

# It's What Happens on the Front Lines of Civic Education Policy that Matters: Reflections on a Natural Experiment on Youth Turnout in Ontario

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**Abstract.** In the last decade there has developed a new level of coordination among those working in the fields of citizenship education and political participation. The paper puts this link to an empirical test, using a natural experiment of youth turnout in the 2004 and 2006 federal election to investigate what, if any, effect can be found of Ontario's introduction of a compulsory Grade 10 Civics course in 2000. We find that changing the curriculum in itself does not appear to have the desired results, concluding that, in practice, any lasting effect of civic education upon youth political participation rests on the effectiveness of front-line implementation.

**Keywords.** Education; participation; youth; civic; turnout.

## Introduction

It is well established that politically informed citizens vote and participate in politics more than those who are less politically informed. It is also well established that the democratic world in the past thirty years has seen a secular decline in the sense of civic duty to so participate. In the absence of such a duty, the political knowledge dimension of political participation becomes increasingly salient. Having informed citizens is a value in itself; it also becomes crucial as a means of stemming the decline in political participation. Furthermore, we know that the combination of declining political attentiveness, knowledge and participation, as well as a sense of a civic duty to vote is in good part a generational phenomenon. Young people arriving at the age of citizenship are in the process of developing habits that will affect choices they will make throughout their lives. Yet sociological and technological changes have made them less subject to the traditional agents of political socialization. Apart from being affected by changes in the structure and role of the family and community in recent decades, young adults in the last fifteen years have reached maturity in the world of the Internet and of digitalized information, one in which the shared social and informational network provided

**Résumé.** Au cours de la dernière décennie, un nouveau niveau de coordination a été développé parmi ceux qui travaillent dans les champs de l'éducation citoyenne et de la participation politique. Cet article teste empiriquement ce lien, en utilisant une expérience de participation de la jeunesse au cours des élections fédérales de 2004 et 2006, afin de rechercher si l'introduction, en Ontario en l'an 2000, d'un cours obligatoire d'éducation civique de niveau 10 a eu un quelconque effet. Nous trouvons que changer le programme scolaire en soi ne semble pas avoir les effets escomptés, et concluons que, en pratique, tout effet durable de l'éducation civique sur la participation politique des jeunes est conditionné par l'efficacité de sa mise en œuvre.

**Mots clefs.** Éducation; participation; jeunesse; civisme; participation.

by the geographical (and political) community is increasingly replaced by an individualized virtual one, composed of persons distant both geographically and psychologically. Hence a greater political-socialization burden is placed on the school, which retains a physical link to the geographical community, as it filters knowledge - including political knowledge.

Citizenship or civic education, as generally understood, seeks to promote citizen engagement, involvement, and interest in politics and public affairs, and to increase knowledge and reinforce the individual's sense of efficacy (Crick, 1998; Verba et al., 1995; Whiteley, 2005). Since the early 1990s there has been a resurrection of policy interest in government-delivered civic education programs stimulated by compelling reports from the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States and all three countries pursued expanded civic education programs (Cogan, 1996; Davies, 2003:50, Kennedy and Howard, 2004:100). The recommendations for mandatory civics and career development in Ontario came from the Royal Commission on Learning (1995). Commission member Avis Glaze recalls that the initial idea for a separate and mandatory civics course in Ontario originated during the commission's private meetings.<sup>1</sup> However, Ontario has not been acting alone. In the last ten years, each province has experienced civic education

curriculum reform. New curricula were adopted across the country: Newfoundland (1998), Nova Scotia (2002), Prince Edward Island (2007), New Brunswick (2006), Quebec (1998), Ontario (2000), Manitoba (2007), Saskatchewan (1999), Alberta (2007) and British Columbia (2005). A growing trend for education policy makers in the 2000s was to expand citizenship beyond traditional civics classes with programs promoting character, volunteerism, and healthy living and community values. While almost all courses are compulsory or may serve as compulsory courses, the units and themes differ from a focus on strands of citizenship (Ontario) to contemporary political eras (Quebec) to variations on the role of Canada (Prince Edward Island).

A substantial literature has pointed to the need to know more about citizenship education – a recent development at least as far as political science is concerned (Niemi and Junn, 1998). An explanation for this belated realization lies in the paradox that western societies have experienced a decline in participation, particularly electoral participation, as they have invested more and more resources into education. Clearly, the assumption that increasing the average number of years in school itself assures the widening of democratic participation has proven unwarranted.

This paradox points to the need for more systematic research into the effects of education on participation, combining what we know about the specific content of civics courses and related activities, to the wider institutional context in which citizenship education takes place. The study of citizenship education until relatively recently has largely been left to education specialists. With some exceptions, the literature has consisted of case studies which do not lend themselves to cumulation. This void has started to be filled with the current interest among social scientists, but progress is held back by the lack of systematic communication among the different disciplines. Though there have been some efforts at cross-national comparisons in the past decade, these have not yet led to the development of the needed systematic comparative data on civic education (Torney-Purta et al., 1999; Council of Europe, 2004; Euridyce, 2005). This absence lies at the root of a series of efforts to address the issue from which this paper emerges.

In this paper we argue that, using Ontario as a case study, changing the citizenship curriculum in itself does not appear to have the desired results on low political participation. In turn, further qualitative research on the curriculum demonstrates that the success of the policy may be greatly influenced by the success of front line implementation. This argument will be supported in two parts. First, it will be demonstrated with Elections Canada data that voter turnout is lower in the cohort of citizens who have completed the mandatory course. Secondly, the importance of front line policy implementation will be presented through interviews with Ontario Civics teachers. Before presenting the support for our argument, the following section will review some of the youth political participation and knowledge literature and outline our approach to answering our research question.

## Literature and Methodology

An important recent initiative on youth political participation was taken by IDEA (The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance), which made youth and democracy the theme of its 1999 Democracy Forum (IDEA, 1999). In the following years, studies based on data from a number of countries confirmed that turnout decline was in good part a generational phenomenon and suggested a link to declining levels of political knowledge (Milner, 2002; Franklin, 2004; Phelps, 2004; Wattenberg, 2007; Howe, 2003).

These concerns coalesced at the ECPR general conference in Budapest in September 2005, where a group, supported by IDEA, was formed.<sup>II</sup> The lack of systematic data on civic education was identified as the key obstacle to the needed cross-national comparative work on factors affecting youth political participation. A questionnaire was produced, and by the following spring a website for the assembled data was established at IDEA.<sup>III</sup> Data from the completed questionnaires has regularly been integrated into the database since. At this point, the database ([www.civiced.idea.int](http://www.civiced.idea.int)) is still in an interim form,<sup>IV</sup> not having yet attained the needed level of reliability to statistically link an aggregate score on quantity and quality of civic education with indicators of political participation. The fact that this is the state of the field tells us how little we know, despite the resurgence of interest in the subject, about the provision of civic education.

Research completed from the 1960s to the 1990s consistently claimed that citizenship education curriculum was not producing much effect or impact on political participation (Litt 1963; Hamilton and Zeldin 1987). A good example is found in William Gardner's (1969:41) claim that "The presence of political content in the curriculum is no guarantee of its effectiveness in stimulating political thought and activities. The various studies which have attempted to assess how instruction affects the degree of political interest and the strength of commitment to ideologies present a blurred picture." In 1968 (853), Langton and Jennings concluded "our findings certainly do not support the thinking of those who look to the civics curriculum in American high schools as even a minor source of political socialization." Over thirty years later, Gaston (2002:222) concluded, "There is no evidence that overall levels of civic knowledge have altered much over time. A recent study compared the responses to questions that were asked in both the 1988 and 1998 NAEP Civics Assessment found that percentages of correct answers had hardly changed over the decade between the two assessments (Weiss et al., 2000)." However, more recent work has challenged previous negative claims on the effects of citizenship education (Denver and Hands 1990; Westholm et al. 1990; Niemi and Junn 1993). In 1998, Niemi and Junn published *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn* and presented new evidence that suggested there might be a correlation between civic education and political participation. With these conflicting findings is where we find the state of the research.

If we know too little about civic education, we might say that we know too much about youth political participation. The diversity of the data being gathered allows researchers to disagree as to the very phenomenon being considered, and produces challenges in how to interpret the data. As Osler and Starkey (2001:289) argued, "It is not self-evident that voting behaviour is an accurate indicator of political interest or engagement." There is wide ranging debate over the type of participation (conventional, non-conventional), the forms of that participation (organized, individual), and the means of identifying it (surveys, voter turnout figures). The current state of the debate can be described as one in which there is a well developed critique of the direct association of political participation with traditional activities like voting and joining a political party, but no consensus over a practical alternative to put in its place. For example, Dalton extends Norris' notion of political participation to comprise "cause-oriented" political activities, to what he terms "engaged citizenship," which he distinguishes from "citizen duty" (Dalton, 2007; Norris, 2003). Rather than centered on actions, his criteria for engaged citizenship, like those of certain British observers (e.g. Henn and Weinstein, 2003, O'Toole, Marsh and Jones 2003), are in good part a matter of expressed attitudes. These variances in identifying youth political participation make clarity in problem construction difficult to achieve. The previous reliance placed on attitudes has created ambiguity and represents the need for methodologies such as those adopted in this paper.

However commendable such attitudes, their expression cannot satisfactorily serve as alternative indicators of political participation, since they costlessly invite respondents to place themselves in a positive light. In high schools and colleges in the United States especially, there are frequently powerful institutional incentives for (expressing an interest in) being active in voluntary community associations. Indeed, the voluntary nature of such participation is dubious given the fact that in many schools and colleges such activity is obligatory. For example, a recent study of young people in four US high schools found "a single theme about the meaning of civic engagement [that] appeared repeatedly: 'resume padding'" (Friedland and Morimoto, 2006). Indicators unconnected to an objective, measurable criterion like political knowledge are intrinsically unreliable. In a survey, one can express attitudes one does not hold, or report voluntary activities never carried out, but one cannot demonstrate knowledge one does not have. Unfortunately, students of political participation who base their assessments on attitudinal surveys rarely balance their findings with an objective measure unaffected by institutionalized incentives by including political knowledge questions.

Excluding the information dimension allows critics of the traditional model of political participation to treat abstention from voting as a form of protest, to assert that young non-voters are practicing a different kind of politics, one inaccessible, even incomprehensible, to older generations. It allows the above-noted British observers to take at face value young non-voters' justification for abstention, i.e., that the parties are "all the same" or "none stand for me," since those questions were not accompanied by ones testing whether the

response is based on at least a minimal knowledge of what the parties actually do stand for. Similarly, it allows Dalton to accept the expression of positive attitudes toward "supporting the worse off" as a positive indicator without testing whether the respondents know which parties and candidates favour policies supporting the worse off, and something about the measures they would employ, or have employed when in power to do so. When this is done, for example by the Canadian Election Study, the study found most young respondents opposed to increased defense spending of whom only 40 percent knew which party was promising a major increase in military spending, supporting the notion that parties are "all the same" (Gidengil et al., 2005).

The data on youth political knowledge, while not as systematic as one would wish given the reluctance of cross-national surveys to standardize political knowledge questions, indicates that younger generations are less politically knowledgeable than previous generations at the same stage of life (Wattenberg, 2007; Milner, 2005; Milner 2007; Howe, 2003; Grönlund, 2003). Given the strong individual-level relationship between political knowledge and reported political participation, it is reasonable to see in it an explanation for the decline in the latter. And, naturally enough, it is equally natural to look to civic education, the primary means by which political knowledge is transmitted to young people, when it comes to policies to address the situation. Yet this is to skip a step: we need first to try to establish a link between civic education and political participation, beginning with, though not limited to, the choice of whether to vote.

The literature seeking to draw a link between civic education and reported youth political participation is inconclusive. At the individual level, data that follows young people over the years from civic education classes at school to political participation as adults is hard to come by. Surveys using prospective questions of young people about their intention to vote when older are highly problematic: they constitute a measure of youth attitudes that provides no basis for assuming they reflect what the respondents will do when they become adults (Hooghe and Kavadias, 2005; Tourney-Punta et al., 2001). Also problematic is asking adults retrospectively about their civic-education experience which is something that is seldom done (Milner, 2007). Indeed, even on the political participation side, retrospective questions can be misleading, as is the case with reports of having voted in the last election, a comparatively simple act of political participation to recall.

We noted above that in a survey, one can report voluntary activities never carried out. One can also report votes one has never cast. Moreover, especially as survey response rates decline, voters are more likely to be contacted than abstainers. The combination of these two factors makes the association between votes reported and cast even more tenuous when the aim is to study a specific age group, since we cannot assume the bias attributable to these factors to be equally strong among all age groups. Using reported survey data for youth voting is especially difficult. Many young people do not own a landline phone, one result of which is that Internet polls are increasingly used to reach young people; but these introduce a different type of distortion due

to self-selection. Consider the estimate of 22.4 percent turnout for first-time electors in the 2000 Canadian election by Pammett and LeDuc, which gave impetus to the Elections Canada study (discussed below) the results of which confirmed, what many had suspected, that the 22.4 percent was too low (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003:20). This was likely due at least in part to Pammett and LeDuc's using a statistical correction on the rate of turnout to account for overreporting that was too high for young people who, given the low sense of civic duty to vote, over-report voting less than older citizens. Again, we find challenges in previous data in dealing with the attitudes and psychological implications of survey respondents.

A similar distortion enters in the relationship between reported and real turnout in cross-national studies. Gallego, using data from the European Voter Project from six countries that have held National Election Studies regularly for a long time (Great Britain, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands), found that:

Overreporting has grown in some countries at the same rate as turnout has declined. [If we compare] elections until 1985, and ... elections held between 1986 and 2005, [we find] for example the Netherlands' electoral participation has dropped by five per cent in the period observed, but according to survey estimates it has not decreased but rather risen by two per cent. ... In Denmark the official decline is three per cent, but the over-reporting has grown by exactly the same amount.... In Germany ... a nine percent real drop is only reflected by a mere two per cent change in surveys... In Sweden a five percent drop becomes three per cent in the surveys (Gallego, forthcoming).

Most countries including Canada do not allow researchers access to recorded data of whether individuals in fact voted, as is possible in the UK, Norway and Sweden. A step in this direction was taken by Elections Canada in 2004 and repeated in 2006, (and a similar initiative is currently being undertaken by the DGE in Quebec<sup>v</sup>). We can now get a better sense of just who votes in Canada, in particular breaking it down by age group. Below, we use the Elections Canada data to conduct a "natural experiment" about the relationship between civic education and voting. Before describing this experiment we need to first set out the methodology used by Elections Canada to gather the data (Elections Canada, 2008).

In 2004 and again in 2006 Elections Canada used electoral data to create a very large sample of electors who voted at an advance poll, by special ballot or at a polling station on Election Day (See Table 2 below). Based on the results of the study, it estimated that overall turnout increased by 4.4 percent in 2006. When it came to young citizens, it found 43.8 percent of youth aged 18 to 24 to have voted, up from 37.0 percent in 2004. Interestingly, when divided between first-time voters and those under 25 who had been eligible to vote in the previous election (top row, Table 1), the former rose only 2.7 percentage points, while the latter jumped a hefty 9.9 points.

**Table 1: Estimated Participation Rate by Age Group (2004 and 2006 General Elections)**

	Cohort	Participation (number of voters/number of electors in the population, %)		Difference
		2006	2004	
Canada	First-time voters	42.2	39.6	2.6
	Previously eligible	44.2	34.3	9.9*
	18-24	43.8	37.0	6.8*
	25-34	49.8	44.0	5.7*
	35-44	61.6	54.5	7.1*
	45-54	70.0	66.0	4.0
	55-64	75.4	72.9	2.4
	65-74	77.5	75.5	2.0
	75+	61.6	63.9	-2.3
All	62.8*	58.5	4.4*	

\* Significant at a 95% confidence level.

Source: Elections Canada

\*\*The estimated national average of 62.8 percent is below the official turnout rate of 64.7 percent to take account of the fact one can register to vote at the polls: it is based on the voting-age population rather than the number of eligible electors.<sup>vi</sup>

The numbers are based on four types of voters (see Table 2): 1. a sample of electors who voted without registering at the polls on election day; 2. electors who registered at the polls and voted on election day; 3. electors who voted at advance polls; and 4. electors who voted by special ballot (SVR), i.e. away from their polls. As we can see in Table 2, younger citizens were overrepresented in the 2nd and 4th category. The first group is based on a sample, the others were counted individually. Electors who vote at advance polls or by special ballot comprised 1,972,057 in all, while those who registered on polling day comprised 904,802 voters.<sup>vii</sup>

**Table 2: Voting method by age (2006 general election)**

	Election day (no registration)	Election day (registration)	Advance poll	SVR National	SVR Local
18 to 24 yrs.	7.0%	27.4%	4.9%	19.6%	9.9%
25 to 34 yrs.	13.3%	25.2%	8.4%	9.2%	7.8%
35 to 44 yrs.	20.9%	17.7%	13.9%	4.9%	8.4%
45 to 54 yrs.	23.4%	13.6%	20.8%	7.3%	14.4%
55 to 64 yrs.	17.3%	8.2%	22.2%	18.9%	22.6%
65 to 74 yrs.	10.6%	4.1%	16.9%	24.9%	20.6%
75 yrs. and over	7.4%	3.9%	12.7%	14.8%	16.2%

Source: Elections Canada

Despite elaborate weighing procedures, there is reason to suspect that the 2006 methodology to some extent overrepresents university students among those 18-24. If this is the case, then it would suggest that part of the overall increase in turnout from 2004 to 2006 attributed to young voters is due to this. This would help explain the significant and puzzling 10 percent turnout boost in one group, those under 25 who had been eligible to vote in the previous election, since it is reasonable to expect that the discrepancy between university students and those the same age no longer in school increases as we go from 18 to 20 year-olds right up to 24 year-olds, since the educational level distance between them increases with each year.

## Results: Turnout

The introduction of a compulsory civics course allows us to better examine the relationship of civic education and voting. The Ontario policy change provides an appropriate case. As Paul Howe (2003:22) observed, “we have a ready-made case at hand (for observation): the new civics curriculum introduced in Ontario high schools.” The course, given over six-weeks in grade 10 and titled “Profile for Civics,” explores what it means to be an informed, participating citizen in a democratic society.<sup>VIII</sup> Since no comparable change took place elsewhere in Canada, and in this period, their level of turnout in 2004 and 2006 can be compared with the same age groups in the other provinces. The latter serve as a control group, creating a kind of natural experiment. The results of that experiment for each election are presented in Tables 3a and 3b below.<sup>IX</sup> The cut-off ages for the 2004 and 2006 elections provide two categories (first for Canada as a whole, then for Ontario, and then for rest of the country – ROC): those at an age to have normally reached grade 10 before the compulsory civics course was introduced in Ontario (bottom row), and those who did so earlier (top row: the upper cut-off age for this latter category was chosen to have a roughly equal sample of the two groups). The numbers are thus greater in 2006 since more students that had taken the course were now at voting age). In each case the margin of error at 95 percent confidence level is provided (the overall numbers for Canada reflect the above-noted fact that the older 18-24 year olds’ vote increased dramatically as compared to first time voters between 2004 and 2006).

If there is a positive relationship between civic education and voting, it is not found in Table 3. Indeed, what we find points in the opposite direction, namely that compared to the control group, i.e. the comparable age group in ROC, Ontarians who entered grade ten after the civics course was introduced, voted less than those doing so earlier. In 2004, those who took the course voted at 38.2 percent compared to those who did not at 38.0, while the numbers for the same age groups elsewhere in Canada are 37.1 and 34.5. The difference is well within the margin of error, suggesting little effect one way or another. But this is not the case in 2006: those who took the course voted at 41.8 compared to those who did not at 46.8, while the numbers for the same age groups elsewhere in Canada are 40.2 and 40.0. This 5 per-

cent difference indeed suggests a relationship, but it is perverse one: taking the new compulsory civics course seems to have discouraged turnout by young Ontarians in 2006.

**Table 3a: 2006 general election**

Age group		Canada	Ontario	ROC
Born between January 1, 1985 and January 23, 1988	18 - 20.1	40.8 (±2.6)	41.8 (±4.3)	40.2 (±3.4)
Born between January 1, 1981 and December 31, 1984	20.1-25.1	42.5 (±4.2)	46.8 (±8.9)	40.0 (±4.2)

**Table 3b: 2004 general election**

Age group		Canada	Ontario	ROC
Born between January 1, 1985 and December 31, 1986	18 - 19.5	37.5 (±3.4)	38.2 (±7.9)	37.1 (±2.5.)
Born between January 1, 1983 and December 31, 1984	19.5 - 21.5	36.1 (±3.1)	38.8 (±6.8)	34.5 (±2.9)

In an attempt to shed some light on this rather surprising and counterintuitive finding, Table 4 presents a breakdown of the 2006 results by province. The turnout data in the Table 4 proves not to be especially helpful: Ontario is the clear outlier (the other, lesser, outliers: Nunavut, the Yukon Territories, and PEI, have too small populations to allow for meaningful statistical analysis) with those Ontarians at the age to have taken Grade 10 civics turning out considerably less compared to those in the same age group everywhere else.

It is hard to think of any political event especially salient to young people that took place during this period that differentiates Ontario from the other provinces. The results could, of course, be a mere statistical accident: the confidence limits provided by Elections Canada based on the sampling methodology used means that, at the 95 percent confidence level, the 46.8 figure for 2006 for the older (non-civic education) Ontario population, the group whose turnout is higher than expected, can in principle have been anywhere from 37.9 to 55.7. It is conceivable that there could be no difference or even a lower percent than the 41.8 percent of the ones who received civic education. Or perhaps the age factor is simply more salient in Ontario, i.e. the increased likeliness to vote of young people closer to 25 than young people closer to 18 is greater in Ontario due to the specificities of cultural factors affecting young people that distinguish the more metropolitan and cosmopolitan Ontario. We cannot therefore simply assert that civics education depressed turnout; but we can say that it did not enhance it. Since a key goal of the course was just this, we are still left

with a negative finding – and a question: why did the course fail to have the desired effect on political participation?

**Table 4: General Election – January 23, 2006 – Estimated Voter Turnout By Specific Age Groups (Revised Population Estimates)**

		Estimate (%)	95% Confidence Limits	
			Lower	Upper
Canada	18 - 21.1	40.8	38.1	43.4
Canada	21.1 - 25.1	42.5	38.3	46.8
NL	18 - 21.1	23.9	21.6	26.2
NL	21.1 - 25.1	23.1	19.1	27.1
PE	18 - 21.1	49.1	44.2	54.1
PE	21.1 - 25.1	53.9	45.6	62.2
NS	18 - 21.1	49.3	46.2	52.5
NS	21.1 - 25.1	43.0	38.7	47.3
NB	18 - 21.1	43.7	41.2	46.3
NB	21.1 - 25.1	44.7	40.8	48.6
QC	18 - 21.1	47.3	42.8	51.8
QC	21.1 - 25.1	48.0	40.1	56.0
ON	18 - 21.1	41.8	37.5	46.1
ON	21.1 - 25.1	46.8	37.9	55.7
MB	18 - 21.1	32.6	30.3	35.0
MB	21.1 - 25.1	33.9	29.6	38.1
SK	18 - 21.1	27.6	24.6	30.5
SK	21.1 - 25.1	27.1	24.2	30.1
AB	18 - 21.1	40.5	33.3	47.7
AB	21.1 - 25.1	40.3	33.8	46.8
BC	18 - 21.1	33.1	20.6	45.7
BC	21.1 - 25.1	30.9	17.6	44.2
YT	18 - 21.1	26.2	22.8	29.6
YT	21.1 - 25.1	30.9	27.4	34.3
NT	18 - 21.1	29.1	26.0	32.2
NT	21.1 - 25.1	32.9	29.2	36.6
NU	18 - 21.1	22.1	20.6	23.6
NU	21.1 - 25.1	37.4	33.7	41.1
All but ON	18 - 21.1	40.2	36.8	43.5
All but ON	21.1 - 25.1	40.0	35.7	44.2

\* For the purpose of these tables, 18-21.1 includes those born between January 1, 1985 and January 23, 1988; 21.1-25.1 includes those born between January 1, 1981 and December 31, 1984; If the 95% confidence intervals for any two estimates overlap the differences in the estimates are not statistically significant. Overlapping values mean that the difference could be due to sampling variability alone.

One clue to possible negative effects of the new curricular requirements is provided by a recent study. Along with introducing the compulsory civics education course, the 1999 Ontario regulations required that students complete 40 hours of volunteer (sic) community service before graduation from high school. Using a quasi-experimental design, Henderson, et al. (2007) surveyed 1768 first year Ontario university students who had completed high school in 2003, as to their recall of taking part in and attitudes toward volunteering, community service, and other measures of civic and political engagement. Because the government, at the same time, shortened the high school curriculum from 5 to 4 years, the 2003 high school graduating class contained two cohorts, only one of which was required to complete a mandated community service requirement (and take civic educa-

tion). The authors were thus able to compare two groups of students with very similar backgrounds, but which differed in whether or not they had been required to perform the community service to obtain their high school diploma. To their surprise, they found “no differences in current attitudes and reported civic engagement that might plausibly be attributed to participation in the mandatory service program” (Henderson et al., 2007:849).<sup>X</sup> Yet this reasoning does not seem to hold when Ontario is compared to the rest of Canada, as we found no such age effect in our control group from the rest of Canada. A further clue may lie in Henderson et al.’s (2007:856) citing the literature to the effect that the explanation may lie in the mandatory nature of the volunteering (sic), “While those who indicated they had engaged in sustained service exhibited significantly more political interest...those who were mandated to perform service in high school exhibited significantly less political media exposure.”

Perhaps something similar contributes to the apparent negative effects of the compulsory civics course in both studies. Our sample consists of young people in a low-politicization environment who were unexpectedly saddled with a new obligation, one their older peers had managed to avoid (Milner, 2007; Llewellyn et al., 2007). It is not unreasonable to suppose, though we are in no position to draw any firm conclusion, that simply adding a compulsory civics course, like obliging volunteering, cannot be counted on to have the desired positive effects on participation and engagement, and can even be counterproductive.

## Results: Policy Implementation

To further examine the Ontario phenomenon we can draw upon a recently completed series of interviews of Ontario civics teachers. The pool of teachers interviewed came from across Ontario and ranged from second year-teachers to a number who had taught over twenty years with a mix of four, ten, and fifteen year veterans in between. Some had only taught the course a few times, while a handful had taught civics over thirty and forty times since its inception. Unfortunately this is not a representative sample since some boards refused permission for their employees to be interviewed, and among those where such permission was granted, a certain self-selectivity of teachers with a particular interest in the subject was inevitable.

Not surprisingly, then, the teachers interviewed generally wanted to see the course maintained, most believing it was making a difference, with students reported as demonstrating greater levels of civic knowledge at the end of the course than the beginning. Yet all the teachers noted that at the beginning of the course students had low to no civic knowledge, were not acquainted with current events and did not have a desire to participate politically. The students of one teacher had trouble identifying the prime minister; another routinely started the course with a simple political quiz that the classes usually failed.<sup>XI</sup> A third teacher stated that most had no idea what civics is, while another estimated that only one percent of the students at the beginning of the

course showed any interest in getting involved in politics. The teachers consistently raised concerns with the method of delivery: in particular, that the course is too short, offered too early in the high school career and difficult to teach due to its “open” nature.<sup>XII</sup> A majority of teachers reported students describing the teaching of Canadian political institutions as boring. Many teachers were also dissatisfied with the inadequacy of the curriculum and the listed textbooks. Despite their frustration with the curriculum and textbooks, most believed they could achieve results through participatory-based activities such as mock trials, parliaments and elections, as well as by encouraging involvement in their own community. Many agreed with the observation of a thirty-five year teaching veteran who had taught the course more than a dozen times that “at the end of the course the students that do well in civics know more about their society than most of their parents.” This matters, as a fifteen-year veteran of teaching asserted, because “it reaches kids who come from non-voting families.”

A more specific contextual aspect is the manner in which the course was implemented. The provincial government introduced the program in 2000 with little support (the curriculum was revised only a few years into its existence). Anecdotal evidence suggests that school principals tend to treat civics as a timetable “dumping ground”, while assigning the course to inexperienced and at times inappropriate (lacking training in social studies or history) teachers. Secondly, there is little consistency even in the same schools, as some teachers continue to stress institutions and others rarely mention the traditional lessons and focus on contemporary events and concerns. While the wide flexibility of the curriculum allows the teachers choice over content, which can be positive in the hands of trained and experienced teachers, in other cases, which seem more typical in Ontario, it leads to courses that fail to integrate those aspects that stress political institutions with current events and community level participation.<sup>XIII</sup>

## Discussion

It is hard to find evidence that the current provincial civic education regimes are affecting the attitudes of many young Canadians in a manner that leads to heightened levels of political participation. This is not due to a lack of policy effort in most provinces across the country. As mentioned in the introduction, since the late 1990s, each provincial education ministry has reformed and implemented its civic education program. Is it a matter of pouring old wine into new bottles, or is real innovation taking place? The reality is that, as Niemi and Junn conclude, “Civics by its very nature is a controversial subject, and there is imperfect agreement on both its meaning and how to test whether students are well informed about it” (1998:12). Hence it is in the context of wide uncertainty that education policy makers continue to search for a successful civics model.

Yet, while contemporary interest may suggest novel policy directions, civic education in Canada is not an incarnation of the 2000s or even the 1990s. Provinces have a long tradi-

tion of including explicit civics courses or implicit moral education in their pedagogical delivery. The constitutional directive of provincial jurisdictional responsibility for education leads to a potentially dysfunctional delivery dynamic for civic education, i.e. provincial governments responsible for teaching (supposedly national) citizenship lessons. Following Confederation, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald believed in the importance of education and its “potential to build support for the new political community” (McDonald, 1982:95). The notion of a new political community was an intriguing label for the young Canadian state.

Just as the Canadian state evolved, so too did Canadian civic education. As post-war Canada continued to map out its contemporary character and secure its sovereignty, civic education via history, social studies and Canadian studies slowly emerged as a pressing pedagogical concern. Possibly the most important call for greater citizenship education in Canada was A.B. Hodgetts’ 1968 publication *What Culture? What Heritage? A Study of Civic Education in Canada*.<sup>XIV</sup> Hodgetts complained “we are teaching a bland, unrealistic consensus version of our past: a dry-as-dust chronological story of uninterrupted political and economic progress told without the controversy that is an inherent part of history” (1968:1). Ten years later, Hodgetts collaborated with Paul Gallagher on *Teaching Canada for the 80s*, noting:

A program of studies designed for this purpose is ‘civic education’ in the widest and best meaning of the term. Obviously, there should be no confusion between this kind of civic education and the old ‘civics’ courses, which dealt almost exclusively with a description, frequently an unrealistic one, of the structure of the government (Hodgetts and Gallagher 1978:3).

In the late 1980s, Canadian political scientists made one of their first comprehensive contributions to the field of citizenship education with the collection of conference papers titled *Political Education in Canada*. In the past, Canadian political scientists had investigated phenomena such as political learning or political socialization, but did not have a tradition of considering civic education policy options. Concerning the dearth in research on citizenship education in Canada, Ronald Landes noted that “no full-length analysis of political learning in Canada has ever appeared in the pre-eminent journal of Canadian political scientists [and] of the five research notes which did appear, four were contributed by researchers at American universities” (1988:16).

There is no literature allowing us to test such an assertion in an effort to understand why the course has not attained the desired effect on political participation. Nevertheless, the work on youth political engagement in Canada, though it seldom allows us to compare provinces, does provide some useful clues. For example, a series of focus groups of young people in Ontario completed by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada in 2002 found that most saw electoral politics as “distant and irrelevant to their lives” (Barnard et al., 2003:45). When it comes to voting turnout, the 2003 General Social Survey indicates that Ontario (at 53%) had one of the lowest levels of reported federal

election voter turnouts for those aged 22 to 29 among the provinces (Quebec's level was 74%; the Atlantic Provinces 64%) (Milan, 2005:5). Among Ontarians as a whole, there has been a tendency for its population to be at the bottom of comparative provincial lists in electoral activity. In the 2000 federal election, Ontario had one of the lowest provincial turnouts (58%), despite few notable differences from other provinces with higher turnout rates (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003:21). In both 1990 and 2000, Ontario citizens (12% and 14%) were near the bottom in terms of political party membership compared to other provinces (Gidengil et al., 2004:128). The province has also experienced a mixed record in alternative forms of political and civic engagement (Hall et al, 2006; Jones, 2000). This evidence suggests that with respect to electoral participation, and youth participation in particular, Ontario presents perhaps a more difficult case than most if not all Canadian provinces. This suggests both the need for such remedies as a compulsory civics course, but also the danger that, given that it goes against the grain of the prevailing political culture, special efforts will be required to avoid its contributing to rather than resolving the problem. Earlier we stressed the link between low turnout and low levels of knowledge of politics and political issues. According to Pammett and LeDuc (2003), a majority of Canadians believe that young people are not turning out for elections because youth feel distant from politics and they have a lack of political information, and believed that the way to address low turnout was information and education. One tentative conclusion from our analysis is that lack of knowledge is largely a symptom of a deeper problem having to do with the subculture of the young that cannot simply be addressed with knowledge-focused civic education courses. Howe points out that this "clearly matters for policy makers...for if political interest is the driving force, then improvements to political knowledge may only produce citizens who know a lot about a subject for which they care little – and do nothing to raise levels of political participation" (2003:83).

However, this does not mean giving up on civic education. For one thing, civic education has far wider goals than simply bringing young people to the ballot box. Indeed, if that were the only goal, it could readily be achieved without any meaningful increase in political knowledge through compulsory voting (Milner et al, 2007). Moreover, if civic education makes young citizens more knowledgeable, even if no more likely to vote, that is an accomplishment nonetheless. But we know from the comparative literature that a positive relationship between more informed and more politically active young people is possible. The question is how to achieve it. We need to learn from the comparative literature when it works and when, as has apparently been the case so far in Ontario, it does not (Chareka and Sears, 2006:535).

Now that Ontario Grade 10 Civics has been offered for almost ten years, it would be valuable to see a formal assessment of the course. Without a formal evaluation of the course, which has yet to be carried out by the Ministry, or a scientific survey of students and teachers, which the admin-

istrators of Ontario education seem reluctant to allow, we can only speculate. And based on what we have seen, our findings are perhaps not as surprising as it seems at first blush. Ontario, as a setting for such a course, seems to have been a relatively uncongenial environment. Attachment to Ontario as an identifiable political community is weaker than to most other provinces. Combined with this, young people in Ontario may be "ahead" of those in other provinces in undergoing a process of cultural change, one aspect of which is distance from political life. In this context, it is perhaps not all that surprising that obliging young people to take the Grade 10 civics within a less than fully supportive educational structure can prove counter-productive.

While our data cannot prove that the course had a negative effect on turnout, it does place into a difficult position anyone who might try to claim it had a positive affect. The cross-national evidence, however spotty, suggests that a key factor in the effectiveness of civic education is the experience, approach and attitude of the teacher and the place of civic education in the wider educational setting. If nothing else, this paper serves to affirm the need for systematic comparative work to consolidate the existing data. The main lesson from this experiment is that we need, via the IDEA database and otherwise, to expand and deepen our knowledge of just what goes on and what works in civic education policy.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>I</sup> Avis Glaze. Ontario Ministry of Education. Phone Interview. 9 February 2008. All cited interviews were part of a series of semi-structured interviews completed by one of the authors with twenty Ontario Civics teachers and a number of educational policy makers across the country and more specifically in Ontario, B.C. and Alberta.
- <sup>II</sup> Two well-attended sections reflecting these concerns, one on civic education, the other on political knowledge, were organized. Participants at panels in these sections formed the nucleus of a coordinating group mandated by IDEA to carry on the task of comparatively studying youth political participation, political knowledge and civic education.
- <sup>III</sup> The questionnaire asked a series of questions about the organization and structure in the provision of civic education (CE), including number of hours, regulations as to CE delivery (by week or term); mandatory vs. advisory CE course; compulsory CE for graduation; training of CE teachers; targeted state funding; and national evaluation, as well as series of questions as to content and delivery of CE. The questionnaires have now been distributed to over 55 civic education specialists in over 45 countries. This work as been put on hold since fall 2008 as IDEA has suspended adding new data in order to simplify and consolidate its various databases.
- <sup>IV</sup> It is useful for practitioners rather than the public at large. More countries need to be added; the data is still largely unverified, and, to some degree, unstandardized - providing, in effect, a preliminary snapshot of what we know.
- <sup>V</sup> This would be welcome indeed, since Quebec surveys have been over-reporting turnout, for example, 86 percent of respondents told SOM (Étude sur l'exercice du droit de vote et le financement politique, Sainte-Foy. Directeur général des élections du Québec, 2004) that they had voted in the 2003 election, for which the actual turnout was 70 percent.

- VI One methodological change took place in 2006. Unlike the 2004 general election, which was held in late June, the 2006 general election took place on January 23, at the start of a university semester. With the students being able to choose whether to vote at their university or family home, Elections Canada chose to take this geographic concentration into account by including all electoral districts with at least one large campus were included in the sample (except for Quebec and Ontario, where one out of every two electoral districts with a campus was selected due to the larger number of campuses).
- VII The sample of already registered electors who voted at their polling stations on January 23, 2006 was derived as follows: First, the federal electoral districts in each province were stratified: those with a large university campus and those without one to ensure good coverage of youth, since university students were at their school-year residence at the time of this election, and analysis of registration patterns suggested that electoral districts with large universities had higher-than-normal voter registrations. From each group within a province, a simple random sample of electoral districts was selected.... (In Ontario and Quebec, there were simply too many to take them all, so only half were selected in the sample.) The three territories' electoral districts were added to the 47 thus selected for a total of 50 districts. The second stage was to identify 20 polling divisions within each of the selected electoral districts, and sampling carried out using simple random sampling. For each selected polling division, the dates of birth were obtained for all electors who were physically struck off the Official List of Electors. A weighting procedure was used at each stage. Finally, margins of error were calculated in reference to the number of polling divisions in the sample, and not the number of electors.
- VIII It is separated into three units, respectively 15, 25 and 15 hours: Democracy - Issues and Ideas; The Canadian Context; and Global Perspectives. The curriculum guidelines stress the historical and institutional approach, with emphasis on knowledge of government procedures, as well as teaching Canadian civic virtues, especially tolerance of diversity, and commitment to the democratic process.
- IX This data was supplied to the authors by Elections Canada and are greatly appreciated.
- X Noting that "in addition to the community service requirement, the Grade 12 cohort was also required to complete a civics course before graduation, they added: "Given this, we might expect that a cohort completing such a course would profess more interest in politics and exhibit more political media exposure than a cohort for which the course was only an option. That the relationship was negative in both of these cases and significantly so for political media exposure suggests that other developmental variables may have suppressed any modest positive effects that the course may have had on students' political engagement. That is, given that the age groups involved here are on opposite sides of a critical political responsibility cusp (18 years) in our society, this finding may simply reflect different stages of political development. As noted, the average age of the mandated cohort was 17.8 years while the non-mandated students averaged a year and a half older. In support of this explanation, when we regress political media exposure on both the age and cohort variables, the cohort effect fades to statistical non-significance" (Henderson et al., 2007:857).
- XI All interviews were anonymous and conducted over the phone between November 2007 and March 2008. Boards and schools also remain anonymous in the research, the intent of the interviews was to emulate Hodgetts "fly-on-the-wall" type observations without actually setting foot in the classroom.
- XII Ontario high school courses are offered in various learning levels including "Academic" and "Applied" in early grades and "University", "College" and "Workplace" in later grades.
- XIII Teachers who were interviewed referred to challenges of staffing. Many indicated that inexperienced teachers or individuals without a social studies background were handed Grade 10 Civics classes.
- XIV Three years prior, the \$150,000 National History Project was initiated by the Board of Governors of Trinity College School. Out of this project arose the Canada Studies Foundation in 1970 and the publication of Hodgetts book in 1968 (Tomkins, 1977: 5). The study was based on an examination of 951 classes in 247 schools across Canada (Boyd, 1978: 1).