

#09

RESEARCH DESIGN  
JUNE 2020



---

## THE EFFECTS OF AN OPEN DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL CLIMATE AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ON CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

---

---

# The effects of an Open Democratic School Climate and Experiential Learning on Civic Responsibility

The goal of this research proposal is to ascertain which kinds of civic education (open democratic climate, experiential learning and direct instruction) are more likely to engender a sense of civic responsibility in students. The concept of civic education, or citizenship education, includes any and all processes that prepare members of a community for civic life (Kawashima-Ginsberg 2016:14). It entails, therefore, not only the development of civic behaviors, but also of civically inclined norms and attitudes (Campbell 2012:1). The development of a civic mindset requires that knowledge is internalized into habits and attitudes, which beget long-term civic behavior (Campbell 2019; Finkel 2014). For this reason, recent studies on civic education have focused on its impact on the attitudes of students, such as political interest, political trust, and civic responsibility (Rossi et al 2016; Campbell 2019; Finkel 2014; Claes and Hooghe 2016). Here, we use Rossi et al’s definition of civic responsibility as “attitudes and beliefs aimed to improving the local community and the wider society, supporting the idea that every community member has the responsibility of being an active citizen” (2016:1042). In this way, civic responsibility may be understood as a precursor of civic behaviors (Lenzi et al, 2013).

Direct instruction is defined as that in which “pupils are being instructed about the political system and the basic values underlying democracy” (Claes and Hooghe 2016:1), is cognitively oriented, and its main goal is to foster political knowledge. Indirect instruction, meanwhile, aims to encourage democratic patterns of behavior and to internalize these behaviors as political attitudes. It includes (i) an open democratic climate in schools – understood as the inclusion of a democratic school ethos elements (Campbell 2019) such as tolerance, the sharing of opinions, equality among peers and activities involving voting, as well as greater opportunities for deliberation and class discussions. Though not all authors treat them as the same education methods (Claes and Hooghe 2016), our understanding is that an open democratic climate allows for open discussions and activities which foster democratic processes, such as deliberation; and (ii) experiential learning methods – which include community service, or service work, community-engaged research, and nonpartisan electoral activities (Kawashima-Ginsberg 2016).

---

## Hypothesis

Our hypothesis is that civic responsibility will be most impacted, *ceteris paribus*, by programs which include opportunities for experiential learning and provide a democratic, open-classroom climate. A program of civic education which integrates different areas of civic engagement, therefore, is more likely to have a positive effect on civic attitudes, including civic responsibility. Therefore, our hypothesis presents two independent variables, measured separately, which are: (i) the existence of an experiential learning component and; (ii) the existence of a democratic classroom climate. In this context, we consider civic responsibility as the dependent variable. Although such a study can, and should, additionally test the impact of different education methods on other variables – such as tolerance, social trust, political interest, political knowledge and political efficacy – these variables are not the main focus of our research, so they will not be described in the current research proposal.

---

## Methods

In order to test the association between a sense of civic responsibility and two different methods of civic education (open classroom climate and experiential learning), we fashion our research according to two different alternative designs.

**Alternative 1 - A large-scale field experiment:** This alternative proposes a longitudinal field experiment during which three different methods of civic education – direct instruction, open classroom climate and experiential learning – would be introduced on four different groups. In this experiment, four separate groups are exposed to the methods according to the distribution shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Distribution of methods according to groups

Group	Methods applied to the groups		
	Direct Instruction	Open classroom climate	Experiential learning
A	Yes	Yes	No
B	Yes	No	Yes
C	Yes	Yes	Yes
D (Control Group)	Yes	No	No

In this design, civic responsibility would be measured longitudinally and periodically, before the experiment begins, and over the course of the field experiment. We propose including direct instruction in all groups because our main goal is to observe the effects of the other two methods (open classroom climate and experiential learning) on civic responsibility. However, direct instruction has been found to enhance political knowledge (Campbell 2019; Claes and Hooghe 2016), and is likely to already be present in the curricula we aim to study. We believe that one year of exposure to civic education methods on students ranging from 14-18 years-old would produce sufficient data, but we are open to suggestions regarding the study's timeline and frame. We understand that, as Maheo (2018) points out, the impacts of civic education are greater on younger ages. However, children who are too young would render the variables more difficult to measure, especially civic responsibility, which is measured through both survey responses and game performance.

Additionally, in order to avoid spillover effects stemming from communication between different treatment groups, per Professor Steven Finkel's recommendation, we propose that each treatment unit be a classroom in different schools, preferably located within significant distance from one another. A group of schools which offers standardized curricula but has different units within a single city would, therefore, be the ideal context for our field experiment.

**Alternative 2 - Focus groups over three weeks:** This alternative is very similar to the option above, with the exception that it is not a field study. Here, a focus group is split into four subgroups, whose treatments mirror those of Alternative #1, displayed on Table 1 above. Each group is to meet with its instructors and engage in the respective activities periodically, two times a week for three weeks. Civic responsibility, measured through survey and game performance, is assessed before and after the experiment.

We propose the assessment of each of the independent variables through a combination of survey methods. Openness of classroom climate is introduced as a treatment, but it is also measured via survey questions because research notes the importance of perception of a democratic climate in school, in addition to the objective existence of such an aspect of civic education (Lenzi et al 2013; Bruch and Soss 2018). Perceived teacher fairness, which is an additional indicator of classroom openness and democratic ethos, may be included in the measure for democratic climate. Experiential learning, unlike democratic climate, is less a matter of perception, so this variable will only be assessed through questionnaires at the end of the experiment, aimed to identify whether the specific methods were deemed effective by students. The proposed methods for each of the independent variables are outlined below.

**Open and democratic classroom climate:**

- *Alternative 1.* Survey questions from Lenzi et al. (2013; adapted from Vieno et al. 2005), aiming to measure the perception of classroom climate openness.
- *Alternative 2.* Teacher and Classmate Support Scale (Torsheim et al. 2000; Santinello et al. 2009), aiming to assess perceived fairness as a component of a democratic climate.
- *Alternative 3.* Social Analysis at School California Civic Index, which analyses civic discussion and deliberation (Kahne et al. 2005; Lenzi et al 2013).

**Experiential learning:**

- *Alternative 1.* Questionnaire applied at the end of the experiment to measure the perceived effectiveness of the method

Civic responsibility, the dependent variable, would be measured periodically in all three groups through both survey questions and through performance in collective responsibility games and simulations. The proposed survey methods and games are outlined below:

**Civic responsibility:**

- *Alternative 1.* Civic Responsibility Survey (Furco, Muller, & Ammon, 1998)
- *Alternative 2.* Civic Duty Index, which used three questions asking how often a respondent felt that “voting in local elections,” “paying taxes,” and “taking part in political decisions” were “very important” responsibilities in a democracy (Finkel and Ernst 2005)
- *Alternative 3.* Stag Hunt game (Skyrms 2004).
- *Alternative 4.* Volunteer’s Dilemma game (Diekmann 2015, 1985).
- *Alternative 5.* Public Goods game (Capraro 2013), per Professor Brian Skyrms’s recommendation.

Civic responsibility, the dependent variable, would be measured periodically in all four groups. In addition to survey methods, civic responsibility would also be measured by subjects’ performance in games and simulations designed to measure commitment to civic attitudes and public goods, such as the Stag Hunt game (Skyrms 2004) and the Volunteer Dilemma Game (Diekman 2015, 1985). Professor Skyrms suggests the Public Goods game, which in his opinion better captures the feeling of civic responsibility.

The virtue of adding an experimental measure to the assessment of the dependent variable is that it strengthens the argument for causation rather than association between education methods and civic responsibility. Suggestions of additional games to measure civic responsibility and commitment to public goods are welcome.

---

## Conclusion

This research proposal is a working paper whose goal is to investigate the effects of different methods of civic education on civic responsibility. We propose alternative methods for testing these effects, including field experiments and focus groups, but recognize that the impacts of education are long-lasting, and are thus best observed longitudinally. We are open to recommendations, suggestions, comments and criticism regarding the experimental designs proposed in this paper.

---

## Works Cited

- Bruch, S. K., & Soss, J. (2018). Schooling as a Formative Political Experience: Authority Relations and the Education of Citizens. *Perspectives on Politics*, 16(1), 36-7.
- Campbell, D. E. (2019); What Social Scientists Have Learned About Civic Education: A Review of the Literature, *Peabody Journal of Education*.
- Campbell, D. E., Levinson, M., & Hess, F. M. (Eds.). (2012). *Making civics count: Citizenship education for a new generation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Capraro V. (2013). A model of human cooperation in social dilemmas. *PloS one*, 8(8), e72427.
- Catalano, R. F., & Hawkins, J. D. (1996). The social development model: A theory of antisocial behavior. In J. D. Hawkins (Ed.), *Delinquency and crime: Current theories* (pp. 149–197). New York: Cambridge.
- Claes, E.; Hooghe, M. (2016): The Effect of Political Science Education on Political Trust and Interest: Results from a 5-year Panel Study, *Journal of Political Science Education*.
- Dewey, John. 1916. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: MacMillan.
- Diekmann, Andreas. 1985. "Volunteer's Dilemma." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 29(4):605–10.
- Diekmann, Andreas; Przepiorka, Wojtek. "Take One for the Team!" Individual Heterogeneity and the Emergence of Latent Norms in a Volunteer's Dilemma, *Social Forces*, Volume 94, Issue 3, March 2016, Pages 1309–1333.
- Finkel, S. E. (2014). The Impact of Adult Civic Education Programmes in Developing Democracies. *Wind Energ.*, 34, 169–181.
- Finkel, S. E.; Ernst, H. (2005). *Civic Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Alternative Paths to the Development of Political Knowledge and Democratic Values*. *Political Psychology*, Vol. 26, No. 3.
- Furco, A., Muller, P. & Ammon, M. (1998). *Civic responsibility survey*. Berkeley, CA: Service-Learning Research & Development Center, University of California, Berkeley.
- Kahne, J., Middaugh, E., & Schutjer-Mance, K. (2005). *California Civic Index [Mono-graph]*. New York: Carnegie Corporation and Annenberg Foundation.
- Kahne, J. E., & Sporte, S. E. (2008). Developing citizens: The impact of civic learning opportunities on students' commitment to civic participation. *Am. Ed. Research Journal*, 45, 738–766.
- Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. & Levine, P.L. (2014). Policy Effects on Informed Political Engagement. *American Behavioral Science*, 58 (5), 665-688.
- Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. (2016). *Future of Civic Education*. Standard, September 2016, 13-19. National Association of State Boards of Education. Washington: DC.

- Lenzi, M., Vieno, A., Pastore, M., & Santinello, M. (2013). Neighborhood social connectedness and adolescent civic engagement: An integrative model. *Journal of Environm. Psych.*, 34, 45–54.
- Lenzi, M.; Vieno, A.; Sharkey, J.; Mayworm, A.; Scacchi, L.; Pastore, M. and Santinello, M. (2014). How School Can Teach Civic Engagement Besides Civic Education: The Role of Democratic School Climate. *Am J Community Psychol* 54:251–261.
- Maheo, V.-A. (2018). Political socialization and reciprocal socialization: A field experiment on the impact of civic education. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.
- Pateman, Carole. *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Rossi, G., Lenzi, M., Sharkey, JD, Vieno, A., & Santinello, M. (2016). Factors Associated with Civic Engagement in Adolescence: the Effects of Neighborhood, School, Family, and Peer Contexts. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 44 (8).
- Santinello M., Cristini F., Vieno, A., Scacchi L. (2012) “Volunteering by Chance” to Promote Civic Responsibility and Civic Engagement: Does It Work?, *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 40:1, 64-79.
- Skyrms, B. (2004). *The Stag Hunt and the Evolution of Social Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vieno, A., Perkins, D. D., Smith, T. M., & Santinello, M. (2005). Democratic school climate and sense of community in school: A multilevel analysis. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 36(3/4), 327–341.