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Adolescent Participation in Student Government and Voluntary Organizations:
A Comparative Study of Australia and the United States*

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Abstract

Objective. This study examines the association between participation in communities of practice such as student government and voluntary organizations, and expected adult political participation and trust among 14-year-olds in Australia and the United States. Prior research on the influence of adolescents' participation in student government and voluntary organizations on future political behavior has found inconsistent results. *Methods.* We conducted analyses of the relations among student government involvement and volunteer organization participation with measures of political trust and anticipated adult political participation for samples from two countries that participated in the IEA Civic Education Study. *Results.* We found support for the hypotheses that involvement in student government and volunteer organization participation is associated with higher trust, expectations of informed voting behavior, and conventional political participation. Gender was also a key predictor. *Conclusions.* Youth involvement impacts a person's adult behavior, and communities of practice must be fostered to promote engagement.

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To maintain a healthy democratic society, active political participation is essential. Yet, while research suggests that support for the democratic process among adults remains strong across many countries (Klingeman, 1999), traditional forms of political participation such as voting, signing petitions, and contacting political representatives appear to have declined, especially in industrialized nations (Dalton, 1999). This decline appears especially pervasive among younger cohorts.

In the United States, for example, voter turnout among youth has declined significantly since 1972, the year when 18-21 year-olds were first permitted to vote (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). According to Keeter and colleagues (2002), about 66 percent of youth and young adults have never engaged in civic activities such as contacting an elected official, participating in a protest or demonstration or writing a letter to a newspaper. At the same time, in Australia as part of the 1999 IEA Civic Education study in that country, Mellor, Kennedy and Greenwood (2002) found that 86 percent of the adolescents surveyed expected to vote. This is not surprising, however, since voting is compulsory in Australia. Moving beyond voting, 87 percent of the students did *not* plan on joining a political party, another 87 percent did *not* consider being a candidate for a government office and 76 percent had *no* plans to write letters to a newspaper about social or political concerns. McAllister's (1998) Australian study further suggests that civic education programs that integrate civics into the school curriculum may be necessary to secure youth political participation beyond simply voting. In fact, recent studies confirm that thoughtful and respectful discussion of political issues in these types of programs not only led to increased student expectations of voting as adults, but also increased community activism, political interest, and commitment to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (Campbell, 2005; Liou, 2004; and Kahne, et al., 2000).

To gain an understanding of what is happening in the civic engagement and education of adolescents worldwide, the 1999 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study measured political knowledge, attitudes, and engagement among almost 90,000 14-year-old students in 28 countries (Torney-Purta and Amadeo, 2003; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald and Schulz, 2001). This paper provides a secondary analysis of this database to examine youth civic participation more closely. More specifically, this current cross-national study examines student government and voluntary participation among 14-year-olds in Australia and the United States to investigate how these patterns are associated with expected adult political participation.

To understand meanings, clarify findings and provide insights regarding youth political participation, a theoretical orientation for the study is necessary. According to Pittman (2001), the goal of youth development is to develop a range of competencies that will allow young people to engage in all aspects of life, including civic engagement and participation. This goal suggests that youth participation requires situated opportunities that allow members to identify, share and develop a context for learning.

As participants within social contexts, people develop a network of relationships that facilitates a sense of belonging and community that can influence adult political participation. Through these engagements and interactions, identity becomes a social process. Wenger (1998) provides a comprehensive model of the social processes leading to involvement, called legitimate participation in communities of practice. The communities of practice model represents a broad conceptual framework that includes how people make meaning out of their lives and the world; the way they interact to sustain mutual agreement; how community is defined and formed by its members; and the way identity is shaped within the context of community. In essence, the communities of practice model is reflective of who we are and the way we talk, work, plan, and

engage in collective action to address common issues. A more developed notion of communities of practice among youth, particularly one with explicit or implicit political content, would be expected to have an impact upon development extending into adulthood (see Torney-Purta et al., 2001, chapter 2, for further discussion of this model).

Induction into civic communities of practice seems to be lacking in today's youth, and perhaps this is associated with decreased political engagement and socialization. Putnam (2000) arguing from a somewhat narrower set of constructs, suggests that social capital is essential to creating the network of relationships necessary for civic participation and sustaining democracy. Social capital emphasizes that the greatest resources available to human beings are the social relationships that exist among them. These resources include factors such as trust, good will and fellowship, each of which allow for the development of shared norms and values in society. Accumulation of these resources affects the ability of individuals in a society to interact with one another; serves as a base of understanding; and helps create a reserve of support for social, economic and political structures within that society. Thus, it would seem that the integration of young people into learning communities where they could develop a political and civic identity, surrounded by peers and mentors, could be a positive step toward encouraging future political and civic involvement.

There is strong theoretical support for exploring the idea that the communities into which youth enter, and the relationships those communities foster, have an impact upon youths' preparation as adult members of society, especially, how these experiences influence networks and expectations of adult civic behavior. This cross-national secondary analysis of data from the IEA Civic Education Study examines the influence of student government and voluntary participation communities of practice upon projected adult political participation and trust among 14-year-olds in Australia and the United States. Our hypotheses are that youth participation in these communities of

practice will be associated with increased levels of expected political participation. If this is the case, this study will give research-grounded support for continued investment of resources and effort into these types of programs among youth. By examining data from both the United States and Australia we hope to support the robustness of the notion of communities of practice.

Research on Youth Participation in Student Government and Voluntary Organizations

In theory, student participation in extracurricular affairs, and especially student government, should enhance adult political participation, especially to the extent that such participation involves voting or decision-making on issues important to the school community. For example, participation in student council should impact the likelihood of students' voting as adults, with an indirect impact through the development of civic knowledge. Similarly, while evidence indicates that youth are abandoning traditional forms of political participation (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002; The Tarrance Group, Inc. and Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates, 1999), they are engaging in alternative forms of civic participation such as voluntary organizations, community service, and service-learning in record numbers, suggesting the potential of these organizations and activities in promoting political participation (The Independent Sector, 2002; Keeter, et al., 2002; Torney-Purta, et al., 2001).

At the same time, less evidence is available regarding the impact of student involvement in governance and voluntary associations on levels of political trust or types of engagement other than voting. As shown below, the literature reveals modest and sometimes even conflicting research in both the areas of student government and voluntary organization participation.

Impact on Political Participation

One question that precedes the issue of high school student government's impact upon future political participation is whether or not students enter into high school with political interests, and if those interests influence the degree and capacity of their involvement in student political

organizations. Research suggests that students do develop political attitudes and concepts well before high school (Hess and Torney, 1967). In addition, Eyler (1982) found that students' political attitudes as they entered high school predicted their involvement in high school politics, suggesting that high school students do engage in political ideation.

A number of studies provide evidence of the impact of high school activity on future adult political participation. In their panel study, Beck and Jennings (1982) found a direct link between high school activities and young adult participation. High school activities also had a small but significant indirect impact upon young adult participation through the mediating variables of young adult civic orientation and youth civic orientations. Other studies found that high school extracurricular participation had a direct impact on adult participation in voluntary associations, and was a strong predictor of voting behavior independent of other factors such as adult socioeconomic status (Hanks and Eckland, 1978). Otto (1976) found that adolescent social integration was the strongest individual predictor of adult social integration, including political participation. Siegel and Hoskins (1981) showed that student participation in high school extracurricular activity positively influenced both voting and non-voting activities. All of these studies provide some support for the belief that involvement in student government can positively influence later political behavior, although more specific and statistically rigorous studies are needed. In addition, many of these studies were conducted with a previous generation and may not reflect current thinking among today's youth.

More narrowly defined research supports the findings of the broader studies. Hanks (1981) survey of high school students during their senior year, and again two years later, showed that high school political participation had a direct effect upon all measures of adult political participation, including discussion of political issues, campaign participation, and voting. Glanville's (1999) study of extracurricular participation and political activity in early adulthood found a direct positive effect

of high school extracurricular activities on the likelihood of working for a campaign, attending political events, and providing monetary support for political campaigns when controlling for personality and adult voluntary organization membership. Smith (1999) showed that extracurricular participation in the 12th grade significantly increased the likelihood of young adult political participation. Finally, Damico and colleagues (1998) investigated why women participated more in extracurricular activities in high school but less in politics as adults. They found that participation in student government differed by curriculum track, with more academically talented students engaging in higher numbers; and high school participation in extracurricular activities increased the likelihood for political involvement later in life.

Verba and colleagues (1995) produced the most direct study of the effects of participation in student government. While the data on high school participation was retrospective, it nonetheless showed that participation in high school government was strongly associated with later political involvement. This was one of the few studies to clearly identify student council involvement as an independent factor and analyze its impact upon adult political behavior.

At the same time, research regarding youth volunteerism and political participation exists primarily in studies that have focused on community service and service-learning. It would seem logical that involvement in these types of activities would lead to increased political participation. However, while studies found support for increased future volunteering, greater awareness of community needs and commitment to service (Perry and Katula, 2001; Simon and Wang, 2002; and Mechior, 1999), the effects of participation in these types of activities upon political participation do not appear substantial.

Several studies have examined the impact of volunteer programs on political, social and moral attitudes and behaviors, important antecedents to political participation. Finkel (1985), in a longitudinal study of the Survey Research Center's 1972-1974-1975 election study corroborates

other research suggesting that political participation can serve as support for political institutions by encouraging behaviors and attitudes associated with incremental social change. Yates, (1999) in his study of political-moral engagement among high school students who volunteered as part of a year-long course in social justice, found that students discussed issues related to moral responsibility and their own capacity to impact change through political participation. Giles and Eyler (1994) reported that among volunteer college students self-efficacy rose significantly, and the students aspired to leadership roles to have an impact on the political system. Finally, Roker, Player and Coleman (1999) argued that youth participation in volunteering and campaigning promotes political awareness, knowledge and understanding. They suggested that gender, ethnicity, family, friends, locality, and religion influence youth social and political participation.

Prior research makes a case for a connection between membership in student government in high school and adult political participation. Unfortunately, it is important to point out that each study reviewed suffers from at least one limitation, for example, a failure to isolate student government from other activities, a dependence on retrospective data collection, or a failure to differentiate between different types of participation. In addition, there is a dearth of studies on student government involvement in countries other than the United States.

There is also evidence to support the relationship between volunteer programs and increased cognitive ability; future volunteering; political, moral and civic identity; and social and civic responsibility. In fact, several of the studies demonstrated that compared to nonmembers, volunteers display more active forms of participation, as well as increased civic and democratic attitudes. Few empirical studies, however, support the connection between these programs and political participation such as voting, and writing elected officials, especially on a cross-national level. Because the IEA study is the most comprehensive database on the civic education of adolescents,

this study serves as an opportunity to more closely examine the relations between student government participation, volunteerism and expected adult political participation.

Impact on Political Trust

A thorough review of available sources revealed no systematic studies of student government participation's influence upon levels of political trust. Certainly some studies looked at democratic values (Damico et al., 1998; Otto, 1976), but this is not the same thing as either generalized trust in the political system or specific trust in certain political actors or organizations. Therefore, this study fills a gap in the research concerning the less tangible impact of student government participation.

Similarly, there is limited evidence regarding the impact of student involvement in voluntary associations on political trust. Stolle (1998) determined that more diverse and engaged associations and those with weak ties include more trusting people and that these individuals may actually self-select into these organizations. The author suggested that little is known about the process that makes members in voluntary associations more trusting and cooperative, suggesting further research is necessary. In another study, La Du Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) found that social capital, which in part is characterized by trust, is generated through personal networks and increasing levels of politically relevant social capital increases the likelihood of individual political participation. They acknowledged, however, that individuals who are politically engaged may self-select into these activities.

Brehm and Rahn (1997) analyzed the General Social Surveys from 1972 through 1994 to determine the causes and consequences of civic engagement and interpersonal trust. They determined that there is a positive, reciprocal connection between the two factors and the relationship is stronger from civic participation to trust, rather than the reverse. They contend that because of the nature of the relationship this could result in either a "virtuous" cycle where both

lead to positive outcomes for civic engagement and trust, or a “vicious” cycle leading to negative outcomes.

Finally, in an international study of primarily European countries, Muller and Seligson (1994) looked at democratic change across two time periods—1972-80 and 1981-90. In general, interpersonal trust seemed to be an effect, not a cause of democracy. In fact, they suggested that a high level of trust is unrelated to a country’s level of democracy, and that low levels of trust may not impede the process.

In conclusion, studies of the impact of volunteer organizations on political trust are limited and somewhat contradictory. As a result, we believe that this study will serve as an opportunity to examine this relationship more definitively, specifically on a cross-national level.

Summary

Overall, the literature regarding the impact of adolescent participation, student government and voluntary organizations on future political behavior is inconsistent and difficult to compare across studies. The IEA Civic Education study, on the other hand, provides a single, comprehensive source of data on the civic behaviors, attitudes, skills and knowledge of adolescents in schools worldwide. It provides a means to examine these phenomena cross-culturally, using a common instrument created and validated by a multinational group of scholars. Utilizing this opportunity, this paper examines the relationship between measures of student government and voluntary participation and projected adult political participation and trust among 14-year-olds in Australia and the United States to investigate whether these forms of civic involvement are likely to lead to more politically engaged adults. Our hypotheses are that involvement in both student government and voluntary organizations will be associated with higher levels of expected political participation and trust, and that this effect will be consistent across countries’ differing cultural contexts.

Methods

The IEA Study

In 1994, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (Amsterdam) began planning a study of civic education. A case study phase from 1994 to 1998 used qualitative data to craft an instrument that was then used to measure political knowledge, attitudes, and engagement in 1999. In all, 28 countries and almost 90,000 students participated in the study of 14 year olds. Publications and data from the IEA study are available at <http://www.wam.umd.edu/~iea>.

Countries and Variables Chosen for this Analysis

The United States and Australia were chosen as data sources for the current investigation for a number of reasons. Each country varied in its orientation to political issues and involvement. Thus, our interest in the two countries was both for investigation of civic education and possible differences in the process that might be conditioned by culture. In addition, we were interested in examining countries with high levels of student involvement. In Australia, thirty-four percent of subjects participated in student council or government, and thirty-three percent of students in the United States did likewise. In terms of voluntary organization participation, thirty-three percent of Australian subjects and fifty percent of United States subjects reported involvement. These rates of involvement were among the highest of all 28 countries.

The independent variables chosen for this study included student government involvement, volunteer organization participation and gender. Student government or school council involvement and volunteer organization involvement were measured with single items on the IEA survey (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Item A, within a larger section of items regarding participation in various organizations, asked whether the subject had participated in “a student council/student

government [class or school parliament]” and item H asked about participation in “a group conducting [voluntary] activities to help the community.”¹ Both questions had no/yes responses.

The dependent variables in the study were political trust and anticipated adult political participation. Trust was measured using the mean of scores to three questions on the IEA survey. The three questions were grouped into a section with a stem that asked: “How much of the time can you trust each of the following institutions?” The three items of interest were: “The national [federal] government [in _____ (the national seat of government)]” “The local council or government of your town or city” and “National Parliament [Congress].” Responses to each included: “never”, “only some of the time”, “most of the time”, “always”, and “don’t know”. The scores for each item ranged from one for “never” to four for “always”, with “don’t know” being coded as a zero (treated as missing). These questions had been part of a scale for trust developed for the original analysis (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

Adult political participation was measured using two scales: informed voting and conventional participation. Past analyses of the IEA data had shown the validity and exclusivity of these two separate scales for adult participation (Torney-Purta, Barber, & Richardson., 2004). Both scales used responses to items in the “Political Action 2” section of the IEA instrument. This section asked students to answer the question “When you are an adult, what do you expect that you will do?” in reference to various political activities. Item response choices were scored from one to four and read as: “I will certainly not do this,” “I will probably not do this,” “I will probably do this,” and “I will certainly do this” with “don’t know” treated as missing. The expected informed voting scale was created using the mean of answers to the items “Vote in national elections” and “Get information about candidates before voting in an election.” The conventional participation scale was created using the mean sum of answers to the items “Write letters to a newspaper about social or

¹ Bracketed wordings were provided for translators.

political concerns” and “Be a candidate for a local or city office.” Each score could vary from one to four. Subjects with missing data on any of the above items were removed from the analysis.

Analysis

Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted to explore the hypotheses of interest in this study. Specifically, we hypothesized that student government and voluntary organization participation would be significantly related to more positive answers to political trust and both adult political participation scales. Gender was included as it had been of interest in other IEA analyses, but we had no hypotheses about its impact

Results

SPSS 11.0 was used for all analyses. Cronbach’s α for the trust, informed voting and conventional participation scales were .71, .74, and .69 respectively. ANOVA analysis requires a check for the homogeneity of variance among the variables (Pedhazur, 1997). These tests were conducted and while no variable met this assumption, the results were considered valid due to three factors. First, sample sizes were very high, ranging from 300 to 1000 per cell. Second, the standard errors of the cells were such that the higher errors were associated with large sample sizes, thus creating heterogeneity of variance but actually biasing the results against finding significant effects. As long as the larger standard error belongs to the group with the smaller sample size, the analysis retains its conservative nature and a p-value of .05 can be used as a reasonable criterion (Lomax, 2001). Finally, as seen below, p values for our findings are all well below .05, further substantiating confidence in the tests of statistical significance.

Trust Analyses

The main effect for student government participation was statistically significant in both Australia and the United States (see Table 1). “Insert Table 1 here” In both countries, involvement in student government was statistically significantly associated with higher scores on the trust scale.

In addition, in the United States girls' mean trust was higher than boys. However, the main effects in the United States must be qualified due to the presence of a statistically significant interaction. Post-hoc analyses showed that boys not involved in student government had a statistically significantly lower mean trust score than all three other groups. There were no statistically significant differences between the other groups. Parallel results were found with voluntary organization participation and trust. In Australia, the only statistically significant difference was a main effect with those participating in voluntary organizations having a higher mean trust score than those who did not participate. In the United States, main effects showed higher means for those involved and for girls. The interaction was also significant, however, qualifying these results in the same way as above, with boys who were not involved showing a statistically significantly lower mean trust score than all other groups.

Informed Voting

In both Australia and the United States, main effects demonstrated that those who participated in student government had a statistically significantly higher mean likelihood of voting and getting information about candidates than those who did not; girls had a higher informed voting score than boys (see Table 1). Statistically significant interactions qualify these results in both countries, however. In Australia, boys and girls involved in student government had statistically significantly higher informed voting mean scores than females not involved, who in turn had statistically significantly higher means than boys who were not involved. In the United States, the only statistically significant interaction effect showed that boys not involved had lower mean scores than all other groups.

Examining the results by voluntary organization participation, in both Australia and the United States those participating had statistically significantly higher mean informed voting scores than those who did not participate. In addition, girls had statistically significantly higher mean

scores than boys. No significant interactions were found. The total model effect sizes for these models are small (Cohen, 1988; see Table 1).

Conventional Participation

In the student government analyses, in Australia the only statistically significant difference between conventional participation scores was that those involved had higher mean scores than those who were not involved (see Table 1). There was no significant interaction. In the United States, main effects showed that involvement was associated with higher mean conventional participation scores compared to those who were not involved, and that girls had higher mean scores than boys. A statistically significant interaction in the United States qualified these results, however, showing that uninvolved boys had the lowest scores compared to all other groups, while uninvolved females had lower scores than males involved in student government.

In terms of voluntary organization participation, the only statistically significant results were main effects for involvement in both countries. Those involved in voluntary organizations had statistically significantly higher conventional participation mean scores than those who were not involved.

Summary

The hypotheses of this study were supported. Student government and voluntary organization involvement seems to be associated with positive civic engagement outcomes such as increased trust, informed voting, and conventional participation in each country. This is positive news for advocates of school-based civic initiatives. A concerning finding was that in the United States males not involved in student government had the lowest average scores on all three measures. Gender main effects for voluntary organization involvement were less often found, but when significant suggested that girls had higher scores than boys. Only in the trust analysis was there a significant interaction, and its results were the similar to many of the United States' findings

that uninvolved boys had lower trust scores than all other groups. In addition, it is evident that the positive effects of student government and voluntary organization participation transcend cultural context, thus providing support for the idea that these communities of practice provide something fundamental to youth.

Discussion

Although young people's involvement in traditional forms of political participation has declined, the research presented here suggests that this trend might be ameliorated through increased participation in student government and voluntary organizations. In both Australia and the United States, participation in these activities was positively, statistically significantly associated with more favorable civic outcomes including increased trust and greater expectations to be an informed voter and an active citizen. Further, the character of these activities seemed to be fulfilling some of the aims of those who organize them—student councils solving school problems and volunteer organizations building a positive sense of obligation to the community. Thus, these communities of practice seem to be transcending culture, and adding to the social capital of their larger communities, with the aforementioned benefits related to youth's expected adult political participation.

Perhaps these results are not so surprising. After all, there is a good deal of research suggesting the positive influence of student government involvement upon adult political participation, as discussed above (Verba et al., 1995; Smith, 1999, Glanville, 1999). While the research on political trust is absent, Putnam's (2002) research would suggest that involvement in a group, particularly one based in political action (such as a student council), would lead to greater social, and perhaps political trust. Of course, it is important to recognize that little is known regarding how much political action actually takes place in student councils.

These results also suggest the importance of voluntary organization participation in promoting civic engagement. As the research review has shown, youth are involved in a wide range of non-traditional volunteer experiences to benefit the community. These experiences can positively influence youths' likelihood of long-term community organization participation. The findings reinforce the fact that youth are seeking alternative forms of civic engagement to address problems in their communities and suggest that these types of experiences could be redesigned to positively impact traditional civic behaviors, attitudes, skills and knowledge.

At the same time, however, the concepts and terms used in this study may be different across countries. Countries are likely to define the concept of voluntary association differently based upon each country's social, political and economic history. For example, what does voluntary participation mean in each country, how are the organizations' missions defined, why do people join these organizations and under what circumstances? These issues could help to clarify some of the country-specific findings regarding the lack of political involvement.

Country Specific and Cross-Cultural Issues

While the overall results were similar, there were some country-specific main and interaction effects. In the United States, these data suggest that for males, the ramifications of not being involved are of particular concern. Many of the prior analyses of gender differences in political involvement are over a decade old, making the IEA Civic Education Study an especially important data resource for looking at male and female adolescents in the late 1990's. Other analyses of the IEA data in the United States have also shown groups of what appear to be seriously alienated 14-year-olds (Torney-Purta, 2004; Barber, 2004) who are disproportionately male (Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2004). It is interesting that such an effect was not as pronounced in Australia. This suggests the need for further in-depth analysis.

In addition, through its examination of the cross-cultural nature of these issues, this study has raised new areas for examination. Should we expect that these student government and voluntary organization structures and organizations are basic across all cultures and countries? If they exist, what are the roles of these programs in different countries? Does the notion of “voluntary” mean different things in different countries? In essence, how different are these experiences across countries? In the end, asking questions and studying these types of areas will provide a better understanding of how to foster civic engagement and hopefully will lead to a firmer grasp of the nature of the civic environment itself. Such an understanding could provide guidance for policymakers and school leaders looking to address the declining political interest of youth and to spur them to greater civic engagement and responsibility.

By examining two different countries, this study extends previous research suggesting that civic involvement in youth, through either student government or voluntary organizations, has many beneficial outcomes in terms of trust and expected future political engagement. In this study, international research has provided corroborating evidence regarding the importance of student government and voluntary organizations across cultures, while also providing an example of how results from different countries can be used to examine the validity of findings, assumptions and proposed latent variables. At the same time, there are still questions related to this study as to whether expected civic engagement will lead to actual adult political behaviors. In other words, what happens between the formation of expectations to participate and the realization of those expectations?

Limitations

One critique of the IEA study, and this secondary analysis, is their dependence upon adolescent projections of future political behavior. A longitudinal or panel study would provide more concrete evidence of adolescent behavior’s impact upon adult political activity. However, given that it is highly unlikely that 14-year-olds who do not anticipate voting will actually do so in

the future, the values in this study can most likely be seen as positively biased estimates of future behavior.

Further qualitative work with young adults may reveal more complex models of how student involvement influences future political engagement. Unfortunately, the small number of existing qualitative studies in this area have had a quite different focus. For example, a critical examination of the role of student power in schools in comparison to that of adults (Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma, 2000) or minority adolescents' perspectives on politics (Hemmings, 2004). Stradling (2004) has provided observations of a school in which the whole student body participated in regular meetings to discuss issues of concern. But again this is quite different from a student government to which representatives are elected. More tailored ethnographic studies could help researchers identify other variables of interest, such as self-efficacy, and their place in the process of developing competence and attitudes relating to political participation.

More specifically, questions can be raised about whether the influence of student government directly impacts later political action, or whether there are some precursors that are the true predictors. For example, it could be the case that youth who are more likely to engage in political action as adults are also the ones more likely to engage in student government in adolescence. There could be any number of variables influencing engagement in student government, such as popularity, leadership, or attainment status. Each of these might also later influence such activities as running for office and becoming informed about a candidate. Future studies should examine how these factors might become more prominent as youth progress through secondary education.

Further research is needed to control for demographic or selection bias in membership that might be an underlying factor for later political involvement. For example, socio-economic status was not included in this study, but certainly it would seem that such a variable would impact

student's current involvement, trust, and future political activity. In addition, if either student government or voluntary participation has an impact upon civic behavior through mediating variables such as self-efficacy, then it will be necessary to attempt to isolate these issues and test them experimentally.

Implications

Despite these limitations, previous research and this study all support the idea that involvement, be it student council based or within a voluntary organization, has the potential to lead to positive civic engagement. In times where both human and fiscal resources are at a premium, it may be tempting to cut these extracurricular activities. However, this and other research suggests that doing so would do serious harm to future political engagement. Most notably, it appears that adolescent males are particularly susceptible to the negative effects associated with a lack of involvement. Given other research showing similar concerns (Torney-Purta, 2004; Henry, 2004), it would seem that communities must provide more opportunities for boys to become involved, and support systems to assist them in that process.

So how and where can youth, particularly boys, become involved in student government and voluntary organizations? We suggest that schools remain the best option to promote political participation among our young people. Torney-Purta (2002) has found that schools that rigorously teach civic content and skills and promote democratic classrooms to encourage participatory action among its members achieve the high-quality results in civic engagement outcomes. Schools can provide rich opportunities for students to learn and engage in interactions with other students and adults; forge a community based on common values, respect, trust and acceptance of human diversity; and participate in voluntary associations that encourage civic knowledge, attitudes and practices. Rather than reducing opportunities for integration within learning communities of practice with peers and mentors, schools should provide more avenues for young people to

becoming involved with political and civic organizations. Such organizations can help students develop self-efficacy, instrumentality, and build social capital.

Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice suggests that schools can become vibrant learning communities that cultivate civic knowledge or engagement and encourage youth to actively participate in voluntary associations for democratic ideals. This requires that schools provide youth opportunities for learning that facilitates robust partnerships where they are involved in an exchange of shared decision making that enhances their motivation to participate in associations that contribute to deliberative democracy. It also requires creating democratically engaged communities where characteristics and traits are enmeshed into a school's social fabric so that the qualities of citizenship and political participation are embraced and practiced by all of its members. As we have seen earlier, one mechanism to help accomplish this goal is through the integration of volunteer experience with school discussion of community problems.

As we have noted, not all service-learning experiences support political engagement. If service-learning is to become a viable option for citizenship and political participation, it would require design strategies that encourage youth to explore and develop these skills. By linking service to political engagement, service-learning could become a particularly fruitful approach to developing civic and political practice among youth because it would help them acquire a democratic self through deliberate practice. More specifically, these types of experiences would help students acquire an understanding of democracy and their role in it, and how to participate as a member of a democratic society for the common good of that society.

What are the implications for future research on student government and voluntary association participation of students in schools? First, our review of the literature indicates a need for studies investigating the impact of voluntary organization participation on political involvement of youth. This suggests that research examine issues related to citizenship, democracy and civic

engagement to ensure more effective outcomes in these areas. Second is the need for civic education researchers to establish scientific inquiry norms. And, third, researchers should explore promising theories from a range of other fields heeded across all civic education research.

Furthermore, the IEA study database offers opportunities to examine measures related to voluntary association participation through a variety of analyses. It allows an examination of relationships of students' activity participation to society-related government responsibilities; social movement-related citizenship; attitudes toward one's nation, women's political economic rights or political activities, for example. In short, the IEA Civic Education Study provides tremendous opportunities for practitioners, researchers and policymakers to explore adolescent civic knowledge, attitudes and behavior. As they do so, it is our hope that they will delve more deeply into the role of voluntary organizations as a way to understand adolescent civic practice and its impact on future adult political participation (Torney-Purta et al., 2004).

Conclusion

This study provides support for the idea that youth involvement impacts a person's adult behavior. Indeed, as demonstrated by this work, the IEA Civic Education Study serves as a potential wealth of information not only about civic education endeavors within countries, but also as a tool to compare what is universal about that endeavor. By engaging in statistically rigorous, internationally informed research, the IEA study, and hopefully future studies like it, can inform longitudinal work on adolescent through adult political behavior. This, in turn, can lead to concrete suggestions for ways schools can future promote political and civic engagement through extracurricular involvement in learning communities of practice.

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Table 1: *Australia and United States ANOVA Results*

| | | <i>Student Government</i> | | | <i>Voluntary Organization</i> | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | | <i>Trust</i> | <i>Informed Voting</i> | <i>Conventional Participation</i> | <i>Trust</i> | <i>Informed Voting</i> | <i>Conventional Participation</i> |
| <i>Australia</i> | | | | | | | |
| Participation | | | | | | | |
| | Yes | 2.733 | 3.310 | 1.970 | 2.688 | 3.254 | 2.017 |
| | No | 2.584 | 3.058 | 1.778 | 2.598 | 3.084 | 1.757 |
| | F | 23.949** | 59.671** | 40.696** | 8.225** | 25.625** | 70.159** |
| Gender | | | | | | | |
| | Male | 2.670 | 3.148 | 1.865 | 2.662 | 3.121 | 1.891 |
| | Female | 2.647 | 3.219 | 1.883 | 2.624 | 3.217 | 1.884 |
| | F | .583 | 4.794* | .349 | 1.483 | 8.053** | .050 |
| Interaction | | | | | | | |
| | Yes/Male | 2.743 | 3.310 | 1.976 | 2.667 | 3.208 | 1.781 |
| | No/Male | 2.552 | 2.986 | 1.754 | 2.581 | 3.034 | 1.987 |
| | Yes/Female | 2.723 | 3.309 | 1.965 | 2.709 | 3.301 | 1.734 |
| | No/Female | 2.617 | 3.130 | 1.801 | 2.615 | 3.133 | 2.048 |
| | F | .813 | 4.925* | .919 | .021 | .011 | 3.087 |
| | df | 1, 1994 | 1, 2428 | 1, 2374 | 1, 1973 | 1, 2407 | 1, 2352 |
| | Effect size ^a | .012 | .028 | .016 | .004 | .015 | .029 |
| <i>United States</i> | | | | | | | |
| Participation | | | | | | | |
| | Yes | 2.821 | 3.376 | 2.100 | 2.821 | 3.324 | 2.087 |
| | No | 2.738 | 3.219 | 1.920 | 2.709 | 2.988 | 1.863 |
| | F | 8.885** | 57.059** | 15.583** | 17.302** | 111.286** | 53.495** |
| Gender | | | | | | | |
| | Male | 2.745 | 3.101 | 2.028 | 2.728 | 3.061 | 1.952 |
| | Female | 2.814 | 3.297 | 1.991 | 2.802 | 3.251 | 1.998 |
| | F | 6.159* | 33.765** | 1.304 | 7.574** | 35.782** | 2.223 |
| Interaction | | | | | | | |
| | Yes/Male | 2.817 | 3.278 | 2.134 | 2.815 | 3.208 | 2.058 |
| | No/Male | 2.673 | 2.925 | 1.848 | 2.641 | 3.034 | 1.846 |
| | Yes/Female | 2.826 | 3.376 | 2.065 | 2.827 | 3.301 | 2.117 |
| | No/Female | 2.803 | 3.219 | 1.991 | 2.777 | 3.133 | 1.879 |
| | F | 4.649* | 8.481** | 10.797** | 5.277* | 1.922 | .176 |
| | df | 1, 2166 | 1, 2408 | 1, 2221 | 1, 2143 | 1, 2389 | 1, 2197 |
| | Effect size ^a | .011 | .048 | .020 | .015 | .067 | .026 |

* ($p < .05$) ** ($p < .01$)^a Adjusted R^2 for entire model