

A Natural Disaster of Civic Proportions: College Students in the Natural State Fall Short of the Naturalization Benchmark

Faculty Research Grant Final Report

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B. Restatement of Research Problem

The research project questions are two-fold: 1) What is the civic education and literacy level of Arkansas and 2) what can be done to improve civic education and literacy in the state? Given recent findings by national studies on civic education (*The Coming Crisis in Citizenship* 2006; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Niemi and Junn 1998), the hypothesis is that civic literacy in Arkansas (like in the U.S.) is low and needs improvement. To evaluate this hypothesis, Dr. Gooch, Dr. Housenick and myself gave ATU students a pre-text and post-test cognitive examination in our POLS 2003 American Government courses at Arkansas Tech University this past Spring 2011. Some initial findings are reported below.

C. Brief review of the research procedure utilized

Data was collected in Arkansas Tech University courses on American government in the spring semester of 2011. A test-retest procedure was used. The citizenship exam was administered at the beginning of the semester as a diagnostic test and then again at the end of the semester after the students had completed the course. Unique identifiers were assigned to students in order to match pretests with posttests. For the pretest and posttest comparisons, students who did not complete the exam in either implementation were dropped from the sample.

This study focuses on civic literacy and the impact that civic education has on civic literacy. *Relative civic literacy* is conceptually defined as the political information knowledge base an individual citizen has to draw from relative to that of the average citizen. *Absolute civic literacy* is defined as the political information knowledge base minimally necessary to participate in politics. Relative civic literacy can be calculated and compared to group, state, and national averages. In order to measure absolute civic literacy, a benchmark must be selected for comparison purposes. Since it is true we would expect civic literacy to vary between countries

and to vary over time (as societies and governments become more complex), a selected benchmark needs to connote face validity while at the same time being broadly applicable in an assortment of comparisons. We use two measures of absolute civic literacy. Borrowing from the logic employed in the ISI studies, we use a ‘grade’ based standard where the baseline for civic literacy is a “C” average or 70% or better correct responses on the citizenship exam. The second measure of absolute civic literacy uses as its baseline the standard used by the United States government to grade citizenship on the USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Service) Naturalization Test for individuals applying to become citizens of the United States.¹

Applicants must get six out of the 10 randomly selected citizenship questions right in order to pass, for a 60% correct standard. The instrument we developed for this project drew 26 randomly selected questions from the 100 question U.S. Naturalization Test and threw in a pop culture question asking them to name the 5 Simpson cartoon characters. We grouped these items into four conceptual areas of American citizenship and included one item on pop culture for comparison (see Table 1):

1. American political heritage – questions covering basic American political symbols and facts such as how many stripes are on the American flag and how many states are in the Union.
2. Current politics – questions on topical political information such as who the president is and who the mayor of their town is.

¹ Applicants filing out Form N-400 to become naturalized citizens must complete an interview with the USCIS where their English skills and knowledge of civics are tested, per the Section 312 requirement under the Immigration & Naturalization Act of 1952 that naturalized citizens possess “a knowledge and understanding of the fundamentals of the history, and of the principles and form of government, of the United States” (8 U.S.C. 1423).(*Immigration and Naturalization Act* 1952) They are required to get 6 out of 10 civics questions correct in order to pass. The USCIS draws these questions from a list of 100 questions which they publish as the “Guide to Naturalization,” available at the USCIS website.

3. Government structure – questions on the institutions and processes of American politics such as who elects the president and what institution is responsible for law-making.
4. Constitution – questions that specifically touch on the Constitution and its provisions such as the Bill of Rights and what we call changes to the Constitution.

As Table 1 shows, the citizenship exam is weighted most heavily towards current politics (33%), with a number of questions that ask students to answer who their current representatives are at the local, state, and federal levels. This over-representation was intentional, as it is information that has the most practical utility for active citizen participation in politics. It is difficult to hold representatives accountable if you do not know who they are. Of less utility to citizens exercising their basic democratic rights is the historical information about the symbolism in the U.S. flag and who the rebellious American colonies fought against in the Revolutionary war.

Table 1: Frequencies of Items in Citizenship Test for the Civic Literacy Categories

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
American Political Heritage	4	14.81%
Current Politics	9	33.33%
Government Structure	7	25.93%
Constitution	6	22.22%
Pop Culture	1	0.04%
TOTAL	27	100.00%

While this information is an important point of the foundational knowledge base for an active citizen and is undoubtedly correlated with desire and capacity to participate, it is of the least practical use to citizens of the four categories. Hence fewer questions in this category were included in the instrument. There were a relatively equal number of questions on government structure and the Constitution. Both categories are of equal import, we believe, in terms of utility for active citizens and indicators of civic knowledge and interest in politics. Furthermore, these two categories contain items that are most often a point of focus in American Government courses and introductory courses to American politics. Consequently we included a relatively

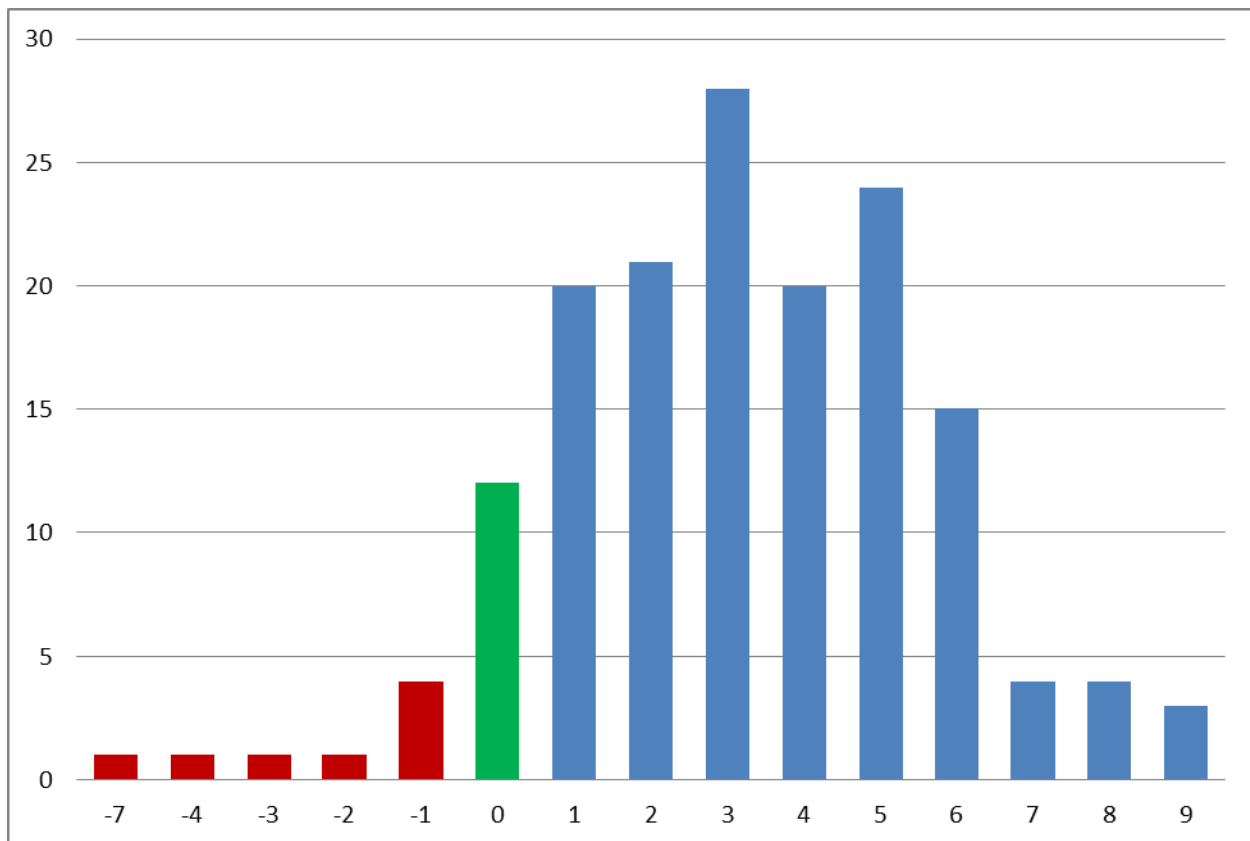
equal number of these items in the instrument and, together, constitute about half of the citizenship exam.

Demographic data on the respondents was collected in each of the citizenship exam implementations. The demographic questions on the exam are U.S. citizenship, race, age, gender, income, home state, and high-school from which the student graduated. Two-question branching items were also used in order to develop seven-point scales of partisanship and political ideology for the respondents to the exam.

D. Summary of findings

While we have yet to do a thorough statistical analysis of the data, some preliminary findings can be provided at this time. There were 159 students that took both the pre- and post-test cognitive examination. There were another 42 students that took only the pre-test and 13 students that took only the post test. Both the pre-only and post-only groups have been dropped from the statistical analysis below.

Of the 26 possible questions on the cognitive exam, the students averaged a 9.19 on the pre-test, while jumping up over 4 points to a 13.37 on the post test. Thus, students on average moved from answering 35% of the questions correctly to 51.4% of the questions correctly. While neither performance is passing, this 4 point gain from one semester of American government is rather dramatic. To illustrate the gain, Table I provides a bar graph of each individual student's point gain or loss on the exam. While regrettably a few students show a loss of knowledge (-1 to -7) over the course of the semester, the overwhelming majority showed a gain on average of 3-5 points but as many as 9.



As a second measure of the improvement, one can also look at the total correct responses.

A number of questions have multiple parts (e.g., one questions asks them to name the three branches of government and another asks them to name all 5 first amendment rights), which requires multiple correct answers to earn a point for the question. However, if we treat the multi-parts of these questions as each answer being worth a point, then there are 33 possible correct answers required for the exam. When examining the 159 students' correct answers for the 33 possible responses, one sees similar improvement. The respondents in the pre-test averaged 13.26 or 40.2% correct, while on the post-test they averaged 17.74 or 53.8% correct.

E. Conclusions and recommendations

The initial findings of our pre- and post-test cognitive examination gives support for our hypothesis that civic literacy in Arkansas (like in the U.S.) is low and needs improvement. Given that most Arkansan college students have not had a civics course since 9th grade, we

expected low civic literacy. What we have initially found suggests lower civic literacy than typical of the nation as whole. Although they uses a much different measure (multiple choice questions) with more questions than ours, ISI found in 2006 that freshman nationally failed a civics exam with an average of 50.4% correct. Our fill in the blank exam based on the naturalization exam found ATU students failed as well, but with the much lower average of 35% correct. What is needed is more data over multiple semesters to confirm if Arkansans college students are consistently below national averages.

Regardless, our hypothesis that Arkansas civic literacy needs improvement seems valid as well. More importantly, our initial one-semester study suggests that an American Government course can be one important mechanism for promoting better civic literacy. Unfortunately, while it did raise scores the one semester American Government course did not raise them enough to where most students passed. Requiring American Government of Arkansas college students does seem to be one possible step for improving Arkansas civic literacy (at least in the short term). However, if a passing score of 60% on the cognitive exam is desired it does not seem adequate by itself to achieve the goal for most Arkansas college students.

Works Cited

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