

Institute for Ethical and Civic Engagement Initiative

Final report: Development of a Course on Citizen Competence and Political Participation

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Course material:

A copy of the course syllabus is attached.

Number of students:

Twenty-six students participated in PSCI 4731, Progress and Problems in American Democracy, in the fall of 2006.

Development and implementation of the course:

This was a critical thinking course open to juniors and seniors, with a small enrollment that allowed for rich classroom discussion and the opportunity to do a number of in-class projects and group activities. The course focused on empirical investigation of questions of citizenship and civic competence. Students read academic articles from social scientists and related these arguments to normative issues of good citizenship as well as their own experiences as citizens in a representative democracy.

In the course, we considered first definitions of citizenship and then citizens' capability and motivation to effectively engage in politics. Next, we looked at patterns of citizen participation in politics, including why people volunteer for campaigns, turn out to vote, participate in their communities, and engage in deliberation. We then considered a number of threats to citizen competence – including media influences, political manipulation, and inequalities in participation. Finally, we considered institutional mechanisms to promote civic competence – and the ways in which government, the media, and other groups might improve levels of citizen knowledge, decision-making, and participation.

Project goals achieved:

By considering empirical evidence related to normative puzzles of citizenship, students had the chance to think more concretely about how to best influence levels of civic competence. As part of the final project for the class, students applied what they had learned during the course of the semester. The first part of the assignment involved identifying a normative concern about citizens – such as low trust in government, declines in voter turnout, or low levels of political knowledge. In the second part of the project, students discussed the explanations for these phenomena using the empirical academic literature. For example, a student interested in low voter turnout among young voters would discuss the reasons political scientists have identified as explanations for why some young people vote and others do not. Finally, in the third part of the project, students developed their own recommendations for how to change citizen behavior. Here, students devised their own creative remedies, informed by what they had learned about the realities of citizen political behavior.

The skills used in this assignment, and the course generally, have utility beyond the university setting. Students interested in working in nonprofit groups can apply lessons learned about how to motivate people to participate. Students interested in working in politics can apply lessons about engaging citizen attention to campaign work. Those interested in normative goals such as increasing voter turnout among youths can also directly apply class lessons to these efforts. Many groups and organizations develop proposals to promote citizen action, voter

education, and youth involvement in politics. But often common sense solutions to promoting good citizenship ignore critical lessons of citizen behavior. By reviewing evidence of what drives political behavior and how citizen roles might be changed, students gained a richer understanding of more realistic remedies to influence civic competence.

I think that students often see politics and government solely in terms of the institutions of government and the people who lead them. This class serves a nice role in calling attention to the importance of citizen behavior and the normative and empirical debates related to citizens.

Sustainability:

I will teach this class in the future. I believe parts of the curriculum developed for this course could also be nicely integrated into other public opinion courses that I teach.