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**ABSTRACT**

Historically there has been a relative dearth of social science research into civic education—even in political science, a discipline that had civic education as one of its founding objectives. This is partly due to the mistaken impression that civics instruction has no effect on civic and political participation, a conclusion that was once conventional wisdom but has since been refuted. More and more evidence has accumulated that well-designed civic education—both formal and informal—has meaningful, long-lasting effects on the civic engagement of young people. Existing research finds four aspects of schooling that affect civic learning and engagement: classroom instruction, extracurricular activities, service learning, and a school's ethos. Furthermore, state-level civics exams can positively affect knowledge about politics and government. The unifying theme that arises from this burgeoning literature is that effective civic education can compensate for a dearth of civic resources in the home and community. However, the renaissance of research into civic education is only just beginning, as more needs to be done. The existing data are too limited, and randomized studies are rare. Truly advancing our understanding of civic education will require a large-scale, multi-method, interdisciplinary effort.

If you were to ask most social scientists what, collectively, their respective disciplines know about civic education, the answer would likely be "not much." While that response may have been accurate 20 years ago, times have changed. In recent years, more and more social scientists have increasingly paid attention to the empirical study of civic education, although it is regrettably still not a major area of research. As a result, many scholars are unaware of the full scope of recent scholarship on civic education. A scan of this literature reveals that the social sciences do indeed have a lot to offer the study of how, what, when, and why young people learn about politics. To paraphrase Dr. Benjamin Spock's famous advice to new parents: social scientists know more than they think they do.

This article summarizes what social scientists know about civic education in secondary schools. Most of the work cited herein comes from political science, although since civic education is a multidisciplinary topic, it also draws on cognate fields such as psychology, economics, and sociology. The focus is primarily on the United States, but this article references research from other Western, liberal democracies where the findings are applicable to the American context. This is

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not to dismiss civic education research in other nations, as there is a lot of exciting research being done on civic education in the developing world as well.[1]

The objective of this article is to encourage more cross-fertilization among empirically oriented scholars across disciplines who share a common interest in civic education. Indeed, the best work on civic education draws from different scholarly perspectives.[2] Throughout the course of the article, I note areas where further research should be directed and which would benefit from collaboration between scholars of different disciplines. While beyond the scope of this article, social scientists interested in civic education should also consult the thriving literature on social studies education. A good place to start is *Citizenship Education and Global Migration: Implications for Theory, Research, and Teaching*, edited by James Banks (2017).

The article proceeds as follows. First, I consider why there is a relative dearth of social science research into civic education. The next four sections then draw on existing scholarship to highlight aspects of schooling that have been shown to affect young people's preparation for active citizenship in a democratic society: classroom instruction, extracurricular activities, service learning, and school ethos. I then discuss how public policy can impact the effectiveness of civic education. Finally, the article concludes with specific recommendations for future research. My hope is that scholars reading this article will take up the charge to conduct more high-quality research. Ideally, the end result will be the development of a thriving literature and sustained research infrastructure to study the effectiveness of civic education.

## Why is there not more research on civic education?

While civic education is a subject of interest across many different disciplines, it has historically been of particular interest to political scientists, going all the way back to the birth of the discipline. The American Political Science Association states that "education for civic engagement and responsive governance were founding objectives of the political science profession" (American Political Science Association, n.d.). In that spirit, political scientists often point to the need for better civics instruction as a cure for various problems. For example, there is a perennial debate over the level of political knowledge within the electorate and whether the (arguably) low levels of factual knowledge are troubling for a representative democracy. Those scholars who lament the level of information in the electorate often point to improved civic education as a remedy (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Similarly, a major theme in political science research has been the decline in civic engagement of all sorts, especially voter turnout. Again, in response to these concerns, a common recommendation has been renewed attention to civic education (Hanmer, 2009; Putnam, 2001; Teixeira, 1992; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). More recently, a meta-theme in the study of American politics has been the heightened state of political tension within the United States; again civic education has been offered as a solution (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Mutz, 2006). In other words, civic education is often the requisite recommendation in the conclusion of a book or article to answer the question of "what is to be done?" Although civic education is often offered as a solution, empirical evidence on effective civic education remains in short supply relative to other topics studied within political science (Battistoni, 2013).

### A (perceived) lack of impact for civic education

One explanation for the lack of civic education research lies in the seminal influence of an article published 50 years ago in the *American Political Science Review*, the flagship journal of the

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[1] For example, see Bleck, 2015; Finkel, Horowitz, & Rojo-Mendoza, 2012; Finkel & Smith, 2011; Gottlieb, 2016.
[2] Illustrative examples include Campbell, Levinson, & Hess, 2012; Hart & Youniss, 2018; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013.

American Political Science Association. Drawing on a nationally representative study of American high school students, Langton and Jennings (1968) concluded that civics courses had little to no effect on a variety of civic outcomes: political knowledge/sophistication, political interest, spectator politicization (i.e., media consumption), political discourse, political efficacy, political cynicism, civic tolerance, and participation orientation (i.e., anticipated political involvement in adulthood). For at least a generation, if political science Ph.D. students were exposed to any research on civic education, it was likely this article. Ergo, further study of civic education did not seem like a fruitful area of research.

Of importance, though, the conclusions of the Langton and Jennings article are often misremembered. While they found no overall effect on civic outcomes for high school civics courses, they did note that such courses had a positive impact on the civic engagement of African American students. When their data were collected in 1965, the United States was still a racially segregated nation, which meant that African Americans were unable to fully participate in American society and especially the political system. Civics classes in school were thus compensating for the disparities that they inferred existed in African Americans' homes and communities. That insight—the compensation effect—reverberates in the most recent research on civic education. The irony is profound, as the same article that was thought to conclude that civic education is ineffectual actually contains within it the fundamental insight of where civic education matters most.

Another reason for the relative inattention to civic education is the ongoing debate over whether the robust relationship between educational attainment and political participation is causal or merely a spurious correlation. Or, according to one argument, perhaps education is no more than a marker of social status (Campbell, 2009; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Tenn, 2005). If the education–political engagement connection is not causal, then it would seem pointless to pursue any further inquiry into what it is about education, including civics instruction, that fosters greater engagement. A number of studies have employed creative identification strategies to overcome the selection problem that bedevils research into the education–participation link—that is, the possibility that people who pursue more education might already be inclined toward political participation. This wealth of research ranges from a study of identical twins (Dinesen et al., 2016) to compulsory education laws (Dee, 2005; Larreguy & Marshall, 2017; Milligan, Moretti, & Oreopoulos, 2004) to a hookworm eradication program that had the effect of increasing education rates where it was introduced (Henderson, 2018)—all of which conclude that greater educational attainment leads to a higher rate of voter turnout. Perhaps most convincingly, Sondheimer and Green (2010) examine three randomized educational interventions, including an intensive preschool for low-income children, a college readiness and scholarship program for at-risk youth, and an initiative that reduced class sizes. All of these interventions led to increased high school graduation rates, which in turn had a large effect on voter participation. While the debate over causality has not been settled (Berinsky & Lenz, 2011; Kam & Palmer, 2008, 2011; Mayer, 2011), the preponderance of the evidence suggests that the well-established empirical connection between education and political participation is indeed causal. The education effect appears greatest for people with low socioeconomic status, who are also the least likely to be politically engaged—further evidence of the compensation effect.

There are two lessons to be learned from the body of research into educational attainment and political engagement. First, the evidence of a causal relationship among the disadvantaged motivates the study of how, when, and why education can correct the socioeconomic skew in political participation. Second, the innovative identification strategies employed in this literature demonstrate what can be learned when inventive researchers get to work on a thorny question. I encourage scholars of civic education, whatever their discipline, to take inspiration from these studies and be equally creative.

## A lack of data

Another explanation for the relative lack of attention to civic education has been the paucity of available data. In civic education, there is no equivalent of the American National Election Study, the General Social Survey, or the Cooperative Congressional Election Study—the workhorses of political behavior research. The data that are available have been put to good use, though, demonstrating that high-quality research follows from the dissemination of "public utility" data sets. Consider, for example, the Youth-Parent Socialization Study.[3] This prescient study began in 1965, including interviews with a nationally representative sample of high school seniors and their parents. Both generations were re-interviewed in 1973 and 1982. In 1997, the second generation (the high school seniors of 1965) was interviewed again, along with their children (the grandchildren of the parents in 1965). This study has produced a wealth of articles, dissertations, and books, with scholars continuing to find ever-inventive ways to employ the data.[4] It was the first wave of this study, in fact, that served as the data for the seminal piece on civics courses by Langton and Jennings, which provided early evidence for the compensation effect. In light of the success of the Youth-Parent Socialization Study, one might wonder why it has not been repeated. One reason is likely the sheer logistical challenge and expense of research on adolescents, not to mention the difficulty researchers face in obtaining access to schools, especially on a national scale. Adding interviews with parents and making it longitudinal only makes such a study more challenging and expensive.

Other commonly used data include the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics exam, periodically administered by the federal Department of Education. In most years, the assessment has included 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-grade students, although the most recent exam included only 8th graders (apparently, the next one will again have 4th and 12th graders). While unquestionably valuable, NAEP data are limited to factual knowledge only, do not include parents, and are not longitudinal.

A large number of studies draw on the 1999 Civic Education Study of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)—also known as CivEd.[5] This multinational study of adolescents and teachers has generated many important publications. However, it too has limitations. For either budgetary or political reasons—or both—the United States has not participated in subsequent waves of the study, and so the data are now dated, demonstrating the vagaries of federal support for civic education research.

Notwithstanding the volume of research that has been produced using CivEd, the study has nonetheless been subject to criticism. Its most vocal critic is Lupia (2016), who argues that CivEd employs poorly designed questions that produce more noise than signal. Lupia's criticism could be read as a devastating attack on the civic education literature writ large, especially since the CivEd study is arguably the leading contemporary source of data—the product of a multiyear, multinational, multidisciplinary collaboration. If this study is deeply flawed, it does not bode well for others. Perhaps, one might conclude, measuring knowledge about politics and government is futile, so why even try? Yet a close read of Lupia's book *Uninformed: Why People Know So Little About Politics and What We Can Do About It* makes clear that this is not his point at all. Instead, his objective is to improve civic education by calling for more attention to how knowledge is measured and studied. I encourage readers to view *Uninformed* as both a clarion call for more—and better—studies of civic education as well as a guide to best practices on how to conduct them.

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[3] This study has gone by different names over its duration. The Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) data archive refers to it as the Youth Study Series, but I have opted to refer to it as the Youth-Parent Socialization Study, historically its more common name. Colloquially, it is often referred to as the Jennings and Niemi study.

[4] For a list of publications employing the Youth-Parent Socialization Study, consult https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/instructors/series/138 (accessed April 15, 2018).

[5] This multinational project is now named the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study. See http://iccs.iea.nl/home.html for more details (accessed April 15, 2018). For a thorough review of articles that employ CivEd, see Knowles, Torney-Purta, & Barber, 2018.

In short, there are multiple reasons that research into civic education has been constrained, which only makes the extant research all the more impressive. One can take hope from the fact that the literature has advanced in spite of these impediments. It is as though researchers have been working with one hand tied behind their collective backs. Imagine what could be learned if they had both hands free—in particular, if they had data greater in both quantity and quality.

I turn next to detailing key findings from the extant literature, noting where there is disagreement, ambiguity, and promising lines of inquiry for future scholarship.

## In the classroom

For most people, the term civic education refers to classroom instruction. Does anything that happens in the classroom matter? Recall that Langton and Jennings concluded that, for the most part, it does not. There are reasons to suspect that formal instruction in civics may not have much of an effect on civic outcomes because, unlike other academic subjects, knowledge about politics and government is often gained through other channels. While there is not a lot of dinner table conversation about subjects like math or physics, many households do have a lot of discussion about politics. Similarly, news coverage focuses heavily on politics—more than content relevant to most other academic disciplines. There are not many news stories on the Pythagorean theorem or the laws of thermodynamics.

A turning point in the study of formal civics instruction came in 1998, with the publication of the book *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn?* by Niemi and Junn (1998). In an exhaustive study of the NAEP civics exam, they found that—contra Langton and Jennings—civics classes did in fact lead to greater knowledge about politics and government. Since they drew on cross-sectional NAEP data, their ability to test causal mechanisms was limited, but the very fact that they could show an effect was significant. Researchers interested in civic education no longer had to argue against the long-standing conventional wisdom that formal instruction in civics classes had no effect. Nonetheless, Niemi and Junn's results hardly led to the conclusion that civics courses have a large effect on what students knew, reinforcing that civics-related information is often absorbed through other means. They found that taking a civics course in high school leads to a 4–percentage point gain on the NAEP civics assessment, roughly the equivalent of moving up one-third of a letter grade (e.g., B + to A−). To critics, this modest increase only underscores the relative ineffectiveness of civics instruction (Hart & Youniss, 2018). Furthermore, since Niemi and Junn rely on NAEP data, they could only examine the impact of civics instruction on a cognitive outcome—factual knowledge—when the civic education literature has a broader ambit that often includes measures of both behavior and attitudes in addition to knowledge.

While Niemi and Junn's book is notable for making a convincing case that civics courses have at least a small effect on civic knowledge, this conclusion is not necessarily "settled law." A recent review essay examines nine studies of various civics curricula and concludes that, taken as a whole, "the results indicate little evidence for civic education having a discernible or direct effect on voting or voter registration/enrolment" (Manning & Edwards, 2014, p. 22). Since the studies included in this review were small in number and highly variable in quality, it should not be taken as definitive. Instead, it simply further underscores the need for more high-quality research into civic education.

Neundorf, Niemi, and Smets (2016) is one such example of a high-quality study. They focus on measures of political engagement—interest in and discussion of political affairs—and find that civics classes not only matter but that they compensate for social disparities, both in the United States and Belgium. Their results are consistent with those of Langton and Jennings, who inferred that civics classes had an effect for African Americans because they had limited civic socialization outside of school. Neundorf et al. directly measure political exposure in the home and find that civics courses taken in high school raise the political engagement of youth who have little

experience with political discussion in the home, for decades following high school. This initial boost pays long-term dividends, as it puts these youth on a steeper upward trajectory of ever-higher levels of political engagement than their peers who did not take a civics course in high school.

The conclusion that formal civics courses matter naturally leads to the question of what makes for effective civics instruction. Throughout the literature, the most consistent theme is the significance of an open classroom climate, which is defined as a classroom in which students are exposed to the enlivening discussion of political and social issues, are encouraged to share their own opinions, and have their opinions respected by their teacher. Both in the United States and elsewhere, a growing number of studies find that an open classroom climate leads to greater civic engagement in general, although studies vary in their specific civic outcomes (Kahne et al., 2013; Martens & Gainous, 2013; Persson, 2015). In the United States, Campbell (2008) finds that an open classroom climate affects both the likelihood of voting and factual knowledge for all students. Further, there is a compensation effect for young people's anticipated voter turnout—students from socially disadvantaged homes are more likely to envision themselves as voters if they are exposed to a civics-oriented class with an open climate (but there is not a comparable compensatory effect on factual knowledge). The importance of an open classroom climate is a good example of resonance between scholarship in education and political science, as education scholars Hess and McAvoy (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015) likewise find positive civic outcomes from political discussion in classrooms.

There are, nonetheless, skeptics that the results for classroom climate are anything more than a self-reinforcing perception of young people who are already predisposed toward civic engagement. By this reasoning, students with a taste for political discussion are simultaneously more likely to perceive an open climate and to be more politically active, efficacious, and knowledgeable. As suggestive evidence that it is individuals' preexisting inclination toward civic activity that drives the climate effect, Hart and Youniss (2018) note that measures of an open classroom from different students in the same classroom do not always correlate very highly (Barber, Sweetwood, & King, 2015). It is precisely because of this concern, therefore, that at least two studies have addressed differences in students' perception. Campbell (2008) and Persson (2015) purge any correlation between each student's report of the classroom climate and the aggregated measure from their peers. In other words, in both studies the aggregated measure of classroom climate is independent of the individual student's own perception and thus of their taste for political discussion. Although this econometric strategy addresses the concern that the climate results are merely spurious, it is still no substitute for an identification strategy that circumvents the selection problem or, even better, a study that manipulates the amount of discussion within a classroom.

Beyond classroom climate, the evidence for the effectiveness of other pedagogical techniques is limited. Gainous and Martens (2012) examine how students react when teachers use a variety of instructional techniques, ranging from traditional methods such as textbook reading and worksheets to more interactive exercises like discussion of current events, debates, role-playing, and writing letters to elected officials. They conclude that a wider variety of instructional methods increases political efficacy among students from disadvantaged backgrounds (still more evidence for the compensation effect), while decreasing their factual knowledge. Although the explanation for the diminished knowledge is not clear, Gainous and Martens attribute it to students becoming "distracted or overwhelmed by a proliferation of teaching techniques" (2012, p. 247). Similarly, Kawashimi-Ginsberg and Levine (2014a) measure the impact of a variety of civic education techniques, including classroom discussion of political issues, researching current affairs, and participating in community projects. Eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds who recalled experiencing more of these techniques were more likely to vote and to be informed voters. Like Gainous and Martens, they do not break out each pedagogical method individually, leaving

open whether some methods are more effective than others—suggesting questions to be answered by future research.

There have also been studies of specific curricula, including programs like We The People (Owen, 2015), Student Voices (Feldman, Pasek, Romer, & Jamieson, 2007; Pasek, Feldman, Romer, & Jamieson, 2008), and Kids Voting, which generally find positive effects on a variety of civic outcomes. In addition to positive outcomes for children, research into Kids Voting also finds evidence that this program leads to greater "civic competence" among parents—increased attention to the news, greater political knowledge, and more fully formed opinions on political issues—suggesting a trickle-up effect for effective civics instruction (McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002; McDevitt & Kiousis, 2004). Such trickle-up effects are a particularly compelling avenue to study, as other evidence has shown that when young people vote, their parents follow (Dahlgaard, 2018). It stands to reason, then, that civic interventions that spur greater political activity among youth will have a spillover effect, boosting the political engagement of their parents and perhaps others within their familial and social networks as well.

The most compelling studies of classroom instruction are randomized controlled trials, which provide the most rigorous tests of causation. These studies build on the foundation of observational studies, which provide many potential questions to test through experimentation. For example, Green et al.'s (2011) exemplary but all too rare study of a randomized intervention underscores what can be learned from rigorous attention to causation. They found that the introduction of a civics curriculum focused on civil liberties increased knowledge regarding those liberties but did not change the participating students' attitudes—an important finding that warrants replication. Is it generally the case that civic education curricula affect knowledge but not attitudes? If this turns out to be a generalizable conclusion, it should give civic educators pause. Is it enough to boost what students know without changing what they think?

A new study in Quebec likewise shows the potential of what can be learned from the randomized introduction of a new civics curriculum in the elementary years (in this case, grades 5 and 6; Maheo, 2018). While this study is still preliminary (and to date unpublished), thus far the evidence shows that the civics curriculum, accompanied by a card game the children took home to play with their parents, increased the participating students' civic knowledge. In addition, there was evidence of a trickle-up effect, as parents also became more informed and more likely to engage in political discussion with their children. Another intriguing example of a randomized intervention with elementary-aged children is a recent study by Holbein (2017). He finds that a North Carolina program that taught at-risk elementary school children psychosocial (i.e., noncognitive) skills such as grit, delayed gratification, and social skills has a downstream effect on voter turnout. Note that not only are these studies notable for employing randomized interventions, but they also focus on preadolescents, when most of the civic education literature centers on adolescents. More research is needed on how education prior to middle and high school affects young people's civic development.

Condon (2015) provides a model for how observational data can inform an experimental design. Using the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, she builds on research into civic skills to show that developing verbal aptitude in adolescence leads to greater civic participation in early adulthood. In a complementary study, Condon uses an experiment to demonstrate that the practice of verbal skills fosters greater political engagement (2012). Specifically, she randomly assigned adolescents to one of two exercises that required them to write an email either to the governor or a university professor about a policy-related topic and found that, when compared to a control group, students given the assignment became more confident in their ability to express their views to public officials (although the effect for writing to a politician was slightly greater).

These studies all demonstrate the potential for studies that pay careful attention to causal mechanisms. For young scholars embarking on research into civic education, my advice is that the most fruitful line of research is the introduction of randomized variation in both content and methods of instruction. This is the next frontier in the study of civics.

## Extracurricular activities

Civic education is not limited to classroom instruction, as there are other ways that schools can serve to educate young people about, and prepare them for, democratic participation. Numerous studies have found that youth who participate in nearly all extracurricular activities—with sports being a notable exception—grow into adults who engage in civic participation. The long-term "civic boost" from such activity is greatest among adolescents who participate in groups that have an explicitly civic component. For example, McFarland and Thomas (2006) analyze the National Educational Longitudinal Study and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and conclude:

> membership experiences in politically salient youth organizations (e.g., service organizations, student council, drama clubs, musical groups, and religious organizations) have modest, significant, additive, positive effects on adult political participation, and net of indirect and direct effects of social background characteristics. (McFarland & Thomas, 2006, p. 418).[6]

This study is representative of the literature, as the essential finding that extracurricular activity in adolescence predicts various forms of civic and political participation in adulthood is affirmed in multiple studies (Beck & Jennings, 1982; Glanville, 1999; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Plutzer, 2002; Smith, 1999; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

The data are clear that there is a sharp socioeconomic divide in participation in extracurriculars, with such activity more prevalent among youth from more educated families. As detailed by Kawashimi-Ginsberg (2014), there are a variety of reasons for this disparity, including the fact that extracurricular activities often require out-of-pocket expenses beyond the reach of many working-class homes. In addition, many working-class teens live in neighborhoods with fewer resources to support extracurricular activities, while their parents do not (often because they cannot) prioritize structured activities for their children (Lareau, 2011). Regardless of the underlying causes, the empirical fact remains that extracurricular activities are a quintessential example of the "Matthew effect"—youth who are already socially advantaged are more likely to participate, further compounding the class gap in civic participation.[7] Furthermore, this class gap is a relatively new development. As recently as the early 1990s, extracurricular participation was not so sharply differentiated by social class, likely a reflection that many high–socioeconomic status teens pursue extracurricular activities to burnish their college applications (Putnam, 2015). Related to extracurricular activity is adolescents' volunteering which, like volunteerism among adults, may or may not be organized through a group or association. According to the annual Monitoring the Future study, a massive, nationally representative survey of high school students, volunteering is more common among teens now than in the 1980s. This increase is in sharp contrast to other forms of extracurricular activity, which have declined over the same period (Galston, 2001). Like extracurricular activity more broadly, the rise in volunteerism is driven almost entirely by high–socioeconomic status students. At least some of this increase is presumably to enhance their chances of college admission (Kawashimi-Ginsberg, 2014). To date, the literature is silent on whether the effects of community service on civic participation depend on the motivation for the service. It could be that instrumentally motivated voluntarism (e.g., for college applications) inspires altruistic behavior, engenders cynicism, or has no long-term effect at all—a research question waiting to be answered.

Participation in extracurricular activities is partly a matter of supply (opportunities made available) and partly driven by demand (the individual student's own interests). Both lend themselves to further study. With the existing evidence, one cannot rule out the possibility that people who are naturally, perhaps even genetically (Fowler, Baker, & Dawes, 2008; Fowler & Dawes, 2008), inclined toward civic participation as adults are drawn to extracurricular activity as adolescents.

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[6] Note their expansive definition of "politically salient" organizations, as they include drama, religious, and musical groups.

[7] Named for the biblical verse that "For whoever has will be given more" (Matthew 25:29; different translations render the verse slightly differently).

The fact that the biggest effects on adults' participation are found for membership in groups with political salience (broadly defined) once again leaves the causal question ambiguous. Do such groups kindle an interest in civic activity that is manifested later in life? Or do people who participate in such groups already have a civic predisposition? The literature awaits a study that convincingly overcomes the problem of self-selection into extracurricular activity, either through randomization or, more likely, a natural experiment or some other exogenous instrument to predict extracurricular participation. If well-designed, such a study could also answer the question of whether the compensation effect applies to extracurricular activity. While, descriptively, there is an upper-class skew in extracurricular activity, the possibility nonetheless remains that any causal effect for extracurriculars is greater for students who, because of their low socioeconomic status, are otherwise less likely to be civically engaged.

## Service learning

A number of teens also participate in service learning, which combines elements of both classroom learning and extracurricular activity. Like an extracurricular, it takes place outside of the classroom. But it is not actually "extra," as it consists of service work done under the auspices of a class or, in some schools, as a graduation requirement. There are many studies of service learning, but most of them are based on observational data, leading to the same questions about causation as studies of extracurricular activity (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Niemi, Hepburn, & Chapman, 2000; Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2007). One notable exception is a study by Metz and Youniss (2005), who were able to test the effects of introducing a service requirement for graduation in one high school. By collecting data from cohorts of students who were and were not subject to the new requirement, they can make a strong causal claim, as there is no reason to think that students were either enrolling in or dropping out of this school because of the new service requirement (an excellent example of research that exploits naturally occurring exogenous variation). They find that among students who were not involved in community service of their own volition, the service requirement led to an increase in their intention to participate in a variety of political and civic activities, including boycotting, participating in a demonstration, working on a campaign, volunteering in their community, and joining civic organizations. They also became more likely to discuss politics, to say that they understand political issues, and to think that teenagers should pay attention to political matters. On the other hand, although this analysis of students in one high school suggests positive civic effects for required community service, at least one study suggests the opposite. Using a difference-in-difference design and data from the annual Monitoring the Future survey, Helms (2013) finds that the mandatory community service requirement for high school graduation in the state of Maryland has actually led to a decline in self-reported volunteerism. Rather than giving them a taste for more service, it seemed to sate their appetite.

None of these service learning studies is definitive. In particular, no study of service learning has examined its long-term consequences with an individual-level longitudinal study. High on the agenda of future civic education research should be studies of whether service learning in adolescence, whether mandatory or voluntary, enhances or dampens civic and political engagement in adulthood.

## School ethos

Studies of classroom instruction, extracurriculars, and service learning each focus on individual components of the civic education provided by a student's experience in school. Other research has focused on schools as immersive institutions, examining whether they can also provide an education in civics through their culture or ethos. Admittedly, "ethos" is a nebulous term, but it generally refers to the values reinforced within the school, either implicitly or explicitly.

The importance of the school ethos is consistent with the social capital literature, which suggests that people adopt the social norms within their environment (Coleman, 1988, 1990; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Putnam, 2001). For example, Bruch and Soss (2018) find that, *ceteris paribus*, adolescents who experience punitive school policies and believe they are treated unfairly by their teachers are less likely to turn out to vote and have a lower degree of trust in government in early adulthood. These experiences are more common among minority students, thus contributing to lower political engagement among students of color. "[S]chools appear to operate as institutional mechanisms that convert social hierarchies into predictable patterns of political inequality and civic marginalization" (2018, p. 50).

Other aspects of a school's ethos can also foster greater civic engagement. For example, Campbell (2006) finds that attending a high school with a richer civic ethos—measured by the percentage of students who endorse voting as essential for being a good citizen—correlates with a higher rate of both voting and community volunteering 15 years after graduation, even when controlling for the individual's proclivity toward civic participation. In a more localized study of high school students in the Baltimore–Washington area, Gimpel, Schuknecht, and Lay (2003) also conclude that the school ethos matters; adolescents who felt that their school's policies were fair scored higher in political knowledge, efficacy, and discussion of political matters.[8] Similarly, Kahne and Sporte (2008) draw on data from Chicago City Schools and find that school ethos—including whether students feel a sense of belonging to the school—has a positive effect on "commitment to civic participation," which they operationalize as a five-item index measuring the youth's sense of civic responsibility. The index includes the adolescents' self-perception of whether they have good ideas to solve community problems and whether they envision themselves working to improve their community in the near future.

The innovation found within charter schools presents a compelling opportunity to study how a school's ethos can effect young people's civic involvement, as many charter schools explicitly define their mission as promoting good citizenship (Seider, 2012). One of the few studies of the impact of charter schools on civic outcomes uses propensity score matching to compare students who are enrolled in Washington, DC–area charter schools to those in traditional public schools. In their analysis, Buckley and Schneider (2007) find that students enrolled in charters are more likely to volunteer in their community, participate in a debate or discussion, and speak at a community meeting. However, although methodologically sound, matching is still no substitute for true random assignment, the proverbial gold standard for determining causation.

Because many charter schools are oversubscribed and thus rely on admissions by lottery, they are essentially experiments "in the wild" waiting to be analyzed. As an example of leveraging randomized admissions for causal inference, Gill et al. (2018) have studied the network of Democracy Prep charter schools in New York City. Students are admitted to Democracy Prep schools through a lottery, enabling a randomized controlled trial. As their name suggests, Democracy Prep schools explicitly encourage civic and political engagement. A former Democracy Prep teacher describes the schools' civic emphasis this way:

> Nearly every fall, students as young as kindergartners can be seen on the streets of Harlem registering voters; they are unmistakable in their distinctive bright yellow T-shirts with the slogan "I can't vote, but you can!" High school seniors work all year on capstone "Change the World" projects wherein they research a social problem of interest to them and then plan and execute some manner of public response—a fundraising drive, a protest, an awareness campaign, etc. Students routinely offer testimony to representatives at all levels of government. Food drives, volunteerism, and "service learning" are encouraged. Passing the U.S. Citizenship Test is a graduation requirement (Pondiscio, 2018).

In other words, Democracy Prep schools have a strong civic ethos. Results show that alumni of Democracy Prep schools have a noticeably higher rate of voter turnout than the control group

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[8] This study also includes a different perspective on the compensation effect. Gimpel et al. (2003) examine how the community context (specifically, the level of political competition) can compensate for less effective civic education at school.

(i.e., students who were not selected for admission)—a 16–percentage point increase in voter registration and a 12-point increase in voter turnout.[9] Given Democracy Prep's explicit focus on civic engagement, these results are probably the upper bound for a school's effect. Further research should be directed toward understanding whether these effects are driven by a specific, replicable component of Democracy Prep's culture and whether it is scalable to other schools— whether charter, traditional public, or even private.

Alongside research into charter schools, private schools also offer the opportunity to study schools' distinctive ethos. However, in contrast to these studies of charter schools (which are public), past research into the civic outcomes of public versus private schools has been mixed. The bulk of the evidence suggests that simply identifying schools as public or private is not all that informative for the purposes of measuring civic outcomes and that a more fruitful line of inquiry is studying distinctions *within* the public and private sectors (Carlson, Chingos, & Campbell, 2017; Dill, 2009; Fleming, Mitchell, & McNally, 2014). Given that many private schools, especially those with a religious character, seek to create a distinctive culture, much could be learned from a rigorous study of different approaches to civic education in both the public and private sectors.

The complementarity among all these studies of school ethos suggests a rich vein of future research. What are the long-term civic consequences of how disciplinary authority is exercised within schools? How can a civic-oriented ethos be promoted within a school? Can schools with strong internal social capital compensate for a dearth of social capital in students' communities?

## Public policy

One reason for the interest in civic education in schools among social scientists is that education is subject to public policy to a much greater extent than other levers to enhance and improve civic engagement. For example, Holbein's (2017) study of soft skills provides an example of a policy that had a long-term effect on voter turnout, notwithstanding that a civic outcome was incidental to the primary objective of the intervention. Are there effective policy levers focused specifically on civics?

One potential way to gain leverage on the question of whether policy matters is the sheer variety in civics requirements across the states. In light of this variety, there might be state-level policies that have a measurable effect on young people's civic outcomes. On the other hand, the low salience of civics as a subject argues against finding that policies matter much, as it could be that the variation is too modest to have any effect. Indeed, both Carlson (2012) and Kawashimi-Ginsberg and Levine (2014b) conclude that state-level policies have no effects on civic outcomes.

More recently, though, Campbell and Niemi (2016) have taken a closer look at states' civic education requirements and found evidence of the compensation effect. Specifically, they report that when states introduce civics assessments as a high school graduation requirement, it leads to higher NAEP Civics scores for Latino students. Furthermore, they draw on data from 18- to 24-year-olds to show that this heightened level of political knowledge endures following high school. Among 18- to 24-year-olds, having graduated high school in a state with a "high-stakes" civics assessment results in higher political knowledge for all Latinos, first- and second-generation immigrants, and—most of all—Latino immigrants. Although the implementation of these exams was not random, there is no obvious pattern to those states that did so, bolstering the case for causation. Indeed, the low salience of civics as a subject assuages concern over selection, as it seems inconceivable that parents are selecting states on the basis of their civic education requirements. Nor is it the case that effective civics education is merely a proxy for high test scores across the board, as the analysis controls for state-level NAEP scores in math and reading. Of interest, like the civil liberties curriculum studied by Green et al. (2011), this study also finds an effect limited

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[9] As of this writing, the analysis of Democracy Prep is in a report from the policy research firm Mathematica and has yet to be formally peer-reviewed.

to knowledge, as the introduction of an assessment in civics does not have an effect on attitudes or even participation.

Why would introducing an exam in civics lead to greater knowledge of government and politics? Campbell and Niemi (2016) hypothesize that a meaningful civics assessment incentivizes students, teachers, and administrators to put greater emphasis on civics. Why would introducing such an exam matter most for Latinos? Campbell and Niemi's explanation for their results draws on the seminal 1968 study by Langton and Jennings. Recall that Langton and Jennings (1968) found that civics classes had an impact on African Americans and thus compensated for a relative lack of political socialization in the home. Today, African Americans have high rates of political participation, while Latinos—and, especially, immigrants—do not. Campbell and Niemi's study is complemented by an in-depth study of what immigrant students learn about civics, both from the formal and informal curriculum, by Callahan and Muller (2013). These studies, however, only scratch the surface of what can be learned about the civic education of immigrants to the United States and their children—an especially promising area for future research.

## Conclusion

What do social scientists know about civic education? Hopefully this article has convinced you that they do indeed know more than they think they do. But there is far more yet to be learned. As scholars across disciplines consider further study into civic education, I close with a set of recommendations.

First, and most important, measures of civic outcomes should be routinely added to studies of educational interventions. Holbein's (2017) study of soft skills is an excellent example of how even interventions that seem far removed from civics can nonetheless foster greater civic engagement. His study relied on matching study participants to voter records, which inevitably means inaccurate matches and lost data. It would be even more informative if civic outcomes were included in the evaluation instruments native to the study.

Second, studies of civic education should include—and perhaps even focus on—the compensation effect. Theoretically, there are reasons to expect civic education to have the largest effects on youth who are socially disadvantaged and/or exposed to the least political socialization in the home. Empirically, more and more evidence has accumulated in favor of civic education as compensation. Normatively, it is important to know how schools serve to level the existing biases in political participation so that best practices can be widely adopted.

Third, wherever possible, civic interventions should test for "trickle-up" effects—young people having an effect on their parents and perhaps other family members and friends as well.

Fourth, researchers should be encouraged to study a variety of schools in both the public and private sectors. In particular, charter schools represent a rich opportunity to study variation in approaches to civic education, as well as differences in school ethos. The fact that many charter schools use lotteries for admission opens the possibility of exploiting random assignment, thus strengthening any causal claims. Similarly, scholars could profitably learn from comparisons of public and private schools, particularly variation within the private sector.

Fifth, scholars should look beyond the conventional forms of civic education, including those discussed in this article, and consider other ways that schools provide preparation for active citizenship in a democratic society. Examples might include the use of schools as polling places, voter registration drives held in the schools, and school visits by elected officials. Likewise, scholars could examine ways that school-based civic education efforts interact with the political environment. Can effective civic education counteract policies that make it more difficult for young people to vote? How is civic education affected by school shootings, including the security precautions that have become commonplace (active shooter drills, closed campuses, etc.)?

Sixth, whatever the specific research question, careful attention should be paid to causal pathways. Ideally, this would include randomized interventions. When randomization proves

impossible, be imaginative—take advantage of exogenous variation where it occurs. Likewise, more attention needs to be paid to longitudinal effects. It is one thing for civic education in secondary school to have an effect while students are enrolled in school; it is quite another to show that those effects endure into adulthood. The civic education literature will not advance merely with more observational studies using cross-sectional data that are limited to measuring short-term effects.

Effective civic education should always be a priority, but it has become especially urgent in light of the evidence that today's young people are skeptical of democracy's promise (cf. Westheimer in this volume). Unfortunately, civics is typically given lip service by policy makers but then shunted aside in favor of reading, math, and science. Of course, these other subjects are important too, not least because they contribute to an informed electorate, but it is equally important to understand what works in civic education specifically. This task is too important to leave to one scholarly discipline. It will take many scholars approaching the question from different angles, wrangling with one another about methods, theory, and interpretation. It is only from that process of research, review, and replication that consensus on best practices will emerge. The good news is that the existing body of research provides a healthy "starter culture." I look forward to a similar review article written, say, 10 years from now, detailing the many ways that scholars across the disciplines have significantly advanced both the study and practice of civic education.

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