may positively affect students' civic behavior (Galston, 2001; Keen & Hall, 2008, 2009).

Our findings identify an additional avenue by which universities might facilitate student political participation. Specifically, creating and supporting opportunities for personal contact, wherein campaign representatives or peers directly ask students to volunteer or contribute to a campagn, also may facilitate political interest and activism. This does not require a university to prioritize specific political candidates or parties, only that a university enable such contacts across the political spectrum. Although our study participants appear to be more civically engaged than the general college-age population (Harvard University Institute of Politics, 2008), expanding the availability of these civic influences may facilitate participation among youth with little prior political experience (Colby et al., 2007). Future research can seek to reduce self-selection bias and target a less elite sample of students.

College students' political behavior

Consistent with Beaumont et al.'s (2006) argument that focusing on voting limits our understanding of the myriad ways in which young adults express themselves politically, we also examine students' participation in a broad range of political behaviors. Although prior research distinguishes traditional, electorally based behaviors from more expressive civic behaviors (Bennett et al., 2009; Zukin et al., 2006), our factor analysis suggests a stronger division along the extent of commitment that each behavior requires. Two solid factors emerge: behaviors that exhibit political interest and those that require a more sustained commitment to political involvement through activism. Substantial differences in how youth engage in these two categories of behavior suggest that the two groupings may provide a meaningful way to understand the diverse forms of modern political behavior among youth.

This sample is highly engaged in political interest behaviors, proactively seeking out information necessary to make political decisions. Almost every student in this sample paid attention to the political campaigns taking place during fall 2008, and nearly the whole sample used the Internet to research a candidate's positions or speeches. Once a student selects a candidate to support (most in this sample supported Barack Obama), he or she exhibits continued interest in supporting the candidate, persuading others to vote for the candidate, joining a social networking group, attending

events on behalf of a candidate, and displaying campaign paraphernalia. Although campaigns specifically targeted youth for mobilization in the 2008 election, future research should examine whether political interest behaviors remain high among youth during subsequent elections.

Political behaviors requiring a sustained or intense level of commitment were much rarer. Just over a quarter of this sample participated in political activism by engaging in group-based activities, such as protests, marches, and demonstrations, or by individually expressing political views on the Internet. Students infrequently contact media or a government representative to express opinions on specific policy or political issues (only 10–15% report doing so). This level of political activism, lower than the observed level of political interest, may reflect less focus on issue-oriented behaviors in the context of an election in which the presidential candidates received the bulk of the attention. Interestingly, students are less likely to engage in community activism, through solving a community problem or consumer politics, than to express political interest but are more likely to do so than to participate in political activism.

Increases in voting by youth in presidential elections during the 21st century (CIRCLE, 2008) suggest a trend that may continue if higher education makes a commitment to support and encourage student participation. These data support the growing calls for higher education institutions to develop citizenship among students (Bok, 2006; Colby et al., 2007). Universities are well positioned to reach this population and have the capacity to strengthen student orientations toward active citizenship. Our findings indicate that colleges and universities may be able to strengthen such orientations by integrating civic influences into curricular and extracurricular offerings.

Conclusion

Politically engaged youth are likely to continue political participation as adults (Flanagan, 2009; Plutzer, 2002; Wattenberg, 2008). Thus, increasing political engagement among college students may lay the groundwork for increases in the size of the pool of active adult citizens and may shape future trends in American political participation (Flanagan, 2009; Wattenberg, 2008). A concerted effort to foster college student political engagement may facilitate continued growth in youth political involvement. Promoting a campus environment in which students are encouraged to take courses on government and politics—one in which deliberative discussion and service involvement are prioritized—may contribute to a growth in engagement by citizens. Furthermore, universities can facilitate and support student contact with campaigns and candidates across the political spectrum. Yet, since relationships vary among the civic influences and the political behaviors examined in this study, campus administrators and faculty should make conscious decisions about the types of civic behavior that their institution wants to promote; an education that integrates a diverse set of influences offers the most potential for success in developing fully engaged citizens.

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