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# Promoting Civic Knowledge and Political Efficacy Among Low-Income Youth Through Applied Political Participation

Yesenia Alvarez Padilla, Mary E. Hylton, and Jennifer Lau Sims

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## Abstract

Studies indicate growing disparities in youth civic knowledge and political efficacy based on socioeconomic status, parental educational attainment, and race. Most studies of youth political participation focus on the effect political efficacy and civic knowledge have on political participation. Few report on the effect political participation has on political efficacy and civic knowledge. This article describes an intervention that coupled civic literacy workshops with applied political participation to increase the civic knowledge and political efficacy of low-income, ethnically diverse high school students. Over three years, 47 high school students enrolled in Upward Bound participated in a six-hour civic literacy workshop. Upon conclusion of the workshop, students spent a day meeting with legislators and attending legislative hearings. Results indicate increases in political efficacy and significant increases in civic knowledge among the youth after both the workshop and the visits with elected officials.

While both civic knowledge and political efficacy have been shown to positively influence the rates of political participation of youth (Galston 2001; Manganelli, Lucidi, & Alivernini, 2014; Reichert, 2016), it is likely that there is a reciprocal relationship between these variables. Direct political participation enables youth to put their knowledge into practice and gain more confidence in being active in policymaking processes. Specifically, the opportunity to discuss issues of concern and practice skills through political participation may foster gains in political efficacy and civic knowledge, furthering the likelihood of future participation (Beaumont, 2011; Feldman, Pasek, Romer, & Jamieson, 2007; Levy, 2013). Beaumont (2011) suggests that experiences that allow students to practice political skills and participate in political settings are useful means of attaining greater political efficacy and political equality. These experiences can help promote further participation by youth from underrepresented groups as they gain the confidence, skills, and willingness to be politically engaged.

Opportunities to engage youth from underrepresented groups are particularly important given growing disparities in political efficacy and civic knowledge. Low-income youth and youth of color score lower on tests of civic knowledge than do their wealthier, white peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). The lack of civic knowledge and subsequent decline in political efficacy among these youth may reflect feelings of alienation from political

processes. Laurison (2015) argues that inequalities in political participation are related to more than a lack of skills or knowledge. Those youth who are low income may also feel that they are not entitled to be politically engaged or express their political opinions (Laurison, 2015). Therefore, it is essential to engage low-income youth in political experiences that incite the expression of political opinions and concerns. Through these experiences youth may feel more connected to civic processes, be more inclined to express their political opinions, and be politically engaged in the future.

This article describes an intervention that coupled civic literacy workshops with applied political participation to increase the civic knowledge and political efficacy of low-income, racially, and ethnically diverse high school students. The intervention was held in the spring of 2016, 2017, and 2018 with three separate groups of students enrolled in a local Upward Bound program. Evaluation data indicate that the intervention was effective in increasing civic knowledge and somewhat effective in increasing political efficacy among the youth.

## Literature Review

### *Political Participation*

Civic engagement describes a wide range of actions that are taken individually or collectively to affect the circumstances of community members (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). These actions can involve participation in voluntary associations, community groups, making donations, and discussing politics

(Pritzker, 2016; Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Political participation is typically seen as a form of civic engagement, where individuals and groups seek to effect political decision-making (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). They also distinguish between latent and manifest forms of political participation. Whereas manifest forms are observable and intended to directly influence political institutions, latent forms are indirect and may serve to influence politics in the future.

Manifest forms of participation include practices that are directly aimed at influencing decision-making bodies. These activities may include: voting, contacting public officials, working with political parties, or buying certain products or basing lifestyle decisions on political beliefs (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Manifest forms can also occur outside of political institutions (e.g., protests or demonstrations). By contrast, latent forms of participation can be as simple as following social or political issues. While most high school students are not old enough to vote, and therefore, cannot participate in electoral forms of participation, they can participate in most of the other manifest and latent forms of participation. For example, youth can testify before policymaking bodies, lobby, and attend and organize rallies, protests, and issue forums.

Unfortunately, there are significant disparities in political participation. Those who are more educated and at a higher socioeconomic position are more likely to be politically engaged than those who are in lower socioeconomic positions, less educated, or racial minorities (Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Osgood, & Briddell, 2011; Gaby, 2016). This inequality in political engagement is persistent across time (Gaby, 2016). Members of higher socioeconomic groups may have access to more resources, like community organizations, and opportunities to engage in political activities (Manganelli et al., 2014; Gaby, 2016). Lessened political participation by youth from disadvantaged groups can serve to perpetuate inequalities as political institutions are not held accountable for the concerns of these youth (Jörke, 2016). Therefore, it is essential to engage youth from underrepresented backgrounds.

### *Civic Knowledge*

Civic knowledge includes the skills and information needed to participate in a democratic society. A report by the National Center for

Education Statistics (2011) found that 64% of high school seniors had at least a basic level of achievement in civics, while only 24% of 12th graders were at or above a proficient level of civic knowledge. There are also differences based on socioeconomic status and race, where those who are eligible for reduced-lunch or are a part of a minority group, score lower than their wealthier, white peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). In order to promote the participation of youth, it is important that they have the civic knowledge needed to be able to effectively participate in their communities (Cambell, Gould, Jamieson, Levine, McConnell, McKinney-Browning, & Smith, 2011).

Galston (2001) illustrates the benefits of fostering the civic knowledge of youth. He argues that civic knowledge allows youth to gain an understanding of their personal or group interests and an understanding of how public policies can affect those interests. In addition, civic knowledge promotes trust in institutions and public officials, with a better understanding of political events (Galston, 2001). The development of civic knowledge may also have a greater impact on those who are the least represented in government, including minorities and those that are low-income (Cambell et al., 2011). Furthermore, increased levels of civic knowledge have been found to promote political participation (Chaffee & Cohen, 2012; Galston, 2001; Cambell et al., 2011).

Civics courses and civic education programs have been used as a means of fostering civic knowledge in youth. Most high school students take a course in civics before graduating (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). In addition, there are service-learning programs, which combine regular class instruction with community service, and involve interactions with political institutions (Feldman et al., 2007). These types of programs have been found to promote the civic knowledge and political efficacy of youth where students are able to learn to access political information and discuss political issues that are relevant to them and their communities (Feldman et al., 2007). Service-learning programs that foster civic knowledge and political efficacy have been found to promote political participation up to a year after students completed the program (Pasek, Feldman, Romar, & Jamieson, 2008). In general, activities that focus on political and civic issues that are relevant to youth and provide avenues for action are more likely to foster political participation (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Feldman et al., 2007; Pasek et al., 2008).

### *Political Efficacy*

Bandura, as cited in Levy (2013), defines self-efficacy as one's own judgment of their ability to perform tasks. Political efficacy is a type of self-efficacy involving the extent to which individuals feel they can participate effectively and influence political affairs or decisions. (Finkel, 1985; Levy, 2013). Political efficacy has been found to promote political participation (Feldman et al., 2007; Finkel, 1985; Pasek et al., 2008; Reichert, 2016). Experiences that increase political efficacy can help mediate political participation inequalities (Beaumont, 2011).

The perceived purpose of political participation results in two different forms of political efficacy, internal and external. According to Finkel (1985), the view that political participation should be beneficial to individuals and their development is related to theories of participatory democracy. From this perspective, Finkel describes internal political efficacy as the extent to which the individual believes he or she has the skills or knowledge to participate politically.

External political efficacy is based on the presumptions of mobilization of support theorists, who argue the purpose of political participation as legitimizing the government and fostering trust toward authorities (Finkel, 1985). In this case the purpose of political participation is to maintain support for political institutions. It is the extent to which individuals feel their needs or desires are being met by the government, and the responsiveness of authority (Finkel, 1985). Thus, internal political efficacy is the perceived ability the individual has in acting to participate politically, while external efficacy involves the feeling that the same individual's actions will make an impact and elicit a response from political institutions (Finkel, 1985).

### *The Impact of Political Participation*

There is substantial support for the importance civic knowledge and political efficacy have on the likelihood of youth participating politically (Finkel, 1985; Galston, 2001; Manganelli et al., 2014; Reichert, 2016). Youth who have more civic knowledge and feel they can make a difference are more likely to report the intent to be civically engaged, despite their socio-economic background (Manganelli et al., 2014). Reichert (2016) suggests that political efficacy has a greater effect in translating civic knowledge into the intention to participate.

Reichert (2016) identified political efficacy as a mediating factor in the acquisition of political knowledge and participation. The feeling that one can influence decision-making and be heard increases the likelihood of political participation (Reichert, 2016; Manganelli et al., 2014). Higher levels of internal political efficacy have been found to have a greater effect on the intent to engage in conventional forms of participation as opposed to unconventional forms (Reichert, 2016). Low levels of external political efficacy may also serve as a means of encouraging political participation in response to unresponsive officials or political institutions (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006). Individuals may attempt to compel public officials to meet the desires of the public.

Political participation can increase political efficacy (Levy, 2013). Participation in electoral or campaign activities has been found to increase external political efficacy (Finkel, 1985; Ikeda, Kobayashi, & Hoshimoto, 2008). Other conventional forms of participation in community and partisan activism have been found to increase internal political efficacy (Beaumont, 2011; Stenner-Day & Fischle, 1992). Political participation has also been found to have a greater impact on the levels of efficacy in those who feel the least represented by government institutions (Ikeda et al., 2008). It is important to provide participation opportunities to underrepresented groups to promote their political efficacy and their likelihood of further participation.

Engaging politically to address relevant community problems can prompt youth to be more attentive to politics and further their engagement (Pasek et al., 2008). Political participation can be used as a means of engaging youth in political discussions, which has been found to increase political efficacy (Feldman et al., 2007). Furthermore, experiences in the community and institutions inculcate feelings of belonging and an affinity toward political participation. Direct experiences with political institutions through political participation can serve to promote a collective and political identity, democratic dispositions, and concern for the community (Flanagan, 2003). Promoting engagement can help address inequalities in political participation among racial minorities and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as youth become socialized to engage in political processes to promote the needs of their communities (Flanagan,

2003). Political participation is a means of fostering the skills, trust, and knowledge that can increase the political efficacy of youth, which then may result in sustained political participation.

### Case Study

Founded in response to a reported continual decline in the political engagement of young adults, the Civic Literacy Project provides targeted workshops on policymaking processes and advocacy strategies followed by a coordinated day of applied political participation. This project targets youth who are racially and ethnically diverse, and who are from low-income families. The goal of the Civic Literacy Project is to increase the civic literacy and political efficacy of those groups who have historically been underrepresented within political processes. The project is headed by a university faculty member who works with first-generation college students to deliver the workshops and arrange/supervise the legislative visits. These college students volunteer for the project and are able to earn hours toward their required internships. The college interns are trained by the faculty member and, as a result, acquire skills in community and political engagement. To reach the desired participant population, the Civic Literacy Project partnered with a local Upward Bound program.

Upward Bound is a federally funded, intensive college preparatory program designed to provide first-generation, income-qualified high school students with free college preparatory services and support to develop the skills and knowledge essential for successful admission, persistence, and completion of postsecondary education. The local Upward Bound program serves approximately 246 students attending eight high schools. This program emphasizes the engagement of their students in personal and professional development activities, including university diversity dialogues, service-learning opportunities, internships and civic engagement opportunities. Coming from first-generation, low-income backgrounds, Upward Bound families are often consumed by attempting to meet basic human needs; making it difficult to emphasize U.S. history, governmental functioning, and political issues. The Upward Bound-Civic Literacy Project partnership addresses this limitation by providing a space for students to learn about governmental processes and their own potential for advocacy within the context of issues of relevance to the students.

The college interns worked with Upward Bound staff to develop recruitment fliers and to recruit students to participate in the Civic Literacy Project. Through these recruitment efforts, Upward Bound students were invited to participate in a six-hour civic literacy workshop as well as a subsequent day of legislative engagement at either the state or federal level. Upward Bound provided support for their students to attend the workshops and legislative activities, including transportation, snacks, lunch, and parent permission forms. The Civic Literacy Project delivered the content of the workshops and helped in the coordination of the state-level legislative activities. Upward Bound coordinated the legislative events at the federal level, which included with the students' congressional delegation during trips to Washington, DC.

Workshops and legislative advocacy days were held once during the spring semester of 2016, 2017, and 2018. The 2016 and 2018 workshops focused on the federal legislative process, while the 2017 workshops and advocacy focused on the state legislature. Although the level of policymaking differed, the structure and basic information provided during the training were consistent across years, and were facilitated by the university faculty member and college interns. Workshops began with an in-depth overview of the legislative process, from bill drafting through committee hearings to floor votes. Students then discussed the various points during the legislative process in which citizens can exert influence as well as the methods for influencing policymaking, such as testifying, face-to-face visits, letter-writing campaigns, phone calls, and emails.

Students were trained on how to concisely tell their stories in ways that persuade others to consider their policy positions. Students were instructed that concise, targeted stories ending with an explicit ask could serve as the basis of a testimony during a legislative hearing, the foundation of a face-to-face visit, or could be adapted as a letter to a policymaker. During this training, students used a structured worksheet to develop stories based on their personal history or something that they have observed firsthand. After completing the worksheets, students took turns reading their stories in pairs, receiving feedback from both their immediate peer partner as well as the college interns.

The workshops ended with a presentation by the college interns about the legislators with whom the students would be meeting during

their legislative advocacy day. The purpose of this presentation was to remove the mystery that often surrounds elected officials. This presentation included biographical information such as where a legislator grew up, their family background, educational background, and previous occupations or political positions held. Additionally, information regarding the legislator's legislative history and current leadership roles was provided. This information included: committee memberships, committee chair positions, leadership roles, and current relevant bill sponsorship.

After the workshops, the Upward Bound students had the opportunity to participate in a day-long legislative event. During 2016 and 2018, the students traveled to Washington, DC to join Upward Bound students from across the country. During the meetings with their U.S. senators and congressional representatives, the students used the stories they developed during the workshops to educate their Congress people on the role of TRiO programs (originally three, now eight U.S. federally funded programs designed to increase access to higher education for economically disadvantaged students) in the lives of first-generation college students.

Given prohibitions on lobbying, the Upward Bound students focused on educating their legislators during these visits rather than asking for support for a specific policy position. During the spring of 2017, the Upward Bound students traveled to the state capitol, where they met with former Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval and many of the legislators representing their respective districts. The trip to the state legislature was coordinated by the Civic Literacy faculty member and college interns. These students focused on school safety.

The students shared their stories of school violence with legislators and were able to discuss their experiences as prospective first-generation college students with the state's governor.

## Methods

This study utilized a pre-post survey design that included 16 quantitative questions and four open-ended questions. Three groups of Upward Bound high school students, a total of 47 students, participated in civic literacy workshops and political participation events during three separate academic years. These students completed pretests immediately before the start of the civic literacy workshop, and posttests immediately upon completion of the workshop. They also completed a posttest upon completion of the visits

with elected officials. Altogether, 120 surveys were collected among the three groups of students, including 44 pretests, 47 posttests completed immediately following the training (posttest 1), and 29 posttests completed after the political participation opportunities (posttest 2). It should be noted that the 2016 group of students was not asked to complete the second posttest. The study was reviewed and approved by the University of Nevada Reno Institutional Review Board.

The pretests and posttests contained six questions on political efficacy and 10 civic knowledge questions. These questions were designed to elicit feedback about the effectiveness of the civic literacy program promoting civic knowledge and political efficacy. The political efficacy questions were derived from questions used in the American National Election Survey (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). Participants indicated their level of agreement with these six political efficacy statements using a five-point scale. The civic knowledge questions were based on questions used in the civics portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress taken by middle school and high school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). In addition, the authors created three questions to test the students' ability to identify local public officials and representatives. Finally, posttests asked the youth to respond to four open-ended questions regarding their experiences and resulting confidence in participating politically. These questions provided the youth an opportunity to share a wide range of information pertaining to their prior preparation for and experiences in the project. The first and second open-ended questions asked students what their high schools had done to help them learn about their government as well as what more they would like to know. The last two questions asked specifically about what they learned through participating in the event. No identifying information was collected from participants.

Survey responses were entered into SPSS for analysis. Frequencies, including descriptive statistics, were run on pretest and posttest data. In addition, Friedman's ANOVA tests were run to analyze the differences in civic knowledge and political efficacy between pretests and both posttests. Due to the ordinal level of the data, the nonparametric Friedman's ANOVA was used to address the presence of three repeated measures (pre, post, and second post). Due to the differences in response rates between pretests and the two

posttests, a subset of 29 responses from those who completed all three tests was used in calculating the Friedman's ANOVA. Summative content analysis was used to analyze the four open-ended questions. As demonstrated in Hsieh & Shannon (2005), open-ended responses were analyzed through identifying the frequency of specific terms that were then examined to determine themes.

## Results

Altogether, there were more females (72%) than males (28%). Responses regarding racial and ethnic identity were open-ended. Students primarily identified as Hispanic or Latino (64%), white (15%), Pacific Islander (6%), Asian (3%), Filipino (3%), and biracial (3%). Six percent of the sample did not identify with a specific group, identifying as human. Students were predominantly between the ages of 16 (31%) and 17 (47%). The remaining students were 14 (2%), 15 (7%), and 18 (13%). Most of the students had taken one government related class (41%), while 29% had taken two or more classes and 30% had not taken any. Given that Upward Bound students are recruited as aspiring first-generation college students, approximately 90% of students had parents who have not obtained a college degree.

The students evidenced substantial increases in civic knowledge scores following the workshops and political participation. Prior to the workshops, students scored on average 4.6 out of 10 on the measure of civic knowledge. Relatedly, only 8% of students scored the equivalent of a "B" (8) or higher on the pretests, while 61% scored a "D" (6) or lower. After the workshops, students scored an average of 7.9 out of 10, with 66% scoring the equivalent of a "B" or higher. Similarly, students scored even higher on the posttest following their day of political participation. The average score on the civic knowledge measure after the political participation event was 9.4. Ninety-two percent of students earned the equivalent of a "B" or higher after engaging in legislative advocacy, with none of these students scoring lower than 7 out of 10.

A Friedman's ANOVA revealed that differences in civic knowledge scores between pretests and both posttests were significant ( $X^2(2) = 20.84, p = .000$ ). Post hoc analysis with Wilcoxon signed-ranks tests was conducted with a Bonferroni correction applied, resulting in a significance level set at  $p < .017$ . There were significant differences between the pretest and the posttest given immediately following the training

( $Z = -5.28, p = .000$ ) and between the pretest and the posttest given following the day of political participation ( $Z = -3.06, p = .002$ ). In addition, the difference between scores on the posttest given after the training and the posttest given after the day of political participation was significant ( $Z = -2.56, p = .010$ ).

Students also evidenced increases in political efficacy on five of the six items (see Table 1). The students evidenced steady increases in disagreement with three of the political efficacy measures: "People like me don't have any say about what government does." "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't understand what is going on." And, "If public officials are not interested in hearing what people think, there is really no way to make them listen." Disagreement with these statements is indicative of political efficacy. Similarly, on statements in which agreement indicated political efficacy, the youth reported increasing agreement after the training and their political participation. These items include: "In a democracy like ours, the people have the final say about how the country is run, no matter who is in office." And, "There are many legal ways for citizens to influence what the government does." It should be noted that on the latter item, students reported higher agreement at the first posttest and then during the second posttest. Similarly, on the item "I don't think public officials care much about [what] people like me think," participants evidenced increased disagreement between pretest and the first posttest. However, the level of disagreement dropped between the first and second posttests for this item, ending at only 2.3% higher than the ratings from the pretest.

A Friedman's ANOVA found that the differences in agreement between pretests and posttests on the following items were not significant: elected officials care ( $X^2(2) = 3.21, p = .200$ ); people have a say in what government does ( $X^2(2) = 2.71, p = .258$ ); government and politics seem too complicated ( $X^2(2) = 2.67, p = .263$ ); and people have the final say within a democracy ( $X^2(2) = 3.97, p = .137$ ). The differences in agreement reported on pretests and posttests on the item indicating a belief that there are legal ways to influence government was significant ( $X^2(2) = 6.02, p = .049$ ) as was the difference in agreement on the item that asked whether or not students believed public officials could be made to listen the public ( $X^2(2) = 6.37, p = .041$ ).

**Table 1.** Agreement with Political Efficacy Items

	Pretest			Posttest1			Posttest2		
	Agree	Disagree	<i>M</i>	Agree	Disagree	<i>M</i>	Agree	Disagree	<i>M</i>
Public officials don't care much about what people like me think.	21%	46%	2.67	8.9%	82%	2.14	41.3%	48.3%	2.89
People like me don't have any say about what the government does.	7.5%	72.5%	2.00	6.8%	86.4%	1.85	6.8%	89.7%	1.55
Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated.	50%	31.8%	3.2	46.5%	37.2%	3.03	30%	53.3%	2.67
If public officials are not interested in what people think, there is no way to make them listen.	13.6%	70.5%	2.24	11.3%	81.8%	1.75	13.3%	86.7%	1.72
The people have the final say about how the country is run.	34.1%	34.1%	3.10	48.9%	22.2%	3.35	51.7%	6.9%	3.50
There are many legal ways for citizens to influence government.	83.7%	0%	4.07	95.6%	0%	4.42	93.1%	0%	4.46
Neutral category not included in table Pretest N=44 Posttest1 N=47 Posttest2 N=29									

Once again, post hoc analysis with Wilcoxon signed-ranks tests was conducted with a Bonferroni correction applied, resulting in a significance level set at  $p < .017$ . On the item that asked agreement about legal means to influence government, only the difference between the pretest and the posttest given immediately following the training was significant ( $Z = -2.92, p = .003$ ). There was no significant difference between pretests and the posttest given following the political participation ( $Z = -2.00, p = .45$ ) or between the first and second posttests ( $Z = -.198, p = .843$ ). On the item that asked students agreement that public officials could be made to listen, the Wilcoxon signed-ranks tests revealed no significant differences between the pretest and the first posttest ( $Z = -1.69, p = .091$ ), between the pretest and the second posttest

( $Z = -2.13, p = .033$ ), or between the first and second posttests ( $Z = -.221, p = .825$ ).

Posttests were also analyzed to determine whether there were any differences in scores across the three years of project implementation. A Friedman's ANOVA found no statistical difference in civic knowledge scores across the three years ( $X^2(2) = 2.039, p = .361$ ). Similarly, Friedman's ANOVAs found no significant differences on all but one of the political efficacy items. When comparing scores on political efficacy for the posttest taken after the workshop, we found a statistically significant difference ( $X^2(2) = 6.138, p = .042$ ) on the item that states "If public officials are not interested in hearing what the people think, there is really no way to make them listen." On this item, a Wilcoxon signed-ranks found a significant



difference between the 2016 and 2018 scores ( $Z = -1.259, p = .011$ ). While the means for all three years evidenced that the youth disagreed with this statement, the level of the disagreement fell in 2018.

Due to the ordinal level of the data as well as the lack of second posttests from the 2016 cohort, Wilcoxon signed-ranks tests were run on the political efficacy measures for the posttests taken after the legislative visits in 2017 and 2018. These tests revealed only one significant difference between years. Specifically, students in the 2018 cohort were significantly more likely to disagree with the statement “I don’t think public officials care much what people like me think” than were those in the 2017 cohort ( $Z = -3.108, p = .002$ ).

### *Open-ended Responses*

Students were asked what their high school did to help them learn about their government and legislative processes; many students did not answer the question or said their schools did little. Some mentioned learning about politics in their classes. A few students mentioned learning about state representatives and bills currently in debate. When asked what they wish they knew about Congress, policy, or government, these students mentioned an overall desire to know anything and everything about the government, particularly how the government functions. A couple of students mentioned an interest in learning about how to become involved in politics.

When asked about what they learned these same students described insights they gained about public officials. They noted that public officials are like normal people and that the officials listened to what students had to say. Students noted different ways to influence political decision-making and realized that their contributions matter. Students learned that they can make a difference in their community. One student wrote, “What I have to say, or even think matters to my assemblypersons, senators, and governor. My voice is important to my community.”

When asked what the most rewarding aspect of their day was, many students enjoyed meeting with public officials, as demonstrated by one student, “I learned that you can make a difference in... different ways. The assembly people are really nice and they do listen to what we say.” Another student enjoyed “getting to meet our local politicians and seeing them as people rather than people in suits.” Many students specifically enjoyed meeting with the governor. Some students enjoyed sitting in on

a committee hearing and seeing their colleagues testify in favor of a school safety bill. In addition, students mentioned feeling more confident and encouraged to participate politically.

### **Discussion**

This study examined the effect of applied political participation on the civic knowledge and political efficacy of three ethnically diverse cohorts of high school students enrolled in a local Upward Bound program. Similar to findings of previous studies (NCES, 2011), students in this study evidenced low levels of civic knowledge prior to involvement in the civic intervention. However, students evidenced substantial gains in civic knowledge after the workshops and after their engagement in applied political participation. As stated previously, the civic literacy workshops emphasized pragmatic understanding of legislative processes as well as legislative leaders. These emphases were tailored to fit the target for change for the subsequent political participation. The pragmatic and applied nature of the workshop content may be more relevant to youth than are the abstract principles often emphasized in one-semester government courses. Specifically, focusing on abstract principles of government and democracy can result in a perspective that largely ignores the historical and current institutional oppression inherent to government and experienced by youth of color. By contrast, sharing information about legislative processes and roles as a means of helping people learn how to influence change results in civic knowledge that can be useful in challenging these systems of oppression.

In addition to the pragmatic and applied workshops, results from this study indicate that engagement with policymakers and legislative processes increase students’ civic understanding/knowledge. The applied nature of political participation may result in greater interest in civic knowledge among youth. Based on these results, it is recommended that programs that seek to increase civic knowledge incorporate opportunities for youth to engage with policymakers around topics of interest to the youth. It is also recommended that potential targets for political participation also include local government, particularly city and county policymaking bodies.

Levels of agreement on all but two of the political efficacy items illustrate steadily increasing efficacy. However, these increases were only significant for two of the items. There are several

possible explanations for the lack of significant increases in political efficacy. First, the youth started at high levels of political efficacy as is reflected by the pretest ratings, leaving less room for growth. These high initial ratings might reflect idealism unique to this sample of Upward Bound students. Specifically, all of the youth selected to join the Upward Bound program are high achieving. Furthermore, through its emphasis on supportive services, Upward Bound might increase the overall efficacy of participants, resulting in students who feel efficacious in many differing arenas.

A second explanation is that the political participation opportunities within this intervention may only effect certain aspects of political efficacy. As noted by Beaumont (2011), socio-political learning processes, experiences in a politically active community, focus on political skills for action, political discourse, and pluralistic contexts can serve to lessen the impact background has on gains in political efficacy. To significantly effect certain areas of political efficacy, students would need to participate in different types of activities. The results of this study suggest that significant changes in political efficacy occurred in some items rather than others based on the types of activities the students engaged in. To have a broader impact on the political efficacy of students it may be necessary to expose them to different political activities.

While still reporting increases between pretest and posttests, on two items participants evidenced decreases in political efficacy between the first and second posttests. On these items, students evidenced sharp increases in efficacy after completing the workshops, but then less efficacy after the political participation opportunities. The decrease between first and second posttests might reflect the optimism conveyed during the training juxtaposed with the reality of visiting legislators. Despite these decreases, participants still reported higher efficacy on these two items upon the conclusion of their political participation than they did prior to participation.

Analysis of open-ended responses suggests that students were receptive to the political participation experiences. The responses by the students suggest that meeting public officials was particularly effective, as well as participating in a committee hearing. Students also demonstrated an interest in learning about the functions and processes of government. The varied grade levels of students were demonstrated by the differences in

exposure the students had of government lessons in their classes. These findings provide support for the importance of using political participation experiences to increase students' political efficacy and likelihood of being politically active in the future.

While few differences in scores on the posttest were noted across years, the two items that did have significant differences warrant further examination. The decrease in disagreement between the 2016 and 2018 cohorts on whether or not people can make elected officials listen may indicate a growing frustration with current electoral processes. The workshops for both of these cohorts focused on the federal legislative processes. However, the 2016 cohort completed their workshop and advocacy prior to the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, while the 2018 cohort witnessed the heightened polarization of that election. Unfortunately, whether or not this difference persisted after legislative advocacy could not be evaluated due to a lack of second posttests for the 2016 cohort. In contrast, the difference in scores on the item related to "whether or not public officials care..." between the 2017 and 2018 cohorts may reflect differences in the level of focus. The 2017 cohort focused on state legislative processes, whereas the 2018 cohort focused on Congressional processes. The experiences advocating in these contexts look substantially different. For example, Congressional delegates have full staffs dedicated to constituent services, whereas the state legislature at which the students advocated have limited staff. This finding illuminates a need for further study on the differential effects advocating at federal, state, or local levels may have on political efficacy.

There are various factors that limit the implications of the study. The sample size consisted of a total of 47 students, making the results ungeneralizable to the general population. Future efforts to examine the effects of political participation on civic knowledge should involve larger groups of youth, including youth who may be less academically inclined than are those students who participate in Upward Bound. In addition, the cross-sectional design of this study limits the ability to examine the long-term effects of this civic intervention. Therefore, it is unknown how the workshops and political participation experiences will affect future rates of civic literacy, political efficacy, or political participation. To address this limitation, future studies could employ longitudinal measures to examine the effects of political participation on the long-term

political efficacy and civic literacy of low-income, ethnically diverse youth. Finally, the inability to track individual student responses across pretests and posttests resulted in a missed opportunity to better understand student growth and development evident in the open-ended responses on the posttests. A matched pair design as well as a more in-depth qualitative component to the study would allow future research to understand what it is about applied political participation that leads to change among participants.

## Conclusion

Traditional civic programs emphasize abstract thinking and understanding of U.S. history, governmental functioning and constitutional issues, but not application. Students are expected to remember and debate constitutional or historical issues from a modernist perspective, as though there is a right and wrong way to “know” government. Given these pedagogical trends, it is no wonder that those students whose life experiences have been heavily influenced by oppression evidence lower rates of civic knowledge and political efficacy. This study supports the use of applied political participation as an effective strategy for increasing civic knowledge and political efficacy with low-income, ethnically diverse high school students. In preparing for and subsequently engaging in legislative advocacy, these youth increased their understanding of government as well as their belief that they can effectively influence it. These increases in knowledge and efficacy are important steps in ensuring that youth from historically disenfranchised or oppressed groups have the tools needed to effectively challenge oppressive social and economic structures.

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