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Civic Education Among College Students: A Case Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the extent of civic engagement among college students and to determine some of the factors that are associated with civic engagement among these students. To this effect, a survey of students at North Carolina Central University, a predominantly Black institution, was conducted and analyzed using correlation analysis. Most of the respondents considered voting to be important in civic engagement. The study also found that institutions of higher learning that have integrated community service in their academic programs are contributing to the promotion of civic engagement.

CIVIC EDUCATION AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze the extent of civic engagement among college students and to determine some of the factors that are associated with civic engagement among these students. To this effect, a survey of students at North Carolina Central University, a predominantly Black institution, was conducted and analyzed using correlation analysis. Most of the respondents considered voting to be important in civic engagement. The study also found that institutions of higher learning that have integrated community service in their academic programs are contributing to the promotion of civic engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Political freedom and participation are essential for promoting development and societal welfare. One of the factors that is central to political participation is civic engagement. There are various definitions of civic engagement. It is defined as “an institutional commitment to public purposes and responsibilities intended to strengthen a democratic way of life in the rapidly changing Information Age of the 21st Century” (U of MN Civic Engagement Task Force 2000). Other definitions include “attitudes toward proper political behavior, and behavior itself, such as voting, commitment to society, and a host of actions that comprise participation in civil society” (Youniss et al. 2002, 124). It is also defined as “an understanding of how government functions, and the acquisition of behaviors that allow citizens to participate in government and permit individuals to meet, discuss, and collaborate to promote their interests within a framework of democratic principles” (Youniss et al. 2002, p. 234). We do not decide which definition is the most appropriate one. They all have some commonalities, such as focusing on democracy and political participation, which are central to our study.

An important component of civic engagement is the right of citizens to participate in the electoral process. Elections serve as a strengthening bond between citizens and their elected officials to confer legitimacy on the government (Ewos, Elliott, and Guseh 2002). “Legitimacy is a belief on the part of citizens that the current government represents a proper form of government, and a willingness on the part of those citizens to accept the dictates of the government as legal and authoritative” (Peters 1999, p.73).

The purpose of this study is to analyze the extent of civic engagement among college students focusing on the case of North Carolina Central University, a historically Black institution. More specifically, the study will analyze some of the civic activities students find important or in which students are engaged. The study will also examine some of the factors that are correlated with civic engagements among students. The results will be useful to institutions of higher learning in providing the necessary education for developing the social competencies of college students. At a time of declining voter participation, the development of such competencies is essential to maintain democratic governance.

The next section presents a review of the literature followed by a brief discussion of the background of civic engagement at North Carolina Central University. The next two sections present the methodology employed and a discussion of the results. The paper concludes with a summary and some implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an abundance of literature on the general decline of civic engagement among Americans. Putnam (1995) in his seminal work provides evidence on a range of factors that have contributed to Americans disengaging from politics and government. He states that direct engagement in politics and government has declined steadily and sharply over the last generation. He argues that there is evidence that the social disconnect exists because there are more Americans bowling today than ever before, but at the same time the number of individuals bowling in organized leagues has declined. Consequently, there are simply more people bowling alone (Putnam, 1995). According to Putnam (1996), Americans are “Bowling Alone” because of demographic factors which can be attributed to changes in family structure and economic trends in America, which have contributed to the overall drop in civic engagement at all levels of the income hierarchy. Other contributing factors that he identifies are computers and televisions, which have turned Americans into homebodies. On the other hand, Ladd (1999, p.1) argues that

America is an individualistic democracy and that the notion of “letting government do it has never been our thing.” Thus, we have counted on individuals doing it, by accepting social responsibility for building and maintaining a good society. The idea of a declining civic engagement seems plausible because many older groups have lost ground (Ladd, 1999).

While participation in elections is an important element of democratic governance, millions of young Americans are not utilizing their constitutional rights to vote. For example, the legal voting age in the United States was lowered from 21 to 18 in 1972, but voter turnout among the 18 to 24 age group has steadily declined in national elections. In 1972, 50 percent of that group voted, and in the 1996 election the percentage dropped to 32 percent. Data from National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) show that nationwide fewer than one in five of those who are 18 to 25 years of age bothered to vote in 1998 (Van Benschoten 2000). During the 2000 elections, while 49 percent were registered to vote, only 32.3 percent voted (Census Bureau 2002).

Janger (1998) also concludes that young Americans’ interests in political activities have remained abysmal. For example, only 26.7 percent of 250,000 college freshmen surveyed in a 1997 study believed that keeping up to date with political activities is an important goal in life, compared with 40 percent in 1990 and 57.8 percent in 1966. This is consistent with data from the Collegiate Results Instrument (CRI), which suggests that though college graduates acknowledge the importance of civic and political engagement, this commitment is yet to be translated into action (Change, 2000).

Given the decline in civic engagement, the need for civic education among young Americans is important if democratic governance is to be maintained in the country. One of the sources through which citizens learn about democracy is institutions of higher learning. From the inception of the first American colleges 300 years ago, institutions of higher learning viewed the development of student character and the transmission of values supporting that character as an important responsibility of faculty and administration (An American Imperative, 1993). It is along this line that Paul (2002) postulates that Historically Black Colleges and Universities

(HBCUs) were established to serve the community, produce leaders, develop responsible citizens, and strengthen civil and democratic society. However, like most institutions of higher education they operate with a model of “Instrumental-Individualism,” the notion that the primary purpose of the academy is to conduct research and disseminate skills and tools essential for economic development and upward mobility. This has contributed little to the social competencies of college students; thus, their apathy towards civic engagement has remained significantly high. Paul (2002) further states that 50 percent of college students between the ages of 18 to 24 believe that schools do not do a good job giving young people information they need to vote.

In the United States, there is, however, no national or established standard on democratic education. Other than the basic civic courses that are taught in high schools, curricula about civic engagement, if any, vary widely among institutions. In many institutions of higher learning there is a multiplicity of civic education programs or projects. In some cases civic education programs are intertwined with service related programs.

In this regard, Parker-Gwin and Mabry (1998) suggest the integration of service learning in college courses. They believe that student outcomes could be enhanced by critical reflections and extensive integration of civic education in the curricula of colleges. According to Walker (2000), the challenge to institutions of higher education is to develop a pedagogy that will position service as a citizenship education tool, rather than re-enforcing the notion that service is morally superior to political engagement. Smyth (2000) suggests that “social capital,” “social connectedness,” or civic engagement can be rekindled if there is greater emphasis on teaching for social responsibility, democracy, social justice, and civility. He states that this might be possible through a critical approach to teaching. Similarly, Youniss et al. (2002) add that democratic practices in the classroom are directly correlated with adolescents’ knowledge of democracy, which consequently impacts students’ intention to vote. Thus, their research suggests that schools are a major and obvious arena through which “civic competencies” could be further enhanced. Janger (1998) recommends that colleges should extend civic education beyond the

classroom through experiential learning. Sunden and Raskoff (1994) also conclude that, net of individual differences, the chances that a student will engage in civic activities are likely to increase if the student attends a school that requires or encourages community service. Similarly, Serow and Dreyden (1990) find that students attending private colleges with strong religious orientations participate in community service more frequently than students at private colleges with less emphasis on religion or at public universities.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AT NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY

North Carolina Central University is one of the sixteen constituent institutions of the University of North Carolina System. The university is a historically Black institution, with a majority of its students being African-Americans. Faced with the ongoing challenges of nurturing and developing future civic minded leaders and as indicated by the literature, institutions of higher education can continue to play an integral part in the development of a strong democratic society, predicated on how they equip students to become effective citizens. To this effect, North Carolina Central University has introduced community service in its academic programs, and students are required to complete 120 hours of community service before graduating. The university is also establishing the Institute of Civic Education, with the goal of preparing students to become civic minded.

METHODOLOGY

Having identified the need and importance of teaching the students about citizenship, the facilitators of the forthcoming Institute surveyed 45 undergraduate students to determine the extent to which students are engaged in civic activities and to identify what students view as important factors that encourage civic engagement.¹ With a sample size of 45, an approximation is statistically good for a sample size greater than or equal to 30.² The survey instrument comprised of several chiefly forced-choice questions designed to address the following:

1. Civic activities in which students are involved

2. The importance of American citizenship
3. The reasons why some young people vote or do not vote
4. The role of schools in promoting voting
5. The importance of, and factors that influence, voting
- 6.

In contrast to open-ended questions where respondents provide answers in their own words, forced-choice questions require respondents to choose from among specified answers.

The results of the survey were analyzed using correlation analysis. Correlation is a statistical method used to determine whether a relationship between variables exists. The correlation coefficient is used to determine the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two variables. Although there are several types of correlation coefficients, the one used in this study is the Pearsonian correlation coefficient, represented by the symbol r . The correlation coefficient is used to test the strength and direction of the relationship between the variable for voting and other variables related to civic engagement, which are discussed in the next paragraph. The coefficient of determination, r^2 , is used to give an indication of the proportion of the variance in the variable for voting that is explained by each of the other variables related to civic engagement. The usual .05 level of confidence is used for testing the statistical significance of the relationship.

As stated above, an important element of civic engagement is the right of citizens to participate freely in the electoral process. As a result, this study will test some of the factors that influence students' participation in this process. The variable used to measure students' participation is the degree of importance students attach to voting, which is represented as VOTING. This variable is measured on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being "Not Important" and 10 being "Extremely Important." Using the same scale, other variables were tested to determine their relationship to VOTING.³ The variables are the importance of:

1. Being an American (AMERICAN)
2. Successful in Career (CAREER)

3. Involved in your Community (COMMUNITY)
4. Gaining Education (EDUCATION)
5. Having a close knit family (FAMILY)
6. Doing well financially (FINANCE)
7. The impact of Government decisions on your life (GOVERNMENT)
8. The impact of Elected Officials' decisions on your life (OFFICIAL)

RESULTS

Summary of the Survey

Table 1 presents a summary of the demographic characteristics of the respondents in the survey. Since the university is a historically black institution, 93.2 percent of the respondents were African Americans, while whites and Asians constituted 4.5 percent and 1.1 percent, respectively. With respect to gender, 62 percent of the respondents were females, and 39 percent were males. Most of the respondents (91 percent) were in the 18 to 24 age group; the 25 to 31 age group and the age group greater than 31 years each constituted 4.4 percent.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
RACE		
African American	41	91.1
White	2	4.4
Asian	1	2.2
GENDER		
Male	17	37.8
Female	28	62.2
AGE		
18-24	411	91.1
25-31	2	4.4
32-38	2	4.4

Note: The percentages in each category sums to 100.

With voting being an important element of civic engagement, students were asked a series of questions to determine their levels of civic engagement and political participation. The results are presented in Tables A1 to A5 in the Appendix. Respondents were asked whether or not they consider voting the most important right to have as an American. About 49 percent responded that they strongly agree, followed by 42 percent who responded that they agree. Thus, over 90 percent of the respondents consider voting very important, thereby suggesting that voting is very important to civic engagement (see Table A1).

When asked to identify the single most important issue that influenced their decision to vote, about 16 percent responded that it was their duty to vote, 9 percent responded that it was their right to vote, and 7 percent responded that it was their personal opinions that influenced them. Factors such as “support for the candidate,” “cannot complain,” “habits,” and “all votes count,” were among the least reasons given, each with 2.2 percent. On the other hand, when asked to give the single most important reason why they do not vote, 40 percent said that voting

does not matter, followed by 27 percent that said they were not informed. Being uninterested in politics and finding no differences among the candidates were reasons given by 13 percent and 11 percent of the respondents, respectively. “Being too busy” was the least reason for not voting, given by 7 percent (see Tables A2 and A3).

Although 48.9 percent regarded voting as the most single important right as a citizen, 40 percent said that voting does not matter. Finding such a large percentage of respondents stating that “voting does not matter” is consistent with the general pattern of nonvoting among African American voters. Between 1964 and 2000, the percentage of nonvoting fluctuated from 43 percent to 60.4 percent (Walton, Jr. and Smith 2003). Many African-American voters are not voting because in general they “lack the basic motivation and incentives essential for political participation,” and hence, their dissatisfaction with electoral politics (Baker, Jones and Tate 1999, p.237).

Respondents were further asked about the kinds of civic activities in which they are typically engaged. About 47 percent said that they helped the elderly, followed by 16 percent that said that they donated to the church and community activities. The least activities in which they were engaged are volunteering in political campaign and writing to government officials, each with 4.4 percent (see Table A4). The latter finding is consistent with the literature that there is a decline in political engagement among young Americans (Change, 2000; Census Bureau, 2002).

Respondents were asked whether or not schools do not inform them about voting. About 42.2 percent said that schools do not inform them about voting, while 35.6 percent said schools do inform them. A cumulative count of those who felt that the schools do not inform them and those who felt the schools do inform them demonstrates a comparable percentage of 53.3 percent and 44.5 percent, respectively (see Table A5). These results are consistent with Paul’s (2002) findings that 50 percent of college students between the ages of 18 to 24 believe that schools do not do a good job giving young people information they need to vote

CORRELATION ANALYSIS

The relationship between the variable VOTING and the other variables was tested, using correlation analysis (see page 7 for the list of the variables). The results are presented in Table 2. All variables tested have the appropriate signs, and except for the variable GOVERNMENT, they are statistically significant at either the 0.05 or 0.01 level.

Table 2
Correlation Coefficients Between Voting and Selected Variables

Variables	r	r^2
American	.429**	.184
Career	.586**	.343
Community	.718**	.515
Education	.601**	.361
Family	.716**	.513
Finance	.355**	.126
Government	-.169	.029
Official	-.375*	.141

N = 45.

Notes: * = significant at the 0.05 level.

** = significant at the 0.01 level.

While the variable GOVERNMENT is not correlated with the variable VOTING, there is, however, a significantly negative correlation between VOTING and the impact of elected officials' decisions on students' lives. This suggests that perhaps students can differentiate the broad reference to government from the specific reference to elected officials. Students seem to attribute the impact of government policies to the elected officials directly involved rather than to the government in general. These correlations also indicate that the more elected officials'

decisions affect student's lives, the less likely students will find voting that important. This may also suggest that the more intrusive students find these officials' decisions in their lives, the less likely they will be involved in the electoral process and civic engagement. With 93 percent of the students in the survey being African Americans, these results seem to be in accord with the findings of other studies. For example, according to Wilson (2002) when African Americans find government less important, they tend to be less involved in civic activities that are associated with government.

The importance of becoming successful in their careers, the importance of education and skills, and the importance of financial success are positively correlated with VOTING. These variables may be related to the economy. When students attach importance to being successful in these economic-related areas, they are more likely to find democracy and voting important. Generally, democracies arise from market economies. As a society's economy becomes more market oriented, people tend to be more involved in choosing those who will formulate policies that will have an impact on their resources, because they have a stake in the policy outcome. With respect to education, it has been found that teaching democratic practices in institutions of higher learning can enhance students' knowledge of such practices which in turn can enhance students' intention to vote (Youniss, et al 2002). Furthermore, research has shown that education promotes political participation (Baker, Jones and Tate, 1999). Thus, we find the importance of career, education, and financial success being highly associated with voting. In fact, the importance of career and education each explains more than a third of the variation in the importance of voting (see Table 2). The importance of being an American also correlates with voting. The importance attached to being an American may be a measure of the degree of patriotism.

Being involved in one's community and having a closed-knit family also appear to influence voting. Interestingly, these variables (COMMUNITY and FAMILY) have the highest explanatory power of 0.52 and 0.51, respectively. That is, each of these variables explains about 50 percent of the variation in the importance of voting among students. These results suggest

that involvement in the community and having a closed-knit family are important in promoting voting and, hence, civic engagement among African-American students. These findings are in accord with those of other studies. For example, Youniss et al. (2002, p.130) predict that civic engagement of youth in the future depends in part on “how many families . . . are involved in igniting and passing on a spirit and praxis of participation.” According to Wilson (2000), students who are involved in community activities tend to be involved in political activities. Putnam (1993) argues that “networks of civic engagement” produce better government. Sunden and Raskoff (1994) find that, net of individual differences, the chances that a student will engage in civic activities increase if the student attends a school that requires or encourages community service. Thus, based on the findings of this study, as well as the literature reviewed, it appears that institutions of higher learning, such as North Carolina Central University, that include community service in their academic programs are in the right direction in promoting civic engagement.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study has been to analyze the extent of civic engagement among college students and to determine some of the factors that are correlated with civic engagement among these students. To this effect, a survey of 45 students at North Carolina Central University, a predominantly Black institution, was conducted and analyzed using correlation analysis. Most of the respondents considered voting to be an element of civic engagement. Some of the factors or variables found to be correlated with voting include the importance of being an American, being successful in one’s career, being involved in one’s community, gaining an education, having a closed-knit family, having financial success, and the impact of elected officials’ decisions on one’s life. The more importance students attach to these factors, the more importance they attach to participating in voting and hence civic engagement.

Among the variables that are correlated with voting, the importance of being involved in community activities and the importance of having a closed-knit family each explains more than 50 percent of the variation in the importance of voting. These variables were followed by the

importance of education and of career, explaining 36 percent and 34 percent of the variation in voting, respectively. Based on these findings, as well as the literature reviewed, it appears that institutions of higher learning that include community service in their academic programs are contributing to the promotion of civic engagement and, hence, political participation.

This study, like other studies of this nature, has some limitations. Using zero order correlation, the study does not control for other factors. Moreover, given that the study focuses on a single institution, which is a predominantly Black university, the results may not be generalized especially to institutions of diverse racial and ethnic groups. These limitations could prove fruitful for further analysis. However, despite these limitations, the results of this study do provide some insights into promoting civic engagement among students, especially in historically Black institutions.

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Table A 1
Voting as the Single Most Important Right

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	22	48.9
Agree	19	42.2
Strongly Disagree	1	2.2
Disagree	2	4.4
TOTAL	44	97.8
Missing System	1	2.2
Total	45	100

Table A 2
Why Vote?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Habit	1	2.2
Duty	7	15.6
Right	4	8.9
Matters of Future	2	4.4
My Opinion	3	6.7
Can't Complain	1	2.2
All Vote Count	1	2.2
Support Candidate	1	2.2
Support Issue	2	4.4
Other	1	2.2
N/A	2	4.4
Total	25	55.6
Missing System	20	44.4
Total	45	100.0

Table A 3
Why Not Vote?

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
No difference in candidate	5	11.1
Too busy	3	6.7
Uninformed	12	26.7
Vote no matter	18	40.0
Uninterested in politics	6	13.3
TOTAL	44	97.8
Missing system	1	2.2
TOTAL	45	100.0

Table A 4
Important Civic Activity

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Help Elderly	21	46.7
Donate to church	7	15.6
Volunteer shelter, community groups	2	4.4
Join political organization	4	8.9
Read magazine/book	3	6.7
Participate in demonstration/march	3	6.7
Volunteer Political Campaign	2	4.4
Wrote letter to government official	2	4.4
TOTAL	44	97.8
Missing system	1	2.2
TOTAL	45	100.0

Table A 5

Schools Do Not Inform Students About Voting

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	5	11.1
Agree	19	42.2
Strongly Disagree	4	8.9
Disagree	16	35.6
TOTAL	44	97.8
Missing System	1	2.2
Total	45	100.0

ENDNOTES

¹ The survey was conducted in three political science courses consisting of two sections of the introductory course in American government and one section of the course in scope and methods. Although these were political science courses, all of the students in the classes were not political science majors. The instrument is available from the authors.

² According to the central limit theorem, the approximation is sufficiently good for a sample size greater than or equal to 30 (See Salvatore, 1982, 62)

³ Two of the variables, GOVERNMENT and elected OFFICIALS, were measured on a different scale. Respondents were asked to choose one of the answers given for each of the following questions: 1) How strong of an impact does government decision have on your life, and 2) How strong of an impact does elected officials' decisions have on your life?

1. Very strong impact
2. Somewhat of an impact
3. Not a very strong impact
4. No impact at all