

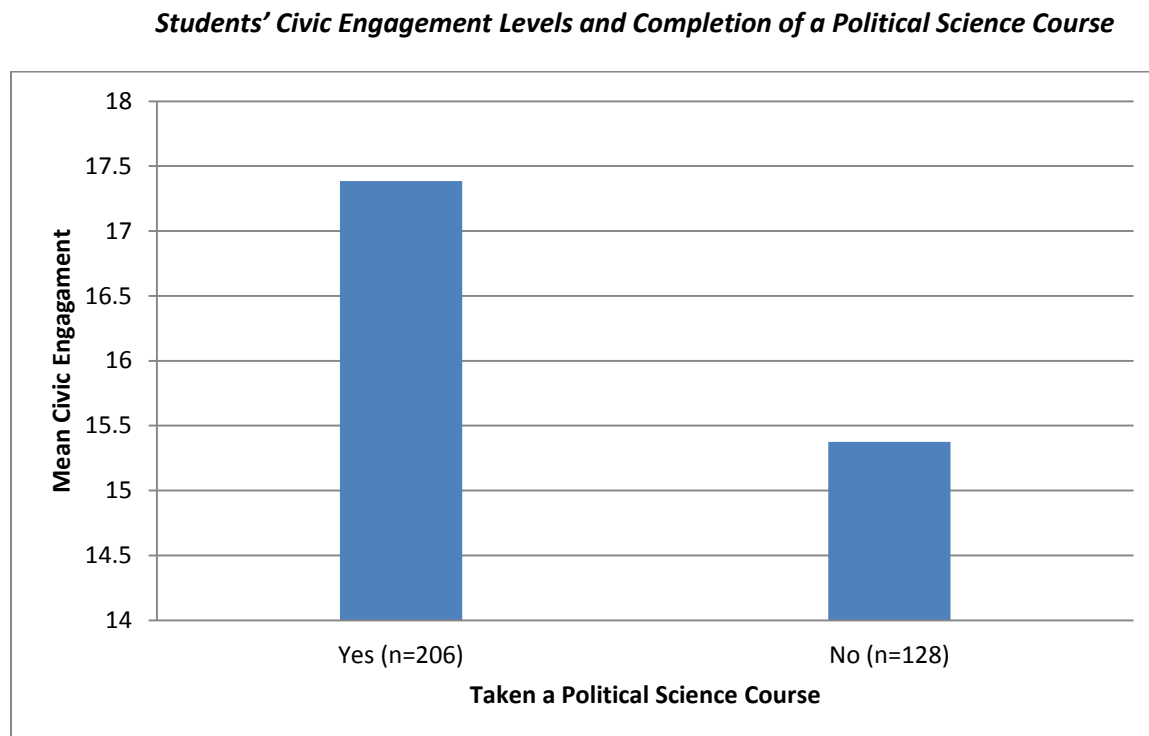
Research Spotlight: Political Science Courses Help Stimulate Political Engagement

Research conducted by Dr. Kenneth Moffett, Dr. Laurie Rice, and Dr. Ramana Madupalli at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville suggests that college students who have taken a course in political science are more civically engaged than their peers.

Political science courses routinely address topics like who participates, how different outcomes in politics occur, and the nature of political interactions in a variety of institutional contexts. These courses frequently emphasize the importance of civic engagement and offer students helpful knowledge and skills for participation in politics. Thus, taking such courses should increase students' level of civic engagement.

To test this hypothesis, undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 25 were selected at random, contacted via e-mail, and invited to complete an online survey. For their participation, students were entered into a drawing for ten fifty dollar gift cards. Students were queried about their participation in a wide range of political activities during the 2008 presidential election year. Their answers were combined into a civic engagement index that could range from 0 for participating in no political activities to 60 for participating in all of the activities very often.

The figure below displays the mean civic engagement score among students who reported having taken a political science class in college compared to those who had not.



Difference in Means Test: $t=1.860$, $p<.032$

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

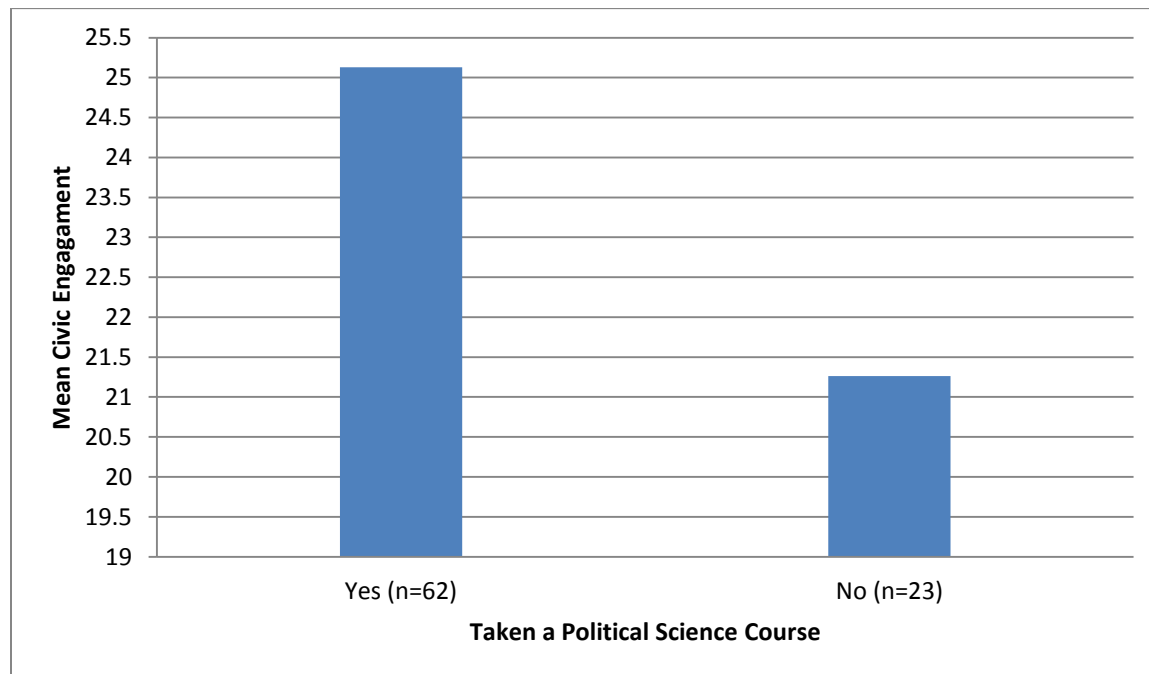
Those who took a political science course had an average civic engagement score of 17.384 while those who had not taken such a course averaged 15.375 on this measure. Although this difference may seem relatively small (it is equivalent from moving from no participation in an activity to participating in it sometimes), a difference of means test revealed a statistically significant difference.

While some colleges and universities mandate a political science or government course as a condition of graduating, others do not. Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, the university where the study was conducted, does not. In universities such as these, one might expect students with higher levels of interest in politics to be more likely to choose to enroll in such courses. To rule out the possibility that the difference in civic engagement observed based on whether students had taken a political science class is solely based on differences in levels of interest in politics, students were also queried about how interested they were in politics.

The civic engagement levels of students who were not at all interested, not very interested, or very interested in politics and did not take a political science course were not significantly different than their peers with the same levels of interest (or disinterest) who took such a course. However, students with these extreme predispositions are in the minority.

Where political science courses appear to matter are among those students who report being “somewhat interested in politics.” The figure below compares civic engagement levels among the “somewhat interested in politics” based on whether or not they had taken a political science course.

Civic Engagement and the Effects of Taking a Political Science Course among those who are Somewhat Interested in Politics



Difference in Means Test: $t=1.574, p<.060$

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

Those who were somewhat interested in politics had higher levels of civic engagement when they took a political science course. These students had an average civic engagement score of 25.129 while those who declined to take such a course averaged 21.261 on this measure. This difference is roughly equivalent to adding one additional civic activity and participating in it very often. A difference of means test confirmed that it is statistically significant.

Taking a course in political science or government is not the cure all for students' low levels of political participation. However, the findings suggest that the majority of students might participate more if they took a political science course. While these results were obtained using a survey of students at a single university, there is no reason to believe that students at this university systematically differ from those at other institutions in ways that would limit the generalizability of these results. Those concerned about the civic engagement levels of college students would do well to encourage students to enroll in a course in political science.

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.