

## Research Spotlight: Discussing Presidential Elections in Class Can Increase Students' Civic Engagement

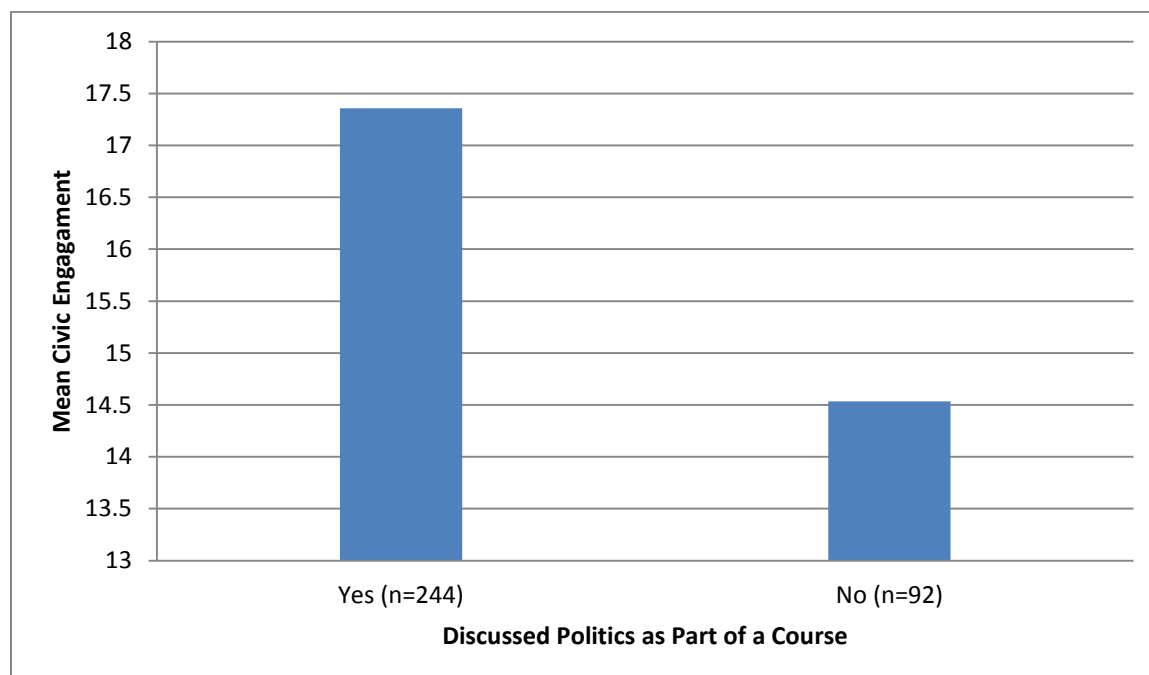
Many educators wonder whether their activities within the classroom have an effect on their students, or the communities in which they teach. Research conducted by Dr. Kenneth Moffett, Dr. Laurie Rice, and Dr. Ramana Madupalli at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville indicates that the simple act of incorporating a discussion of the presidential election into one's classroom can have a substantial impact on students' level of political participation.

Discussions of presidential elections can be relevant to courses in many different fields beyond that of political science. For example, a course in social work may discuss the election's potential impact on a variety of social programs, a course on biomedical ethics may discuss where candidates stand on stem cell research, and a course in business may talk about how regulations may change as a result of different election outcomes. English or speech communications classes might analyze the rhetoric contained in candidate speeches or the skill of their delivery.

Through such discussions students can learn about candidates and their policy positions. In the process, students may discover that elections are relevant to subjects they care about. This may encourage them to become more interested, active citizens.

To investigate the link between class discussions on elections and student's civic engagement, a random selection of undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 25 were contacted via e-mail and asked to complete an online survey. In order to encourage responses, students who participated were entered into a drawing for ten fifty dollar gift cards. Students were queried about their participation in 15 different political activities during the 2008 presidential election year. Their answers were compiled into a civic engagement index that ranged from 0 for no participation to 60 for participating in all of the activities very often.

**Civic Engagement and Class Discussions about the 2008 Presidential Election**



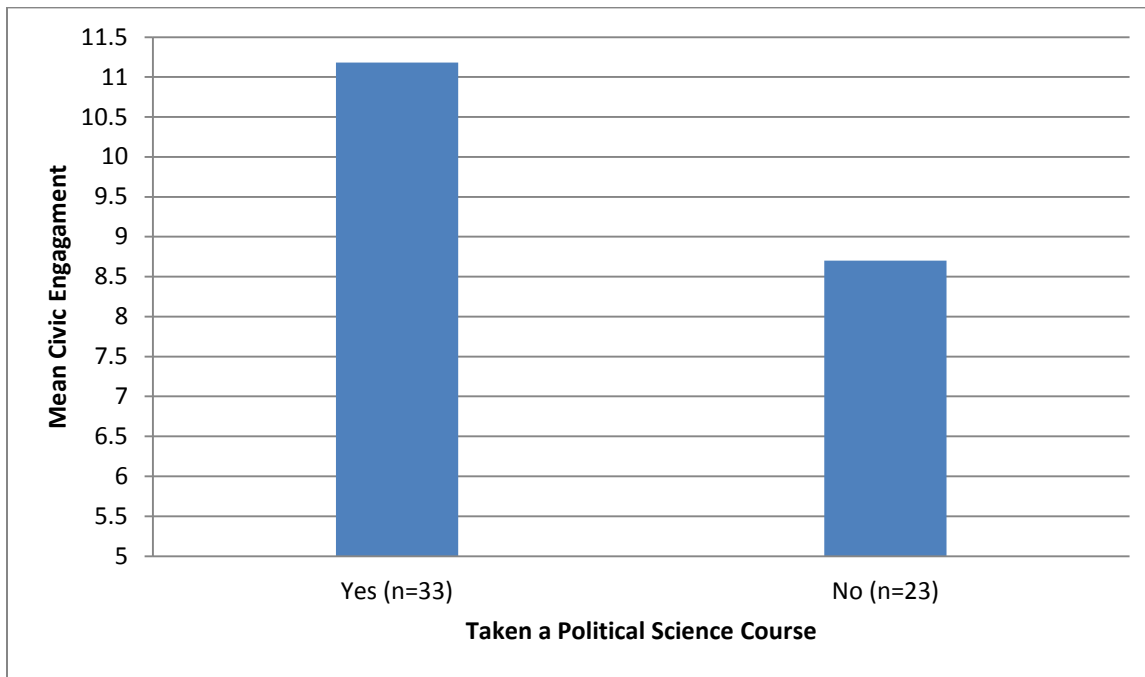
Difference in Means Test:  $t=2.416$ ,  $p<.008$

Note: The number in parenthesis is the number of cases in each category.

The figure above compares the mean civic engagement score among students who reported having had a class discussion about the 2008 election to those who had not. Those who had discussed this election during class had an average civic engagement score of 17.357 while those who did not averaged 14.533 on this measure. Difference in means tests confirmed this difference is statistically significant. A difference of this size is roughly equivalent to moving from no participation in an activity to participating in it regularly.

Even among those with low levels of political interest, class discussions on elections are linked with greater levels of civic engagement. The two figures below depict the differences in civic engagement based on whether one has had a class discussion among those who report being “not very interested in politics” and only “somewhat interested in politics. Together, these groups constituted 70% of the students surveyed.

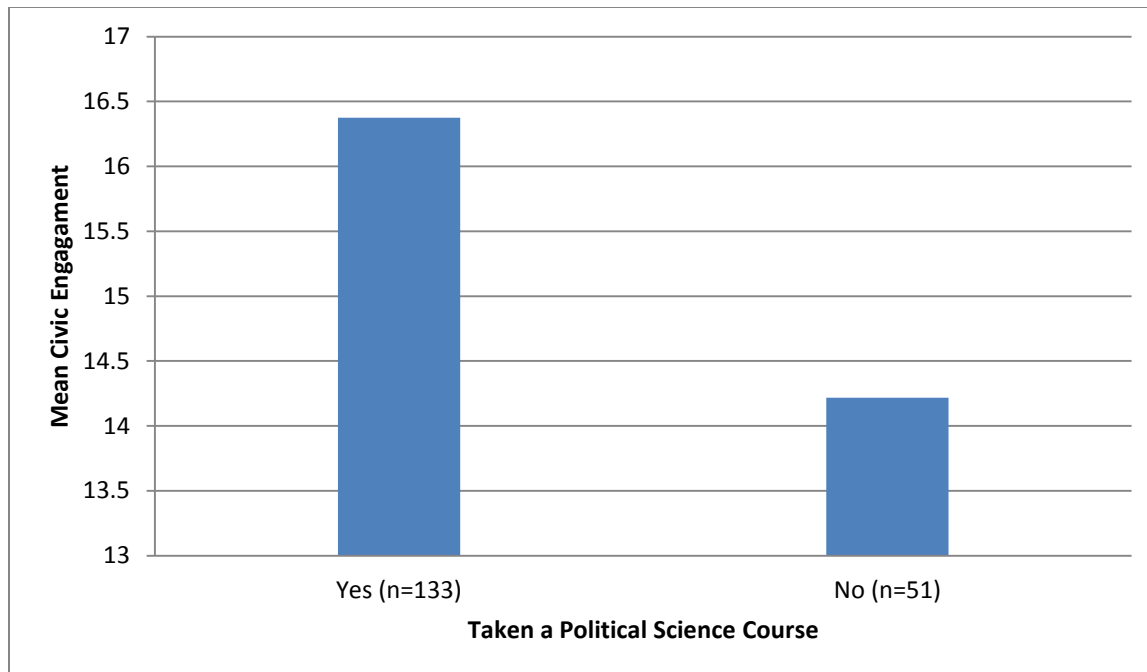
### **Civic Engagement and Discussions about the 2008 Presidential Election among Those Who Are Not Very Interested in Politics**



Difference in Means Test:  $t=1.644$ ,  $p<.053$

Note: The number in parenthesis is the number of cases in each category.

### **Civic Engagement and Discussions about the 2008 Presidential Election among those who are Somewhat Interested in Politics**



Difference in Means Test:  $t=1.647$ ,  $p<.051$

Note: The number in parenthesis is the number of cases in each category.

Students who were not very interested or somewhat interested in politics had higher levels of civic engagement when they discussed the 2008 presidential election during class. Students who were not very interested in politics who discussed the 2008 presidential election during class had an average civic engagement score of 11.182 while those who did not averaged 8.700 on this measure. Students who were somewhat interested in politics who discussed the 2008 presidential election during class had a mean civic engagement score of 16.376 while those who did not averaged 14.216 on this measure. Difference in means tests indicated both differences are statistically significant.

Although the study was conducted at a single university, the results suggest that taking the time in your classroom to discuss presidential elections might make a difference in how much your students participate. They also indicate that students who are not very interested in politics would benefit from discussing presidential elections during class, even if they resist the idea somewhat

*This research spotlight presents data from the “Who Votes in 2008: Examining College Student Engagement and Political Participation” survey conducted by Dr. Kenneth Moffett, Dr. Laurie Rice, and Dr. Ramana Madupalli.*