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Civic and Political Leadership Education

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Abstract

Unique in its demands as a system of governance, democracy requires active citizen leadership to be successful. Citizen leadership, in turn, requires engagement based on knowledge and action. Therefore, civic and political education is essential to the success of any democracy. This article discusses a model of applied political and civic leadership education that is based in theory, yet practical to the lives of young people. Surveys of past participants demonstrate that after the program, participants are more confident that they have the skills to become involved in politics and in community life.

Introduction

Young Americans exhibit striking contradictions: they are active in social organizations, yet fairly disengaged from politics and political participation. The UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (2004) reports that 34.3% of freshmen believed that "keeping up to date with political affairs" is a very important or essential life goal. This compared to the 60.3% of freshmen reported in 1966. In addition, only 25.5% of freshmen in 2004 reported discussing politics (HERI 2004).

This lack of interest in things political is coupled with a much more serious problem: Americans lack basic political knowledge, do not participate in the political process and increasingly do not know how to do so (Keeter, et al. 2003). At a minimum, citizens need to know what government is and what it does (Barber 1973: 44) and traditional normative theory suggests that citizens should be interested and participate in political affairs because the democratic system of governance depends on the participation of individual citizens (see Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954). In other words, for a democracy to function in a vibrant and sound manner, citizens must have a minimal level of knowledge and interest in political issues. Both anecdotal evidence from news reports and empirical research shows that Americans' basic level of political knowledge is poor. The most systematic empirical examination of this topic by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) confirms that while Americans are not as uninformed as some might think, they are also not as informed as democratic theory suggests that they should be. Delli Carpini and Keeter identified thousands of survey questions dating to the 1930s and found that less than half of all respondents could answer questions related to domestic and foreign policy topics.

In terms of participation in the political process, Americans are doing so less and less. Despite a slight surge in the 2004 election, the most basic form of political participation in America, voting, has seen a steady decline in recent decades (Lopez, Kirby, and Sagoff 2004). Other forms of political participation, such as writing a member of Congress, attending a meeting related to a town or school affair, or signing a petition, have also declined in recent decades (Delli Carini 2000). This lack of knowledge and interest in things political could presage difficulties for American democracy. For instance, scholars (especially Graber 1984) have pointed out that there is a connection between political information and political skills. The lower the level of political information and skills one has acquired, the less likely one is to have the intention of

participating in the political process. Research has shown that strong civic culture is directly related to more effective and innovative government (Rice and Sumberg 1997).

To What End Education?

Thus, for a democracy to function in a vibrant and sound manner, citizen leaders must have a minimal level of interest and knowledge. While citizens have opportunities to learn about politics and public policy in any number of ways, scholars are nearly unanimous in agreeing that formal education is among the strongest influences on the political knowledge of the individual (see Hyman, Wright and Reed 1975; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Nie et al. 1996; Niemi and Junn 1998 and Torney-Purta 2000). Niemi and Junn (1998) suggest that civic education curricula should incorporate aspects of real life. We believe that civic engagement has two fundamental qualities for young adults. First, it focuses on practical skills. Boyte (2003) argues that learning practical political skills (such as how to express one's views or work with a group to achieve a common goal, or even to look up a bill, etc.) makes politics collectively productive rather than exclusionary. Perry and Katula (2001) find little evidence that service learning leads to greater levels of civic and political activity, and Kirlin (2002) suggests that this is because the development of civic skills (deliberating about public policy issues, monitoring public events, interacting with other citizens, influencing policy decisions) is often missing from civic education and service learning program.

Second, it is action oriented and relevant to the day-to-day lives of young adults. The focus of politics seems to have shifted over time away from the town hall and state capital to the national capital and international arena. For instance, of the hundreds of survey questions that Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) examined, none were focused on state and local institutions, leaders, or issues. Yet, it is still the case that the city council or state legislature's actions will more immediately affect the lives of ordinary Americans than will the president's or the U.S. Senate's. In this study we focus on two questions related to this literature: First, what pedagogical practices in civic participation and political involvement are the best to teach young people to lead in their localities and in their states? Second, what are the expectations we should have of the participants who will be future leaders in local and state politics, and would a pedagogy focused on skills development meet those expectations?

An Applied Pedagogical Approach

The College Leaders Program (CLP) of the Thomas C. Sorensen Institute for Political Leadership at the University of Virginia incorporates two fundamental qualities: skills development and practical relevance. It is a four-week residential program, and students are selected through a competitive application process from several dozen colleges and universities. Activities include formal class meetings, speakers, workshops, simulations, discussion sessions, and on-site visits. Political science is the dominant major represented, but majors as varied as computer science engineering and sculpting are represented as well.

The CLP achieves relevance and provides civic and political leadership skills development through the curriculum. First, we focus on Virginia only, and avoid discussion of the federal government or federal issues except in cases where they intersect with state and local affairs. The program focuses on Virginia politics and policy because it is highly accessible, students can easily conceptualize the relevance of the topic, and it is an area not covered in high school or college government classes.

Second, the CLP focuses on issue education by orienting all of the readings and discussion around contemporary state and local policy issues. The curriculum asks students to learn about the most pressing issues in the state, and to propose solutions to those issues in a group project in which the students research and write their own legislation to address issues that they select. They then develop legislative action plans, assessing where they would draw support and how to counter opposition. This includes writing sample op-eds and briefing memos and at the conclusion of the program presenting their proposal to a panel of legislators, journalists and public policy leaders. Students have seen their proposals introduced as bills by their legislators as a result of their efforts.

Third, the CLP constantly challenges the values and principles of the participants. The students have to leave their political identities at the door when they enter the program, and spend time helping them articulate, formulate, draw out, defend, and employ their own political and civic values and principles absent party labels. The goal is to help them understand their values and principles based upon qualities and arguments other than party identification and also come to understanding of their classmates' beliefs and values without partisan stereotypes. Fourth, the program focuses on civic organization and political activism by building leadership skills in students that they can use for building coalitions and civic organization in their own communities. For example, we teach them how to make a speech at a city council or board of supervisors meeting, lobby a legislator or write an opinion-editorial

Finally, the students are placed in networking situations with nearly sixty speakers, from the Governor to the director of a local homeless shelter. Each student is asked to introduce at least one speaker, which allows him or her to practice public speaking and to research the speaker and meet and talk with the speaker one-on-one. The chance to talk with these policy practitioners in a small group setting gives the students a unique perspective into the process in Virginia and a better understanding of how to engage that process.

In its totality, the course is an effort at leadership development through the prism of citizenship. Many of these students are leaders on their campuses, but many campus leaders still don't have the skills or understanding to be productive citizens. Thus, we focus on the requisites of good citizen leadership: knowledge of the public challenges facing one's community, commitment to a defensible set of personal principles to guide consideration of solutions to those challenges, and the practical, localized skills necessary to successfully advocate for change. Though we do not focus on leadership in the traditional sense, graduates of the program are prepared to become not just engaged citizens, but citizen leaders.

Method of Assessment

The assessment device is a pre and post program survey with questions ranging from awareness of issues to political skills and attitudes to current political actions and the likelihood of future political actions. The device was originally developed for use in the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's Political Engagement Project in 2002-2003. The pre-test is administered at the start of the program and the post-test is administered just before students leave the program. Data for this study was collected over a three-year period. Each class had an average of 20 students and 59 completed surveys were collected (21 male and 32 female). In this analysis we look at sixteen questions about students' views about their general and political skills and future civic

and political leadership abilities. Using a six-point scale ranging from "cannot do this" to "can do this very well", students were asked to indicate whether they have or do not have the particular skill in question. We also look at thirteen questions tapping students' expected future political actions. Using a six-point scale ranging from "will certainly not do this" to "will certainly do this", students were asked to indicate their future intention regarding the action in question.

Results

In terms of general and political skills, we found statistically significant increases across the board (see Table 1). General skills are those social and interpersonal skills required of active and engaged citizens. We found increases from pre- to post-test in average responses to six of eight categories. Students reported increases in their general ability to:

- deal with conflict;
- articulate their ideas and beliefs;
- gather and analyze information;
- assume the leadership of a group;
- talk about social barriers such as race; and
- make a statement at a public meeting.

Political skills are those skills related to political action and understanding. We found increases from pre- to post-test in average responses to seven of eight categories. Students reported increases in their ability to:

- know whom to contact to get something done;
- weigh the pros and cons of different political positions;
- organize people for political action;
- persuade others to support their political position;
- recognize conflicting political interests;
- develop strategies for political action; and
- write well about political topics.

In terms of future actions, we found statistically significant increases from pre- to post-test in the average responses to six of eleven categories (see Table 2). Students reported increases in the likelihood that they would:

- wear a campaign button or put a sticker on their car;
- work together to solve a community problem;
- contact or visit a public official;
- discuss political problems with friends;
- attend a speech, informal seminar or teach-in about politics; and
- vote in every local election.

Our assessment shows improvement in skills development across almost all of the categories. We think there are two explanations: first, the improvements in skills development suggest a need for this kind of practical training of young civic and political leaders. With our focus on practical civic and political skills, students feel better equipped by the end of the program than they did at the beginning to engage in the civic and political process, to problem solve in multiple ways, and to understand how to engage. Second, while many of our students are already campus leaders, the world of campus leadership, while valuable, does not necessarily represent the world these students will enter upon graduation nor are the skills necessarily the same as those required in broader society. They have room to grow when it comes to skills development, and the pedagogy we offer provides for this growth.

Our assessment shows improvement in action intentions as well, especially in areas where the individual plays a direct role in civic and political leadership, such as working with others to solve community problems, discussing political problems with others, contacting public officials about problems, and voting in local elections. Clearly by the end of the program students can see how these individual activities matter in the political process and not only feel as though they have the skills to engage in them, but also intend to engage in them. Several traditional methods of political activity, such as working for political candidates, giving money to political candidates or causes, working for political groups, or signing a petition did not show significant increases by

the end of the program. We think this is a reflection of the extent to which youth are unimpressed with the traditional methods of political activity. In addition, these traditional methods of political activity have little or no role in problem solving. Finally, students don't report a significant increase in their intentions of contacting newspapers or magazines. We think this too is a reflection of the extent to which the traditional news media does not capture the interest of today's youth.

Conclusion

The research presented here addresses an important problem: Young Americans are at once active and engaged in social organizations but at the same time lack knowledge, skills, and interest in civic affairs. We suggest that this lack of interest in public affairs is due in part to a lack of understanding and skills about how to engage in public affairs and an inability to see the day-to-day relevance of politics to their lives. This is problematic because our American theory of governance relies on active engagement and effective citizen leadership. We outline a pedagogical approach to youth civic and political leadership training designed to address these weaknesses. It is important to note that the curriculum is both practical and theoretical in creating young leaders who are knowledgeable and engaged. The reported assessment data showed improvements in both knowledge and skills about how to participate in the political process as well as intention to participate in the political process in the future. These findings suggest that youth civic and leadership training that meets these needs can significantly effect the ability and likelihood of the next generation of Americans to engage in the political process.

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