Civic Education and Knowledge of Government and Politics

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship of civic education to the acquisition of political knowledge. Specifically, this research examines the influence of civic education on knowledge levels generally as well as the effectiveness of particular types of curriculum approaches and activities. Using data from an original national probability survey and a survey of alumni of the We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution program, the study finds that civic education is positively related to political knowledge. Lecture and textbook approaches to civic education are associated with higher levels of factual knowledge about political institutions and processes. Innovative curriculum approaches, such as the use of current events, classroom activities, and community activities, can be effective in conveying political knowledge when they are not the dominant basis for the learning experience.

It is essential for citizens in a democratic polity to have sufficient knowledge of Constitutional principles as well as the structure, function, and processes of government. Knowledge of how the system works provides a basis for the development of a sense of political efficacy and civic duty that facilitates participation (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Studies have demonstrated that higher levels of political knowledge are associated with greater acceptance of democratic principles, issue understanding, voting, and engagement in community affairs (Galston, 2001). Despite its importance for democratic engagement, Americans' political knowledge has remained at virtually the same low levels for more than half a century (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Civic education programs have the potential to convey political knowledge to students. However, the extent to which knowledge is gained through these programs depends upon students' civic learning experience. Civics instruction across the nation varies widely in its structure, content, and quality. Many schools incorporate civic education into social studies or American history courses rather than offering dedicated civics classes. At the same time, school-based programs that aim to improve civics instruction by going beyond standard lecture and textbook teaching methods alone have been implemented. Students not only learn about the Constitutional and historical foundations of American government, the requirements of citizenship, and structure and functions of the political system, they also become familiar with the skills needed for meaningful political and civic participation, such as public speaking, participating in public hearings, contacting officials, meeting with community leaders about issues, and using media to engage the polity. These kinds of active learning experiences can provide a memorable context for understanding facts about government and politics, and reinforce information that is gained through standard textbook and lecture formats.

This study examines the extent to which individuals' civic education experience is linked to their factual knowledge of government and politics. It addresses the following questions: Does civic education at the precollege level influence the acquisition of political knowledge? What kinds of classroom instructional approaches are most effective in conveying facts about American government, the U.S. Constitution, and the electoral process? Are particular types of civic education experiences more conducive to conveying political knowledge that is retained over the life course?

The Acquisition of Political Knowledge

Political knowledge encompasses a vast amount of information pertinent to government and political life. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996: 10-11) define political knowledge as, "the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory." The present study examines basic factual knowledge of political institutions and processes, the U.S. Constitution, and elections. Other forms of political knowledge, including information about political players and specific leaders, political parties and groups, domestic and foreign policy, and political events, are relevant for citizens' political life, but they are not the focus of this research. Individuals who are very informed in one area of politics tend to be informed across other areas of politics as well (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

Multiple studies have confirmed the importance of political knowledge for civic and political life (e.g., Niemi and Junn, 1998; Galston, 2001; Milner, 2002). A strong knowledge base allows citizens to develop attitudes towards politics that are predicated on more than just emotion, and to effectively understand how their own interests fit into a complex political system. In the United States, citizenship is defined by an understanding of and appreciation for the principles embodied in the Constitution. Indeed, those who possess more civic knowledge

have been found to be more supportive of democratic values, such as political tolerance (Finkel and Ernst, 2005; Galston, 2004; Brody, 1994; Youniss, 2011).

Political participation requires some material and cognitive resources, and chief among these is political knowledge. Individuals who possess sufficient political knowledge are better able to understand their own interests and how to effectively participate in the political process. People who have higher levels of political information tend to be more politically efficacious, and have the confidence and ability to participate in the marketplace of political ideas (Galston, 2004; DelliCarpini and Keeter, 1996; McDevitt and Chaffee, 2000; Meirick and Wackman, 2004). Comparative studies confirm that a lasting drop in political participation in some nations reflects a corresponding decline in civic literacy. This "vicious circle," whereby citizens lack or have unequal opportunities to learn about politics, has been found to perpetuate economic inequality, including the decline of the welfare state (Milner, 2002).

Research conducted over the past half century or more confirms relatively low levels of the public's political knowledge. Prior studies have found that only about half of the public is somewhat knowledgeable about the basic institutions and procedures of government (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Pew Research Center, 2011). Despite the growing numbers of Americans attending college, overall levels of political knowledge have not correspondingly increased. The public's knowledge appears to be on par with what it was fifty years ago (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996).

Subgroup Differences in Political Knowledge

Disparities in political knowledge have real world consequences as we might consider knowledge to be a form of capital that overcomes obstacles to participation. The publics' political knowledge splits along the familiar cleavages of socioeconomic status, gender, race, and

age. Generally speaking, poor, younger, minority, and female Americans have been found to possess lower levels of overall political knowledge (Kenski, 2000; Mondak and Anderson, 2004). Better educated and more affluent segments of the population remain very knowledgeable about public affairs.

Scholars long have been interested in political knowledge gaps between different cohorts of citizens. A gender gap in political knowledge is one of the most consistent and pronounced study findings (Campbell, et al., 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001; Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Kenski and Jamieson, 2000). Women typically score lower than men on political knowledge questions about the role of different branches of government and current political leaders who are most often male (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993). This is the type of factual knowledge about government and politics addressed in this study. There are realms of political knowledge where women hold equal if not superior levels of knowledge to their male counterparts. Women tend to be more informed than men about local politics and "gender relevant" issues that are directly pertinent to women's lives, such health care, abortion policy, or women's representation in local, state, and national government (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Kenski and Jamieson, 2000; Hansen, 1997; Dolan, 2011).

Scholars have identified a number of reasons why women score lower than men on certain kinds of knowledge questions. Sex role socialization privileges politics as the domain of men, a perspective that is reinforced through the existence of a male-dominant national political system. There also are discrepancies in the means, motives, and opportunities for learning about politics afforded to men and women, especially as women frequently are accountable for maintaining a household and childrearing (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Dow, 2008).

Dow (2008) finds that men receive significantly higher returns on political knowledge from education, while women appear to learn more than men about politics through group membership. Women also are more likely than men to select "don't know" as a survey option for political knowledge questions. Because they are less likely to guess than men, their knowledge scores tend to be lower (Mondak and Davis, 2001; Kenski and Jamieson, 2000; Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001). These findings raise concerns as women's lower levels of factual political knowledge can potentially impair their ability to participate effectively in politics. Despite this fact, men and women have voted at the same rate since 1980 (Delli Carpini and Fuchs, 1993). However, women are less likely than men to engage in other forms of political activity, such as running for higher level office (Burns, Scholozman, and Verba, 2001).

Racial discrepancies in political knowledge have been documented by scholars. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) find that African Americans are less politically knowledgeable than whites, with three quarters of blacks scoring lower than three quarters of whites on their knowledge index. Niemi and Junn's (1998) study, based on data from the 1988 NAEP Civics Assessment, shows that the effects of classroom civic learning are lower for Hispanics than Caucasian students, and they are lower for African Americans than Hispanics.

Educational attainment has been cited as the most important factor determining political knowledge (Jennings and Stoker, 2008). The strong association between knowledge and education persists in the face of statistical controls for other variables, so the conclusion that education plays a fundamental role in shaping these outcomes has rarely been questioned. What exactly happens within the black box of more education is not well understood, especially as the public's aggregate level of knowledge has remained the same despite increasing numbers of college graduates (Rosenstone and Hanson, 1993). The motivation and ability to attend college

undoubtedly reflects cognitive ability, including an increased capacity for learning and understanding, an asset favorable to learning about public affairs. College bound youth set out on a different path by middle and high school in terms of formal educational opportunities to learn about politics, often having better access to civic education (Kahn and Middaugh, 2008). Panel research suggests that some of the benefits ascribed to higher education as a predictor of civic engagement should be attributed to self-selection by those who choose to go to college compared to those who do not (Jennings and Stoker, 2008). By adolescence, stratification is evident among those who sort themselves onto college and non-college bound tracks in terms of differences in political knowledge, interest, and engagement, which become amplified for those who complete a B.A. (Jennings and Stoker, 2008; Verba, Schlozman, and Burns, 2005). In addition, students with high verbal aptitude, as measured on pre-collegiate SAT scores, as well as those who take social science courses in college are more likely to engage politically (Hillygus, 2005).

People with higher levels of income are more knowledgeable about politics than those with lower incomes (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Income level and education level are highly correlated, which may in part explain the connection between income and political knowledge. Higher levels of income also are associated with increased political participation (Verba and Nie, 1972) and a greater sense of civic duty (Owen and Soule, 2010), which may encourage people to seek out political information and thus gain knowledge. Higher income families are more likely to follow politics, gain an understanding of political institutions, processes, issues, and policies, and to make their voices heard (Verba, Schlozman,and Brady, 1995). People in higher income brackets are accorded greater deference by political leaders, who consider their opinions when taking political action. Views of voters in the upper third of the

income distribution, for instance, have been found to receive 50% more weight than those in the middle third in the voting decisions of senators, while the preferences of the lowest third of the income distribution receive no weight at all in their senators' voting calculus (Bartels, 2009). A closer examination of political knowledge among low-income communities shows that while in urban environments political knowledge is quite low, people in low-income rural areas have high levels of political knowledge and participation. Building on Putnam's (2000) assertion that people are more knowledgeable and participatory in environments where they know and trust one another, Lay (2006) argues that positive social interactions in rural towns account for the discrepancy.

The Relationship of Civic Education to Knowledge

Civic education can influence the acquisition of political knowledge both directly and indirectly. People can gain political knowledge through classroom civics instruction, and some may retain it over the long term. Particular events, such as an election campaign, public policy controversy, a discussion of politics, or a media report, may invigorate recall of relevant political facts that were learned in class. Civic education can stimulate interest in political affairs, create a lasting sense of civic duty, and encourage an orientation toward political life that compels people to be attentive to politics. Thus, civic education may be responsible for positioning people to encounter and be receptive to information about the political world long after they leave the classroom.

Our study examines the relationship of particular types of civics instruction, ranging from more traditional textbook and lecture approaches to innovative methods, to the acquisition of political knowledge. Data are accumulating that suggest that more and better quality civic education results in greater gains of political knowledge (Finkel, 2003; Niemi and Junn, 1998).

The classroom is a unique setting in which young people can at once gain knowledge, autonomy in their ideas, and confidence in their abilities to serve as civic actors (Ehman, 1980; Morgan and Streb, 2001).

More time spent on civic education utilizing traditional instructional approaches—textbook and lecture-based instruction—may enhance political knowledge (Niemi and Junn, 1998). Textbooks specifically convey discrete facts about political institutions, actors, and processes. This information can be reinforced and contextualized through lectures, and is often the basis for testing and evaluation. While there is some indication that textbook facts may be forgotten soon after the test is taken, students can better retain this information when it is presented within a meaningful context or in conjunction with current events (Winerip, 2011).

Classroom-based activities can expand a young person's civic capacity to gain knowledge about politics, especially when interactive, student-centered methods are combined with lecture and textbook instruction. Students who take part in programs that integrate problem solving, collaborative thinking, and cross-disciplinary approaches in their curricula may develop a greater sense of their own agency as civic actors (Atherton, 2000; Tolo, 1998). Innovative instructional methods that enhance textbook learning, particularly in the hands of skilled and knowledgeable teachers, can enhance knowledge gains (Finkel, 2003, Torney-Purta, et al., 2001, Torney-Purta, 2002; Westheimer and Kahne, 2004; Torney-Purta, Amadeo, and Richardson, 2006). Interactive methods include discussion of current events, simulations of democratic processes and procedures, and service learning.

Niemi and Junn (1998) identified two factors that play a significant and positive role in conveying political knowledge—the integration of current events into classroom discussions and the variety and breadth of topics covered. Current events can bolster civic knowledge and

engagement by providing new and timely information to students, as opposed to other classroom approaches that may present redundant material in a dry format (Galston, 2001). Instruction incorporating current events can be most effective when it involves discussion that is tailored to students' interests and does not avoid controversial topics (Niemi and Junn, 1998). The 2005 California Survey of Civic Education reported that 61% of students in classes that continuously discussed current events said that they were interested in politics compared to 32% in classes that did not include current events discussions in their curricula (California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2005). However, a current events-centric curriculum may not be sufficient to promote political learning and knowledge gain, especially of facts about institutions and processes. Discussing current events may require some reinforcement, including through educational materials like textbooks, readings, videos, and online resources. Vercellotti and Matto (2009) found that combination of reading political articles and discussing them at home can promote an increase in internal political efficacy that did not occur for those who discussed the articles only in class. Hess (2009) suggests that classroom discussion of controversial issues should be carefully considered in terms of public policy rather than being a quick response to the day's headlines.

Simulations, such as role playing, mock elections, and mock trials, have been found to be effective in increasing knowledge and developing political attitudes (Niemi and Junn, 1998; Levine, 1996; Leming, 1996; Brody, 1994; Kahne and Middaugh, 2008a; Middaugh and Kahne, 2009). Yet some studies have shown that such simulations of civic activities are often limited to select programs, such as Advanced Placement classes, or omitted due to strict curriculum guidelines (Kahne and Middaugh, 2008b; Torney-Purta, 2002). Community-based activities, such as attending meetings, service learning, meeting with community leaders, and field trips,

can enlighten students about the ways in which they can participate in politics that can become especially relevant later in the life course. However, community-based activities, including service learning opportunities, do not always contributed to the acquisition of political knowledge, especially when the curriculum is not linked directly to the experience (Youniss and Yates, 1997).

Assessing the connection between civic education and political knowledge can be challenging given that there are other sources of political information that people encounter over the life course. People who are interested in politics and follow government actions closely are likely to be far more knowledgeable about politics than people who pay little attention to political affairs. They can gain information from political media, discussions with others, and through their involvement in political and civic life.

Hypotheses

We argue that civic education contributes positively to people's acquisition of political knowledge. We expect to find that lecture and textbook-based approaches to civics instruction are conducive to conveying facts about American government and politics to students. Certain types of active learning approaches also are related to knowledge gain, especially those that make facts an integral element of the learning experience. Incorporating discussions of current events into the curriculum is one method that can be used to make civics come alive for students. Other approaches, such as those that involve community-based activities, may be less conducive to the learning of political facts, especially when a direct connection between the activity and political knowledge is not established.

Thus, following hypotheses will be subject to empirical testing in this study:

H_1: Higher levels of formal civic education are associated with higher levels of political knowledge.

H_2: Lecture and textbook approaches to civic education are positively related to the acquisition of factual knowledge about government and politics.

H_3: Incorporating discussions of current events into the curriculum is positively related to the acquisition of factual knowledge about government and politics.

H_4: Community-based instructional methods are not related to the acquisition of factual knowledge about government and politics.

Data

This study employs data from two original surveys designed to examine the influence of civic training on the development of political orientations and citizenship skills.[1] The Civic Education and Political Engagement Study (CEPES) is an online survey conducted by Knowledge Networks (KN) between May 14 and 28, 2010. It employs a national probability sample (n=1,228) drawn from KN's nationwide online panel.[2] This study is unique in the extent to which it explores respondents' civic education experience in detail through an extensive battery of questions that takes into account classroom civic education, service-learning programs, and participation in extracurricular activities. Respondents evaluated their own civic education experience and reported their attitudes toward civics instruction in general.[3] The survey includes standard and new items related to political socialization, knowledge, norms, attitudes, values, participation, campaign activity, voting behavior, traditional media use, and new/social media use.

The same questionnaire with additional items was administered to a sample of alumni of We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution (WTP), a civic education

program developed the by Center for Civic Education. The program's curriculum incorporates innovative instructional techniques, including a simulated congressional hearing in which students demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of constitutional principles in front of a panel of judges. More than 30 million students and 90,000 teachers have participated in We the People since its inception in 1987 (http://new.civiced.org/programs/wtp). The survey was administered online by the researchers to a convenience sample of WTP alumni (n=1,245). The first round of data collection targeting WTP alumni from all age cohorts took place in May and June of 2010 (n=1,002). The survey was administered to a sample of recent graduates of WTP in May and June of 2011 (n=243), half of whom were winners of state-level competitions based on simulated hearings and had attended the WTP National Finals in Washington, D.C. , while the other half were typical program students.[4]

Measures

The dependent variable in this study is political knowledge, which is explored both in terms of individual items and an additive index. The analysis employs three types of civic education measures. The first measure, the civic education index, provides a general account of the extent of a respondent's formal civics training. It taps whether a person has no civic education, has taken a basic course, or has experience with a more intensive program with a dedicated and innovative civics curriculum. The second set of indicators examines the basic approach to civics instruction that was employed by the respondents' teachers—lecture, textbook, current events, classroom activity, and community activity-based approaches. The third category of items measure respondents' experiences with specific curricular activities, such as taking part in debates, writing

letters to political leaders, and attending community meetings, as part of their formal civic education. The analysis also employs measures of respondents' participation in extracurricular activities, demographic variables, and an index of attentiveness to politics.

Political Knowledge

The CEPES and WTP Alumni data sets both include six political knowledge indicators that are used in this study. The measures tap respondents' knowledge of basic facts about national institutions, including the presidency, House of Representatives, Senate, and Supreme Court, as well as an item about the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and a question about presidential elections. (See the Appendix for complete question wording.) Each item was scored 1 for a correct answer and 0 for an incorrect response. There is a debate in the literature about the treatment of the "don't know" responses to political knowledge questions (see Luskin and Bullock, 2001). A very small percentage of the respondents in our study selected the "don't know" response, and these responses have been combined with those indicating an incorrect answer. The six items were combined to form a seven-point political knowledge index ranging from a low of 0 to a high of 6.[5]

Civic Education Index

A civic education index was constructed for the CEPES data as a basic indicator of the amount of civics instruction people received. The index also taps into the quality of a respondent's formal civic education experience. The survey asked respondents if they had taken a government, social studies, or civics class in junior high or high school.[6] Participants also indicated whether or not they had taken part in a civic education program that went beyond the basic government, social studies, or civics curriculum to

incorporate active and innovative learning features, such as field trips, interviews with civic leaders, debates, mock trials, hearings, and simulated elections. Survey respondents affirmed participation in approximately 35 different civic education programs. These programs differ in specific goals and instructional methods, but all involve some type of curriculum innovation. More than twice as many respondents to the CEPES conducted by KN participated in We the People (75 cases or 6% of the sample) than in any other program. Additional programs include Kids Voting USA, Model Congress/Model United Nations, Street Law, Close Up, and Project Citizen. Students who participate in some of these programs can be predisposed to high achievement and strong civic attitudes. Some students may self-select into the program or are encouraged to enroll by teachers and parents. However, others may be exposed to the program as a regular part of the curriculum or because it is a required course. Pretesting of the survey revealed that respondents could not recall whether their civics instruction was required or elective, and so we excluded this variable from the study and cannot make a determination about how a student came to participate in a civic education program. The civic education index consists of three categories: 1) people who had no civic education at all (12% of the sample); 2) those who took a civics/social studies course only (47% of the sample); and 3) individuals who took a civics/social studies course and participated in a civic education program (41% of the sample).[7]

Instructional Approach Variables

The surveys include items that tap into the type of classroom civics instruction that the respondent received. These variables measure the extent to which the class experience included lecture, textbook-based learning, current events-based learning,

classroom activities, and community-based activities. Each item is measured using a five point indicator ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (always). Lecture and textbook-based learning were combined to form an additive index of traditional instructional methods ranging from 0 to 8. A similar nine-point additive index of activities-based instructional methods was created from the classroom and community-based activities items.[8]

Curricular Activities Variables

Respondents were asked if they had ever taken part in a variety of activities in conjunction with their civics training. These items catalogue specific active learning elements as opposed to the broader instructional approach variables. A mock election, for example, might be a classroom activity used in conjunction with an activities-based instructional method. The fourteen instructional activities include: 1) debates, 2) a competition to test civic knowledge, 3) mock trials, 4) hearings, 5) mock elections, 6) delivering a speech, 7) discussing current events that the respondent cared about, 8) writing a letter to a government official, 9) circulating a petition, 10) attending a community meeting, 11) meeting with government or community leaders, 12) taking a field trip to a local, state, or federal government institution or historic site, 13) community service, and 14) creating civics-related informational material, newsletters, videos, or websites. These dichotomous items were coded 1 if the activity was part of the respondent's civic instruction and 0 if it was not. A curricular activities index combining twelve of these indicators was computed.[9] The competition and informational materials variables were not included in the index as few people reported having these activities as part of their civic education experience, and these items had no relationship to political knowledge.

Extracurricular Activities Variables

The survey asked respondents if they had participated in eighteen different types of extracurricular activities, each represented by a dichotomous variable (coded 1 "yes, participated" and 0 "did not participate"). Prior research indicates that particular types of extracurricular activities are related to specific aspects of politicization, especially political activation. Participation in politically-relevant extracurriculars, such as student council or working on an election campaign, for example, is related to greater political engagement over the life course (Gordon and Babchuk, 1958; Ziblatt, 1965; Beane, et al., 1981; Beck and Jennings, 1982; Olsen, 1982; Ladewig and Thomas, 1987; Putnam, 1993; Youniss, et al., 1997; Youniss and Yates, 1998; Eccles and Barber, 1999; Eccles et al., 2003). To test for the influence of extracurriculars on political knowledge, we created four scales representing specific categories of extracurricular activities—political, media-related, service, and sports/hobbies. The political activities scale (range 0 to 4) includes participation in student government, debate team or mock trial, a political campaign, or political internship. The media-related extracurricular activities scale (range 0 to 4) consists of taking part in student newspaper, yearbook, the school's radio or television station, and literary journal. A scale representing service extracurricular activities (range 0 to 4) takes into account participation in a community service organization, Boy or Girl Scouts, 4-H Club or other agricultural organization, and church or religious groups. The final scale (range 0 to 5) includes participation in sports, hobby organizations, cheerleading, band, choir, glee club, drama club, and language clubs.

Control Variables

Demographic control variables for sex, age, race, years of education, and family income were included in the analysis as prior research indicates that these factors are correlated with political knowledge. In addition to these demographic variables, the amount of interest in and attention to politics reported by respondents was taken into account. Three questions were combined to form an index of political attentiveness: 1) In general, how interested are you in politics and public affairs? 2) How often do you follow government and politics? 3) How much attention do you pay to media coverage of politics? [10] The index ranges from 1, indicating no interest in or attention to politics, to 12, referencing a high level of attentiveness.[11]

Analysis

The results of our analysis of the CEPES national data confirm the findings of prior studies documenting the public's generally low levels of basic knowledge of American government and politics. Less than half of the public could successfully answer the knowledge questions on the CEPES national survey with the exception of the item asking for the number of U.S. senators (52%). Forty-six percent of the public correctly answered the presidential succession item, 42% knew the length of a House member's term, and 41% could state the number of Supreme Court justices. Knowledge of the First Amendment to the Constitution was especially low, as only 27% of the national sample got this item correct. Forty-six percent of the public gave the right response to the election question.

Demographics

A bivariate analysis of the national data reveals differences in knowledge based on the demographic variables. Our study supports the findings of prior research

indicating significant gender differences in factual knowledge about political institutions and processes favoring males. As Table 1 demonstrates, a higher percentage of men than women gave the correct response to every one of the knowledge items.[12]

[Table 1 about here]

The bivariate findings for age in the national data set are not consistent, and vary by question. (See Table 2.) A higher percentage of older people got the presidential succession question correct. People age 30 and older scored better on the items asking about the number of Senators, the number of Supreme Court Justices, and elections. There were no significant age-related differences on the House of Representatives question. People age 18-44 were more knowledgeable about the U.S. Constitution than their older counterparts. The correlation between the political knowledge index and age is very low (Pearson's R=.003) and nonsignificant.

[Table 2 about here]

There are statistically significant differences in political knowledge associated with race in the bivariate analysis. As Table 3 shows, a higher percentage of whites in the national data set correctly answered all of the questions except the item about the U.S. Constitution, where there were no significant differences across racial categories. As we will see, these race-based variations do not hold up in the multivariate analysis. It is likely that other factors, such as education and socioeconomic status, mitigate the racial distinctions observed here.

[Table 3 about here]

As one would expect and prior research has shown (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1991, 1996; Ehman, 1980; Lambert, et al., 1988; Niemi and Junn, 1998; Kenski, 2000),

years of education is a strong predictor of political knowledge. The Pearson's correlation between education and political knowledge (.354; p≤.00) is the highest among the demographic variables in our study. As Table 4 demonstrates, the percentage of people who gave the correct answer increases with education for every question. Family income level also is strongly and positively correlated with political knowledge (Pearson's R=.335; p≤.00).

[Table 4 about here]

Civic Education

Higher levels of civic education are positively associated with political knowledge gain. The CEPES data show that, with the exception of the presidential succession item, people who have no classroom civic education have far less knowledge of basic facts about government and politics than people who have taken a civics or social studies course. People whose civic education experience includes participating in a civics program, like Close Up, We the People, or Street Law, are substantially more likely to answer the knowledge questions correctly than the general public. (See Table 5.) For example, 64% of people who have taken a civics course and participated in a program could correctly state the number of U.S. senators compared to 47% of those who have taken a social studies course only and 33% of those lacking formal civics training. People who have participated in a civic education program (35%) were twice as likely to answer the U.S. Constitution question correctly as those who have no classroom civics training (17%).

[Table 5 about here]

An examination of the We the People Alumni data provides further evidence of the effectiveness of civic education programs in conveying basic political knowledge. Table 6 compares data from WTP class of 2011, separated into those who participated in the National Finals competition and those who did not, to their approximate age cohort (18-19 year olds) in the CEPES national sample. The table also contrasts the knowledge of the alumni sample (minus the 2011 graduates) to the national sample. The findings indicate that We the People alumni are far more likely to correctly answer the six knowledge questions than the general public. As one would expect, the 2011 graduates are the most likely to correctly answer the questions given that the information is fresher in their minds. This result is particularly strong for students who participated in the WTP National Finals, which requires intensive preparation and critical processing of core civics information for the simulated congressional hearing competition. Knowledge of the Constitution is a central element of the WTP curriculum, and the data reveal the largest gap in knowledge between the 2011 WTP students and their age-based cohort is on this question. Ninety-one percent of 2011 WTP students—97% of national finalists—correctly answered the First Amendment question compared to 35% of 18-19 year olds in the general population. Similarly, a far higher percentage of the older WTP alumni gave the correct response to the knowledge items than members of the general public. Eighty-seven percent of the WTP alumni sample gave the right answer to the First Amendment question compared to 27% of the national sample. These findings suggest that WTP alumni retain information they learned through their innovative civics training over time, although it is impossible to verify with the survey data. Interviews we have conducted with WTP alumni provide support for this conjecture. Participants attribute the program

with not only teaching them basic facts about politics, but also in imparting an understanding about why this information is important and how it relates to political life.[13]

[Table 6 about here]

We next examine whether particular instructional approaches are more effective in conveying basic knowledge about government and politics than others. The analysis takes into account traditional lecture and textbook-based approaches as well as methods that rely on current events, class activities, and community activities. Table 7 provides the percentage of people correctly answering each question whose civic instruction "always" involved the approach. There is a higher correspondence between the traditional approaches of lecture and textbook learning and respondents correctly answering the political knowledge questions than for methods employing current events, class activities, and community activities. This finding is not surprising, given that lecture-based classes and those that rely heavily on textbooks are likely to cover basic facts about American government as a routine part of the curriculum. The relationship is strongest for respondents whose civics instruction "always" included lecture, and is somewhat less robust for instruction that relied heavily on textbook learning. These two approaches are often used in tandem. The relationship for civics instruction that "always" incorporated current events is somewhat weaker than for lecture and textbook approaches. Instruction that "always" involved class or community activities had the lowest correspondence to the learning of political facts. The general pattern is weakest for knowledge of the First Amendment to the Constitution, as the differences in the

percentages of people getting the question correct vary only slightly across the types of instructional techniques.

[Table7 about here]

Table 8 presents the correlations between the political knowledge index and the classroom instructional method variables. This analysis also demonstrates that the strongest correspondence exists between knowledge and instruction that is lecture-based (Pearson's R .234; $p \leq .00$) followed by approaches that rely heavily on textbooks (Pearson's R .151; $p \leq .05$). The coefficients for the innovative approaches incorporating current events, class activities, and community activities were all weak and nonsignificant. These findings indicate that classroom approaches that rely solely or heavily on class or community activities may be less successful than lecture and textbook-centric approaches in conveying the kind of factual information about government and politics addressed in this study. More active approaches may be more conducive to promoting other forms of politicization, such as civic attitudes and actions.

The finding for current events-based approaches seems to contradict evidence from prior studies. Our data show that instructional methods that are "always" or "frequently" current events-based, perhaps to the exclusion or marginalization of lecture and textbook content, are not as useful for conveying discrete facts about government and politics as traditional methods. A current events-heavy curriculum may well be effective for teaching different material, such as issue or political process information. Our findings should not be interpreted as negating the importance of current events to the civics curriculum. Instead, it suggests that the way that current events are employed in the classroom may make a difference in the extent to which knowledge is gained. The

next section of our analysis hones in on specific active approaches to civic learning, and shows that including discussions of current events that students care about as part of the curriculum is an important predictor of political knowledge. Making current events relevant while imparting facts about government and politics in class, perhaps in conjunction with textbook and lecture elements, may be a valuable way to structure the curriculum.

[Table 8 about here]

We now turn to an examination of the relationship between curricular activities, such as mock trials and elections, giving speeches, and meeting government leaders, to political knowledge. As Table 9 indicates, a small percentage of CEPES respondents were exposed to the types of innovative curriculum approaches that we document in this study. A quarter of respondents engaged in discussions of current events that they cared about and a similar percentage went on field trips (24%), took part in a debate (21%), or delivered a speech (18%). Twelve percent or less of the respondents received civics instruction that included any of the other types of curricular activities. Only a handful of respondents took part in a hearing or created civics-related materials. The situation is different for the WTP alumni, as the majority of these students were exposed to active learning approaches as part of their civic education experience (see Owen, 2011). The innovative approaches that are integral to the WTP curriculum may contribute to alumni's superior levels of political knowledge. In our interviews with WTP alumni, subjects consistently identified active instructional aspects of the WTP curriculum as being central to their learning experience.

Extracurricular Activities

A positive relationship exists between extracurricular activities and political knowledge in the bivariate analysis. (See Table 10.) As expected, the strongest association exists for participation in politically-relevant extracurriculars (Pearsons R=.164; p≤.01), such as student government or volunteering for a campaign. The correlation between service extracurricular activities (Pearson's R=.151; p≤.01) is slightly less robust than for politically-relevant activities. The fact that the differences between these coefficients is small signals that participating in community service, a church group, a 4-H Club, or scouts is almost as relevant for political knowledge acquisition as taking part in an overtly political activity. It may be the case that service activities attract students who have a commitment to community, and are more inclined to feel that learning about government is a civic responsibility. The relationship is weaker for sports and hobbies (Pearson's R=.106; p≤.01) and media-related activities (Pearson's R=.091; p≤01), like student newspaper and yearbook. As we shall see, the relationship between extracurricular activities and political knowledge is no longer significant in the multivariate analysis.

[Table 10 about here]

Multivariate Analysis

An OLS regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between civic education and political knowledge controlling for the effects of demographic variables, political interest, and participation in extracurricular activities. The variables were entered into the model in blocks consisting of: 1) demographic variables; 2) the political attentiveness index; 3) civic education variables; and 4) extracurricular activities variables. Blocks were employed in order to determine the contribution of each category of indicators and, in the case of the civic education

and extracurricular activities variables, to deal with some evidence of multicollinearity. The findings appear in Table 11.

The block of demographic variables explains the highest percentage of the variance (20%). The two strongest demographic predictors are education (beta=.155; p≤.01) and income (beta=.159; p≤.01). The gender differences indicating men have more knowledge of basic facts about politics than women remains significant in the multivariate analysis. Age, whose bivariate correlation with knowledge is weak and nonsignificant, is statistically significant in the regression analysis. The coefficient indicates that younger people have greater political knowledge than older people. This finding may be attributed to the better specification of the age variable by the other items in the analysis. Younger people, especially those with higher levels of education and greater resources, like income, are more knowledgeable than their older counterparts who may lose recall of factual knowledge over time (Jennings, 1996). The dummy variables entered for race (white, black, Hispanic) are not statistically significant.

The political attentiveness indicator is the strongest individual predictor of political knowledge (beta=.300; p≤.00). On its own, political attentiveness explains 8% of the variance in the dependent variable. Political attentiveness is positively correlated with all of the civic education variables with the exception of community-based instructional approaches.[14] This association suggests that civic education contributes to people following politics later in life, which also can play a part in their exhibiting higher levels of political knowledge.

The block of civic education variables explains a small percentage (2.5%) of the variance in political knowledge after controls for demographics, political attentiveness are introduced. The civic education index, which is a general indicator of the quality of a respondent's civic education experience, is positively related to political knowledge and is statistically significant.

The findings of the multivariate analysis for the classroom approaches variables reveal trends similar to those evident in the bivariate analysis. These variables reflect respondents' perceptions of the overall approach that characterized their civics instruction. The relationship of lecture/textbook learning to political knowledge is positive and statistically significant. The beta coefficient for the current events-based approach variable is small and nonsignificant. The combined class and community activities approach variable is negatively associated with knowledge. The active curricular methods index taps into specific curriculum innovations that were incorporated into the respondents' civic education. This index has the highest coefficient among the civic education variables (beta=.206; $p \leq .00$), and is the second highest in the model following political attentiveness. Not one of the extracurricular activities variables is statistically significant in the multivariate model, and the block explains virtually none of the variance in political knowledge.

[Table 11 about here]

Discussion

Explaining political knowledge is a challenging exercise, especially as numerous factors can account for people's acquisition of information about government and politics. Our study backs the contention that civic education has a discernable positive effect on political knowledge. It suggests that a curriculum grounded in traditional instructional methods and which incorporates meaningful active learning elements may be optimal for conveying factual knowledge about institutions, foundational principles, and political processes. Our analysis supports the hypothesis that exposure to traditional lecture and textbook approaches to teaching civics is positively associated with political knowledge. People whose civics instruction was strongly based on these methods were more likely than others to answer the knowledge questions

in the study correctly. Regarding innovative instructional methods, it may be the case that too much of a good thing undermines the transmission of factual knowledge of politics. Civics classes that are predicated entirely or heavily on current events may not be successful in conveying factual political knowledge in a manner that is retained by students. However, instruction that integrates current events as an element of the civics curriculum that includes discussion of relevant topics is positively associated with heightened knowledge levels. Similarly, civic education that is entirely or frequently based on classroom or community activities is not correlated with political knowledge. Including class or community activities as a meaningful part of the curriculum, however, can enhance political knowledge gain.

The influence of civic education on political knowledge can be direct in terms of imparting information through classroom instruction that is retained over the life course. It also can be indirect, as civic education creates a heightened sense of politicization that encourages people to be attentive to politics. Individuals can learn about politics through interpersonal discussion, direct observation of government and political processes in action, or via the media. This study does not test these assumptions directly, but the findings suggest a connection between civic education and a propensity to follow politics later in the life course that could correspond to heightened knowledge levels.

Our study demonstrates the link between pre-collegiate civic education and political knowledge, a finding that may be especially relevant for people who do not seek a college education and stand to benefit from such instruction. There has been a decrease in classroom opportunities for non-college bound youth to acquire citizenship knowledge and skills, as the amount of time devoted to the instruction of democratic citizenship has declined (National Center for Learning and Citizenship, 2010; Youniss, 2011). In a 2006 study of 299

representative school districts in every state conducted by the Center for Education Policy, 71% of the surveyed districts reported they had reduced instructional time in at least one other subject to make more time for reading and math. The decline in opportunities to become politically informed has not been uniform across groups. Those who speak English as a second language and who come from disadvantaged backgrounds are more like to attend schools that omit civic education and focus primarily on reading and math. In addition, the future of many civic education programs is in jeopardy as schools lack the resources to implement them. The Education for Democracy Act, which funded civic education in the United States and emerging democracies that has benefitted millions of students, was cut from the federal budget in 2011. We the People, Close Up, and other programs mentioned by respondents to our study lost their funding.

Conclusion

The present study is part of a larger project we are conducting on civic education and political engagement, and it is our first step in examining political knowledge. This analysis focused on knowledge of discrete political facts. We also asked respondents about how much they feel they know about a variety of political domains, such as the lawmaking process, the rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizens, and the Electoral College system. We seek to explain variations in people's perceptions about how much they know about government and politics, and the implications for their political development and engagement.

This study lays the groundwork for understanding the factors that contribute to political knowledge. There are countless avenues of future research on the acquisition of political knowledge and civic education. First, political attentiveness, as the strongest predictor of political knowledge in our study, warrants further investigation, especially attention to political

media and discussion of politics. Future work on political media consumption would indicate the strength of the connection between exposure to political media and political knowledge. Research might focus on differing knowledge returns across specific media platforms (e.g., newspapers, television, Internet, and social networks) as well as different outlets (e.g., NBC News, Fox News, CSPAN, The Wall Street Journal, Politico, Drudge Report, and Twitter). How much time a person spends discussing politics with others is also an important aspect of political attentiveness. This variable can be studied on its own, testing Putnam's theory to determine if interpersonal communication is an important predictor of knowledge. This work can delve deeper into the issue by looking at varying knowledge returns from discussions with family, friends, colleagues, or other opinion leaders.

The findings presented here raise possible policy implications for civic education by assessing the effectiveness of particular techniques. To build on this practical application, future research should take a more nuanced look at different cohorts of American students. For example, which classroom techniques yield the highest knowledge returns for low income/low education students versus high income/high education students. This work would be instructive for educators who could tailor their curricula depending on the demographics of the students they are teaching. Further, future research should examine the impact of teacher quality on political knowledge returns. This work would shed light on which classroom techniques are inherently successful and which are dependent on the manner and style in which they are taught.

Table 1
Political Knowledge by Gender (CEPES)

(percentage of respondents answering the question correctly)

	Men	Women	Sign. χ^2
Presidential Succession	53%	40%	.00
# of U.S. Senators	56%	49%	.03
U.S. House Member Term	45%	40%	n.s.
# Supreme Court Justices	44%	38%	.04
First Amendment to Constitution	32%	23%	.00
Election	50%	43%	.01

Table 2
Political Knowledge by Age (CEPES)

(percentage of respondents answering the question correctly)

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+	Sign. χ^2
Presidential Succession	36%	41%	35%	38%	.00
# of U.S. Senators	46%	58%	54%	51%	.04
U.S. House Member Term	44%	42%	45%	39%	n.s.
# Supreme Court Justices	34%	45%	48%	36%	.00
First Amendment to Constitution	34%	35%	26%	14%	.00
Election	40%	50%	50%	44%	.02

Table 3
Political Knowledge by Race (CEPES)

(percentage of respondents answering the question correctly)

	White	Black	Hispanic	Other	Sign. χ^2
Presidential Succession	51%	41%	35%	38%	.00
# of U.S. Senators	58%	35%	33%	58%	.00
U.S. House Member Term	45%	34%	38%	36%	.02
# Supreme Court Justices	43%	34%	33%	49%	.01
First Amendment to Constitution	27%	28%	25%	29%	n.s.
Election	49%	39%	43%	38%	.03

Table 4
Political Knowledge by Education (CEPES)

(percentage of respondents answering the question correctly)

	< High School	High School	Some College	College	Sign. χ^2
Presidential Succession	31%	38%	49%	61%	.00
# of U.S. Senators	24%	37%	54%	78%	.00
U.S. House Member Term	30%	34%	45%	55%	.00
# Supreme Court Justices	28%	27%	42 +%	61%	.00
First Amendment to Constitution	16%	16%	27%	46%	.00
Election	36%	44%	47%	54%	.00

Table 5
Political Knowledge by Civic Education (CEPES)
(percentage of respondents answering the question correctly)

	No Civic Ed	Civics/Social Studies Course Only	Civics/Social Studies Course and Program	Total Sample
Presidential Succession	49%	39%	59%	46%
# of U.S. Senators	33%	47%	64%	52%
U.S. House Member Term	24%	40%	50%	42%
# Supreme Court Justices	21%	37%	51%	41%
First Amendment to Constitution	17%	23%	35%	27%
Election	32%	44%	54%	46%

X^2 sign. p≤.00 for all knowledge items

Table 6
Political Knowledge of We the People Alumni
(percentage of respondents answering the question correctly)

	2011 WTP National Finalists	2011 WTP National Finalists	National Sample (age 18-19)	WTP Alumni Sample	National Sample
Presidential Succession	90%	94%	35%	85%	46%
# of U.S. Senators	80%	92%	48%	80%	52%
U.S. House Member Term	73%	80%	43%	68%	42%
# Supreme Court Justices	88%	92%	38%	85%	41%
1st Amendment to Constitution	91%	97%	35%	87%	27%
Election	77%	86%	40%	71%	46%

Table 7
Political Knowledge by Classroom Instructional Method (CEPES)

(percentage of respondents correctly answer the question whose civics instruction "always" included the method)

	Lecture	Textbook	Current Events	Class Activities	Community Activities
Presidential Succession	53%	47%	39%	36%	42%
# of U.S. Senators	64%	54%	57%	38%	29%
U.S. House Member Term	53%	52%	41%	33%	38%
# Supreme Court Justices	55%	49%	40%	36%	31%
1st Amendment to Constitution	38%	34%	35%	30%	32%
Election	47%	51%	39%	35%	42%

Table 8
Correlations (Pearson's R) Between the Political Knowledge Index and Classroom Instructional Method (CEPES)

Lecture	.234*
Textbook	.151**
Current Events	.060
Class Activities	-.008
Community Activities	-.071

*p≤.00 **p≤.05

Table 9
Curricular Activities and Political Knowledge (CEPES)
(percentage who took part in the activity and correlation with political knowledge index)

	% Who Took Part in Activity	Correlation with Political Knowledge Index Pearson's R
Discuss current events that you cared about	24%	.224*
Take a field trip to a local, state, or federal government institution or historical site	24%	.195*
Deliver a speech	18%	.188*
A debate	21%	.165*
A mock election	12%	.154*
Meet with government or community leaders	5%	.111*
Community service	8%	.109*
Attend a community meeting	8%	.105*
Mock trial	12%	.076*
Circulate a petition	4%	-.077**
A competition to test your civic knowledge	6%	.060**
Write a letter to a government official	9%	.044
A hearing	2%	---
Create civics-related informational material, newsletter, videos, or website	1%	---

*p≤.01 **p≤.05

Table 10
Correlations (Pearson's R) Between the Political Knowledge Index and Extraurricular Activities (CEPES)

Political	.164*
Media	.091*
Service	.151*
Sports and Hobby	.106*

*p≤.01

Table 11
OLS Regression Analysis of the Political Knowledge Index on Demographic Variables, Political Interest, Civic Education, and Extracurricular Activities (CEPES)

	Beta	R^2 for Block
Demographics		.199*
Gender	-.088*	
Age	-.072*	
White	-.051	
Black	-.030	
Hispanic	-.045	
Education	.155*	
Income	.159*	
Interest/Attention to Politics	.300*	.082*
Civic Education		.025*
Civic Education Index	.079*	
Lecture/Textbook Approaches	.063*	
Current Events Approach	.049	
Class and Community Activities Approach	-.169*	
Active Curricular Methods	.206*	
Extracurricular Activities		.003
Political	.035	
Media	.003	
Service	.034	
Sports and Hobbies	-.050	
Total R^2 for Model		.311*
n=1,096		

*p≤.01

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APPENDIX

Political Knowledge Question Wording

After the Vice President, who is next in line for the U.S. presidency?

--Secretary of State
--President Pro Tempore of the Senate
--Speaker of the House of Representatives
--Secretary of the Treasury

How many senators are in the U.S. Congress?

(open-ended question)

How long is the term for members of the House of Representatives?

(open-ended question)

How many justices serve on the Supreme Court?

(open-ended question)

Which one of the following rights is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution?

--Protection from unreasonable search and seizure
--Right to petition the government for redress of grievances
--Right to a speedy trial by jury
--Right to bear arms

Which of the following statements is NOT true about American presidential elections?

--A candidate can win the popular vote and not be elected president
--Ties in presidential elections are decided by the Supreme Court
--The electoral college is mandated by the U.S. Constitution
--Presidential candidates are selected by delegates to the parties' national nominating conventions

NOTES

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[1] The principal investigator for the study is Diana Owen of Georgetown University. The study is funded by the Center for Civic Education.

[2] Information about the sampling techniques used by Knowledge Networks and response rate information can be obtained from their website: http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/knpanel/index.html.

[3] The fact that respondents relied on recall of their civic education experience is a potential limitation of this study. We sought to mitigate this pitfall by subjecting the instrument to rigorous pretesting of the items. The Georgetown University research team conducted an extensive survey and interview pretest on 288 subjects. A subsample of approximately 50 of the survey respondents was interviewed to determine if they had difficulty answering any of the questions. The interview subjects ranged from young people to octogenarians and included members of a senior citizens community in Florida. The subjects generally had little difficulty recalling their civics experience in some detail. A small number of items where recall was sketchy, such as whether their high school civics course had been required or was an elective class, were eliminated from the study. The survey instrument was pretested further by Knowledge Networks on 50 subjects before the final version went into the field.

[4] Participants for the WTP Alumni Survey were recruited through the WTP alumni network, WTP teachers, and WTP program coordinators. Respondents from 50 states and one American territory are represented in the sample. The respondents are self-selected; the sample is neither random nor representative. An attempt was made to recruit respondents who did not self-select into the WTP curriculum. Teachers and program coordinators reached out personally to students, and some successfully made special appeals to students who were not the top performers in the class to take the survey.

[5] The Cronbach's alpha for the political knowledge index for the CEPES data is .707 and for the WTP Alumni data is .620.

[6] The fact that respondents relied on recall of their civic education experience is a potential limitation of this study. We sought to mitigate this pitfall by subjecting the instrument to rigorous pretesting of the items. The Georgetown University research team conducted an extensive survey and interview pretest on 288 subjects. A subsample of the survey respondents was interviewed to determine if they had difficulty answering any of the questions. The interview subjects ranged from young people to octogenarians and included members of a senior citizens community in Florida. The subjects generally had little difficulty recalling their civics experience in some detail. A small number of items where recall was sketchy, such as whether their high school civics course had been required or was an elective class, were eliminated from

the study. The survey instrument was pretested further by Knowledge Networks on 50 subjects before the final version went into the field.

[7] Six respondents participated in a civics program, but did not take a civics course. These respondents were eliminated from the analysis because there were too few of them to analyze.

[8] The Cronbach's alpha for the CEPES traditional instructional methods index is .676 and is .698 for activities instructional methods index.

[9] For the CEPES data, the Cronbach's alpha for the class activities index is .713, for the community activities index is .696, and for the curricular activities index is .805.

[10] The Cronbach's alpha for the political attentiveness index is .827.

[11] Other indicators of political interest and engagement, such as level of political discussion, were examined. The relationship to political knowledge was weaker than for the included variables, and they were a source of multicollinearity in the OLS regression model.

[12] In keeping with prior research, we find that women are more likely to respond that they "don't know" the answer to the question than are men. However, these differences in our sample are small--between 1% and 2% depending upon the question. Thus we included the "don't know" responses with those indicating the wrong answer.

[13] Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with We the People alumni and teachers were conducted in May, June, and July of 2011 by the research team. The interviews have been transcribed and will be analyzed as part of the larger project on civic education and political engagement.

[14] The correlations between the political attentiveness index and the civic education indicators appear in the following table:

Civic Education Variable	Pearson's R
Civic Education Index	.169*
Lecture	.157*
Textbook	.159*
Current Events	.142*
Class Activities	.109*
Community Activities	.058
Curricular Activities Index	.307*

*p≤.01