

The Birth of a Citizen: Political Scientists Study How to Engage Young People

Young adults in America today are less interested in political affairs than any generation before them, but the trend might be reversed with effective interventions in the college years, according to research in a new issue of the *Journal of Political Science Education* (Volume 2, Number 3), published by Routledge.

In the special issue titled “*Fostering Political Engagement: Research from the Field*,” educators and political scientists explore civic involvement among young people to learn which features of early political education are important for later life and how young people can be engaged to become active citizens.

“If democracy means government by, of, and for all people, we must be particularly concerned about the role educational institutions, including colleges and universities, can play,” say Elizabeth Beaumont of the University of Minnesota and Richard Battistoni of Providence College, in their introduction to the special issue.

While the 2004 presidential election did bring out more 18- to 25-year-olds than the 2000 election, their rate of participation was still only 47 percent, which is 10 percent less than the 25-34 age group and 22 percent less than the 45-54 age group.

But the focus on voting alone may miss the big picture, say Beaumont and Battistoni. A wide range of political activities – from participating in rallies and community outreach to interactions with political leaders or activists – shape students’ civic consciousness and their later participation, the authors say.

As part of the Political Engagement Project of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Beaumont worked with Anne Colby and Thomas Ehrlich of the Carnegie Foundation and Judith Torney-Purta of the University of Maryland to see if innovative college political science courses at a variety of colleges and universities could improve students’ political understanding, skills, and activity.

In interviews with 481 students who participated in 21 different courses, they found significant increases in all students’ political knowledge and skills. Students who had little

political interest on starting the courses also showed a significant increase in their political activities and plans for political participation in the future.

“The findings show that a variety of courses and programs that include a focus on promoting political engagement can significantly increase political knowledge, skills, and motivations in undergraduates,” say Beaumont and colleagues. The new findings are consistent with a growing body of research that emphasizes early socialization in the development of engaged citizens, the authors say.

Other articles in the special issue focus on other innovative programs to increase college students’ political knowledge and activity:

- A program in which undergraduates participate in service projects from Central America to Eastern Europe, then reflect on their experiences.
- A program in which upper-level undergraduates serve as “coaches” for middle-school and high-school students to devise and carry out political action projects.
- An “Agenda-Setting Model,” in which students in political science courses develop an agenda of issues that interest them, from tuition increases to the war in Iraq
- A survey about the effectiveness of techniques used to promote political involvement in high school and undergraduate political science courses

“These articles contribute to our understanding of effective methods for promoting political engagement,” say Beaumont and Battistoni.

Sponsored by the **Political Science Education Section** of the **American Political Science Association** (Formerly the Undergraduate Education Section), the *Journal of Political Science Education* publishes high-quality scholarship on teaching and pedagogical issues in political science. Aimed at undergraduate and graduate school instructors in political science as well as upper-level high school instructors, the journal aims to represent the full range of questions, issues and approaches regarding political science education, including teaching-related issues, methods and techniques, learning/teaching activities and devices, educational assessment in political science, graduate education, and curriculum development.

Subscription information for the *Journal of Political Science Education* or a sample copy of the journal can be obtained from the address below. An online sample of the journal can be viewed at: <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/onlinesamples.asp>.

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John Ishiyama, *Editor in Chief*
Division of Social Science
Truman State University
Kirksville MO 63501 USA
Tel: 660-785-4096
Fax: 660-785-4337
Email: jishiyam@truman.edu

To submit an article, contact:
Marijke Breuning, *Editor*
Truman State University
Email: mbreunin@truman.edu

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