

A LIFE LESSON *In* CIVICS



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How Democracy Prep Charter Schools Boost Student Voting

EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES has a foundational public purpose: to prepare students for effective citizenship. The idea that an educated and engaged citizenry is essential to the health of a democracy motivated the creation of government-run “common schools” in the early decades of our nation and remains an important value in modern times. Yet adult behavior often falls short of this goal; voter turnout, for example, is relatively low, at about 61 percent in recent presidential elections. And just 22 percent of U.S. 8th graders passed the most recent nationwide civics test, part of the 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Early advocates of common schools theorized that they would naturally inculcate the knowledge, values, and skills needed for effective citizenship, based on their leadership by democratically elected community members. A handful of states have moved beyond this theory to make civics education an explicit part of public-school curricula, but it remains largely overlooked as a field of study. However,



Democracy Prep students wear t-shirts and distribute literature reminding people to vote.



PHOTOGRAPHS / COURTESY DEMOCRACY PREP PUBLIC SCHOOLS

the importance of an engaged electorate has resurfaced as a prominent educational issue as of late, and in the past two years, at least 27 states have considered proposals to mandate or expand civics, motivated in part by a divided electorate, fast-paced media landscape, and bruising political discourse.

Amid this activity, some see another potential challenge to that old theory of civics osmosis: public charter schools. Since their debut in the 1990s, charters have represented a new type of public school: they are publicly authorized, publicly funded, publicly regulated, and open to all, but operate autonomously, outside the direct control of elected officials. Will this structure lead charter schools to place less emphasis on the goal of educating students for citizenship? Or might the autonomy afforded to charter schools enable them to find innovative and effective ways to foster civic engagement?

To determine how effective a public charter school might be at encouraging civic engagement, we studied the voter-registration and election-participation rates of former students of a charter network dedicated to encouraging such behavior: Democracy Prep, which has as its mission “to educate responsible citizens for success in the college of their choice and a life of active citizenship.” We find that Democracy Prep has large positive effects on civic participation, increasing its students’ voter-registration rates

School, was launched in the Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan in 2006. Today, the network educates more than 6,500 students in 21 elementary, middle, and high-school programs in five cities: New York City, Las Vegas, San Antonio, Baton Rouge, and Camden, New Jersey. Most students are from low-income families of color, characteristics that are associated with lower rates of voter registration and election participation among U.S. adults (see Figure 1). From the 2008–09 to 2013–14 school years, three quarters of students qualified for free or reduced-price school meals, and student enrollment was 69 percent black and 30 percent Hispanic. Among families applying to Democracy Prep for admission, the prior voter-registration rate of parents was 60 percent, about 10 percentage points below the national average in 2017, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Is Democracy Prep effective at boosting civic participation among its students after graduation? The existing literature suggests that it is following a sound approach. Both education in general and civics courses in particular have been found to positively affect registration and voting, though most studies have needed to use non-experimental methods that cannot definitively identify a causal relationship. Stanford economist Thomas Dee found that completing additional years of high school and enrolling in college increase voter registration, voting, volunteering, and

newspaper readership. Other studies have suggested that achieving high-school graduation increases voting in the United States.

A small number of studies have attempted to measure the effect of attending a private rather than a public school on registration and voting. For example, Dee has presented evidence that students who attended 10th grade at Catholic high schools were more likely to vote as adults, although unmeasured characteristics of the students rather than the schools themselves might have driven those results. Another study, in which Deven Carlson, Matthew Chingos, and David Campbell looked at the voting behavior of students in a randomized voucher lottery in New York City, found that students who won scholarships to attend private schools were no more or less likely to register and vote as adults than those who had not.

The potential link between civics education courses and civic engagement is clearest: education about government and the electoral process specifically aims to increase democratic participation. Rigorous evidence documenting this link is scarce, but a recent non-experimental study by Jennifer Bachner found that students who completed civics coursework were more likely to vote after graduation, a relationship that was amplified among students who reported not discussing politics with their parents at home.

These findings suggest that education may be a lever for enhancing civic engagement, but they have important limitations. Most notably, none of the favorable evidence comes from

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by about 16 percentage points and their voting rates by about 12 percentage points. Given the low registration and voting rates of young adults nationally, these are substantial impacts. And they provide new evidence that an education focused on preparing students for citizenship can, in fact, boost civic participation in adulthood—even when the school in question is not operated by democratically elected officials.

Educating “Citizen-Scholars”

At Democracy Prep, students are known as “citizen-scholars” and schools follow the motto: “Work Hard. Go to College. Change the World!” The network encourages civic behavior through a variety of curricular and experiential means, including by having students visit legislators, attend public meetings, testify before legislative bodies, and discuss influential essays on civics and government in class. On Election Day each year, students participate in “Get Out the Vote” campaigns and canvass busy street corners wearing “I Can’t Vote, but You Can!” T-shirts. As high-school seniors, they enroll in a capstone course in which they develop a “Change the World” project to investigate a real-world social problem, design a method for addressing the issue, and implement their plan.

The network’s first school, Democracy Prep Charter Middle

the sort of studies that permit strong causal inferences. Further, no study has examined the civic effects of charter schools. Our analysis of Democracy Prep provides the first rigorous evidence on whether charters that specifically focus on civic preparation can enhance the public engagement of their graduates.

results, names of parents, and contact information. We matched these lottery and enrollment records to voter registration and participation data provided by Catalist, which maintains a national database with comprehensive information on voting-age individuals. We scrutinized both data sources to ensure that all information matched, and treated records that

Data and Research Design

Like many charters, Democracy Prep enrolls students based on a randomized admissions lottery. In such lotteries, offers of admission are determined by chance, and so families who “win” and are offered admission do not differ, on average, from those who “lose” and receive no offer: both groups should be similar in terms of prior achievement, demographic characteristics, and unmeasured factors such as student and parent motivation. The admissions lottery therefore creates a natural experiment that we use to provide the strongest possible evidence about the causal impact of Democracy Prep on voter registration and participation in the 2016 presidential election.

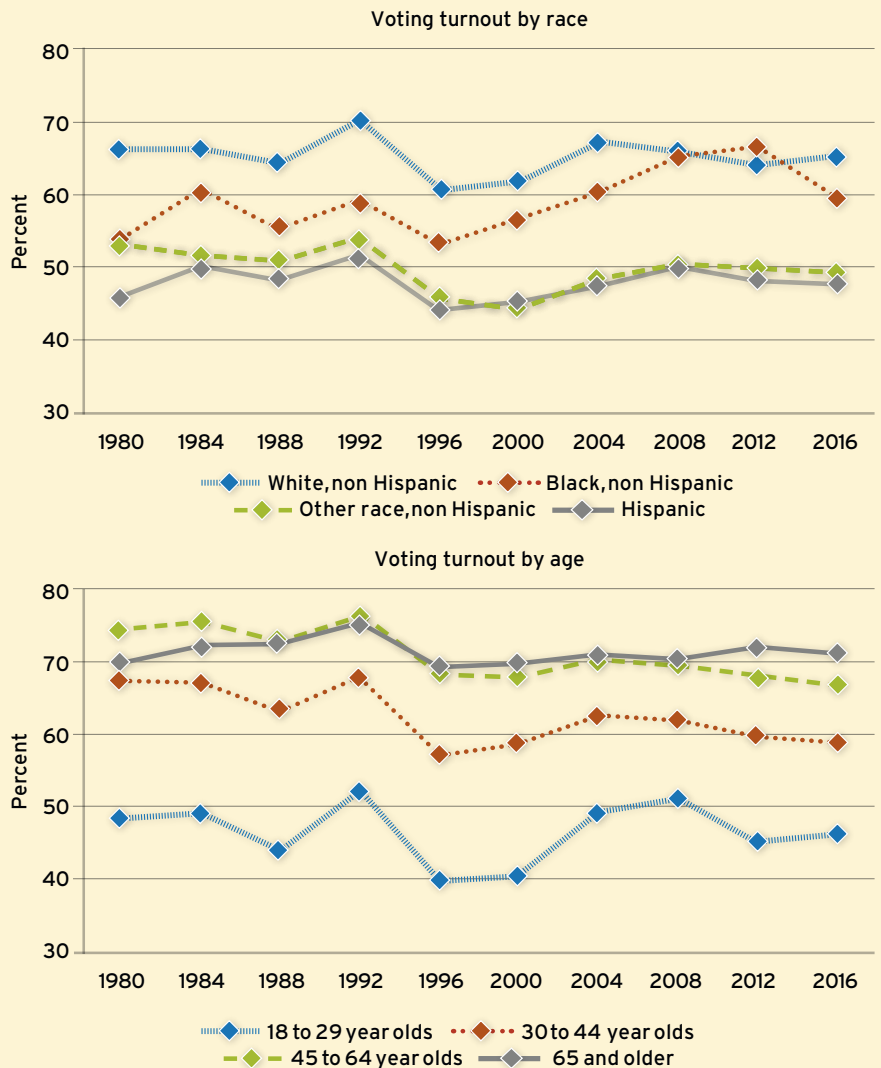
We use data on 1,060 students who were the first applicants in their families entering the lottery to attend any Democracy Prep school in New York City from 2007–08 through 2015–16. We focus on first applicants because they do not benefit from the sibling preferences built into the lottery process. This group of students applied to enroll in grades 6 through 11; younger students were not 18 years old by 2016 and therefore are not part of our study. In all, 35 percent of lottery applicants were offered admission.

However, not all students offered admission went on to attend Democracy Prep. More than half of winners opted to enroll elsewhere, and many lottery losers eventually found a way to enroll (such as through waiting lists). The enrollment rate for lottery winners is 44 percent compared to 19 percent for students who did not win the admissions lottery, a difference of 25 percentage points.

Democracy Prep provided admissions lottery and enrollment data, including applicants’ names, dates of birth, gender, lottery priorities, lottery

Turnout for Black, Hispanic, and Young Voters Lags Older Whites (Figure 1)

Black and Hispanic adults report lower rates of voting compared with whites, but black participation has increased since 1996 and exceeded that of whites in 2012. Voters under 30 remain far less likely to participate in elections than any other age group.



SOURCE: U.S. Census, Current Population Survey, Voting and Registration Supplement 1980-2016

Catalist could not match as non-registrants and non-voters.

Democracy Prep has tried to promote the civic participation of parents as well as students by, for example, including voter-registration information in enrollment materials. We therefore also use the admissions lotteries to analyze registration and voting among Democracy Prep parents in the 2014 midterm and 2016 presidential elections. The sample for this secondary analysis includes the 5,792 parents of Democracy Prep applicants across all grades, 52 percent of whom had children offered admission through the lottery. None of these estimated impacts on registration or voting by parents are statistically significant. That is, we find no evidence that having a child admitted to one of the schools affects parents' civic engagement.

Impacts on Registration and Voting

The story for students themselves is quite different. To assess the impact of Democracy Prep on students' voter registration and election participation, we first use its admissions lotteries to identify two groups of students: the "treatment" group of students offered admission and the "control" group of students not initially offered admission.

Comparing these two groups, we find that winning the admissions lottery for Democracy Prep increases students' voter-registration and turnout rates in the 2016 election by 6 percentage points (see Figure 2). The estimated impact on voter turnout is statistically significant, while the impact on registration falls just shy of that threshold. Taken together, however, the two results suggest that receiving an offer to enroll in Democracy Prep substantially boosts students' later involvement in the electoral process.

Moreover, winning the admissions lottery cannot have affected voter registration and turnout among students who chose not to enroll. We can therefore use these comparisons to estimate the impact of actually enrolling in Democracy Prep, as opposed to simply being offered a seat. Because students in the treatment group—that is, those offered admission—were only 25 percentage points more likely to enroll than those in the control group, this adjustment amounts to increasing the raw difference between participation rates across the two groups by a factor of four.

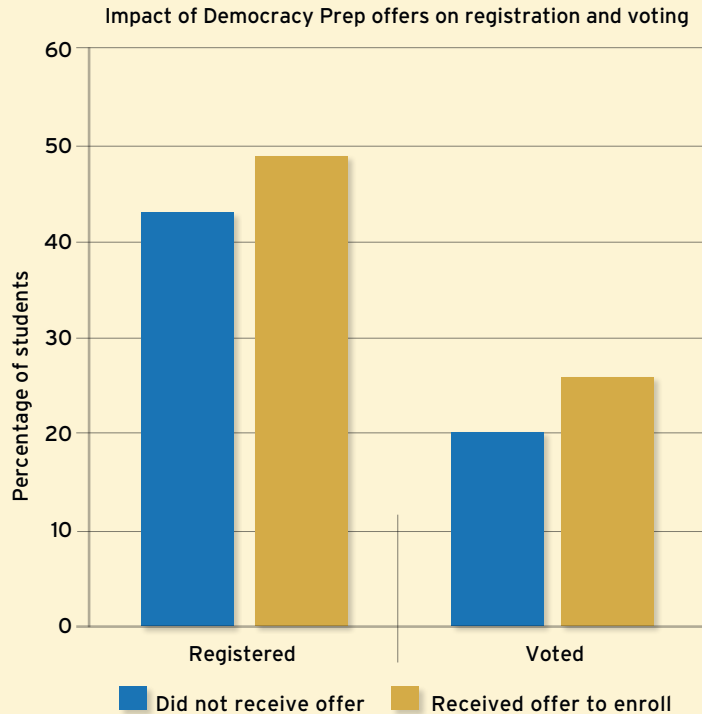
These estimates are dramatically larger than impacts found in previous studies of the effects of education on registration and voting, implying that Democracy Prep more than doubled the expected voting rates of its students. However, due to the limited number of students and schools on which the estimates are based, they also have a considerable degree of statistical uncertainty.

Anticipating this as a potential concern, we decided in advance of conducting our analysis to estimate the likelihood that Democracy Prep does, in fact, have positive effects on students' registration and voting and to adjust the size of those estimated effects by combining them with results from prior research. To do so, we use what's known as a Bayesian approach, which allows us to assess the probability of a school's positive effects on civic engagement in light of the available evidence on similar interventions in the existing literature.

Implementing a Bayesian analysis in our case requires an externally informed understanding of the difficulty of improving civic participation via similar educational interventions. If such interventions had rarely had large impacts on similar outcomes, then we would infer that it is hard to move the needle on

Democracy Prep Boosts Voter Registration and Participation (Figure 2)

Students offered a place at Democracy Prep through an admissions lottery were 6 percentage points more likely to register to vote and participate in the 2016 presidential election compared to students who applied but did not receive an offer to enroll.



NOTE: This figure shows the unadjusted treatment group mean and regression-adjusted control mean.

SOURCE: Authors' calculations



Students in the Democracy Prep Global Citizens program travel to Rome, Italy.

registration and voting—which would in turn make a very large impact of Democracy Prep seem less plausible. By contrast, the more often that large effects have been found in the past, the more probable it is that a sizable impact estimate in this study was the result of a true effect rather than random chance.

We therefore gathered information from 29 prior studies that estimated the impacts of eight other educational interventions on civic engagement. Almost all of the prior impact estimates are positive, with average impacts of about 8 percentage points on registration and 6 percentage points on voting. However, because these are estimated impacts, not true effects, it could be unwise to take them entirely at face value. They could be affected by random differences between treatment and control groups, or by systematic errors such as publication bias (that is, the tendency of journals to publish only findings that are statistically significant). To prevent these issues from propagating through to our analysis of Democracy Prep, we assume that the prior estimates are exaggerated by a factor of two.

The bottom line is that it is highly unlikely that our finding from our Bayesian analysis that Democracy Prep has a positive impact on voter registration and turnout is the result of chance. In all, we arrive at a 98 percent probability that enrolling in Democracy Prep increased voter registration and a 98 percent probability that it increased voting in the 2016 election.

Using this same framework, we also generate a complementary set of impact estimates. This analysis suggests that Democracy Prep increases the voter-registration rate of its students by about 16 percentage points and increases the voting rate of its students by about 12 percentage points. In sum, even a conservative analysis, which accounts for possible overestimation of impacts

based on the data in our sample, suggests that enrolling in Democracy Prep has large positive effects on students' democratic participation in adulthood.

Implications

Democracy Prep provides a test case of whether charter schools can successfully serve the foundational purpose of public education—preparation for citizenship—even while operating outside the direct control of elected officials. With respect to the critical civic outcomes of registration and voting, the answer is a clear yes.

There can be little question that increased civic participation overall is an urgent American goal. Indeed, the current fractures in our political and media environments suggest that education for citizenship might

be even more important now than in the past. A well-informed, active electorate can counterbalance voter disengagement, the proliferation of misinformation, and political stasis at the party level. In addition, expanding turnout among younger voters is important: in most presidential elections in the past half century, the differential in voter turnout between young adults ages 18 to 29 and older Americans has been 10 to 25 percentage points.

Democracy Prep demonstrates that charter schools can serve the foundational public purpose of public education—preparation for citizenship.

Yet decisionmaking at the state and federal level has far-reaching consequences for Americans of all age groups.

Given its explicit mission to educate “citizen-scholars,” Democracy Prep is surely not typical of all charter schools. Nonetheless, its success in raising the registration and voting rates of the low-income minority students it serves provides a proof point for charter schools and conventional public schools alike: an education focused on preparation for citizenship can in fact increase students' civic participation when they reach adulthood. Renewed attention to the foundational purpose of public schools might broadly increase civic participation across the country.

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