

The Civic Efficacy Conundrum: Do Diverse Pedagogies in Civic Education Help?

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Abstract

August 30th to Sept. 2nd of 2018, the American Political Science Association (APSA)—the national professional association for political scientists—held its annual conference in Boston, Massachusetts. My primary professional development opportunity was presenting with my co-author (Dr. Donald Gooch of Stephen F. Austin State University) our research on civic education in Arkansas.¹ I am also on the executive board of the organized APSA section Political Science Education and served as its 2018 Program Section Co-Chair. Thus, I attended the biannual business meeting of Political Science Education, as well as was present for the section panels and sessions I helped create. My travel fares, hotel, conference registration fee, and other miscellaneous expenses were how my professional development grant of \$2,000.00 was spent.

Conference Paper Overview

For the 2018 APSA conference, Dr. Gooch and I presented some new research we have conducted on how a 2007 change in the social science secondary education curriculum that added a requirement of one semester of economics by the Arkansas Department of Education (herein ADE) has negatively impacted the civic literacy of Arkansans over the last half dozen years.

Restatement of Problem Researched

Our paper opens with the question: How much does state policy impact civic education? The conventional view that emerged in the mid-1900s was that civics instruction specifically has little to no effect on civic literacy. In a famous study of civic education, Langton and Jennings found additional years of education mattered, but additional courses in civics appeared to have

¹ To download the paper presented, see:

https://convention2.allacademic.com/one/apsa/apsa18/index.php?cmd=Online+Program+View+Paper&selected_paper_id=1381073&PHPSESSID=peet8rtp3qvgfrsrt7qvmffr6

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no significant effect on civic literacy levels.¹ This became the conventional view of civic education, still evident in research at the turn of the twenty-first century.² Thus, ADE requiring a semester of economics, which caused many schools in Arkansas to reduce the civics taught from the norm of two semester or a full year down to one semester to accommodate the new economics requirement, should not have negatively impacted civic literacy. For, the total education is not being decreased, just the specific content in civics declined.

However, recent research (including past work by Gooch and I) shows a civics curriculum matters and can have a statistically significant impact on civic literacy. Such research has largely focused on aggregate differences in the amount of civics taken. For example, at the secondary education level Niemi and Junn find students having had a civics course in high school leads to about a two percent increase in civic knowledge over those without one.³ Delli Carpini and Keeter produced the seminal study of higher education, but others have reinforced their finding that instruction in civics makes a statistically significant difference in civic literacy.⁴ However, most of these studies rely on self-reporting by participants on their civic education. What has not been studied well systematically is: What is the effect on civic literacy of a state decreasing or increasing its coverage and/or assessment requirements for civics? Does state civic education policy matter? Does a decline from two to one courses negatively impact civic literacy? Maybe one course is adequate and the second is just over saturation as Langton and Jennings argue.⁵

To answer these questions, Gooch and I have pretest civic literacy data of students taking American government at Arkansas Tech University since 2008. They matriculation level of these students covers the spectrum from freshman standing to senior standing, but is heavily concentrated at the freshman and sophomore levels. One might question what makes ATU a good, representative sample of Arkansas youth. First, either American Government or US history is a state-mandated

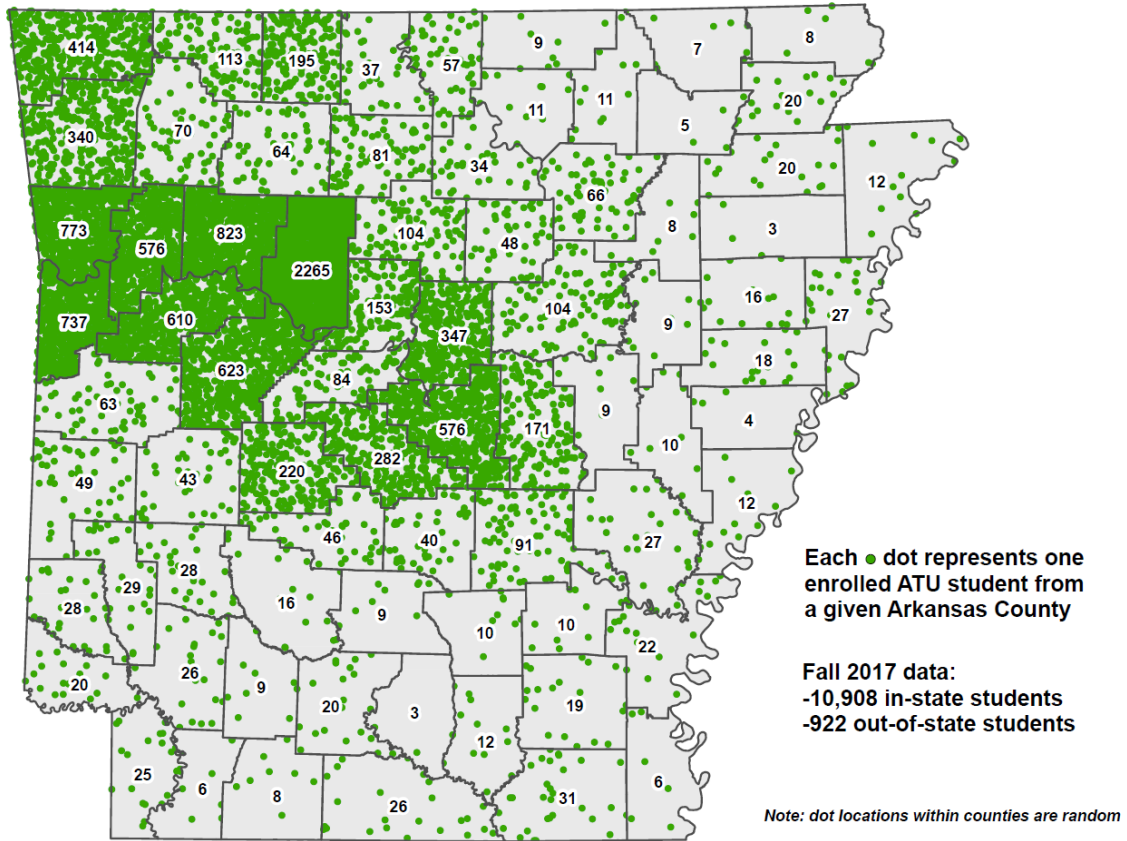
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general education requirement for higher education in Arkansas. Therefore, a large portion of Arkansas youth taking courses in higher education pass through the American Government course. More importantly, as a regional university ATU has consistently been composed of a student body that is predominantly Arkansas—consistently over 9 out of 10 students, it is an ideal public institution of higher education to serve as a sample that is rather generalizable to at least northwest Arkansas if not the entire state (see Figure 2: ATU’s Arkansas Makeup below).⁶ While its student population is less diverse than may be desirable, so is the state of Arkansas generally.⁷ Simply put, ATU students are a reasonable subsample of 18-24 year olds in the state of Arkansas. If anything, given the Arkansans being assessed are in college, the most one would expect is that they perform a little better on a civics exam than the larger Arkansas population which contains more individuals who performed poorly in and/or did not complete high school. Still, overall there is good reason to see ATU students as a good microcosm of Arkansas youth.

Figure 2: ATU’s Arkansas Makeup

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Arkansas Home Counties of Arkansas Tech Students, Fall 2017



* Map provided by Dr. Patrick Hage, ATU Assistant Professor of Geography, from data provided by the ATU Institutional Research Office.

The civic literacy assessment is a subset of 25 questions taken from the naturalization exam sample questions provided online by the US government.⁸ The questions range from who is the president to what is the highest law of the land to name the current mayor of your town or representative to the US House for the district where you live. Given that the decision to implement an economics requirement was made in 2007, we label the period from 2007 to 2011 the implementation phase. Essentially, we do not expect any effect on civic education to fully materialize until after Fall 2011. Since most students in Arkansas take their semester of high school civics in ninth grade and only a few districts provide it in eleventh or twelfth, it took as much as four years for the students only receiving one civics course as opposed to two to reach

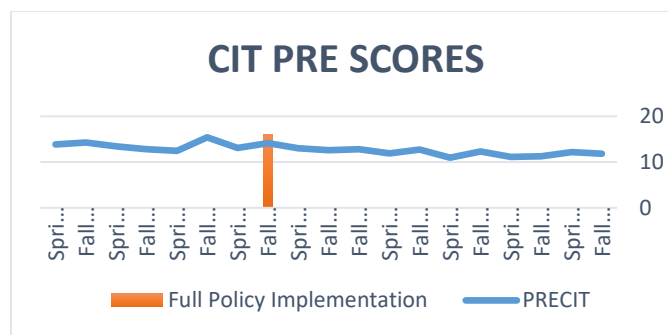
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college. What we are interested in is how the pretest scores from 2007 to 2011 compare to the pretest scores from 2012 to 2017. Our hypothesis is that average pretest scores, the dependent variable, from 2007-2011 will be higher than averages from 2012 to 2017. We expect this finding to be statistically significant and a result of our independent dummy variable, the state action to increase economics and inadvertently reduce civic education from two semester to one for most Arkansans in public school.

Summary of Findings

Although we have yet to fully write up the findings, we do provide below our graphs and tables. The key result we reported is a statistically significant decline in civic literacy across both measures (Score 26 and Citizenship Score), even after controlling for demographic and political characteristics in the sample (Fall 2008 – Fall 2017). Remove the civics foundation from the high school curriculum and states will get a substantially less civically literate student population. We will provide a more thorough discussion of these findings in future iterations of this project as first a journal article and later a chapter in a book on civic education.

Figure 3: Decline in Civic Literacy Post Implementation



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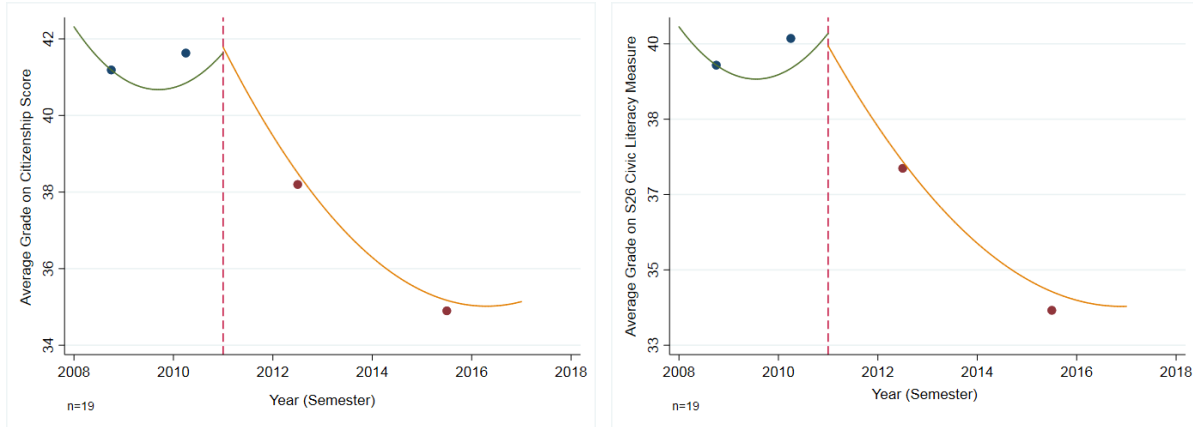


Table 1: Average Score on Civic Literacy for Implementation vs. Post Implementation Period

Phase 1: Implementation (Spring 2008-Spring 2011)	13.7
Phase 2: Post Implementation (Fall 2011 to Fall 2017)	12.06
Total Decline in Average Score	1.64

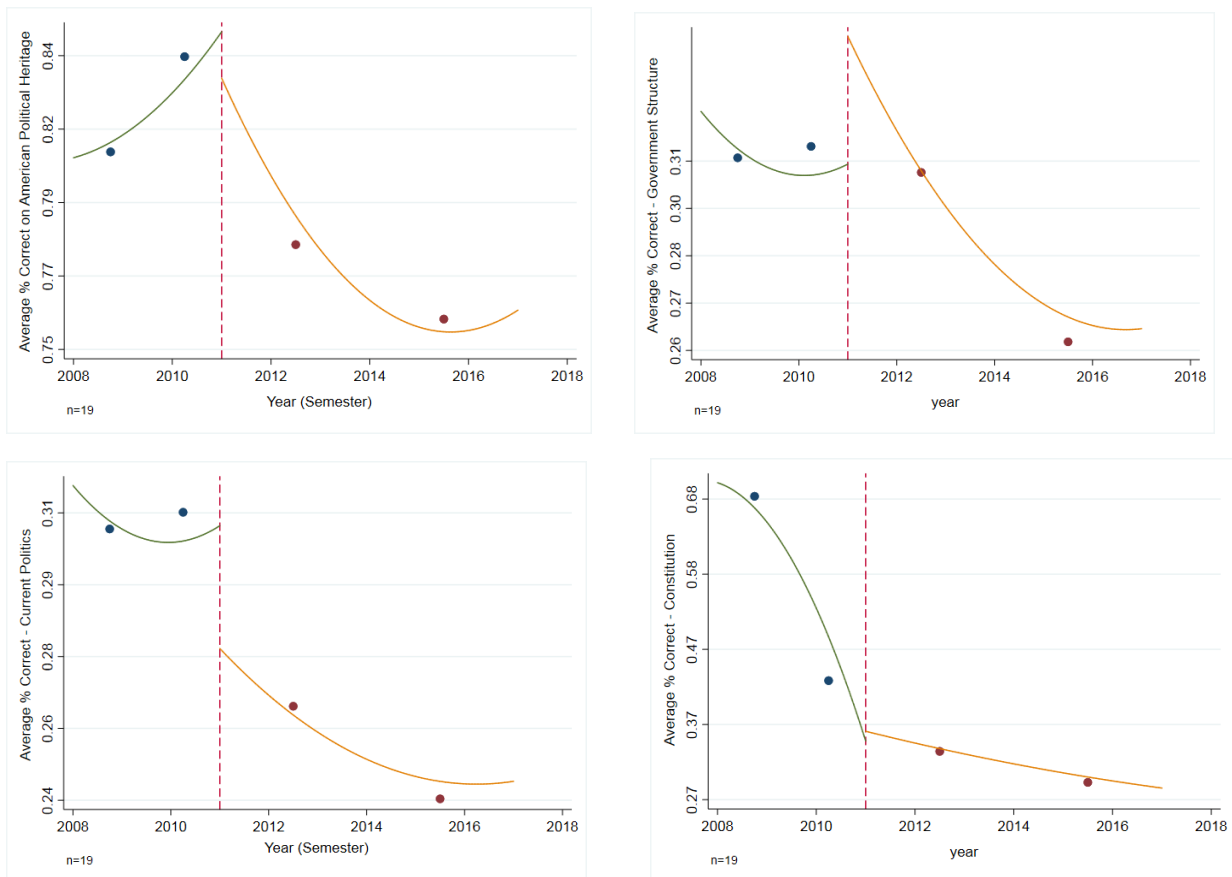
Table 2: Linear Time Model with Demographic and Political Controls

VARIABLES	Overall Civic Literacy		Areas of Civic Knowledge			
	Citizenship Score	S26 Civic Literacy Score	American Political Heritage	Current Politics	Government Structure	Constitution
	P.E. (S.E.)	P.E. (S.E.)	P.E. (S.E.)	P.E. (S.E.)	P.E. (S.E.)	P.E. (S.E.)
Race	14.443 *** (1.686)	14.062 *** (1.624)	0.205 *** (0.021)	0.065 *** (0.017)	0.178 *** (0.027)	0.169 *** (0.022)
Income	1.048 *** (0.361)	0.893 *** (0.348)	0.010 ** (0.004)	0.012 *** (0.003)	0.006 (0.006)	0.007 (0.005)
Party ID	0.056 (0.402)	0.099 (0.388)	-0.003 (0.005)	0.002 (0.004)	0.004 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.005)
Ideology	0.186 (0.442)	0.192 (0.426)	0.010 (0.005)	0.004 (0.004)	--0.005 (0.006)	0.002 (0.005)
Gender	7.648 *** (1.606)	8.296 *** (1.547)	0.065 *** (0.020)	0.046 *** (0.016)	0.153 *** (0.025)	0.067 *** (0.021)
Time	-0.301 ** (0.150)	-0.265 * (0.144)	-0.003 (0.001)	-0.003 * (0.001)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.001)
Constant	24.245 *** (2.776)	22.792 *** (2.674)	0.596 *** (0.035)	0.180 *** (0.028)	0.117 *** (0.043)	0.187 *** (0.037)
R²	.141	.146	.146	.061	.109	.092
Pr > F	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001

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N	806	806	806	806	806	806
* $P < .10$, ** $P < .05$, *** $P < .01$						

Figure 4: Decline by Question Block Types



Conclusion

This paper refutes the traditional view that the number of courses offered in civics course specifically does not matter. The reduction in the civics curriculum that resulted from the state of Arkansas adding a semester of economics to the secondary curriculum negatively impacted

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the civic literacy of youth in Arkansas. Dropping from a yearlong civics sequence to one semester mattered. States and government officials need to know this and understand the impact their decisions can have on the civic literacy and citizenship development of the future citizens of America.

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¹ Kenneth P. Langton and M. K. Jennings, "Political Socialization and the High School Civics Curriculum in the United States," *The American Political Science Review* 62, no. 3 (1968), 852-867.

² Pamela Johnson Conover and Donald D. Searing. "A Political Socialization Perspective." In *Rediscovering the Democratic Purposes of Education*, edited by Lorraine M. McDonnell, P. Michael Timpane and Roger Benjamin, 91-124. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000.

³ Richard G. Niemi, *Civic Education : What Makes Students Learn*, ed. Jane Junn (New Haven: New Haven : Yale University Press, 1998b), 121. See also, Barrett and Greene, "'Civic Education: A Key to Trust in Government'," in *Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines*, ed. Matto and others (Washington, DC: American Political Science Association, 2016), 65-72.; Myiah J. Hutchens and William P. Everland Jr., "The Long-Term Impact of High School Civics Curricula on Political Knowledge, Democratic Attitudes and Civic Behaviors: A Multi-Level Model of Direct and Mediated Effects through Communication" (<http://www.civicyouth.org>: Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, [August 2009]).

⁴ Donald M. Gooch and Michael T. Rogers, "Dude, Where's the Civic Engagement? the Paradoxical Effect of Civic Education on the Probability of Civic Participation," in *Civic Education in the 21st Century: A Multidimensional Inquiry*, eds. Michael T. Rogers and Donald M. Gooch (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2015), 295-344.; Donald M. Gooch and Michael T. Rogers, "A Natural Disaster of Civic Proportions: College Students in the Natural State Falls Short of the Naturalization Benchmark," *Midsouth Political Science Review* 13, no. 1 (2012a), 53-82.; Delli Carpini and Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997);

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⁵ Langton and Jennings, "Political Socialization and the High School Civics Curriculum in the United States," *The American Political Science Review* 62, no. 3 (1968), 852-867., 857.

⁶ Through demographic data publicly available through the ATU Institutional Research office, one can see that ATU's student population has consistently been extremely Arkansan over the last decade. While the Arkansas population has slightly declined during this time period, it has only dropped from the mid 90 percent range to the low 90 percent range.

⁷ Donald M. Gooch and Michael T. Rogers, "A Natural Disaster of Civic Proportions: College Students in the Natural State Falls Short of the Naturalization Benchmark," *Midsouth Political Science Review* 13, no. 1 (2012b), 53-82.; Gooch and Rogers, "Dude, Where's the Civic Engagement? the Paradoxical Effect of Civic Education on the Probability of Civic Participation," in *Civic Education in the 21st Century: A Multidimensional Inquiry*, eds. Rogers and Gooch (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2015), 295-344.

⁸ For a comprehensive description of the pretest data being collected, see Gooch and Rogers, "A Natural Disaster of Civic Proportions: College Students in the Natural State Falls Short of the Naturalization Benchmark," *Midsouth Political Science Review* 13, no. 1 (2012b), 53-82.