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Civic and Political Knowledge and Skills

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Possessing political and civic knowledge is widely believed to be an important, even essential component of good citizenship. Although political and civic knowledge are similar, there are some differences. *Civic knowledge* is generally thought of as foundational information about the political, social, and economic system in which one lives (for example, the names of the three branches of the federal government in the United States) and often includes understanding the function of certain institutions (e.g., why civil liberties or access to multiple sources of news are important in democracies). This has been of long-standing interest but has intensified with recent concerns about low voting rates, especially among young people. As civic education has expanded in the recent past, increasing attention has been paid to developing high-quality test instruments in this area, composed of multiple-choice questions with keyed correct answers. These assessments are usually designed for the age-group from early adolescence through young adulthood and often include a section measuring civic skills as well. Examples of civic knowledge and skills tests are the National Assessment of Educational Progress for Civics (NAEP) and the series of cross-national studies of civic education conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA, discussed later in this entry).

In contrast, measures of *political knowledge* are usually designed for adults and ask them to identify the names of political leaders or to demonstrate awareness of current political issues or the stands taken by political parties. The next three sections deal with assumptions and evidence about both civic and political knowledge and skills and also consider recent changes in the nature and acquisition of civic and political knowledge brought about by the Internet and social media. A subsequent section compares U.S. adolescents' civic knowledge and skills with those in other countries and describes associations among the cognitive dimensions, attitudes of political trust, and expected participation.

Assumptions and Evidence About Political Knowledge and Its Value

Many scholars and opinion leaders identify a book written in 1996 by the political scientists Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter as providing the basic foundation for this topic. That classic volume, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*, defined *political knowledge* as consisting of factual knowledge about current issues or about political parties and leaders; these questions had been asked to adults in telephone surveys. It is usually assumed that political information is useful to citizens, as it allows them to live their lives in conformity with the law. Furthermore, if voters know how to get information about candidates before an election, this political knowledge will allow them to support candidates who are likely to promote policies that will benefit them or their communities. One of the most quoted findings from this book focuses on individuals of lower socioeconomic status, a group that obtains low scores on these measures of political knowledge. The irony, the authors argue, is that these are the very individuals who could benefit from electing officials who hold positive views about concrete economic programs such as support for low-income housing or a higher minimum wage. Citizens in these groups are particularly likely to be disadvantaged by their lack of political knowledge.

Henry Milner (a Canadian who worked extensively in Sweden) extended Delli Carpini and Keeter's work. He argued that enhancing citizens' political and civic knowledge, particularly about the issues and the positions of particular candidates, is a vital route toward greater participation in politics. Furthermore, he argued that when citizens are knowledgeable and display their knowledge in the choices they make in voting and advocacy, governments are more likely to be circumspect in their actions. These assumptions about the primacy of

citizens' knowledge over more emotional factors in making political choices and about governmental responsiveness represents an ideal for which there are historical and recent counterexamples, however.

Until about a decade ago, it was assumed that the majority of up-to-date political knowledge would be acquired by reading a newspaper (or watching television) or by talking with friends, neighbors, family, or coworkers face to face. Now the variety of media by which such information is available has changed rather abruptly. As Sarah Soberierja and Jeffrey Berry (2011) noted in their article titled "From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News," political information is currently disseminated, received, and assimilated in a wide variety of ways. These include talk radio, cable news, the blogosphere, and social media. The information from these sources, according to Soberierja and Berry, is often composed of facts that have not been checked for accuracy and of unedited opinion. It can be argued that factually verifiable information is playing less and less of a role in candidate choice and other aspects of politics. This may be especially consequential in certain age-groups.

A survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in 2012 concluded that social networking sites (such as Facebook and Twitter) are an important component of political and civic engagement for Americans with 66% of social media users posting their views on issues, responding to others' views, or encouraging others to act. The respondents between 18 and 29 years of age (the youngest group surveyed) were the most likely to use social media for civic or political activities. For example, the Pew researchers found that 42% of the 18- to 29-year-old respondents posted "thoughts on issues" whereas only 20% of the 65 and older respondents did so. The younger respondents were also more likely than any of the other age-groups to "follow officials/candidates on social media" (Pew Research Center, 2012, p. 5). Finally, in an analysis of Internet use of upper secondary students in Chile, Denmark, and England, Amadeo (2007) found a positive association between Internet use and civic knowledge and between Internet use and respondents' expectations for future civic and political activities. In short, there is ongoing debate about whether the increasing political use of the Internet and social media is positive or negative for gaining political knowledge and fostering informed political participation.

Assumptions and Evidence About Civic Knowledge and Its Value

In contrast to political knowledge, which is largely acquired during late adolescence or adulthood, many are convinced that *civic knowledge* should be transmitted during students' compulsory education. This means requiring courses in government and American history and civics that do not emphasize partisan political information or partisan choices. Textbooks, often packed with factual knowledge about governmental leaders and events, along with lectures, recitations, or testing, are the vehicles expected to transmit civic knowledge. Some assume that learning facts about the history and founding of American political institutions creates citizens who throughout their lives will experience deep respect for the heritage and traditions of the country (as David Lowenthal argues in his 1998 book *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*). It is assumed that knowledge of the names and functions of the three branches of the federal government (including the circumstances in which they were established) and the principles of checks and balances established in the Constitution (and other facets of American exceptionalism) will promote respect for the actions of elected political leaders and their decisions. Many who accept these premises become concerned when students are encouraged to debate issues such as the current struggles toward achievement of equality rather than being required to learn facts about what the U.S.

Constitution contains.

Evidence About Political and Civic Skills

A number of individuals and groups suggest that political and civic skills and the willingness to practice them are as essential as content knowledge for effective citizenship. One example of this is Michael Burawoy's call for a *public sociology*, made during his address as president of the American Sociological Association and followed with handbooks and materials on curricular approaches. In his view, education should equip students with knowledge and also the participatory and cognitive skills necessary for improving their communities. This includes, for example, the ability to identify major social problems about which there are disagreements and skills to judge the extent to which journalists and other media sources are providing accurate and actionable information about pressing issues or potential solutions. Fathali Moghaddam, in a book titled *The Psychology of Democracy*, has taken a more psychological approach, proposing a set of 10 *convictions* citizens in democracies should possess. His list includes a number of civic and political skills. For example, the democratic citizen must "critically question everything ..., revise opinions as the evidence requires, and seek information and opinions from different sources" (2016, p. 51).

Many authors distinguish between *cognitive or analytic skills* like these and *participatory skills*, which include being able to collaborate and cooperate with others who hold different opinions, as well as the skill to speak in an articulate way in contexts of public advocacy. In their well-known 1995 book *Voice and Equality*, Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady argued that civic skills often develop during adolescence. Of even greater importance is their conclusion that individuals who possess civic skills are likely to participate in civic life and to be effective.

In the tests that compose the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the U.S. Department of Education makes a distinction between civic cognitive or intellectual skills and civic participatory skills when they measure students' academic progress in the "civics" subject area (Amadeo, 2016). The intellectual or cognitive skills are described as the students' ability to describe, explain, interpret, and analyze. The participatory skills assessed include "interacting, monitoring, and influencing" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, pp. 4–5). The NAEP tests are administered to students during Grades 4, 8, and 12. A 2015 review paper by Judith Torney-Purta and colleagues, which lays out a framework suitable for assessing college students, also distinguishes between cognitive and participatory skills.

Civic Knowledge and Skills of U.S. Adolescents Compared With Those in Other Countries

Americans have become accustomed to hearing about the poor performance of their students in international tests of knowledge in fields such as science and mathematics conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). In contrast, when nationally representative samples of young people (aged 14) in 28 countries were tested using a 38-item assessment in the IEA CIVED Study, the U.S. sample achieved the highest score on the *civic skills component* (see Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). This measure included, for example, the ability to comprehend a mock election leaflet and to tell the difference between statements of fact and statements of opinion. Scores on the test's *civic knowledge component* for students in the United States were also above the international

mean. Students from homes with low literacy backgrounds and who did not aspire to college education had substantially lower civic knowledge and skills scores, however. In fact, the distribution of civic knowledge scores in the United States was bimodal. In other words, there was a substantial group of respondents with nearly perfect scores and a substantial group answering at little better than a chance level.

The IEA CIVED Study identified several school-related correlates of high knowledge and skills scores, which suggest the kind of civic education that is likely to be effective. Students who reported classroom study of four specific U.S. political institutions had higher overall knowledge scores than those who did not report such instruction (Torney-Purta & Barber, 2004). These educational researchers as well as David Campbell and other political scientists have shown that an open and respectful climate for classroom discussion and deliberation is associated with higher civic competence and participation. What might be the mechanism here? Christopher Karpowitz and Chad Raphael in their 2014 book titled *Deliberation, Democracy and Civic Forums* reported a study of adults' discussions in organized civic or public forums and concluded that "through exposure to the argument of others, deliberative talk can help participants ... enlarge their knowledge of issues and perspectives, ... correct false beliefs ... and arrive at more sophisticated views" (p. 69). The congruence of research findings about the importance of open and respectful discussion for developing civic knowledge is striking, whether adolescents or adults are considered.

Analyses of the IEA CIVED Study also found that students who possessed more civic knowledge and skills were more likely to expect to vote as adults and to obtain information about candidates before voting, a significant predictor in all 28 countries (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). More knowledgeable students in the United States also held more positive beliefs about the overall importance of citizens' conventional civic participation (voting, keeping up with political affairs). Civic knowledge was less substantially associated with the expected likelihood of volunteering, contributing to charity, or planning to engage in political activism (Torney-Purta & Barber, 2004).

The IEA CIVED Study (2001) and the subsequent International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS) (2010), from which these findings come, also included assessments of attitudes (e.g., sense of political efficacy, trust in political institutions). In a 2015 review of publications based on these studies, Ryan Knowles and Marialuisa Di Stefano found that few scholars appear to have examined civic knowledge in isolation. Most analyses relate knowledge to attitudes and participation. To give just two examples, looking across countries, Torney-Purta, Barber, and Richardson (2004) reported that trust in government was positively associated with civic knowledge in many democracies. However, in some postcommunist and Latin American countries, there was either no association, or higher knowledge scores were associated with less trust. Jon Lauglo (2013) confirmed these findings about trust and also found a significant association between civic knowledge and support for women's political rights (which he presented as an example of a rationally based civic attitude). However, it is important to recognize that the extent of political participation in adulthood or the choice of a particular candidate in an election depends only partially on political or civic knowledge. Possessing knowledge could allow a voter to obtain and comprehend information about which candidate most closely matches his or her own position on issues, but the choice of whether to vote and for whom depends on many other attitudinal and motivational factors.

Conclusion

The formation of political and civic knowledge and skills is essential for informed and active

participation in democratic life. This has become especially important in the context of a proliferation of new ways in which citizens are acquiring news and information about political issues, candidates, and events. Many researchers argue that knowledge and skills (in particular civic knowledge and skills) develop during adolescence. And most agree that those individuals with well-developed civic skills are more likely to be effective in participating in their communities. Therefore, assessing political and civic knowledge and skills is important, as well as attending to ways to increase effective classroom approaches such as open and respectful discussion of issues on which there are differing opinions.

See also [Citizenship](#); [Civic Engagement](#); [Democracy](#); [Political Participation](#); [Social Networking](#); [Voting Behavior](#), [Theories of](#)

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