Promoting Civic Activism: 
Student Leadership in Service-Learning

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Service-learning is an approach to experiential education where students apply knowledge and skills that they learn in the classroom by providing needed service to the larger community in which they live. One goal of service-learning programs is to develop citizens who are engaged and involved in the political process. This paper examines the effects that service-learning programs have on students’ political participation. The data we use come from the Civic Education and Political Participation Survey gathered by the Indiana Department of Education. This pre/post survey includes students from the 5th through the 12th grades from five states. The survey allows us to examine the change in political participation for students involved in service-learning programs. Using a political socialization perspective on participation and education theory that draws from Dewey, Piaget and Kolb, we use an expansive definition of political participation that includes much more that the simple act of voting. Specifically, we examine whether students, through their involvement in service learning, (1) engage in political communication, (2) will participate in acts of civic support, (3) will contact public officials, and (4) will vote. We find that service-learning does appear to make students more likely to participate in the future. The effects of service-learning are even greater when students had leadership in the project.

Introduction

Political participation is imperative for a democracy—indeed some would argue it is a cornerstone of a robust democracy. Academic researchers have noted that America has a relatively low rate of voting compared to other industrialized democracies (see Powell, 1986).1 Further, while political parties have become more scientific and precise in their efforts to bring their supporters to the election booth, fewer Americans are showing up to cast their ballots (Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Miller 1992; Teixeira 1987 and...
While about 63 percent of the electorate voted in the presidential election of 1960, it declined to about 50 percent in the most recent presidential election (Conway 2001).

Researchers have presented a number of different models that attempt to accurately explain the factors that correlate with turnout (Campbell et al. 1960; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Teixeira 1987). Some have proposed empirical or even theoretical models that attempt to explain why these changes are occurring. However, explaining the decline in turnout is not as simple as it may seem. For example, education is highly correlated with political participation, i.e. voting, but the average level of education has increased over the past twenty years while the level of political involvement has decreased (Teixeira 1992).

In many ways, the question is whether the glass is half full or half empty concerning political participation in America. However, the debate has resulted in specific, focused discussions that try to more precisely measure participation, while ignoring some of the broader, normatively significant questions. While some researchers have noted a variety of contextual factors that limit participation, virtually none have suggested possible solutions that will increase participation. This paper examines one specific educational approach that may be able to increase the level of political participation: service-learning.

Service-learning is a pedagogical approach that engages students in community activities in the volunteer sector that are tied to the academic material covered in their classes. Research suggests that, as a mechanism of experiential education, it is a more effective approach to teaching than the standard didactic approach that is traditionally used — the “sage on the stage” (Kolb 1984). Service-learning is also a program that is supported through funding from a federal agency, the Corporation for National Service. Thus, the ability for service-learning to increase participation is made even more important as it reflects the direct policy efforts of a federal agency.

We begin the article with a discussion of four different schools of thought regarding participation, each of which has some merit. However, we argue that it is political socialization that influences whether children participate politically when they grow older. Second, we briefly discuss why service-learning is considered to be such a powerful pedagogical tool. Next, we explain the study and report the results for two different components of participation: political communication and future political participation. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the large impact service-learning can have on those least likely to be politically active.
Why are People Involved in Politics?

Though there are many descriptive studies about who is involved in politics, the broader theoretical question is “Why are people involved in politics?” We mention three broad models that are drawn from slightly different understandings of the answer to this question, and then present a model that can incorporate these different approaches in the context of our current study.

**Socioeconomic Status Model**

One way to respond to the question of why people are involved in politics is to state that they can and want to be involved. The Socioeconomic Status (SES) Model suggests that participation is primarily caused by the individual’s resources—time, money and skills—as well as civic orientations. Most quantitative studies rely on this basic model that Verba and Nie (1972) clearly articulated, and there is substantial empirical proof for the model. In addition to evidence that supports the important role of education, there is also strong evidence that the person’s age is a key predictor of increased participation. This specific finding is referred to as the “life-cycle model,” where young individuals participate less (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Jennings 1981; Jennings and Markus 1988).

Though this model is widely accepted, there is one criticism that is important to discuss, particularly in the context of this current study. The SES Model proposes a unidirectional model where civic attitudes precede participation. However, research in political science shows that participation in political activities can also influence attitudes (Bennett 1975; Leighley 1991). Though there are statistical methods to help determine the size and direction of these effects, it is best dealt with by gathering data using a panel design, which is used in this study.

**Rational Choice Model**

The Rational Choice Model, pioneered by Downs (1957) and Riker and Ordeshook (1968), proposes that individuals participate in government when it is in their best interest to do so. In the case of voting, a citizen would cast their vote only if they felt that the benefits they would gain from voting would exceed the costs that they would incur from voting. This rationale implies that there must be some actual chance that a person’s one vote would make a difference in the outcome of an election. Since it would be rare that an election would be that close, the “Paradox of Participation” emerges.
Because it takes time to vote in an election—not to mention the time it takes to be even marginally informed—the costs of voting would be greater than any direct expected benefits; therefore, abstention is a rational act.

Scholars have suggested a variety of solutions to this paradox. Downs (1957) proposed that individuals include in their mental calculus the long-term benefits of maintaining a democracy; by voting, they are insuring that democracy will continue. This view has been expanded to include other benefits, such as the expressive and consumptive values of voting (Fiorina 1976; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). For example, some individuals perceive themselves as “good citizens,” and as a result, they feel obligated to vote based on their view of themselves. Others may vote simply as a way to express their support—or displeasure—with the candidate, knowing full well that their one vote cannot make a difference in the election.

Aldrich (1993) suggests that the debate over lack of participation is further complicated by the fact that many researchers focus too narrowly on only one act of political participation—the decision to vote or abstain. Though the costs are often higher, for example, to contact a politician, the benefits are much more clear and immediate. Consider a citizen who cares strongly about the level of spending on high school athletics. The chance that her one vote in the election might make a difference on the level of spending for athletics is small. However, if she calls the board members and makes her opinion known, the chances of influencing policy are likely to be much greater.

**Mobilization Model**

Another answer to the question of why people participate is that they were asked to do so. Put in a more formal way, the Mobilization Model claims that individuals participate in political activities that are structured by their environment in response to cues from their environment. While personal resources—time, money, and skills—as well as civic orientations are still facets of this model of participation, they are not the cores of the model. Mobilization is an intervening factor between socioeconomic status and political participation.

This model is typically examined with aggregate data by looking at how turnout increases when there are close elections (Caldera and Patterson 1982). Others have examined the direct effect of political discussion (Leighley 1990) or looked at the effectiveness of direct contact from either the party or the candidate on participation (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992). In a comprehensive examination of this model, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) find that the lack of both electoral and non-electoral mobilization efforts have produced
significant effects in turnout, accounting for about half of the decline in turnout seen since 1960.

Political Socialization

These different models of political participation are all informative to our understanding of the effects of a method of civic education like service-learning. However, as Margaret Conway (1991, 40) suggests, political socialization is “most appropriate as an integrative framework” to understand political participation. Of particular importance to this paper is the fact that a political socialization perspective of participation would partially explain why different cultures have different patterns of participation.

For example, Almond and Verba (1963) found that citizens participate in different ways at different levels in different societies. From a political socialization perspective, this suggests that citizens’ expectations about the appropriate level and type of civic participation vary based on the norms in their society—it is a function of prior socialization. Similarly, political socialization can help explain how civic attitudes are caused by prior educational opportunities, including school and parents. Current behavior is influenced by past behavior, and mobilization efforts—if viewed from a broader perspective than just one election—are efforts to socialize individuals into a specific type of future behavior.

In this paper, we examine the effect of a method of civic education that an increasing number of students experience in high school: service-learning. Why is political learning that occurs before people are old enough to vote important? More broadly, why should we be concerned with the political attitudes of youth? Because the first attitudes children form may endure throughout life, and it is possible that these attitudes can provide a structure that is used to understand future information (Searing, Wright, and Rabinowitz 1976; Searing, Schwartz, and Lind 1973; Easton and Dennis 1969).

Further, the primacy principle holds that political attitudes are learned early in life and that these attitudes are relatively constant throughout life (Hess and Torney 1967; Easton and Dennis 1969). A number of studies have provided evidence that if students participate in activities when they are young, they are more likely to participate in organizations and in the political process when they are older (Almond and Verba 1963; Verba et al. 1995; Rosenstone and Hanson 1993). Lindsay (1984) finds that participation in extracurricular activities in high school is even more important than educational attainment as a predictor of participation in voluntary activities as an adult.
The \textit{structuring principle} also assumes that the orientations that are developed at an early age will persist. These political attitudes will structure the information that we receive later on in life (Searing et al. 1973). In other words, new information will be processed and filtered through the political schema that was established as a young adult. Further, a large body of literature from social psychology suggests that current attitudes do influence how individuals process new information (Conover and Feldman 1984; Lau 1986; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995; Zaller 1992). Before proceeding with how service-learning can increase political participation, we must first mention why it is such a strong approach to teaching.

\textbf{Service-Learning}

Service-learning is a type of experiential education that draws heavily on two luminaries in education: John Dewey and Jean Piaget. John Dewey believed that all genuine education comes about through experience, and that future behavior and attitudes are powerfully influenced by that experience. According to Dewey, the traditional teaching method provided “experiences which were . . . largely of the wrong kind. How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them? . . . How many came to associate the learning process with ennui and boredom?” (Dewey 1938, 26-7). It was through experiential learning in a classroom that students would achieve true learning and develop the skills needed to participate in a democracy (Dewey 1916).

Swiss biologist Jean Piaget (1952) proposed a model of cognitive development that adds to this understanding of the importance of direct experience. While behaviorists viewed humans as passive respondents to environmental conditions, Piaget argued that people are active processors of information. They do not merely respond to events around them, but manipulate these events and learn from what occurs. It is through this interaction with their physical and social environment that children learn and develop cognitively.

Taking both Dewey and Piaget together, we see a process that starts with (1) an experience that is followed by (2) a collection of data and information about that experience. The person then (3) examines this information, and (4) makes conclusions that are then used to guide future behaviors (Kolb 1984; Lewin 1951). A person can enter this cycle at any point, but he must complete the entire cycle for effective learning to occur. However, if students
merely bypass this process and are, for example, asked to simply memorize a series of facts or dates, the knowledge will be shallow and will probably not persist (Brock and Cameron 1999).

While service-learning can trace its roots back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* or the works of John Dewey, it was not until recently that it became more clearly articulated as a pedagogical tool (Sigmon 1996). At its simplest, service-learning occurs when students participate in the nonprofit sector by doing volunteer work that is tied to the academic outcomes of a course. For example, in one particular computer course, the students taught residents of a retirement home how to use computers and search the Internet. The students had the chance to take what they were learning in class and help people who often feel uncomfortable using computers. At the same time, stereotypes that the two groups might have had about each other may have diminished.

The Study

The Sample

Participants in the study were 390 middle and high school students from twenty-seven different classrooms in a total of eleven schools. The study was conducted during the 1998-1999 school year in five states. The participants were in classes from the 7th grade to the 12th grade, with a handful of fifth and sixth grade students involved in the projects.

The Indiana Department of Education surveyed students in each of the eleven schools. These eleven sites had all received funding to support their service-learning projects, and each was required to complete the surveys as part of the evaluation process of their programs. Schools were selected to participate in the service-learning program by submitting an application that described their plan to implement a service-learning project. The purpose of the overall program was to introduce new schools to service-learning and to help educators with previous experience to improve their projects. Thus, the schools involved were not highly experienced in service-learning, though they all had projects that included at least some basic elements of service-learning.

The survey was given in a pre/post format, with one survey administered prior to participation in service-learning and one administered after the students completed the service so we could capture changes in attitudes caused by involvement in service-learning. Attrition is always a concern with panel studies, and 43 percent of the sample was lost over the course of the study. The attrition was caused almost entirely because a few classes did not have
the students complete the second survey, though a small number of the students simply were not at school when the follow-up survey was given. The primary reason that a few classes did not complete the post survey was because the service project occurred at the end of the year, and in the final rush of the last week of school, the surveys were not finished. In a few cases, the service project was not completed; therefore, the second survey was never given. Thus, the attrition rate should not necessarily produce any significant amount of bias.

The demographic characteristics of the participants are disproportionately female—with females comprising 60 percent. A number of the service-learning projects were conducted in home economics classes that were predominantly female; this can help explain the skew in gender of the respondents. A series of tests that we conducted revealed that, in almost all cases, the same trends held for both males and females. While the respondents were more likely to be young women, the racial demographics look similar to the country as a whole. Thirteen percent of the respondents were black, compared to sixteen percent of the school-aged youth nationally. Similarly, three percent were Asian or Pacific Islander, compared to five percent nationally (Indiana Youth Institute 1999). Because there were only 390 respondents, the sample is more representative than might have been expected.

The Survey and the Dependent Variables

As stated, the survey was given in a pre-post service format so we could effectively capture any changes that occurred because of student involvement in service-learning. The pre/post survey format is also advantageous because it takes care of any simultaneity issues that might arise otherwise. All of the questions used Likert scale responses, where 0 = strongly disagree, 1 = disagree, 2 = neutral, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree.

Students were involved with different projects, all of which were designed to have positive effects on the community, student learning, and student development. Most projects involved tutoring or helping people in need, such as the homeless, and occurred in a wide range of classes including government, history, English, science, and home economics. How can political attitudes and behaviors be influenced in a class other than political science? Topics like abortion (health class), pollution (science) and war (history) are at their essence issues of political struggle. For example, students in a home economics class who volunteered at a homeless shelter might become actively involved in combating homelessness by volunteering again in the future, contacting an elected official about the problem, or, when they are older,
voting for a candidate who supports their position on fighting homelessness. Nevertheless, if we find that involvement with service-learning increases student participation regardless of the academic focus of the course, it would greatly increase the potential impact of this pedagogical approach.

Like others, we view participation in much broader terms than simply voting. Verba and Nie (1972) argued that political participation can be defined quite broadly, including turnout; contact; communal activities, such as organization membership; and campaign activities. Likewise, Milbrath (1965) believed political discussion to be a form of participation. There are several possible aspects of participation where we would expect service-learning to have an impact. First, because students are likely to get involved in community issues through their service projects, we expect that service-learning will have a positive influence on political communication; students should be more likely to discuss local politics. Also, we expect that having a voice in service projects will make the student more prone to become politically active in the future, such as volunteering in other programs, sitting on a jury if asked, contacting public officials, and/or voting.

Impact of Participation in Service-Learning

Figures 1 and 2 provide a simple comparison of the students’ average responses to the various questions before and after the service project. In all cases but one of participation in programs to help people but, a statistically significant difference existed between the pre and post responses in the hypothesized direction. Figure 1 presents the pre and post answers regarding political communication. When students were asked if they frequently discuss community issues or local politics outside of class, it is clear that before the service project, not many did. The mean pre-survey response was 1.58. After the service project, however, the mean response rose to 1.90, p-value < .05). While students are still not discussing politics as much as we would hope, involvement in the service project did have a significant impact on many students.

Figure 2 reports the differences in responses for future participation. Significant and substantive changes in the students’ pre and post answers occurred in almost all cases. When asked if they would serve on a jury, the students’ average responses rose nearly half a point, 0.46; p-value < .001. This is the equivalent of the average student response moving from slightly above “neutral” to “agree.” We found similar results regarding whether students reported that they would contact a public official and whether they
Figure 1. The Level of Political Communication Before and After Participating in Service-Learning (Average Response)

Outside of class, I frequently discuss community issues or local politics


Note: 0 = Strongly Disagree; 1 = Disagree; 2 = Neutral; 3 = Agree; 4 = Strongly Agree.

would vote when older. The difference of means rose by .22, p-value < .01, for contacting a public official and by .31, p-value < .001, for voting in the future. The only instance where a statistically significant difference did not exist between the pre- and post-survey responses is for the question “In the next five years, I will participate in programs to help people.” While the post-survey responses did increase by .11, the differences of means between the pre- and post- surveys is not significant.

These results indicate that there are main effects of students participating in service-learning projects, although the changes are somewhat modest. However, our analysis must go further. First, the above analysis does not include any control variables, making it impossible to discern whether only certain types of students, i.e. those who are more interested in school, benefited from their participation. As important as controlling for variables regarding the respondent is the need to control for the quality of the program. Service-learning projects are not all the same, nor are they necessarily implemented in like ways. In fact, studies have shown great variation in the amount of quality among these programs (Melchior 1998). We argue that the positive results of student participation in service-learning projects grow even greater when we take into consideration what we believe to be the most important aspect of program quality—student leadership.
Figure 2. The Level of Future Participation Before and After Participating in Service-Learning


Note: 0 = Strongly Disagree; 1 = Disagree; 2 = Neutral; 3 = Agree; 4 = Strongly Agree.
The Effect of Student Leadership

The Importance of Student Leadership

While the focus of this paper concerns student participation, and our data indicate that students’ willingness to participate in the future does increase by simply participating in service-learning projects, we believe the effects of the service experience are even greater when students have leadership in implementing the service projects; they must have a voice. The major problem with service-learning as a pedagogical tool is that the quality of the program varies immensely. Students often have the project completely planned out for them by the teacher and have limited ability to provide input or make important decisions. If students have little input into the project, they are likely to view the project as meaningless and as a waste of their time; they are not nearly as likely to reap the greatest benefits from being involved in service-learning. Previous work (Morgan 1995; Melchior 1998) suggests that student leadership is significant in making service-learning a long lasting, successful experience for the students. This argument is consistent with the views of such educational luminaries as John Dewey (1916), who argued that it was through such experiential learning that students would develop the skills needed to participate in a democracy.

The Model

To analyze the effects of student leadership, we created an index to measure the impact that students’ input into the project had on their willingness to participate in the future. Based on previous work (Conrad and Heiden 1985; Melchior 1998), we chose four different indicators of student leadership. Students were asked to rate on a five-point scale how strongly they agreed with the following statements:

1) “I had real responsibilities.”
2) “I had challenging tasks.”
3) “I helped plan the project.”
4) “I made important decisions.”

This variable was created by summing the responses to the four questions and then dividing by the number of questions answered. Thus, a one unit change is equal to moving one unit on the original four-point scale, e.g. neutral to agree.
In all cases, the dependent variable looks at the students’ attitudes or behavior at t2, while controlling for their attitudes at t1 (see Finkel 1995). All five of the outcomes examined in this paper use the above mentioned five-point Likert scale. Each is coded so that a one unit change is equal to the student’s opinion moving one unit—from “Neutral” to “Agree” for example. A list of the exact wording for all questions can be found on the corresponding tables.

Again, the independent variable with which we are most concerned is the amount of leadership the student reported having in the project. We also control for a number of factors that might explain student voice or student attitudes about school to insure that the impact is not spurious: student G.P.A., how much the student likes school, and whether she is prepared for class. A student’s grades are simply his G.P.A. on a four-point scale. The “likes school” and “prepared for school” variables are both on the same five-point scale as the dependent variables. The questions asked in the survey are “I like school” and “I come to class prepared to do the days work.” We also control for the student’s grade level in school, 5th grade through 12th grade, and the respondent’s race, whether she is white. As stated, since we examine students’ attitudes on a series of questions after participation in service-learning, we also control for their attitudes on the same issues prior to being involved with the project as well. Because we are only concerned with the impact of student leadership, we do not provide much discussion about the effects of the control variables. In fact, in almost all cases the control variables were insignificant.

To examine the effect of student leadership on each of the dependent variables, we used the ordered logit model.

The Effects of Student Leadership on Political Communication and Future Political Participation

Political Communication

As stated, others have argued persuasively that discussing politics is a form of political participation (Milbrath 1965); we agree. Because students are engaged in active learning in a topic that has some political content, they should be more apt to discuss politics or community issues outside of class. For example, students who planned interviews with local politicians, as one class did, may talk about aspects of the politicians that particularly impressed them with their parents. Table 1 reports the coefficients for whether students were more likely to discuss politics or community issues after their service
Table 1. Impact of Student Leadership in Service-Learning on Political Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Discusses Politics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Leadership</td>
<td>1.12**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Variable at t2</td>
<td>0.57**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes School</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepared for School</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Grade</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (White)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point 1</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point 2</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point 3</td>
<td>5.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.61)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Cut Point 4</td>
<td>8.36</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>N</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note: The above are ordered logit coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. 

***p-value < .001  **p-value < .01  *p-value < .05  tp-value < .1.


Question Wording:

Outside of class, I frequently discuss community issues or local politics.
experience. Those engaged in service-learning projects that appropriately included student leadership had a statistically significant, .001 level, increase in their political discussion. As Figure 3 indicates, as leadership increases from 0 to 4, the probability of giving a negative or neutral response to the communication question decreases immensely, from almost 1 to about .3. While the probability of students responding “strongly agree” as leadership increased only slightly, a large increase of about .6 can be seen in the number of students who agreed that they discuss politics often. Having leadership increases students’ propensity to discuss politics.

Figure 3. Cumulative Probabilities for Political Communication, by Student Leadership

Source: Estimates obtained from Table 1.

Future Political Participation

Not only do we find that students are discussing politics more often because of their leadership in the service project, they report wanting to participate politically in the future as well. Table 2 lists the ordered logit coefficients for student participation in civic life. Involvement in service-learning that includes student leadership has a statistically significant impact in three of the four cases at the .001 level on whether students said they would serve on a jury if asked, participate in programs that help others, contact an elected official, or vote in the future. While there are no significant main effects for the question regarding participation in programs that help others, there are significant effects in the leadership variable when relevant controls were included in the model.
Table 2. Impact of Student Leadership in Service-Learning on Participation in Civic Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Serve on Jury</th>
<th>Serve in Programs</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Leadership</td>
<td>1.05***</td>
<td>1.21***</td>
<td>0.50**</td>
<td>0.65***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Variable</td>
<td>0.96***</td>
<td>0.56***</td>
<td>0.69***</td>
<td>0.68***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Likes School</td>
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<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
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<td>Prepared for School</td>
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<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.37*</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Grade</td>
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<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
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<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.77*</td>
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<td>0.93</td>
<td>-1.17</td>
<td>-1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point 2</td>
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<td>2.78</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point 3</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point 4</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>6.93</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 102 226 225 224

Note: The above are ordered logit coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses.

***p-value < .001  **p-value < .01  *p-value < .05  ‘p-value < .1.


Question Wording:

When I am older, I will serve on a jury when I am asked.
In the next five years, I will participate in programs to help people.
In the next five years, I will contact public or elected officials about issues I think are important.
When I am older, I will always vote in elections.
Figures 4-7 provide the cumulative probabilities for each of the four dependent variables. In each case, the probability of a student agreeing or strongly agreeing with the dependent variable question substantially rises as student leadership increases, while the probability of negatively responding to the question drops. The probability of a student responding “strongly agree” to the question that they will sit on a jury in the future rose by about .5 as the leadership variable went from 0 to 4 (see Figure 4). Clearly being involved in a service-learning project with appropriate youth involvement is likely to instill a sense of civic duty for activities like serving on a jury.

**Figure 4. Cumulative Probabilities for Sitting on a Jury, by Student Leadership**

A similar result can be found when students were asked if they would participate in programs in the future that would help others. While the probability of the student disagreeing or strongly disagreeing drops from about .6 to almost 0 as the leadership variable increases from its minimum to maximum value, the probability that a student reported “agree” or “strongly agree” increased by almost .8 for the same range of the independent variable (see Figure 5). Having leadership in service-learning makes students want to get involved in other programs in the future.
Figure 5. Cumulative Probabilities for Participating in Other Programs, by Student Leadership

Source: Estimates obtained from Table 2 (Volunteer in Programs).

Figure 6. Cumulative Probabilities for Contacting an Official, by Student Leadership

Source: Estimates obtained from Table 2 (Contact).
Involvement in quality projects makes students aware that change can be made by getting in contact with people who have the ability to implement policy as well. Students are also more apt to write politicians because their project made them aware of a problem that exists, e.g. illiteracy, homelessness, and pollution. They may be likely to become active in causes designed to help improve these problems by contacting elected officials. While the results of the contact model are smaller than the others, the probability of agreeing or strongly agreeing that students would contact elected officials in the future still rose by about .4 as voice increased from 0 to 4 (see Figure 6).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly in the context of political participation, students reported that they would vote when they became eligible. As Figure 7 indicates, the probability that a student answered “strongly agree” to the vote question increased by roughly .5 as the student leadership variable increased from 0 to 4. While many of these students still may fail to vote when they are older, the size of this finding remains particularly impressive. Students learned that there are issues that are worth fighting for and the best way to do so is through the ballot. Being actively engaged in the service project increases the likelihood that students will participate in politics or contribute to their community in the future, which, in turn, creates a stronger, more robust democracy.

**Figure 7. Cumulative Probabilities for Vote, by Student Leadership**
Discussion and Conclusion

When students take active roles in service-learning projects, they are inclined to participate not only more now, but in the future as well. We believe these findings are crucial given what is known about the life-cycle model and political socialization. Study after study has shown correctly that America’s youth are disengaged and disinterested in politics and their community. We feel that service-learning can be a solution to that problem. Involvement with projects where students were given the opportunity to plan the project, make important decisions, and have real responsibilities helps combat this civic apathy among students. Students understand why participation is important and how they can make a difference. While we may only say that students report that they will participate in the future, given the research on political socialization, it is quite likely that students will participate in the future.

The findings of this paper are important for another reason as well. Studies have indicated that the opportunities to participate are not equally distributed; membership in voluntary organizations is concentrated among high status individuals (Verba and Nie 1972; Klandermans and Oegema 1987). In the data used in this survey, service-learning was more likely to occur in schools that were either urban or rural as compared to suburban, thus it can provide an equalizing effect. Service-learning provides these students—those most likely to shun the political process or just not participate—with a greater understanding of the importance of participation. However, we must be aware that systematic efforts to include service-learning in one type of school or class versus another could shift the base level of participation. This implies that as citizens, we should be concerned that service-learning is implemented in a systematic manner so as to narrow the gap, not increase it.

Furthermore, service-learning not only increases political participation, but also the consequences of raising the level of participation can be quite positive. For example, policy outcomes are often tilted toward the groups who do participate. Thus, higher levels of turnout in poor areas are associated with higher welfare benefits (Hill and Leighley 1992). In other words, voting matters. Since many of the students in this study come from poorer areas, their ability to improve their community increases if they participate.7

Also, often students see that their involvement produces a response by officials. Many project participants in our study have met with the mayor to discuss their service, or the local newspaper has covered their efforts. Students may see tangible results because of their work. For example, funding for
literacy programs in local schools may increase, or houses may be built for the homeless. These tangible results are likely to keep students active in the future.

While much of the existing student participation research has focused on whether the participation glass is half empty or half full, it was not our goal in this paper to engage in that debate. Instead, we believe that we offer a solution to help fill the glass. When students participate in service-learning projects in which they are given leadership, their propensity to participate increases both now and in the future. Indeed, when students are given a voice in the project, service-learning appears to foster civic activism.
Notes

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1 It should be noted that some countries, such as Australia and Italy, have compulsory voting where citizens are required to vote. Obviously, turnout in countries with compulsory voting will be much higher than turnout in the United States. Nevertheless, the U.S. fares quite poorly with other industrialized countries regarding voter turnout.

2 Three different surveys were given to various classes to allow us to analyze more aspects of the impact of service-learning and keep the survey relatively short as well. Some question were not included on all three surveys, which explains why none of the individual models contain 390 respondents.

3 We re-analyzed all the models in this paper by including gender and the interaction between gender and student voice. Controlling for previous attitudes, gender was only a significant predictor of the attitude after completion of the service project in two cases with both coefficients in a negative direction. In all cases, the effect of voice was still statistically significant, and the interaction of gender and voice was only statistically significant in the jury and political communication models. While the two of the models indicate gender differences, the vast majority of them indicated no statistically different effects for men or women. Thus, the oversampling of women should not be a concern.

4 The leadership variable thus has seventeen possible values (0, .25, .50, .75, 1, etc). We should also note that some may be skeptical of the leadership variable because it is self-reported. To make certain this is not a problem, we examined the changes in students’ attitudes depending on the level of student leadership in each class. In this case, we are interested in the level of student leadership that the teacher allows in the service project (average for the class), not the different level that each student reports. Previous research indicates that self-reported leadership and class leadership produce similar results (Morgan and Streb 2001). In each model, the same positive trend holds although the statistical significance of the class average variable varied.
Naturally, we were concerned that the control variables may be highly correlated because several are related to a student’s performance in school (e.g., likes school, G.P.A., prepared for school). Correlations of the control variables indicated that this problem did not exist. The largest correlation between any two variables was .30.

It is important to note that this type of figure shows the change in the probability over the entire range of the data. However, the student leadership variable is evenly distributed and the probability curves are sigmoid, which means that the majority of the change takes place in the middle.

Unfortunately, we cannot show that the students participating in the survey came from lower-income families because we were not allowed to ask family income on the questionnaire. We do know, however, that many of the schools participating in the survey were located in poorer areas. While we can only infer that the students participating in the survey were not well off, we do not believe this is a huge leap.
References


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