

## The Impact of Country Characteristics on Civic Knowledge and Political Participation

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### Abstract

*Political participation scholars have argued for years over whether or not civic education has any effect on political participation, with no clear conclusion being drawn, despite a variety of analyses. These analyses tend to ignore the country characteristics and structural factors that influence the relationship between civic education and political participation. This article seeks to address the gap in the literature by using data from the International Civic and Citizen Study and other sources to show through quantitative analysis that country characteristics such as low economic development, stable state authority structures, and high inequality play a clear role in how effective civic education is in encouraging political participation. The article concludes by discussing limitations of the research and suggestions for future research.*

### Keywords

Civic Education; Economic Inequality; Education; Governance; Political Participation

## Introduction

Democracy depends on the active participation of citizens in a variety of governance activities, from voting in elections and donating to political campaigns to protesting and running for office. Scholars and researchers have found ample evidence supporting this assertion over the years, and it is now widely acknowledged as fact that democracies cannot be built or survive without robust political participation (Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996). Unfortunately, there is evidence that political participation in many Western democracies is dropping, and recent studies show that younger age cohorts are the least likely to participate. In this context, some politicians and researchers are beginning to fear that democratic institutions and the freedom and equality associated with them may begin to erode (Galston, 2004).

Educators and policy-makers point to education generally, and civic education specifically, as a cure for falling political participation rates and rising political apathy. According to Galston (2001), the concept of civic education can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, who noted that a key aspect of education is teaching future citizens how to behave and interact within the political system. This holds true in autocracies and democracies alike, where children must learn how to interact with the political structure of the society in which they live. In modern usage, civic education most often refers to a specific type of formal education in democracies through which students learn about their country's political system and how to take part in the system (Galston, 2004). Murphy (2007) argues that civic education also involves the transmission of certain civic virtues to students, but many scholars disagree with him. Most recently, the process of civic education has been distinguished from civic knowledge, which is the set of skills and competencies necessary for engagement in politics (Lauglo, 2013). For the purposes of this analysis, civic education will be defined as the formal educational process through which students learn the concrete skills and knowledge necessary for participation in the political systems of democratic countries, while civic knowledge will be the measurable outcome of the civic education process.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the literature on the effect of civic education on participation is mixed at best. Using data from the Vietnam War era, Berinsky and Lenz (2011) show that increasing overall education levels among veterans did not impact rates of political participation. Instead, they present evidence that although education is correlated with political participation, there is no causal link between the two (Berinsky & Lenz, 2011). This finding is supported by research in Sweden showing

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<sup>1</sup> Although most of the research cited throughout this article focuses on the relationship between civic education and political participation, the focus of the analysis will be on the relationship between civic knowledge and political participation, in recognition of new developments in the field and new methods of investigating civic education and civic knowledge.

that increased exposure to civic education curriculum did not lead to increased political participation (M. Persson & Oscarsson, 2008).

Other researchers provide evidence supporting the idea that civic education can address falling political participation. Based on years of research and experience in the field, William Galston argues that civic education is the most effective way to raise rates of political participation (Galston, 2004). Research on civic education in the United States has shown that it builds civic skills and increases civic knowledge which researchers argue in turn increases political participation (Nie et al., 1996; Niemi & Junn, 2005). Finally, Lauglo (2013) shows that civic knowledge, the product of civic education, is positively correlated with expected political participation across almost 30 countries using data from the International Civics and Citizenship Education Study.

A consistent weakness across all of the studies mentioned is the treatment of the civic education – political participation relationship as a black box. The research above looks at civic education as the input and political participation as the outcome, but that may be an overly simplified view of the relationship. Lauglo (2013) notes that there is variation in the average correlation between an individual's civic knowledge and expected political participation across countries, yet there is no further exploration of the causes of these variations.

The fact that variations in the strength of the correlation exist suggests that outside factors may influence the civic education – political participation relationship. By looking at the economic, political, and social contexts in which citizens receive civic education and participate in politics, this article aims to present evidence that previous studies examining civic education and its efficacy in encouraging political participation overlook the importance of the national context. The next section outlines the theoretical arguments for including an analysis of the national context in any examination of the relationship between civic education/knowledge and political participation. Following that, three national characteristics—economic development, governance structure, and economic inequality—are discussed as potential national characteristics that could influence how civic knowledge affects political participation.

## **Analytical Framework**

### ***Resources for Participation and the Political Environment***

The analytical framework for this article is adapted from the Resource Model of Political Participation developed by Brady, Verba, and Lehman Schlozman (1995). Based on the strong positive correlation between socioeconomic status and political participation, this model argues that individual political participation is closely related to the resources available to the individual, which are in turn reflected in socioeconomic status (Brady et al., 1995). Brady, Verba, and Lehman Schlozman identify three resources that most heavily influence participation: time, money, and civic

skills. Individuals need free time in order to be engaged in political activities, whether it is voting in an election or taking part in a protest, and they also need money to be able to participate in activities and to support their preferred candidates and interests. Finally, civic skills are necessary in order to use time and monetary resources efficiently in the political arena (Brady et al., 1995). Interestingly, there is little exploration of the relationships between the three resources and if deficiencies in one resource can be countered by surpluses of other resources.

Although Brady et al. (1995) focus on the resources necessary for participation at the individual level, others have noted how the broader social, political, and economic environments play a role in resource allocation, thereby shaping political participation. Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, and Rich (2001) show how the socio-political environment shapes the resources and motivations of citizens, which then influence the individual's participation in political activities. Taken together, these two models of political participation argue that factors influencing the social, political, and economic environment can have an impact on the resources crucial to political participation. With this in mind, it is possible to identify the country characteristics that influence the social, political, and economic environments of citizens, thereby shaping the resources available for participation in the context of a given country.

### ***National Characteristics Influencing the Civic Knowledge – Political Participation Correlation***

Assuming an efficient and effective education system, civic education leads to increased civic knowledge, which in turn helps to develop the civic skills identified by the Resource Model of Political Participation as critical to political participation (Brady et al., 1995; Nie et al., 1996; Niemi & Junn, 2005). Given these assumptions, national characteristics that influence the civic skills available to citizens will likely have the most significant influence on the strength of the civic knowledge – political participation relationship. In contrast, where national characteristics limit the availability of money and time, there may not be as strong of an influence on the civic knowledge – political participation relationship, since having the civic skills necessary to participate is unrelated to the monetary and time-based barriers to participation imposed by structural factors. Three national characteristics have been identified that could influence the relationship of interest: governance structure, economic development, and inequality.<sup>2</sup> Each of these is discussed below, along with hypotheses of the expected effects on the civic knowledge – political participation correlation.

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<sup>2</sup> Data limitations constrained the national characteristics that could be analyzed. Since this analysis is based on publicly available secondary data, it was not possible to find data for some structural factors initially identified as interesting to the research. Future research can compile data on structural factors for which there is not data available, extending and enhancing the findings of this article.

The first national characteristic expected to influence civic knowledge and political participation is the governance structure of a country. The governance structure of a country refers to the authority characteristics of the government of a state. This concept can be thought of as how democratic or undemocratic a state is. While the governance structure of a state has far reaching implications for all aspects of society, it impacts the civic skills available to citizens most. Research has shown that when there is competition in the politics of a country, a key aspect of democracy<sup>3</sup>, political participation rates are higher (Franklin, 2004; Norris, 2004). As this competition continues to occur over generations, participation becomes a part of the political culture of a state, which is then transmitted to new generations through formal civic education and informal political socialization, further strengthening the culture of participation (Bockstette, Chanda, & Putterman, 2002; Franklin, 2004; Giuliano & Nunn, 2013; Searing, Schwartz, & Lind, 1973). Viewed a different way, past experience with democracy provides citizens with the necessary skills to participate politically in the future. Just as one learns to ride a bike or swim by practicing, one can also “learn” democracy and gain civic skills through practicing democracy. These skills are then transmitted from one generation to the next.

An important assumption, drawn from the literature, is that while one can learn the civic skills necessary for participation by participating in democracy, one cannot gain the civic knowledge taught through schools and civic education by simply practicing democracy (Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Muller & Seligson, 1994). As used throughout this article, civic knowledge refers to the outcome of civic education, which is not gained from participation in democracy. Civic knowledge can lead to the development of civic skills identified by Brady et al. (1995) as important to political participation, but having the civic skills does not mean one also has civic knowledge (Brady et al., 1995).

Since democracy transmits civic skills, it is expected that the more democratic a state is, the weaker the civic knowledge – political participation relationship will be. When civic skills are passed on outside of civic education from democratic culture, political participation is not as dependent on civic education and civic knowledge. When civic skills are not passed down due to a lack of previous democratic experience, then the civic knowledge of a citizen is more important in developing the civic skills necessary to participate. This leads to the hypothesis that as democracy increases, the strength of the civic knowledge – political participation relationship will weaken. In other words, the more democratic a country is, the less civic knowledge is related to political participation. This relationship is expected to be strong since both civic knowledge and past democratic experiences affect the civic skills used for participation.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the characteristics of democracy and the role of political competition in it, refer to Lipset (1959) and Schmitter and Karl (1991).

The second characteristic expected to have an impact on the civic knowledge – political participation correlation is the level of economic development of a state. Most commonly measured by gross domestic product, the level of economic development of a country is how productive the country and its economy are. As Lipset (1959) states, a basic level of economic development is a necessary condition for democracy and can be used to predict political participation. As economic development and country wealth increase, democracy often becomes ingrained in society, and participation becomes more and more a part of political culture (T. Persson & Tabellini, 2006). Brady et al. (1995) explain these findings by showing that money is an important resource in allowing citizens to participate in government and politics and by linking the money available to individuals to the wider economic state of the country. As a country and its citizens becomes more wealthy, political participation becomes more likely, so it is expected that the relationship between economic development and the civic education – political participation correlation will be positive simply because political participation becomes more likely. Because economic development encourages participation through the monetary resources available for participation, and not civic skills, it is expected that the relationship between economic development and the civic knowledge – political participation correlation will be weak.

Finally, the level of income inequality in a country is expected to influence the correlation between civic knowledge and political participation. Income inequality limits the money available for participation by concentrating resources in the hands of economic and social elites (Solt, 2008). This in turn depresses participation not only by limiting the resources available but also by decreasing public motivation to participate due to a perceived lack of relevance (Brady et al., 1995; Kuklinski et al., 2001; Lipset, 1959). By limiting participation in the ways described, income inequality is expected to have a negative effect on the civic knowledge – political participation relationship. With inequality depressing participation, all else equal, civic knowledge will not counter this effect since inequality and civic knowledge affect two different participation resources. Income inequality most directly affects money, therefore it is not expected that there will be a strong relationship between the civic knowledge – political participation correlation and income inequality.

## **Methodology**

In order to examine the relationships between the three national characteristics identified and the civic knowledge – political participation correlation, a quantitative analysis of the available data was undertaken. To do this, the structural factors identified were operationalized using well known measures and datasets. Governance structure was operationalized using the Polity IV dataset which contains a variable for how democratic a government is in any given year as well as a variable for the amount of time since the last change in governance structure (Gurr & Marshall, 2015).

Economic development was operationalized using gross domestic product (GDP) from the World Bank (“Gross Domestic Product,” 2017). The GINI Index provided quantitative measures of income inequality used for the analysis (“The GINI Index,” 2017). The dependent variable comes from Lauglo (2013), who used student-level data from the International Civics and Civic Education Survey to calculate the average correlation between an individual’s civic knowledge and his or her expected level of political participation for approximately 30 countries. Once all the data was compiled, an ordinary least squares linear regression was performed to determine how the structural factors related to the dependent variable—the national civic knowledge – political participation correlation.

## Findings

Analysis of the data collected shows that the national characteristics identified account for just over half of the variation in the country civic knowledge – political participation correlations (adjusted  $r^2 = .505$ )<sup>4</sup>. This confirms the central hypothesis of this article which argues that the civic knowledge – political participation relationship is not a direct relationship but rather is affected by the national context. The adjusted  $r^2$  value suggests that other structural factors are influencing the correlation but were not accounted for in the regression. Since data limitations forced the exclusion of some variables initially deemed relevant to the analysis, this result is not surprising. Future research may be able to address this gap by expanding the data collected beyond publicly available secondary data.

The first variable analyzed was governance structure, operationalized by the Polity IV scale. As expected, the sign of the correlation was negative, indicating that high levels of civic knowledge are less likely to correlate with high levels of political participation when a state is democratic in nature. Unfortunately, the result is not significant for this variable, meaning that the observed correlation between governance structure and the civic knowledge – political participation correlation may be due to chance, so all interpretations of the data must be made with this in mind. Surprisingly, this relationship was the weakest of all the variables analyzed, indicating that the effect of governance structure on the civic education – political participation correlation is the least influential of the structural factors identified. This finding runs contrary to the expectation that governance structure would be the most influential of the factors identified since it most directly affects civic skill resources available for participation—the same resource that civic knowledge affects.

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<sup>4</sup> Complete regression results can be found in Annex 1.

The length of time since a change in governance structure, measured by Polity IV durability, was also included in the analysis and showed a surprisingly strong effect on the civic knowledge – political participation correlation. The correlation was positive and significant to 96%, meaning that the length of time since the last change in governance has a noticeable impact on civic knowledge and political participation. All things equal, for each year since a change in governance structure, a high level of civic knowledge is nearly 40% more likely to correlate with a high level of political participation. Further analysis was performed by running the same regression noted above but only using cases which are considered a full democracy<sup>5</sup>. The relationship was confirmed and the correlation was stronger and maintained significance. The implications of this finding are discussed in more detail in the discussion section of this article.

The regression analysis showed that there was a weak but positive relationship between income inequality and the strength of the civic knowledge – political participation correlation. This means that as income inequality increases, civic knowledge becomes more positively correlated with political participation. Although the finding is insignificant, the moderate positive correlation found refutes the original expectation that income inequality would weakly and negatively correlate with the civic knowledge – political participation correlation since income inequality affects money available to participate, while civic knowledge affects the civic skills participation resource.

Finally, the level of economic development of a country was found to have a strong negative correlation with the strength of the civic knowledge – political participation correlation. The finding was significant to 98%, indicating a real and observable relationship. As a country develops economically, civic knowledge is not as closely correlated with political participation. When all other variables are held constant, every \$10 billion USD increase to a country's GDP, weakens the civic knowledge – political participation relationship by nearly 90%. This clearly and resoundingly rejects the expectation that economic development would have a weak and positive effect on the dependent variable. The implications of this finding are discussed in the following section.

## Discussion

As noted above, although increasing levels of democracy decrease the potential role of civic knowledge in encouraging political participation, the length of time since a change in governance structure increases the chance of civic knowledge positively correlating with political participation. This is a surprising finding because it calls into question the idea of the civic skills that lead to political participation being transmitted as a part of democratic culture outside the context of civic education and civic knowledge. Since it is clear from the findings that higher levels of democracy weaken the

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<sup>5</sup> The definition of “full democracy” is derived from the Polity IV codebook. For more information, consult Gurr and Marshall (2015).



relationship between civic knowledge and political participation, and since democracies inherently have higher levels of participation, it is possible to say that the civic skills needed to participate could be transmitted outside the context of civic knowledge and civic education. The findings on the length of time a given governance structure has persisted could suggest that the transmission of the civic skills through democratic culture does in fact increase the civic knowledge of citizens, contrary to expectations. This would mean that civic knowledge and political participation increase due to the consolidation of democracy, but there is not necessarily a causal relationship between the two. Further research probing the role of civic education and the development and transmission of civic skills and knowledge in democracies could help to clarify the findings from this analysis.

The correlations observed between economic development and income inequality on one hand and the civic knowledge – political participation correlation on the other suggest that there is the possibility for substitution between the resources Brady et al. (1995) identify as crucial for political participation. As noted above, income inequality limits the monetary resources available for participation. Based on the finding that an increase in income inequality strengthens the civic knowledge – political participation correlation, it can be said that the civic skills derived from civic knowledge might bolster political participation in cases where there is a lack of money available to participate. The finding that low levels of economic development similarly strengthen the correlation between civic knowledge and political participation further supports this conclusion. If civic knowledge does correlate with higher political participation in instances where monetary resources are low, then building civic knowledge through civic education can be a viable policy tool to address low rates of political participation.

With the results of the analysis in mind, it is possible to build an ideal type of the context in which civic knowledge most positively correlates with political participation. The concept of an ideal type comes from Max Weber who developed the idea to facilitate comparisons between cases (Eliaeson, 2000). By coming up with a hypothetical ideal type to act as the standard for comparison, social scientists can compare variations in real life cases to the ideal type in order to predict variables for analysis. Constructing an ideal type of the context in which civic knowledge most strongly correlates with political participation will allow researchers and policy-makers to better explore the relationship between civic knowledge and political participation as well as to know in what situations increasing civic knowledge may lead to increased participation rates.

From the analysis, it is clear that civic knowledge is more likely to positively correlate with political participation when economic development is low. Additionally, the relationship between the two is strongest when income inequality is high. As less money is available as a resource for participation, civic knowledge and civic skills may be able to act as a substitute resource for

participation. Finally, less democratic states are more likely to show a stronger positive civic knowledge – political participation correlation, and this relationship strengthens as a government remains unchanged.

Altogether, these findings indicate that civic knowledge is most highly correlated with political participation in countries with high income inequality, low economic development, and governance structures that are stable but undemocratic. In other words, the relationship between civic knowledge and participation is strongest in countries that are the least developed by Western standards. This means that efforts to increase civic knowledge, such as increasing exposure to civic education or reforming civic education curriculum, might be effective ways of raising political participation in less developed countries. In turn this could promote transitions to democracy which is a major goal of many international actors (Barro, 1999; Diamond, 2006; Dunning, 2004). Unfortunately, this also means that improving civic education and increasing civic knowledge in developed Western democracies may not address the concerns many researchers and policy-makers have regarding decreasing participation rates.

## Conclusions

The analysis and discussion of the findings above does shed some light on the relationship between civic knowledge and political participation and the situations in which the two have the highest positive correlation, but there are some limitations to the research conducted. First, it is important to note that nothing in the research establishes causality. There is no clear causal link between civic knowledge and political participation, so the effects observed and discussed in this article could be resulting from changes in an unknown and extraneous variable. This possibility limits the validity of the findings, but it does not discredit them altogether. Further research into the mechanisms behind political participation and civic knowledge may reveal causality, but that is beyond the scope of this analysis. Additionally, the research was limited by the availability of public secondary data. It was not possible to collect data for this analysis, so some national characteristics of interest had to be excluded from analysis. Future research can address these gaps by collecting primary data for analysis.

Another limitation of this study is that it only considers the national characteristics affecting the civic knowledge – political participation relationship. There are almost certainly individual level factors that also influence the correlation, but it was not possible to explore these factors with the data available. There is some support in the literature for the idea that individual level factors such as socioeconomic status, job status, and personal attribute/characteristics may affect the civic knowledge – political participation correlation (Brady et al., 1995; Kuklinski et al., 2001; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2016). Extending the analysis into individual level factors influencing the correlation

would provide additional insights into the relationship that could benefit policy-makers and researchers in the future.

Finally, this research can be further developed and built upon in several ways. As previously mentioned, more detailed research into the mechanisms behind political participation can help to establish causality, moving beyond the correlational research of this analysis. Future research can also explore the substitution of the resources Brady et al. (1995) identify as crucial to political participation. The analysis above suggests that there may be a substitution effect between civic skills and money, but a more detailed analysis of the process through which this occurs would benefit the literature greatly.

From the analysis conducted it is clear that structural factors do play a part in determining the strength of the civic knowledge – political participation correlation, and that the relationship should not be treated as a black box, but should be explored more thoroughly. Some structural factors were identified that influence the correlation, but it is likely that others also play a role. Nonetheless, this study provides a starting point for discussing the contexts in which civic education and civic knowledge can be expected to correlate with higher levels of political participation, and this allows policy-makers interested in political participation to begin to develop strategies to increase it.

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## Annex 1: Regression Results

*Regression Coefficients Predicting the Strength of Civic Knowledge - Political Participation Correlation*

	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized B
polity2	-0.014	0.01	-0.244
Gini	0.003	0.003	0.301
GDP_2009	-0.009	0.004	-0.899**
durable	0.001	0.001	0.38**
(Constant)	0.626	0.13	

Notes: Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .505

\* p < .10

\*\* p < .05

\*\*\* p < .01

## Appendix 2: Datasets Used

The datasets used in this research can be accessed online through the following link (1 July 2018):

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6P5s-RPOMByRG5WeDJ4WkUzYm8/view?usp=sharing>