Chapter 9

Democratic values and citizen action: a view from US ninth graders

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Abstract

As part of the IEA study of civic education, US ninth graders were assessed for their civic knowledge, concepts, attitudes, and experiences. The study yielded information about the development of democratic attitudes and dispositions toward social action. US ninth graders rated free expression and free elections as most important for democracy. They were less sure about the importance of peaceful protests. US ninth graders were above the international average in their support of rights for both women and immigrants. However, not all groups of students were willing to extend rights to “the other.” Additionally, students were most likely to have experienced social actions to help the community; far fewer were likely to engage in more politically oriented actions. Socio-economic variables and race/ethnicity were related to civic knowledge.

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1. Introduction

What can we learn about the development of democratic values among US ninth graders from the IEA Civic Education Study? What can we learn from this study about US students’ participation in social action today and their anticipated participation as adult citizens? Those are the questions addressed in this paper.

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In the United States, a primary purpose of public schools has always been to prepare youth for their roles as citizens of a democracy. From the time of Thomas Jefferson to the present, political and educational leaders have continually asserted the importance of educating youth for informed participatory citizenship. However, despite a consensus in the country about the value of civic education, there is no uniform policy for preparing young people in this area. Because states and local school districts are responsible for education, there is much variety in policies that influence how civic education is delivered.

Yet, in spite of this decentralized system of policies and practices, students in the United States are exposed to remarkably similar civic content (Avery & Simmons 2000/2001; Hahn, 1999). In contrast, instructional practices, school climates, and opportunities for extracurricular activities vary greatly from one school to the next—indeed, even from one classroom to the next when the same curriculum and textbooks are used.

It is against this general background that the IEA Civic Education Study was conducted in the United States. For Phase 1 of the study, colleagues and I surveyed the states and analyzed textbooks. In addition, we conducted focus group interviews with students ages 13–15 and with eighth- and ninth-grade teachers (see Hahn, 1999 for a description of methods and findings). For Phase 2, which is reported here, a nationally representative sample of ninth grade students was used.

2. Sample

Researchers in the United States used a three-stage, stratified, clustered sampling process to obtain the sample for Phase 2 of the study. The resulting sample for the United States contained 2,811 students from 124 schools (for further information on sampling procedure, see Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001). The mean age of the sampled ninth graders was 14.7 at the time of testing (October, 1999). Fifty-one percent of the students were females and 49% were males. The racial and ethnic composition of the sample was: 63% White (non Hispanic), 13% Black (non Hispanic), 14% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 4% multiracial, and 2% other (in this article, all percentages are rounded to the nearest whole percentage). Ninety percent of the students were born in the United States. Ninety-four percent attended public schools. Students’ schools were fairly equally distributed across the country’s geographic regions: Northeast, 23%; Southeast, 20%, Central 26%, and West, 30% (Baldi et al., 2001).

Socioeconomic level of sample students was inferred from several school-and individual-level indicators. At the school level, the percentage of students in a school who were eligible for the free and reduced lunch program was taken as an indicator of the socioeconomic level of families whose children attend the school. For the 124 schools containing sample students, 21% of the schools had 49% or more of their students who were eligible for the program, indicating that a large percentage of the student body came from low-income families. Seventeen percent of the schools had from 26% to 48% of their students eligible for the program, 31% had from 14% to
25% of students who were eligible, and 31% of the schools had 13% or fewer students who were eligible for the program. Individual level variables that were used as proxies for socioeconomic status were student estimates of the number of books in their homes and parents’ level of education. Eight percent of US ninth graders estimated that they had 10 or fewer books in their home, 21% estimated 11–50 books, 22% estimated 51–100 books, 20% estimated 101-200, and 29% estimated that there were more than 200 books in their home. Fewer than 5% of the ninth graders said that neither parent had completed elementary school; 20% reported that the highest level of education either of their parents completed was high school. Twenty-seven percent said that one parent had attended but not completed university, whereas 35% reported that at least one of their parents had a bachelor’s degree (Baldi et al., 2001).

3. Context

In Phase 1 of the IEA study, national research coordinators were asked to gather data on what students were intended or likely to learn about democracy, democratic institutions, and rights and responsibilities of citizens, as well as on other aspects of civic education. As part of that process in the United States colleagues and I asked students in focus groups what the term ‘democracy’ meant to them. They responded with answers such as “the form of government we have” and “elected people to represent us.” Students also said that “freedom” was an important aspect of democracy. The students told us that in their social studies classes they studied about the branches and levels of government, a few using the terms ‘executive,’ ‘legislative,’ and ‘judicial.’ Others described studying about the president, Congress, and courts. Most of the interviewed students said they had studied the United States Constitution and amendments, particularly the Bill of Rights. Some students mentioned studying “checks and balances” in the Constitution; others described learning about some of the history to the Constitution, such as the Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence, and the Articles of Confederation. Clearly, to the students in our focus groups, democracy meant United States’ forms of representative democracy. When asked about citizens’ rights and responsibilities, the focus group students mentioned voting either as a right or as a responsibility. They said that rights included the right “to have whatever religion you want, to free speech, and to bear arms” (Hahn, 1999).

Although 85% of US students take a course in civics in government before the end of Grade 12, only a few students are likely to have had such a course by the beginning of Grade 9, which was the grade targeted for the IEA assessment (Hahn, 1999; Niemi & Smith, 2001). Nevertheless, US ninth graders are likely to have acquired considerable information about democracy and democratic institutions from elementary and middle school social studies lessons about the nation’s political history and about the structure and function of government. That point was reinforced in Phase 2 of the IEA Civic Education Study when 79% of ninth graders reported studying the US Constitution at some time over the previous year (Baldi
et al., 2001). Seventy-five percent said they had studied Congress, 70% reported studying courts, and 66% said they had studied the presidency.

Students across the United States are exposed to a common narrative about the nation’s history. Data from the focus groups and textbook analysis indicated that most students study a similar story of the country’s founding and development. Usually they study in chronological order the periods from English antecedents through the colonial period and the establishment of the Republic, the westward expansion of the nation, to the Civil War, and on through two world wars to the present. In this national narrative, students learn that the country has not always lived up to the ideals of democracy, equality, and justice for all. Focus group students reported learning about the harsh treatment of Native Americans, slavery, and Japanese internment. They said they had studied about the women’s suffrage and civil rights movements. Young people come to view their nation’s history as a story of progress moving toward democratic ideals and see citizen action as the vehicle for reaching those goals (Hahn, 1999).

4. Perceptions of what is good/bad for democracy

Central to the concept of democracy is the idea of government by the people. The IEA study used a number of means to assess young people’s perceptions of and experiences with civic participation. Additionally, democracy rests on the idea that citizens should have certain rights and freedoms such as the rights to free expression and to freely associate with others in voluntary groups that form the civil society. The IEA Civic Education Study assessed the extent to which young people thought that such rights and freedoms are good for democracy. Table 1 presents the percentages of students reporting their perceptions of what is good or bad for democracy.

Ninety percent of US ninth graders said that it was “somewhat good” or “very good” for democracy when everyone has the right to express their opinions freely (Baldi et al., 2001). Almost as many students (88% and 86%, respectively) said that it was good for democracy when citizens have the right to elect political leaders freely and when many organizations are available for people who wish to belong to them. More females than males thought these two principles were good or very good for democracy.

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<th>Item</th>
<th>Good for democracy (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>It’s good for democracy….</td>
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<tr>
<td>When everyone has the right to express their opinions freely</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When citizens have the right to elect political leaders freely</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When many organizations are available for people who wish to belong</td>
<td>86</td>
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<tr>
<td>When people protest against a law they believe to be unjust</td>
<td>78</td>
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democracy. The IEA Civic Education Study thus tells us that more than 85% of ninth graders in the United States think that freedom of expression, free elections, and a strong civil society are important features of democracy. Fewer—78%—said that when people peacefully protest against a law they believe to be unjust, that is somewhat good or very good for democracy.

5. Democratic attitudes

In democratic societies citizens must be willing to extend rights to others that they would claim for themselves. In the IEA Civic Education Study students in most countries tended to be supportive of rights for women and immigrants, with 70% or more indicating support on a variety of items. However, US students, along with students from Norway, Sweden, and Cyprus, scored above the international mean on both the women’s rights and immigrants’ rights scales (Torney–Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz, 2001). Nine out of ten US ninth graders said they supported women’s political and economic rights (Baldi et al., 2001).

Additionally, in the study more than eight out of ten US students said immigrants should have all the same rights as everyone else in the country (Baldi et al., 2001). Most students agreed that immigrants should have the opportunity to keep their own customs and lifestyles, and that after living in the country for several years they should have the same opportunity as other citizens to vote in elections.

However, not all students were equally supportive of extending rights to all. Males were significantly less supportive of rights for females than were females. Additionally, students born outside the United States were less supportive of women’s rights than those born in the country and black students were less supportive than white students (Baldi et al., 2001). Students with fewer books in the home were less supportive of women’s rights than were students with more books.

With respect to rights for immigrants, students born in the United States were less supportive of immigrants’ rights than students born outside the country. Furthermore, white students were less likely than their Hispanic, Asian, and multiracial peers to report a positive attitude toward immigrants’ rights.

6. Social action and the good citizen

In the IEA study students were asked about actions they associated with being a good citizen. Table 2 presents the percentages of students agreeing that participating in social actions is important to good citizenship.

The behaviors US students were most likely to say were important or very important to good citizenship were: participating in activities to help people in the community (89%), taking part in activities promoting human rights (84%), and taking part in activities to protect the environment (83%). The mean for US students on the Social-Movement Related Citizenship Scale containing these three items was significantly higher than the international mean. Further, female students were more
likely than males to say that these three behaviors were important to good citizenship; there were no differences by race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status (Baldi et al., 2001).

Students in the United States were also more likely than their international peers to say that a number of conventional practices were important to good citizenship. That is, students from the United States said that voting in every election, showing respect for government leaders, and knowing about the country’s history were all important to good citizenship (with 83%, 80%, and 73%, respectively, saying they were important). Fewer, but still a majority, said it was somewhat or very important for good citizens to follow political issues in the media and to engage in political discussion (66% and 58%, respectively).

7. Democratic participation

Many students are engaged in civic-related activities by the time that they are 14 years old. Fifty percent of US students said they had participated in a voluntary group that helps the community (Baldi et al., 2001). That was larger than the percentage reported by students in all the other 27 countries participating in the IEA Civic Education Study (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

One-third of US ninth graders reported participating in student government and 20% had worked on a student newspaper—two school level avenues for civic participation. More, however, had participated in sports, music or art programs, community service, or religious organizations (with 81%, 62%, 50%, and 45% participation, respectively, in those programs). Interestingly, US students who participated in any of these extracurricular activities did better on the knowledge part of the IEA Civic Education Study assessment than students who did not participate in those activities (Baldi et al., 2001). In Phase 1, focus group students said they learned much about democracy, rights and responsibilities of citizens, and about multicultural diversity from their participation in extracurricular activities (Hahn, 1999).

One way in which democratic citizens can participate in “the public space” is by following public affairs and expressing their views. However, although a majority of US ninth graders reported that they obtain news from television and newspapers, the percentages were lower than percentages reported by students in most other countries. Indeed only in Bulgaria and England did smaller percentages say they followed news on television (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

<table>
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<th>Item</th>
<th>Important to good citizenship (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participating in activities to help people in the community</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking part in activities promoting human rights</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking part in activities to protect the environment</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
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I noted earlier that in describing “the good citizen,” US students were less likely to report that a good citizen follows events and discusses politics than engages in action to help the community. Perhaps that is a reflection of the way in which students experience—or do not experience—democracy in their classrooms. Overall, US students scored above the international mean on the Classroom Climate for Discussion Scale. More than 75% of US students said that they are encouraged to express their views in classes. On the other hand, fewer reported they had the opportunity to explore controversial public policy issues through democratic discourse. Almost one-third of the ninth graders disagreed that teachers encouraged them to discuss political or social issues about which people have different opinions (Baldi et al., 2001). In the international analysis, Torney-Purta and her colleagues found that open classroom climates in which students are encouraged to express their views and to explore controversial issues were associated with students’ civic knowledge and expectation of voting as adults (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). That was true for the US sample, as well as the international sample.

8. Equality and knowledge

Finally, equality, along with freedom and participation, is an important component of democracy. Students in the United States are taught that a fundamental principle enshrined in the United States’ Declaration of Independence is that all people are created equal. Moreover, as noted previously, students learn that the history of their country has been a continuing struggle to ensure equal rights for all. Against this picture of cultural values transmitted to youth, it is noteworthy that the IEA Civic Education Study, as well as other similar studies conducted in the United States, found a persisting inequality in educational achievement. In the IEA study, students’ knowledge of democracy and democratic principles was reported as three scores—one for overall knowledge, and two for the subscales related to content and skills. On the overall test of civic knowledge US students performed above the international mean (Baldi et al, 2001; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Additionally, US students did exceptionally well on items that measured skills needed by citizens in a democracy, such as the abilities to comprehend political messages, interpret political cartoons, and distinguish fact from opinion. On the skills subscale of the test, US students scored significantly higher than students in any of the other participating countries. On the subscale measuring knowledge of content, US students did not differ from the international average.

But that is not the full story. The results for the US sample differ substantially by socioeconomic class and race/ethnicity. Students who attend schools in which more than 25% of students are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program did less well on the three achievement measures than students in schools with fewer than 25% of their students eligible for the program. Additionally, performance on the test was related to home literacy resources and parents’ education. That is, students who came from homes with many books and a daily newspaper, as well as students whose parents completed more years of school did better on the test than
students without those resources. Further, ninth graders who had high expectations for their own continued education did better on the Civic Education Study assessment than students who expected to complete fewer years of school (Baldi et al., 2001).

Race and ethnicity were also related to civic achievement for the US ninth graders. White and multiracial students scored higher, on average, than black and Hispanic students on the Civic Education Study’s three measures of civic knowledge (Baldi et al., 2001). In addition, Asian students scored higher than black students on the three measures and higher than Hispanics on the content subscale.

9. Discussion

Overall, the results of the IEA study reveal several positive indicators of effective civic education in the United States. But there is no reason to be complacent, as the findings also suggest considerable room for improvement. On the one hand, it can be considered a positive sign for the future of democracy when such high percentages of youth think that free elections, free expression, and the presence of voluntary associations are important for democracy. On the other hand, for some young people the right to dissent seems to be viewed as less essential in a democracy. Although 78% of the ninth graders said that when people peacefully protest against a law they believe to be unjust, that is somewhat good or very good for democracy, close to 20% were not certain that that was good for democracy. Students in the Phase 1 focus groups said that in their social studies classes they studied about the women’s suffrage movement and the civil rights movement. They did not, however, mention learning about contemporary protest movements. We need to learn more about why sizeable numbers of adolescents do not see peaceful protests as healthy signs of a democratic society.

The fact that males are less likely to support women’s rights than females and that non-immigrants are less likely to support rights for immigrants also raises questions. It is easy to dismiss these findings with the assumption that it is natural for people to be more supportive of rights for people like themselves than for others. I believe, however, that we should be concerned about the substantial numbers of ninth graders (between 10% and 20%) who are less than fully supportive of rights for “the other.” Do students think that granting rights to others somehow reduces their own? Do they feel threatened by “the other?” We need more research on student conceptions of rights for diverse groups in pluralistic democracies. We also need to learn more about what students are taught about democracy and rights for all.

Students’ views of good citizenship reveal another area in which students in the United States compare favorably with students in many countries. Nevertheless, I believe that there are areas for concern. Democracy requires more of its citizens than merely being a good neighbor, voting and showing respect; it requires that citizens take an active interest in public affairs, stay informed, and engage in public debates. It is particularly troubling to me that one-third of US ninth graders did not think it was important for good citizens to engage in political discussions.
Similarly, the information about what young people are already doing in the area of social action is of concern. US students seem much more willing to do voluntary community service work than engage in more political activities. Volunteering to help others in the community may be a healthy sign for the future of civil society, but it does not mean that young people will grow up to be engaged in the democratic process of trying to influence public policies. US students need to develop the habit of following the news and discussing alternative policies if we are to have a vibrant democracy. Not discussing controversial public issues in classes is a “missed opportunity” for many students to experience democracy and to develop skills and attitudes for later participation. Not only has an open classroom climate been linked to student knowledge as it was in the IEA study, but other studies have found that it is also related to the development of political interest, trust, and efficacy in youth (Hahn, 1998).

Finally, when we look at inequality in civic achievement, we see another area warranting attention. In a country founded on ideals of equality, it is especially troubling that particular groups of students consistently do not perform well on tests of civic knowledge. There is some evidence that the instruction students receive differs by class, race, and ethnicity. In focus group interviews with teachers for the Phase 1 case study, it appeared that the quality of social studies instruction provided to students varies by the socioeconomic level of the local community. In schools in urban areas serving large numbers of students from low-income families and students of color, social studies is often a review of the textbook. Ironically, out of a genuine concern for students’ poor reading abilities and a realization that many students are not likely to read their social studies textbooks at home, teachers try to meet student needs—but at a cost. One teacher explained that he was trying to do the best he could under the circumstances; he spent the majority of class time having students read the textbook and answer questions at the end of the chapter to ensure they understood what they read. He was aware that as a consequence his students were not engaged in discussions or other involving activities (Hahn, 1999). Other teachers in urban schools explained that the school as a whole put such an emphasis on order and discipline that the school atmosphere was authoritarian rather than democratic and students were not encouraged to express their views in class discussions. We did not hear such reports from teachers in middle-class suburban schools. Instead they described a rich variety of in-class and out-of-class activities that were provided to enhance students’ civic education. Consequently, students who come from families with the fewest educational and economic resources may also be attending schools that provide the least varied and involving activities to develop student civic knowledge.

By looking at the multiple data sources used in the two phases of the IEA Civic Education Study, it is possible to learn much about the development of democratic attitudes, participatory behaviors, and knowledge among today’s youth. However, there is much also that we do not yet know. And of that which we do know, not all of the news is good. Clearly, civic educators in the United States, like their counterparts in many other nations, face many challenges.
References


