

## **Assessing the Impact of Local Politics on Civic Engagement**

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### **Abstract**

Previous scholarship questions the link between civic education and civic engagement. Some studies find a causal link and other do not. The debate on whether civic education matters is unresolved. Most Introduction to American Government courses focus on the Constitution and federal branches. Students may or may not connect what they learned to what happens in their neighborhoods and communities. A connection to local politics may have an impact on civic engagement. My research question: Does civic engagement increase when students learn and work on local politics? I argue that when students learn and work on local issues, their civic engagement increases.

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## **Introduction**

Civic engagement broadly defined is a sought-after student learning objective not only in political science but also institutions of higher education. At both two-year and four-year colleges, civic engagement is referenced in college mission statements and course learning objectives, especially in introductory American Government courses. There are also numerous civic engagement centers and programs across U.S. colleges. Moreover, recent initiatives and reports by the American Political Science Association (APSA) indicate a renewed interest in civic engagement learning and civically engaged research.

At the same time, despite record turnouts in 2020 U.S Presidential election, there is increasing alarm that civic engagement is decreasing across the U.S., especially among the younger population. This growing concern stems from research that consistently confirms the low levels of civic literacy and political knowledge among Americans (Bartels, 1996; Galston, 2001; Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2022) and low levels of civic and political participation, particularly voting among young people (Leighley & Nagler, 2013; McDonald, 2022). However, political scientists have found some optimism with studies that suggest traditional classroom-based civic education or additional civic instruction can increase political knowledge (Galston, 2001; Rogers, 2017). In addition, introductory level American politics courses are widely offered and taken by undergraduate students in the U.S., supported by almost universal general education graduation requirements that include American politics and history.

While the growing scholarly consensus that civic education can improve civic literacy (Galston, 2001; Rogers, 2017) is promising, the causal effects of civic education on civic engagement is much weaker and under debate. Civic education can impact some measures of political engagement but there are many confounding factors, such as the type of assignments and quality of instruction (Claasen & Monson, 2015). More significantly, rather than civic education in the political science classroom, high impact practices known to consistently increase civic engagement are service learning and skill acquisition, which can connect students more directly to their communities (Bennion & Laughlin, 2018). Unfortunately, for many political science instructors, service learning

and skill acquisition internships or projects are not feasible in an introductory American politics course. Many Introduction to American Government courses also focus on the national level with course content centered on the Constitution and the federal branches and neglect politics closer to home.

I argue that what may be lacking in traditional classroom based civic education in Introduction to American Government courses is a connection to local politics, which may provide a closer link between students to their communities and increase their civic engagement. Local politics learning in this study is assessed through a community mapping project. To examine the potential impact of teaching and learning of local politics, I measured student civic engagement using a survey instrument in my introductory American Politics courses. Based on preliminary survey results, I find that when students learn and work on local issues, their civic engagement increases.

### **Civic Education and Civic Engagement**

In the scholarship of teaching and learning in political science literature, there is an ongoing debate on the causal link between civic education and civic engagement. Overall, meta-analyses and original research find a mixed impact on civic education on civic engagement with several possible confounding factors. Civic engagement gains may depend on assignments, activities, and the instructor (Claassen & Monson, 2015). There are also few long-term studies (Claassen & Monson, 2015). For non-majors, an introductory American politics course may be their single shot for civic education, which contributes to making long-term studies difficult. In addition, researchers also do not use uniform measures or definitions (Bennion & Laughlin, 2018). Finally, there is little on the impact of specific course content or assignments on civic engagement.

### **Civic Education and Civic Engagement at Hostos**

The research study in this paper takes place at Hostos Community College, City University of New York. As a result, a brief discussion of the New York City context is helpful. Hostos College is a 2-year community college, located in the South Bronx. It is a Hispanic Serving Institution, and most students commute from the Bronx and Upper Manhattan. There is no standalone political science major at Hostos and there is no

articulation agreement in place for students to transfer to CUNY senior colleges to earn a B.A. in Political Science. However, American Government (POL 101) fulfills the United States Experience in its Diversity (USED) general education requirement and it is a designated Pathways course, meaning the course and its credits are directly transferable to any other CUNY college. In addition, civic education is one of the required student learning outcomes for all USED courses. Specifically, a USED course must identify and differentiate among the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government and analyze their influence on the development of U.S. democracy. For most of my students, POL 101 will be the only political science course they ever take and often the only classroom-based opportunity to increase their civic literacy.

CUNY-wide, civic engagement is one of ten experiential learning opportunities (ELOs), and courses can be designated as civic engagement ELO course. Any designated civic engagement ELO course must include meaningful civic education and activities for social good. However, each campus can decide whether to require a civic engagement course. Some CUNY colleges like Kingsborough Community College require one designated civic engagement course to graduate. Others like Hostos have elective opportunities for both service learning and civic engagement in designated courses or through extracurricular programs like the Student Leadership Academy or Honors Program. POL 101 is not designated as a civic engagement ELO course. While there are regular assessments of POL 101 to examine if the USED civic education student learning objective is being met by students, there is no previous research study that examines the connection between civic education and civic engagement at Hostos or CUNY-wide.

### All Politics is Local

The phrase all politics is local is commonly used in American politics. On the candidate side, this principle means that politicians need to appeal to local concerns and develop local skills and knowledge to gain votes. On the constituent side, voters care most about issues that impact them personally and their local communities, like affordable housing, schools, and employment. They will then vote according to those

personal and local interests. However, teaching an introductory American politics course in a 15-week semester, most courses focus on the national level. There may be little room for local or state politics outside of current events discussions or election years where there are important local and state races. My students, like many young voters often report feeling disconnected from national level and even state level politics. At the same time, using an asset-based approach, students know their own neighborhoods and communities well. They also have a strong sense of the problems their communities are facing and the strengths of their own communities.

In POL 101, I spend at least three class sessions on local politics. One session on criminal justice reforms in New York state and New York City in the Civil Liberties Unit. Another session on local agencies in New York City in the Bureaucracy Unit. And then a third class on major offices and elections in New York state and New York City. During the semester, we also discuss current events when time and the topic of the class session permits.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I have used a modified contract grading system for POL 101. Students choose and commit to an A/B/C level grading contract, and they can choose a template of assignments or design a mix of assignments outside of in-class engagement and exams to reach their contract grade. Several of these assignments are local politics focused assignments. Students can: (1) attend a local political education or participation event like a Community Board Meeting, (2) write a letter to a local elected official, (3) create a student voter guide (3) visit a local museum that has political exhibits and (4) create a community map. Students in their mid-semester and end of semester reflections noted what assignments they enjoyed the most and learned the most from and students noted the community mapping assignment specifically and more generally learning about local politics. Students wrote how they learned about places and resources in their community and the history and importance of their community. What was most promising was several students wrote how they felt more likely to participate politically. Based on student feedback, I hypothesized that student civic engagement increases when they learn about local politics and work on local politics assignments in POL 101.

## Community Mapping Assignment

To better answer my research question: Does civic engagement increase when students learn and work on local politics?, I have assigned the Community Mapping Assignment to all of my POL 101 students, which gives them less assignment choice but allows me to explore the impact of this local politics assignment. While the full assignment is posted on APSA Educate: <https://educate.apsanet.org/community-mapping-assignment>, a short description of the assignment is summarized here. In this assignment, students use their own local knowledge and experiences to map their neighborhoods or boroughs. Student will be able to connect and visualize American politics to their own communities and potentially increase their civic engagement. In Part 1 of this assignment, students use Google My Maps to create an annotated community map of important landmarks, organizations, and institutions in their neighborhoods or borough. Then in Part 2, students then write a short paper that asks them to introduce their community to a reader who may not be familiar, analyze an issue area in their community, reflect on their community's assets, and propose recommendations for development or reform in their community.

## **Methods and Design**

There is no single definition of civic engagement used in scholarship of teaching and learning in political science literature. I consider civic engagement as a broad term that includes political engagement but also includes more general participation to improve community life. Community can be local, regional, or global. Civic engagement can be informal, private, and individual but also formal, public and collective (Adler & Goggin, 2005). Most researchers use attitude and behavior indicators for civic engagement but again there is no uniform measures of civic engagement. Each new study uses different measurements. I use a pre-existing measurement scale, Civic Engagement Scale (CES) from Dolittle and Faul (2013) that has been used in measuring civic engagement in service learning, which is a high impact practice that is known to increase civic engagement. By using the CES, I can potentially make later comparisons with previous civic engagement research outside of civic education like service learning.

Students are also asked to complete a pre and post survey on Civic Engagement before and after they complete the Community Mapping Assignment to assess any changes in their civic engagement after completing the Community Mapping Assignment. This survey uses a 7-point scale attitude and behavior questions from Dolittle and Faul (2013) along with my own open-ended questions. The CES survey uses a 7-point Likert scale with eight questions on attitudes and six questions on behaviors. I also added in five of my own open-ended questions and control/demographic questions. The survey uses a pre and post-test design. The study is not long-term study and surveys students in a single semester.

I deployed the CES surveys with open-ended questions in the Fall 2022 and I plan on doing the same in Spring 2023. I had low response rates with 25 pre surveys and 24 post surveys completed in the Fall 2023 semester. The complete survey instrument is included in the Appendix after the Reference section.

## **Results and Discussion**

I collected 25 pre surveys and 24 post surveys in Fall 2022. Table 1 summarizes means for each attitude question on the CES. Not all measures of attitudes increased in the posttest. Means for Q2 and Q3 on civic responsibility for making a difference and for the poor decreased. Means for Q1, Q4-Q8 did increase. The largest change was for Q4 on attitudes toward serving their community. This provides some evidence that civic engagement attitudes increased for students.

Table 2 summarizes means for each behavior question on the CES. The means on behavior increased or stayed the same on each question. The largest shift from pre to post surveys is in Q3 on helping their community and Q4 staying informed. These results provides some evidence that civic engagement behaviors increased for students.

Despite increases in means on CES attitude and behaviors, low response impacts the original design. In addition, while the posttest occurs after students have completed the Community Mapping Assignment, civic education in the course up to that point could also have impacted student survey responses.

Table 1: CES Attitudes Questions 1-7 Scale Fall 2022

	Mean Pre-Test	Mean Post-Test
1. I feel responsible for my community	5.29	<b>5.46</b>
2. I believe I should make a difference in my community	5.83	5.79
3. I believe that I have a responsibility to help the poor and the hungry	5.46	5.29
4. I am committed to serve in my community	4.88	<b>5.30</b>
5. I believe that all citizens have a responsibility to their community	5.50	<b>5.67</b>
6. I believe that it is important to be informed of community issues	6.17	<b>6.33</b>
7. I believe that it is important to volunteer	5.58	<b>5.88</b>
8. I believe that it is important to financially support charitable organizations	5.13	<b>5.17</b>
N	25	24

Table 2: CES Behaviors Questions 1-7 Scale Fall 2022

	Mean Pre-Test	Mean Post-Test
1. I am involved in structured volunteer position(s) in the community	3.25	<b>3.32</b>
2. When working with others, I make positive changes in the community	5.00	<b>5.56</b>
3. I help members of my community	4.96	<b>5.63</b>
4. I stay informed of events in my community	4.79	<b>5.08</b>
5. I participate in discussions that raise issues of social responsibility	4.28	<b>4.38</b>
6. I contribute to charitable organizations within the community	4.00	4.00
N	25	24

Open-ended questions follow a similar trajectory with the CES scale results. In the pre-test open-ended questions 5, 6, and 7, almost all students reported low self-assessment on political knowledge and little political activity. In the post-test, most of the students' self-assessments were higher and more positive. Question 10 was similar,



almost all students reported low empowerment in the pre-test but a majority indicated more feelings of empowerment. Questions 8 and 9 on how they make a difference and whether they will make a difference in the future, started off high and remained high. Several students mentioned income as a limiting factor in making a difference in their community, with numerous comments on how education and earning more will change their impact on their community.

## **Conclusion**

Preliminary survey results show that there may be an impact on local politics learning and assignments on student civic engagement. However, more respondents are needed. Overall, I found that civic education has increased student civic engagement attitudes and behaviors. Interviews may also be needed to better understand how local politics rather than general civic education may impact civic engagement. Finally, a comparison with the service learning literature that uses the CES survey will also be helpful in understanding the role of civic education and local politics on civic engagement.

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## Appendix

### Civic Engagement Survey

#### *Attitudes Questions*

	Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
1. I feel responsible for my community	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I believe I should make a difference in my community	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I believe that I have a responsibility to help the poor and the hungry	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I am committed to serve in my community	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I believe that all citizens have a responsibility to their community	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I believe that it is important to be informed of community issues	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I believe that it is important to volunteer	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I believe that it is important to financially support charitable organizations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

#### *Behaviors Questions*

	Never						Always
1. I am involved in	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

structured volunteer position(s) in the community							
2. When working with others, I make positive changes in the community	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I help members of my community	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I stay informed of events in my community	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I participate in discussions that raise issues of social responsibility	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I contribute to charitable organizations within the community	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

### Open-Ended Questions

1. Do you consider yourself to be politically knowledgeable in local politics and local issues? Do you consider yourself to be politically knowledgeable in national politics and national issues? Why or why not?
2. Do you consider yourself to be politically active? Why or why not?
3. How do you make a difference in your community? How do you think you can make a difference in your community in the future?
4. Do you feel empowered to be active in your community? Why or why not?
5. **For the Post-Survey only:** Which of the following course activities did you complete in this course? Mark all that apply
  - ☐ Community Mapping Part 1
  - ☐ Community Mapping Part 2
  - ☐ Perusall or Online Discussion Boards
  - ☐ Midterm Exam
  - ☐ Campus Wide Politics Events
  - ☐ Skills Worksheets
  - ☐ Textbook Quizzes
  - ☐ Journal Entries

- ☐ Museum Visit
- ☐ Student Voter Guide
- ☐ Write a Letter to Your Local Politician