

Service-learning and political engagement, efficacy, and apathy: A case study at Sam Houston State University

Education, Citizenship and
Social Justice

2015, Vol. 10(2) 107–117

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DOI: 10.1177/1746197915583940

ecsjs.sagepub.com



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Abstract

Given the decline in political engagement among the electorate, especially among youth, there has been an effort to increase engagement through service-learning courses at both the high school and college levels. The research that exists regarding the effects of these courses on students is mixed. Some studies show that students become more civically engaged and increase their political efficacy, but these effects are found in courses tied specifically to politics. Other studies involving courses from other disciplines show no effect. Using a longitudinal study gathered at two points in time (when students enter their college career and are graduating), I show that students who take a service-learning course are more likely to engage politically (especially online) and report significantly higher levels of political efficacy. These results hold for students overall regardless of the subject of the course.

Keywords

political apathy, political efficacy, political engagement, service-learning

Over the past 60 years, there has been a decline in civic participation among almost all segments of society. One of these forms of participation that has been especially troubling to lawmakers and scholars alike is the percentage of adults voting in both congressional and presidential elections. Along with a general decline in political participation, there has also been a decline in political efficacy and an increase in political apathy. As fewer individuals make it to the ballot box, more citizens believe that they cannot make a difference in politics, and more individuals get ‘turned off’ to politics, theorists worry that our democracy is in trouble. In order for our democracy to remain strong, citizens need to feel like they can make a difference in politics and engage in the political system.

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The group that has received the most attention from scholars and lawmakers for their lack of engagement in the political process is young people. Recent surveys show that not only do young people show up at the polls at lower rates than their peers, but also their dissatisfaction with government is increasing along with their distrust of politicians (Fox, 2014). Due to this decline in political efficacy and participation, as well as an increase in political apathy, there have been many efforts aimed at increasing the engagement of citizens, such as getting out the vote drives (GOTV) and Rock the Vote (RTV). In this article, I will examine one of the suggested ways of reversing the low levels of efficacy and participation: service-learning.

Service-learning has been defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics as 'curriculum-based community service that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities'. Service-learning courses integrate community service into the curriculum, and this service is connected to the course's learning objectives. Typically, service-learning courses use critical reflection as part of the course (Skinner and Chapman, 1999).

Given the community experience in service-learning projects, some scholars have investigated whether those who take these courses become more active in politics and have found mixed results. Using data collected from entering freshmen at Sam Houston State University (SHSU), as well as follow-up data collected upon their graduation, I examine whether service-learning courses affect levels of political engagement, political efficacy, and political apathy. I find that students who take service-learning courses are more likely to engage in the political process and have significantly higher levels of political efficacy than those who do not take such courses.

First, I review the literature that exists surrounding service-learning and these indicators of a healthy democracy. Next, I describe the unique dataset used for this project and the method. Finally, I discuss my results and unanswered questions about this very important topic in American politics.

Political engagement and political attitudes of young adults

As scholars and researchers have documented, there has been a general decline in participation levels of young people. Not only are young people less likely to vote than their elders, but also young people consistently report little interest in politics and little trust in the political system (Levine and Lopez, 2002; Torney-Purta, 2002). The Harvard Public Opinion Project recently found that 75% of young people did not classify themselves as politically active (Kohnle, 2013), and fewer than a quarter of people under 30 said that they would vote in the upcoming 2014 congressional elections (Edwards-Levy, 2014).

Policy makers and scholars have noticed this decline in political interest and engagement among young people and have expressed concern about the future of our democracy.¹ While there is a general decline overall, the groups that are most affected by these low levels of engagement and interest are women and minorities (Hart and Atkins, 2002; Niemi and Junn, 1998).

Along with a general decline in political interest, there has been a rise in volunteerism. Recent survey research suggests that more than one in four adults volunteered through nonprofit organizations (Madison, 2014), while the youth volunteerism rate is almost double (Billig et al., 2005). Given this rise in volunteerism, many policymakers have suggested that high schools and colleges implement service-learning courses. Service-learning is a form of experiential education where students take something that they have learned in class and apply it to a real-world situation. Service-learning is defined as "a teaching strategy wherein students learning important curricular objectives by providing service that meets community needs" (Billig et al., 2005: 3). Normally, these courses require students to do some type of community service that is connected to the curriculum, and after performing the service, students reflect on their experiences.

Many studies have provided some evidence of positive effects of service-learning courses, including effects on political engagement, political efficacy, and political apathy. In the two sections that follow, I review the work that has been performed in each of these areas.

Political engagement

One of the benefits that is often examined in the service-learning literature is political engagement, sometimes used interchangeably with 'civic engagement'. Political engagement is generally defined as some type of political activity, such as voting. Many studies have shown that students who engage in their communities when they are young are more likely to participate in politics when they get older (Almond and Verba, 1963; Beck and Jennings, 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Youniss et al., 1997). Since in service-learning courses students are participating in some type of community volunteerism, we should expect these experiences to lead to greater engagement in politics. While most service-learning courses are not designed with an end goal of increasing student political engagement beyond the classroom, theory suggests that there should be an effect.

Research specifically about service-learning and political engagement has mixed findings. Some researchers find that community service (whether required in a course or completely voluntary) has a positive impact on voter turnout and political engagement (Billig et al., 2005; Hart et al., 2007; Levine, 2007; Nokes et al., 2005). A recent report from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) involving a multi-institution study shows that students who had taken service-learning courses were more likely to say that they planned to vote, and those who engaged in political activities scored the highest on the civic dispositions (Billig et al., 2005).

Other work, however, suggests that service-learning does not always promote political engagement (Kirlin, 2002; McAdam and Brandt, 2009; Morgan and Streb, 2001; Perry and Katula, 2001; Reinke, 2003). Reinke (2003), for instance, shows that in a study of Master in Public Administration (MPA) graduate students, those engaging in service-learning were actually less politically engaged. Reinke (2003) suggests that the results might be due to the small sample size and the duration of the service project. Morgan and Streb (2001) also show that there are increases in political engagement only among students who take service-learning courses where they have a high degree of voice and ownership. The research in this area, therefore, is mixed regarding whether service-learning can positively affect political engagement.

Political efficacy

There are many reasons to think that service-learning would increase students' political efficacy. Service-learning by definition is about making a real difference in one's community. If students are involved in a class project that requires to engage with those in their communities and make a positive impact, we should see an increase in positive self-concept, which will spill over to increased political efficacy (Morgan and Streb, 2001).

Research investigating the effect of service-learning on political efficacy has also found mixed results. Wade and Saxe (1996), for instance, reviewed 22 studies that had political efficacy as a dependent variable and found that, generally speaking, the effect on political efficacy is a result of the type of course the instructor was teaching. Some studies have found positive impacts on political efficacy, but these studies usually involve courses that are either about politics and policy or tie the service-learning component back to government (Button, 1973; Hamilton and Zeldin, 1987; Morgan and Streb, 2001; Sylvester, 2010; Wilson, 1974). Others have found little to no impact on

political efficacy, even among courses about politics (Corbett, 1977; Kahne and Westheimer, 2006; Mariani and Klinkner, 2009; Newmann and Rutter, 1983). Kahne and Westheimer's (2006) research on service-learning and political efficacy actually suggests that some forms of service-learning, such as those that challenge the status quo and fail to achieve change, can lower levels of political efficacy.

There is very little work specifically regarding service-learning and political apathy. Most studies that are interested in the general idea of apathy examine whether students are more interested in politics and have lower levels of political cynicism after taking a service-learning course. There is considerable disagreement about whether classroom-based civics instruction can affect political interest (Galston, 2007; Niemi and Junn, 1998), but it seems as though service-learning can positively affect the likelihood that students will pay attention to and raise awareness about social and political issues through the Internet (Keen and Hall, 2008).

Method

The goal of this study is to bridge the gap that exists in the knowledge regarding how service-learning affects political engagement, political apathy, and political efficacy. Since most studies examine only one classroom setting and have only one key dependent variable, we do not know whether service-learning on college campuses can positively affect these indicators of a healthy democracy. To add to the current debates in the literature, this study employs a longitudinal dataset drawn from students attending SHSU from fall 2010 to spring 2014. SHSU is a typical large public university that draws very racially and ethnically diverse students coming from modest financial backgrounds.²

Students in the class of 2014 were surveyed about their political beliefs and experiences within their communities before starting any of their college courses (N = 878). Four years later, these same students were reinterviewed about their experiences during their college career, as well as their attitudes toward politics and civic engagement (N = 150). The results that follow are from the 150 students that completed both surveys.

Independent variables

My main independent variable is service-learning. At SHSU, students can enroll in Academic Community Engagement (ACE) courses. ACE courses are courses that 'combine community engagement with academic instruction' (<http://www.shsu.edu/academics/ace/>). Students taking courses with an ACE component serve their communities and then discuss their service in class, which is the standard service-learning model.

In the follow-up survey from 2014, students were asked if they had taken an ACE course during their time at SHSU and to describe the type of service they participated in. Almost 30% said that they had participated in an ACE course, and most of the students described working with local community organizations as their service activity. The following is a description of some of the ways these students were involved in their communities during their ACE courses.

- 'In (my) Family Violence (course), I worked with nonprofit organizations that serve Montgomery County'.
- 'I had to do Community Service that involved helping children and the other that involved foster care'.
- 'I had to volunteer with senior citizens at a nursing home or do a ride-along with adult protective service'.

Table 1. Political activities.

	'Yes'
Made a donation to a political campaign?	4.73%
Placed a sticker on your car or a sign in your yard about a political campaign	8.78%
Volunteered for a political campaign?	10.07%
Followed a political candidate on Twitter	16.89%
Posted a response on a blog about a political topic	23.33%
Retweeted something about a political topic	26.17%
Discussed politics on Facebook	32.43%
Are you planning to vote in the upcoming 2014 Midterm election?	47.30%
'Liked' a Facebook page of a political candidate	47.33%
Did you vote in the 2012 Presidential election?	52.00%
Are you registered to vote?	73.83%

In the models that follow, *ACE* is a dummy variable scored 1 if the individual reported taking an ACE course (0 otherwise). Since gender has been shown to affect the rate of volunteerism (Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1997; Marks, 1994; Myers-Lipton, 1994; Niemi et al., 2000), *Female* is included in the models that follow and is a dummy variable (1 = *Female*, 0 = otherwise). Other studies have also shown a race component to volunteerism, with *White* students volunteering more often than minority students (Niemi et al., 2000), therefore *White* is also included as a dummy variable (1 = *White*, 0 = otherwise).

Dependent variables

Students were questioned about their political engagement and their attitudes toward politics and government. Students were asked about a variety of political activities, such as registering to vote and retweeting something political on Twitter. Table 1 shows the percentage of students who said that they had participated in each of the following activities. Most students report being registered to vote, while less than half say that they plan to vote in the upcoming election. Since each of these activities is different, 11 dependent variables were created from the responses to these questions. *Registered*, *Vote2012*, *Vote2014*, *Campaign*, *Donation*, *Sticker*, *Blog*, *Like Facebook*, *Discuss Facebook*, *Retweet*, and *Follow Twitter* are each dummy variables scored 1 if the person reported doing, or planning to do, any of those activities.

Students were also asked about their attitudes toward government and politics. In particular, students were asked questions regarding political efficacy and apathy. They were asked whether they thought 'people like me don't have any say about what the government does', 'politics is not relevant to my life right now', and 'it really doesn't matter to me who the president is'. *No Say*, *Relevant*, and *President* are ordinal dependent variables with values ranging from 1 to 4 (strongly agree to strongly disagree). For additional information on all of the variables in this study, including means and standard deviations, see Appendix 1.

Findings

Before examining whether students in the second round of the survey were more likely to get involved in politics and had different opinions about government, we can look back at the first wave of the survey to see if there were any significant differences between these students and their

Table 2. Political engagement, political apathy, and political efficacy of ACE students before college.

	ACE	Non-ACE
Attended a rally	0.15	0.10
Signed a petition**	0.17	0.28
Participated in a political blog	0.16	0.15
No say**	3.15	3.25
Relevant	2.93	2.97
President	3.58	3.52

ACE: Academic Community Engagement.

** $p \leq 0.01$, z-test.

Table 3. Political engagement, political efficacy, political apathy, and political knowledge among college students by participation in the ACE program.

	ACE	Non-ACE
Political engagement		
Registered	0.77 (0.42)	0.72 (0.45)
Vote2012	0.58 (0.50)	0.50 (0.50)
Vote2014	0.53 (0.50)	0.45 (0.50)
Campaign	0.11 (0.32)	0.10 (0.30)
Donation	0.02 (0.15)	0.06 (0.24)
Sticker	0.13 (0.34)	0.07 (0.25)
Blog**	0.31 (0.47)	0.20 (0.40)
Like Facebook**	0.51 (0.51)	0.46 (0.50)
Discuss Facebook**	0.38 (0.49)	0.30 (0.46)
Retweet**	0.31 (0.47)	0.24 (0.43)
Follow Twitter	0.18 (0.39)	0.17 (0.37)
No say**	2.86 (0.73)	2.78 (0.94)
Relevant**	3.16 (1.02)	2.90 (1.00)
President**	3.41 (0.91)	3.18 (0.99)
N	45	105

ACE: Academic Community Engagement.

** $p \leq 0.01$, z-test.

answers when they began college. Any results that are reported below can be called into question if these students were already more likely to participate in politics.

In the first round of the survey, students were asked similar questions about their involvement in politics. Specifically, they were questioned about whether they had ever attended a political rally, signed a petition, and participated in a political blog. They were also asked the same set of questions about political apathy and political efficacy. Their answers to these questions show that those who eventually took an ACE course were actually significantly less likely to sign a petition and were more likely to believe that 'people like me don't have any say about what the government does' before their four years in college. The percentages are given in Table 2.

When it comes to the second round of the survey, the bivariate relationship between taking an ACE course and each of the dependent variables is shown in Table 3. As these results demonstrate, ACE students have higher scores in almost all categories. Students who have taken ACE courses

Table 4. Logit regression results for political engagement.

	Registered	Vote2012	Vote2014	Campaign	Donation	Sticker	Blog	Like Facebook	Discuss Facebook	Retweet	Follow Twitter
ACE	0.28 (0.50)	0.39 (0.36)	0.38 (0.37)	0.10 (0.59)	-1.16 (1.11)	0.70 (0.60)	0.58 (0.41)	0.17 (0.36)	0.32 (0.38)	0.41 (0.41)	0.07 (0.49)
Female	-0.59 (0.28)	0.24 (0.58)	0.12 (0.43)	-0.85 (0.60)	-1.83* (0.81)	-1.09 (0.60)	-0.55 (0.47)	-0.42 (0.43)	-0.20 (0.45)	-0.70 (0.47)	-1.06* (0.51)
White	-0.50 (0.42)	-0.51 (0.36)	-0.30 (0.36)	0.19 (0.62)	0.87 (1.12)	-0.08 (0.64)	-0.23 (0.42)	0.41 (0.36)	0.13 (0.39)	-0.95* (0.40)	-0.74 (0.46)
Constant	1.79** (0.61)	0.12 (0.49)	-0.12 (0.49)	-1.72* (0.73)	-2.22* (1.16)	-1.75* (0.75)	-0.79 (0.54)	-0.09 (0.49)	-0.76 (0.53)	-0.01 (0.52)	-0.33 (0.57)
Pseudo R ²	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.13	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.05	0.04

ACE: Academic Community Engagement.

**p ≤ 0.01, *p ≤ 0.05, +p ≤ 0.10.

are more likely to have participated in all of the political engagement activities except for making a donation to a political campaign and are significantly more likely to report having blogged about politics, liking Facebook page of a political candidate, discussing politics on Facebook, and retweeting something about a political topic.

When it comes to the other dependent variables, ACE students report lower levels of political apathy and higher levels of political efficacy. They are significantly more likely to disagree with the statements about not having any say about what the government does, politics not being relevant to their lives, and it does not matter who the president is.

While these results are suggestive that taking a service-learning course can increase students' political engagement, political efficacy, and decrease political apathy, this is only a first step. Other variables may play a role. To see whether this is the case, models were calculated for each dependent variable and are reported in Tables 4 and 5. All of the participation variables were used as dependent variables in logit models, while the three Likert scale variables were used in ordered logistic regression.

The results from Table 4 show that once other factors such as gender and race are taken into consideration, taking an ACE course is not a significant predictor of any of the political engagement variables. Gender is significant in two models (making a donation and following someone political on Twitter), while race is only significant in one model (retweeting something political).

Taking an ACE course is, however, significant in the model for political efficacy. Students who had taken an ACE course were significantly more likely to disagree with the statement that 'people like me don't have any say about what the government does'.

Discussion

As these results demonstrate, service-learning has a significant impact on political efficacy. Before stepping foot on campus, the students who decided to take an ACE course reported significantly lower levels of political efficacy than those who had not taken an ACE course and then after taking an ACE course, they reported significantly higher levels of political efficacy than those who had not taken an ACE course. As Figure 1 illustrates, while there is a general decline in feelings regarding political efficacy over the 4 years, there is a significantly smaller decline for students who have taken an ACE course.

Among the other variables under study here, the results are not as strong. Students who take an ACE course are more likely to participate in politics and have lower levels of political

Table 5. Ordered logistic regression for political apathy and efficacy.

	No Say	Relevant	President
ACE	0.55 ⁺ (0.34)	0.20 (0.33)	0.51 (0.36)
Female	-0.14 (0.41)	0.12 (0.40)	0.42 (0.42)
White	0.03 (0.33)	-0.18 (0.33)	0.37 (0.35)
/cut 1	-1.91 (0.51)	-2.29 (0.52)	-1.61 (0.52)
/cut 2	-0.92 (0.48)	-0.43 (0.47)	-0.71 (0.50)
/cut 3	0.57 (0.48)	0.97 (0.48)	0.62 (0.49)
Pseudo R ²	0.01	0.00	0.01

ACE: Academic Community Engagement.

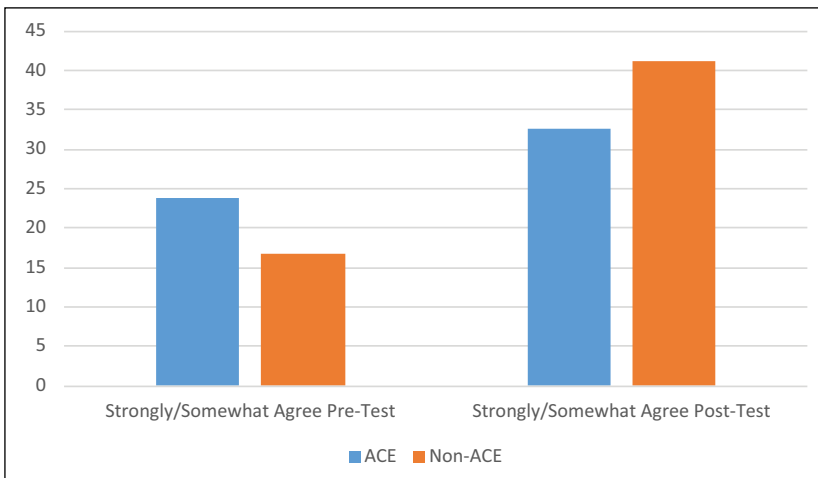


Figure 1. People like me don't have any say about what the government does.

apathy, but when other statistical controls are introduced in multivariate models, the effects are not significant.

What is encouraging about this study is that the service-learning studied here is cross-disciplinary. At the time of this data collection, none of the students had taken an ACE course in the political science or public administration program, which means that these effects are happening in courses not directly related to politics. While other studies suggest that it is the topic of the course that affects whether students increase their political engagement and political efficacy, I find that students are more likely to get involved politically after taking courses with service-learning components even when those courses are not about politics.

Future work should examine the total amount of time students spend on their service-learning projects as well as the amount of time they spend reflecting on their activities. These factors might explain some of the variation found here, but unfortunately, I did not collect data regarding the number of hours students spent in these activities. Other studies suggest that this might be the case, such as Hamilton and Zeldin (1987) who find that the programs with the largest time commitment have the largest gains in political knowledge. Morgan and Streb's (2001) research on high school service projects suggests, however, that the amount of time students spend on service does not change their results, which also show that service-learning can positively affect political efficacy.

It is possible that particular students are affected more by the service-learning experience than others. For instance, those with lower levels of political efficacy might be affected differently by taking an ACE course than those with higher levels of political efficacy. Unfortunately, due to the size of my sample, I am unable to test this theory. Future work should examine this possibility.

Funding

This study was supported by a Faculty Research Grant from Sam Houston State University in the fall of 2010.

Notes

1. For example, see the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement (http://www.ecs.org/html/ProjectsPartners/nclc/nclc_main.htm).
2. Additional information about the background of the students and the university can be found at <http://www.collegeportraits.org/TX/shsu/print>.

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Appendix I

Political knowledge, political apathy, and political efficacy.

Item or response categories	Percentage of students
No Say	
Strongly agree	8.97
Agree	29.66
Disagree	33.10
Strongly disagree	28.28
Relevant	
Strongly agree	12.41
Agree	15.17
Disagree	34.48
Strongly disagree	37.93
President	
Strongly agree	8.90
Agree	10.27
Disagree	27.40
Strongly disagree	53.42

Independent variables.

	Mean (standard deviation)
ACE	0.30 (0.46)
Female	0.80 (0.40)
White	0.67 (0.47)

ACE: Academic Community Engagement.