

David and Goliath: A Study on College Class Size and its Effects on Political Participation

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Abstract

Past literature has considered several different avenues on what effects political participation. A focus in the scholarly work attributes education as a strong indicator on influencing participation. But what within the process of achieving an education increases the likelihood of participating? This study aims to understand the relationship class size has on political participation. Participation is an important aspect in a democracy. Informed citizens will have made more prepared decisions when it comes time to vote and continue these practices in future elections. Through a multi-university study, I examine various forms of participation students could engage in. As class size decreases, I theorize that political participation will increase.

Scholars of democratic politics have been studying the individual and institutions and their correlation to political participation for decades. Scores of literature and research have been dedicated to answering the questions that stem from the lack of participation. This work is strongly motivated by participatory inequalities faced by many different groups (Verba, Scholzman, Brady, and Nie 1993; Kam and Palmer 2008). The groups that experience these inequalities display a disproportionate level of influence over policy and playing a role within government.

In some cases, these groups possess a lower degree of education than groups that do not experience these inequalities. Groups with less education are not likely to begin participating in

politics and stay within the political climate. With little education, most people will not be motivated to further understanding of candidates and policy platforms (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1997; Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, and Weisburg 2008). It is important then to start looking at education as a primary factor in a voter's consistent participation and engagement within politics.

Education builds the foundation for many people as they partake in their civic duty as a citizen. However, does simply possessing higher education suddenly make an individual a "better" voter? Studies have looked into the effects of earning a higher education. However, there have not been enough studies dedicated to understanding what within education makes students more motivated to become civically engaged and active citizen. I believe we must investigate further into this subject, as we do not understand enough about the potential effects a strong educational background can have on participation.

I examine how class size at universities can affect the rate of political participation and civic engagement in students. In short, I argue that smaller class sizes are more likely to intellectually stimulate and engage students, which will lead to the cultivation of greater civic skills than is possible with larger class sizes. Thus, I expect that smaller class sizes will be associated with greater political participation outside of the classroom.

Education's Influence on Political Participation

During the election season, it is almost impossible to escape the campaign canvassers, constant television advertisements, late night phone calls and mass emails soliciting for donations. But even with all these influences flowing in and out of your daily life, why is that the United States reports low numbers of civic engagement and turnout (Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, and Weisburg 2008). The American voter remains stout in their lack of interest in politics or refusal to participate within the political system.

Studies have been conducted throughout the years looking at many different areas that can affect the amount of participation one may invest into politics. Previous findings have looked into the effects of education, race, income, risk, and time investment on political participation. The education factor will be confined to just higher

educational institutions that cover undergraduate as well as graduate students. For this study, we will look how education plays a vital role in participation, while keeping in mind the importance that income, risk, time investment, and race can have on participating in politics.

There have been many studies conducted that tests the effects of higher education and the positive impact it has on a person's level of participation (Henderson and Chatfield 2011; Persson 2013). People that participate in politics that also possess a higher education are more likely to have access to more resources. They are also exposed to a wide variety of intellectual stimuli that may improve reasoning and research skills, which can open people to new ideas that they wouldn't normally be exposed to (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). These formative years for students play a vital role in fostering a sense of political participation as well as establishing a lasting connection to politics (Leighley 1995). The beauty of an education is that it is universal. An educational experience provides skills that can be utilized wherever you go.

A particular piece looked into the effects of what a higher education can personally do for an individual. "With more formal education comes a stronger interest in politics, a greater concern with elections, greater confidence in playing one's role as a citizen, and a deeper commitment to the norm of being a good citizen", citizens can benefit with a more intact interest within their political environment (Lewis-Beck et. al 2008). Education can also enhance participation more or less directly by developing skills that are relevant to politics – the ability to speak and write, the knowledge of how to cope in an organizational setting (Verba, Scholzman, Brady 1995). An "enhanced" individual will be able to make more informed decisions when they participate and will do their best to make sure their ideal candidate gains office.

A panel study conducted by D.E. Campbell (2008) looks into the effects of an open classroom environment and how it relates to political engagement. In this study, Campbell measures classroom

climate at the class level, rather than relying on self-reports. Campbell discovers that, within the context of an open classroom environment, not all US students benefit from this style of teaching. Disadvantaged students experienced the most benefit out of the open class discussion (Campbell 2008). The students, in general, were reported to have a more informed vote choice as well as appreciation for political conflict. While these students were reported to have no real change in civic engagement, they became more informed voters. Becoming an informed voter is half the battle so this may lead to people becoming more engaged over time.

What Does Education *Specifically* Do to Influence Participation?

Education is part of the foundation that builds your political beliefs as well as how strongly you dedicate yourself to these beliefs. But is just attending a higher educational institution that magically makes you a better participant (Kam and Palmer 2008)? Or is what you do within the institution that makes the real difference between participating or not participating? I investigate to see if, in universities, class size has an integral part in the political participation of the student population. Students that attend smaller universities will have more time to collaborate with like-minded students and gain more material from faculty due to class size. Due to these smaller class sizes, I believe students will be able to have more discussion-based lectures which will allow for more convergence of ideas people may not normally be introduced to on their own.

In 2015, a study was conducted that (Perrson 2015) looks deeper into the subject of open classroom environments. Perrson follows students a year older than Campbell's previous study. Perrson's study manages to find more data to support the impact of an open classroom climate. Students that feel they can openly contribute to the discussion process are more likely to take those ideas and implement them in their own lives (Perrson 2013; 2015). It is important to foster this development at this age, as they are most vulnerable and malleable to new stimuli and abstract ideas. One distinct remark about this study, so future studies on this particular subject may also take note, is the absence of a panel study. A panel study, while difficult to conduct, is

very important for studying participation over time. One study of a particular time of civic engagement is not enough to establish a real definition of the long-term effects education or different styles of teaching may have on students in the present and the future (Perrson 2013; 2015; Perrson, Lindgren, and Oskarsson 2016).

Factors that Influence Participation Outside Education: Income

As stated before, income is not the focus on this study, but I believe I should acknowledge the extent to which income can effect a person's participation. Money can help make participation an easier process for people to get involved in. Many times people will cite how they don't have the time to spend to help out campaigns and together organizations will their agenda (Brady, Verba, Scholzman 1995). A higher income will allow people to worry less about future expenses and free more time to participate in politics. Income can also be used to put more influence within government and policy. People with more income are more likely to donate their money to campaigns and participate within politics as a result ((Brady, Verba, Scholzman 1995, 1997). People that have a lower income, however, cannot take the time to educate themselves on candidate platforms, donate money, or invest in a campaign and thus lose out on having a bigger voice compared to those with disposable income.

Those with lower levels of income may also report low rates of political efficacy, or belief government is trustworthy and works for all. Drawing back to the primary elections, candidates like Bernie Sanders had drawn large support from college millennials on a strong platform on financial reform and progressive taxing. Messages like this made it possible for higher rates of mobilization especially for groups that historically have low turnout. It may be possible to circumvent the problem of income with the right candidate, but with a group such as the college student it would not be as applicable as someone who has not sought out a higher degree of education.

Factors that Influence Participation outside Education: Race

Race is another factor that plays a role within participation, but is not the focus of this study. Racial tensions have been around for many years, but we have slowly come around to a slightly more balanced field. However, minorities still report lower levels of turnout and participation (Verba, Scholzman, Brady, and Nie 1993). Minorities have seen a history of disenfranchisement and harsh voting laws that drove away potential voters. This disenfranchisement is responsible for the low levels of political efficacy within racial minorities and why many minorities do not involve themselves in politics enough (Verba, Scholzman, Brady, and Nie 1993; Leighley 1995). Going back to our earlier analysis on income, racial minorities are reportedly more likely to have less income. This negatively effects them further as they will have even less incentive to educate themselves on the different candidates as well as invest the time to help out these candidates

A topic within race as a factor for participation that could be further researched is how race plays a role within the classroom. Do minorities at universities engage less because they do not feel they have an equal voice that will be heard or do they feel they can actively engage in their new environment and be treated with respect? If in the past minorities did not feel they could engage in intellectual debate and not get immediately shut down by other students, they will choose to be silent and not contribute to the discussion. The best way to promote more discussion between different groups in the classroom is by using more open and student friendly teaching techniques. Teaching styles that center around lectures or even just reading notes off a PowerPoint do not serve to stimulate a student or them active within the classroom (Perrson 2015). I think it is important to consider that as we progress so should our teaching methodology.

Factors that Influence Participation outside Education: Risk-Seeking Attitudes

Risk attitude is where an individual analyzes a situation and determines the amount of risk that could come out it. Risk-takers see politics as a novelty or as a challenge to overcome (Kam 2012). Taking the risk to

become involves also draws back to rational choice theory, which theorizes people making an analysis of an activity or action and judging if the benefits outweigh the costs. If the benefits outweigh the cost, people are more likely to take the risk of participating or investing in different activities (Brady, Verba, and Scholzman 1995; Kam 2012). However, if the costs outweigh the benefits, people will be less likely to engage in new activities and stick to what they know. It is imperative for groups to show that their organizations are worth the risk. This can help engage people early and retain a desire to continue their investment within a group.

Young people of all groups are the most likely to actually participate in risky situations. With little to hold them back, younger generations can be a strong force within politics if mobilized properly. Looking to candidates like Bernie Sanders, we can see that, with the proper motivation, younger generations can mobilize and participate in massive numbers. At this time, young people make a good chunk of the voting bloc. If candidate can tap into this potential source, they can easily turn an election into a more favorable outcome. Young people can risk taking the time and devoting resources to these political groups because they are free from too many commitments. They can easily become involved within an organization or even just active as a citizen because they do not have the mass amount of responsibilities that most older citizens contend with. Young people are the kind of risk-takers that need to be engaged. If young people feel there is still a sense of challenge to what they are doing, they may be more likely to stick with politics and continuously participate during the election cycles.

Research Design

I use data from a survey conducted between seven universities in the United States between October 11 and 21. About 1,500 participants were recruited from seven universities, all with different majors, years of schooling, regions, racial backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and

political backgrounds. Participants of the survey completed the survey using an anonymous link on their own time, either at home or school.

Of the 1,500 respondents, approximately 60% were female and 40% were male. 70% of those polled were undergraduate students while 30% were in graduate programs. About 71% of the participants across the 8 universities were white, 15% were black, 6% were Hispanic, 4% were Asian, and 4% identified as mixed/other. The sample was well-balanced between Democrats and Republicans with 33% identifying as Republican and 39% identifying as Democrats. Over 16% reported to be Independent, with 12% identifying as other or unsure of their political affiliation.

Measuring the Dependent Variable: Political Participation

I measure a person's level of participation by asking the respondents questions on various forms of participation or events that they can become involved in.¹ They are asked questions that gauge their level of participation at the local, state, or national level of politics. Respondents could check multiple boxes if they had engaged in various activities. For instance, potential political activities included voting in the 2016 presidential primary, joining a political interest group, volunteering for a candidate, or contacting an elected official.

To calculate participation, I simply add the number of total activities that a student reported engaging in. Thus, political participation is ultimately measured on a 0-9 scale, depending on the number of activities that each individual has engaged in during 2016. A score of "0," indicates that they participated in none of the offered activities, while a score of "9" denotes that they engaged in all of the possible activities.

Measuring the Independent Variable: Class Size

I examine class size to test whether a college student with, on average, smaller classes will engage in more political events than a student who has larger classes. I hypothesize that students with larger classes will engage in fewer political activities than those with smaller classes.

¹ All survey questions are available in the Appendix.

To measure class size within one's major, I use an ordinal variable that ranges from one to five. A value of "1" denotes that class sizes within a student's major have, on average, about ten or fewer students, while a value of "5" indicates that class sizes are typically over 50 students. Similarly, I measure class size in non-major classes using a one to seven scale, where "1" indicates fewer than ten students to a class, while "7" denotes that classes typically have more than 100 students in attendance. These two variables will allow me to control for the typical student environment with respect to class size. A smaller class size will most likely allow a student more time to debate and discuss new material. A larger class may not allow a student to discuss material in as effective a manner (or at all) as a smaller class. Thus, I argue that class size in college contributes to the development of civic skills (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995).

Results and Discussion

The dependent variable is political participation. I explore the different activities in which respondents were able or willing to participate in during the 2016 election cycle. I am interested in how the typical class size in college influences a student's tendency to engage in political activities, given the potential for smaller class sizes to foster the development of civic skills. Figure 1 reveals the frequency with which students reported partaking in various types of political activities.

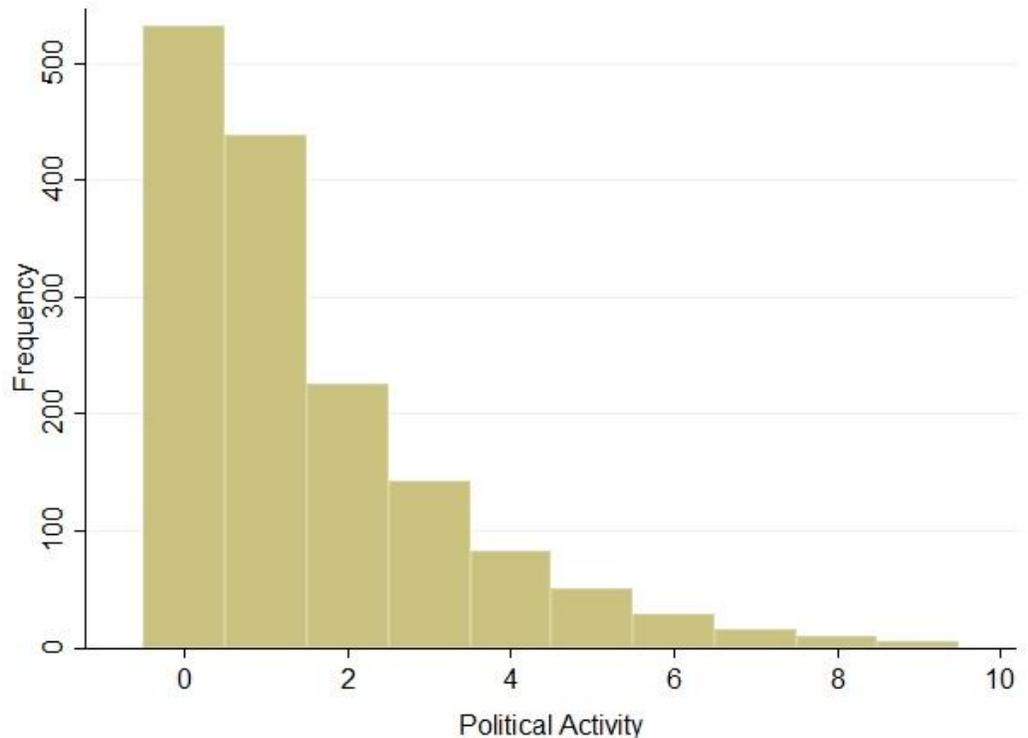


Figure 1: Frequency of Political Activity in Respondents

Most respondents were not politically active, which is not surprising given that the sample size is comprised entirely of college students. Very few participants (five out of 1,531) engaged in all nine types of political activities. The average number of political activities that a typical respondent completed is 1.504 (with a standard deviation of 1.721). By far, the most common type of activity that students reported doing (or planning to do) is vote in the 2016 election. Overall, respondents engage in a manner similar to previous studies in participation.

The key independent variable is college class size (for both major and non-major classes). I am interested in examining the relationship between class size and one's proclivity to engage in political activities. Thus, I regress the number of political activities a student engages in on his or her typical class size.

Table 1 presents the results of an ordinary least squares regression. Controlling for income, race, ideological extremism, year in school, and university affiliation, political participation tends to increase as class size in both major and non-major classes decreases. As a student's typical class size (in his or her major) increases from one (indicating that the average class has fewer than ten students) to five (indicating that class has more than 50 students), the number of political activities that the student engages in increases by .800, a nearly one-point increase in political participation. For non-major classes, the effect is less pronounced. However, the same relationship manifests, whereby smaller classes are associated with higher rates of participation in political activities.

Table 1: The Effect of College Class Size on Political Participation (2016)

Independent Variable	OLS Coefficient (S.E.)
Class Size (Within Major)	-.160** (.044)
Class Size (Outside Major)	-.064** (.029)
Years in School	.078** (.040)
Ideological Extremism	.278** (.047)
Family Income	.019* (.140)
Black	-.191* (.127)
Hispanic	-.273* (.181)
Asian	-.442* (.229)
Illinois State University	-.546** (.188)
University of South Alabama	-.892** (.203)
University of West Florida	-.452 (.484)
Susquehanna University	-.430 (.415)
SUNY Buffalo	-.426** (.212)
University of South Florida	-1.083** (.255)
Constant	2.364** (.310)
N	1,491
Log Likelihood	-2,875.368

** denotes $p < .05$ (one tailed test); * denotes $p < .10$ (one tailed test)

Political participation also increases as a student progresses through school (and, thus, ages). As expected from past works, race has a significant impact on participation. White respondents participated at a higher rate than black, Asian, and Hispanic

respondents.² Furthermore, the more ideologically extreme a student is, the more likely he or she is to participate. This suggests that young moderates are less likely to participate than young ideologues. In short, these findings paint a relatively coherent picture of the factors that shape participation among college students, including the effects of the class size.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to examine a possible subsection to the lasting effects education can have on young voter's participation within politics. While past literature has asserted the benefits of just having education, I wish to look further and understand what within education effects students to become more politically engaged. I look to class sizes within universities to see if having fewer students allows more students to become more aware and intrigued by the material. If they are becoming more intellectually stimulated and excited, they may choose to become more involved in politics as a result. With more knowledge on the issues and more skills to go and find more information, students are more likely to become better informed and make an informed decision.

Through the cross-university survey, I can show a trend of participation in relation to class sizes in and outside a student's major. At several universities with different backgrounds from one another, an increase in participation appears as class size decreases. White respondents had a higher rate of participation amongst racial groups. Partisanship permeated through the results of the survey, with those of ideological extremes more likely than moderates to participate. Those with higher income were also more likely to participate than

² Both Miami of Ohio and white respondents are contained within the constant.

those who have a lower income. With this new data, we can hope to further understand what class size can do for engaging students.

It is important that we look to new and different ways of teaching so that we may be better prepared to future generations. Further studies should look study not just different universities, but also the difference in students. Looking to their excitement for candidates or their knowledge on issues may place a greater understanding as to how a classroom can help facilitate their enthusiasm as well as channel their enthusiasm to motivate them to participate more in politics. As we progress, we must adapt to new ways of improving student's understanding of new material. I am hoping this study will add to the collective knowledge of the political participation as well as delving further into the impact education has on our lives.

Appendix: Survey Instrument

univ What college or university do you attend?

- Illinois State University (1)
- University of South Alabama (2)
- University of Kentucky (3)
- University of West Florida (4)
- Creighton University (5)
- Susquehanna University (6)
- SUNY Buffalo (7)
- University of South Florida (8)
- Florida State University (9)
- Miami of Ohio (10)
- University of Georgia (11)

year What is your year in college?

- Freshman (1)
- Sophomore (2)
- Junior (3)
- Senior (4)
- Graduate student (5)

class_size1 How large are classes in your major?

- 10 or fewer students (1)
- Between 10-20 students (2)
- Between 20-35 students (3)
- Between 35-50 students (4)
- More than 50 students (5)

class_size2 About how large are your non-major classes?

- 10 or fewer students (1)
- Between 10-20 students (2)
- Between 20-25 students (3)
- Between 35-50 students (4)
- Between 50-75 students (5)
- Between 75-100 students (6)
- More than 100 students (7)

pid Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?

- Democrat (1)
- Republican (2)
- Independent (3)
- Other (4) _____
- Don't know (5)

ideology We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a scale on which the political views that people

might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. In general, where would you place yourself on this scale?

- Extremely liberal (1)
- Liberal (2)
- Slightly liberal (3)
- Moderate/Middle of the road (4)
- Slightly conservative (5)
- Conservative (6)
- Extremely conservative (7)

gender I identify my gender as:

- Male (1)
- Female (2)

income What is your family's household income?

- Less than \$10,000 (1)
- \$10,000 - \$19,999 (2)
- \$20,000 - \$29,999 (3)
- \$30,000 - \$39,999 (4)
- \$40,000 - \$49,999 (5)
- \$50,000 - \$59,999 (6)
- \$60,000 - \$69,999 (7)
- \$70,000 - \$79,999 (8)
- \$80,000 - \$89,999 (9)
- \$90,000 - \$99,999 (10)
- \$100,000 - \$149,999 (11)
- More than \$150,000 (12)

race What is your race?

- White (1)
- Black (2)
- Hispanic (3)
- Asian (4)
- Native American (5)
- Other (6) _____

activities Many people do not engage in many political or community activities. In which, if any, of the following activities have you engaged in during the past year?

- None of the above (0)
- Voted in the 2016 presidential primary (1)
- Wrote a letter or email to a newspaper (2)
- Joined a political interest group (3)
- Contacted an elected official (by phone, email, letter, etc.) (4)
- Contributed money to a campaign (5)
- Volunteered for a political candidate (6)
- Joined a group in the community to address a local issue (7)
- Volunteered on a community project (8)
- Attended a city council or school board meeting (9)

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