



# Politics: The Missing Link of Responsible Civic Education

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Several nonprofit organizations provide instructional materials and guidance to support experiential civic education in schools. General evidence from national surveys suggests that the use of these products and methods improves students' political and civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors.<sup>1</sup> This paper reports the result of a particular experiment conducted to study the effects of an ongoing national youth civic engagement program sponsored by the UVA Center for Politics called the National Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI).

The experiment described here is unusual in two main respects. First, the YLI curriculum emphasizes experiential learning about politics and elections, on the theory that politics ought to be explicitly taught if we want young people to vote, follow the political news, and try to influence the government.

Second, the YLI program was tested in an unusually rigorous way; students who participated in YLI were compared to students who received more traditional civics instruction. According to other studies, students who take civics courses are more likely than other young people to be knowledgeable and engaged in politics. However, it is possible that this is not an effect of the courses; rather, students who are already interested in politics elect to take classes on civics. Also, studies have shown that different teaching techniques and curriculum content have different types of benefits for students. The YLI research used quasi-experimental design to demonstrate that these particular civic classes—using experiential methods and emphasizing electoral politics—had statistically significant, positive effects.

## **THE PROGRAM**

The National Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI) is a national civic education program designed to involve students in the American electoral and policymaking process and to foster greater community awareness and participation. The program was developed by the University of Virginia Center for Politics and includes five teaching resources: a student mock election, "e-Congress", "A More Perfect Union" CD-Rom, "Democracy Corps", and on-line social studies lesson plans.

The Youth Leadership Initiative seeks to fill a void in participatory political education by developing research-based classroom resources and social-studies course units that are specifically linked to each state's unique academic curriculum standards. Technology is the signature component of the Youth Leadership Initiative and the primary tool that enables the program to link schools and students with their counterparts in every region of a state and throughout the nation.

## **YLI PROGRAM COMPONENTS**

The following provides a brief synopsis of each of the program components utilized during the treatment phase of this research. All of the programs put direct emphasis on political aspects of civic life, and four of the five involve active participation of students in the learning experience.

### **MOCK ELECTION**

Each year, the Youth Leadership Initiative conducts the largest on-line mock election in the nation using electronic cyber-ballots that are specifically tailored to each student's home voting location. In addition

<sup>1</sup> See, generally, Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE, *The Civic Mission of Schools* (2003)

to the balloting process, participating teachers may access an extensive bank of on-line lesson plans on topics ranging from campaign advertising to reapportionment to the presidential nominating process. Students use the YLI website to research candidates, take a political ideology quiz, and draft letters to current and prospective elected officials.

## **E-CONGRESS**

The Youth Leadership Initiative's e-Congress is an on-line simulation that allows middle and high school students nationwide – through experiential learning – to research, draft, debate, and pass original legislation. Students use the YLI website to connect with congressional leaders and their peers nationwide to share ideas, request expertise and explore the role of interest groups in the legislative process. In the concluding stage of the simulation, students first serve as committee members deciding the direction of legislation from around the country and later serve as individual representatives as they cast their votes on the virtual House floor. Over the course of the simulation, students develop skills in political participation, research, community awareness, writing, problem solving, and consensus building.

## **A MORE PERFECT UNION**

This interactive CD-ROM allows students to manage a "live" campaign for the United States Senate in the fictitious state of Franklin. Using supporting lesson plans on the YLI website, students have the opportunity to explore campaign headquarters and the state of Franklin, plan their candidate's every move, learn the intricacies of managing an entire campaign staff, purchase campaign ads and develop statewide strategies to promote their candidate, and order polls to learn the issues of greatest concern to Franklin's citizens.

## **DEMOCRACY CORPS**

This program represents the most intense level of direct exposure to and interaction with elected representatives and government officials as well as local, state and national political and community issues. Designed as a potential remedy for disengaged youth, the Democracy Corps program attempts to supplement existing service learning programs with "civic learning" and helps students understand why they should be involved in American democracy, teaching them – through experiential learning – how to be actively engaged.

## **LESSON PLANS**

In addition to the lesson plans that support each of the activities above, the Youth Leadership Initiative also offers rigorous teacher-developed course units that are correlated to each state's unique academic standards in government, civics, and technology.

## **THE RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESULTS**

During the 2002 and 2003 school years, students and teachers across the nation were given a written pre- and post-test questionnaire. The schools chosen to participate in this study included schools offering YLI (the treatment group) and those that did not offer it (the control group) within similar geographic areas. As of June 2004, more than 8,000 teachers in all fifty states were registered to use YLI resources, but at the time the sample was selected, use of YLI resources was most prevalent in the state of Virginia;

therefore, roughly half the schools selected for inclusion in the treatment groups were from Virginia.

In order to find out whether the YLI program helped to increase students' civic engagement, attitudes, and knowledge, the researchers conducted a quasi-experimental study. Classes chosen to be part of the study were divided into the following four groups:

<p><b>Treatment A:</b> completed a pre-test questionnaire, participated in YLI, and completed a post-test questionnaire approximately 6 months later</p>	<p><b>Control A:</b> completed a pre-test questionnaire, completed the post-test questionnaire at the same time as Treatment Group A</p>
<p><b>Treatment B:</b> participated in YLI, completed the post-test questionnaire approximately 6 months later</p>	<p><b>Control B:</b> completed the post-test questionnaire, at the same time as Treatment Group B</p>

Please Note: The pre- and post- test questionnaires are the same tests, but are administered at different times.

This research design allowed a series of meaningful comparisons:

#### **COMPARISON #1: WHO SCORED HIGHER—TREATMENT GROUPS OR CONTROL GROUPS?**

The researchers compared the post-test questionnaire results of the students whose classes participated in YLI with those who did not participate (Treatment A&B versus Control A&B) to generate a first estimate of the effects of the program. Compared to students in traditional civics courses, students who took the YLI course had higher scores on a wide range of variables, including political efficacy, trust, knowledge and reported likelihood of participating in many forms of political activity. These results are presented in the full report, Tables 1 and 2.

However, it is possible that students who took the course started off more engaged than students who did not take the course. In a pure experiment, the two groups would be randomly selected and would therefore be statistically identical at the beginning. In this quasi-experiment, the researchers selected which schools to include in the study, but the teachers were able to opt in or out of the program; thus there might be some differences between the treatment and control groups at the start of the process. To compensate for this problem, another comparison was done.

#### **COMPARISON #2: WHO SHOWED A GREATER DEGREE OF IMPROVEMENT—TREATMENT GROUP OR CONTROL GROUP?**

The researchers compared the degree of change in treatment and control groups between the first time they took the questionnaire and the second time (Treatment A versus Control A). By focusing on the degree to which students changed their political orientations and knowledge over the course of the year, rather than the overall levels reported in the post-test, the researchers controlled for any initial differences that may have existed between the students participating in the YLI programs and those who did not receive the program. This method produced somewhat weaker results; in particular, there were no statistically significant effects in students' "pride in politics." Despite the selection effects found using this statistical test, the researchers found that the program has a positive effect on students' political efficacy and knowledge.

This method produced the weakest results, overall. They are presented here as the most conservative estimate of the effects of YLI:

**TABLE 1: TEST OF CHANGE**

	Interest in Media	Political Efficacy	Responsibilities of Citizens in a Democracy	Trust	Pride in Politics	Political Participation	Future Participation	Political Knowledge
Mock Election		X						X
Mock Election/ Lesson Plans		X						
Democracy Corps	X	X		X	X			X
E-Congress								X
A More Perfect Union								X
A More Perfect Union Lesson Plan								
E-Congress Lesson Plan								
Campaigns Lesson Plan		X						
Fundamentals of Government Lesson Plan		X						

\*Note "X" indicates a significant positive effect of YLI, whereas "(X)" indicates a significant negative effect of the YLI program at the .05 level.

A second methodological problem arises because students who take the questionnaire twice may score well the second time because they have seen the instrument before; they may be "sensitized" to it.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, a final comparison was done.

<sup>2</sup> Sensitization effects can be thought of in statistical terms as an interaction effect between the act of prior measurement and the intervention. If sensitization is operative, then the intervention is more efficacious in the presence of pre-test measurement than it would be in the absence of that measurement.

**COMPARISON #3: WHO SCORED HIGHER—TREATMENT GROUP A OR TREATMENT GROUP B?**

Students participating in YLI who received the pre-test were compared with students who did not take the pre-test (Treatment A versus Treatment B). This comparison tested whether seeing the questions on the pre-test helped students score better when they took the test again six months later. When examining all students taking the post-test, students exposed to many components of YLI reported more pride in politics and political knowledge. Democracy Corps had positive effects on interest in media and trust when the non-pretest groups were taken into account. This method produced weaker results than comparison #1, but stronger results than comparison #2. They are presented below. For more details, see the full report, Table 4.

**TABLE 2 TEST OF SENSITIZATION**

	Interest in Media	Political Efficacy	Responsibilities of Citizens in a Democracy	Trust	Pride in Politics	Political Participation	Future Participation	Political Knowledge
Mock Election		X						X
Mock Election/ Lesson Plans		X						
Democracy Corps	X	X		X	X			X
E-Congress								X
A More Perfect Union								X
A More Perfect Union Lesson Plan								
E-Congress Lesson Plan								
Campaigns Lesson Plan		X						
Fundamentals of Government Lesson Plan		X						

\*Note "X" indicates a significant positive effect of YLI, whereas "(X)" indicates a significant negative effect of the YLI program at the .05 level.

## **DISCUSSION**

In summary, we can say with confidence that the YLI programs have substantial, positive effects on students' level of political knowledge. These effects hold up under statistical tests designed to eliminate possible effects of sensitization or selection, which are potential confounding factors in any quasi-experimental evaluation design. We have some evidence that the YLI programs have positive effects on students' political efficacy, pride in politics, and propensity for future political participation, but these effects are not seen as consistently across the various statistical tests that are possible in this complex study design. Note that all these results involve whole classes of students, whose teachers either did or did not offer the YLI programs. They do not take into account whether individual students did or did not become actively involved in the class activity that was offered.

## **EFFECTS OF EXPOSURE TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

The more exposure students have to the political participation exercises involved in the mock election aspects of the YLI program, the more likely they were to show increased positive outcomes. Students whose classes participated in the mock election were more likely to agree with statements that reflected political efficacy (an average of 2.20 items out of 5 on the index) than were students whose classes did not participate in this program (an average of 2.06).

Moreover, there was a larger increase in the measurement of efficacy for students who actively participated in the mock election (an average of 2.31 items). Similar results were found with respect to measures of students' pride in politics, political participation and knowledge. Students in classes that participated in the mock election were on average more likely to agree with statements such as "Politics is a good thing" or "There is a lot about our form of government that I am proud of" (an average of 3.75 versus 3.43 items out of 7) than were students in classes that did not participate in the program. They also engaged in more political activities (averaging 6.84 activities out of 17 versus only 6.52) and performed better on political knowledge questions (scoring an average 11.15 out of 17 questions versus 9.87). Furthermore, the general improvement in observed attitudes and behavior for students whose classes participated in the mock election (compared to those whose classes did not) is even more evident for those students who actively participated in the mock election.

Taken together, these significant differences related to individual student involvement in the class activity are further testimony to the efficacy of the YLI formula, which expressly includes political learning and actively involves students in interactive learning processes. Adoption of YLI by the teacher brings enhanced learning to the class, and those students who go 'hands-on' with the YLI learning experiences are strengthened in key areas that are predictive of future political participation and civic involvement.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

These initial results provide support for the effectiveness of YLI for a number of civic outcomes, especially pride in politics and political knowledge. While the post-test data for all groups suggests that some initial effects seen in the pre-test/post-test groups may be attenuated when controlling for sensitization and selection effects, a number of significant findings remain. In addition, the results concerning the level of exposure and participation in the mock election portion of the program indicate that greater involvement in this aspect of YLI results in enhanced positive impact of the program. Additional analyses are underway to examine more thoroughly the intricacies of the data and the positive effects of the political participation exercises of the YLI program on student civic outcomes.

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

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