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**Can Education Reduce Political Polarization?:
Fostering Open-Minded Political Engagement during the Legislative Semester**

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ABSTRACT

Background: In the United States, elected leaders and the general public have become more politically polarized during the past several decades, making bipartisan compromise difficult. Political scientists and educational scholars have argued that generating productive political cooperation requires preparing members of democratic societies to productively negotiate their political disagreements. Numerous prior studies on civic learning have focused on fostering youth political engagement, but little research has examined how educators can support both political engagement and political open-mindedness.

Purpose: The study described in this paper explores how students' experiences in a unique high school government course may help to foster their *open-minded political engagement* (OMPE) which we define as an individual's propensity to explore and participate in political affairs while maintaining a willingness to adjust one's political views.

Research Design: Using quantitative and qualitative methods, we examined the development of adolescents' OMPE during their participation in high school government courses at three schools. Whereas participants at Standard High (N=87) completed a traditional government course, students at Green High (N=224) and Gomez High (N=94) were enrolled in the Legislative Semester course, an extended political simulation that required students to research, discuss, debate, and mock-vote on controversial public issues. At each research site, we gathered data through student surveys, teacher and student interviews, and classroom observations during the fall 2014-15 semester. We analyzed survey data using principal component analysis, t-tests, and OLS regression, and we conducted constant comparative analysis with our qualitative data.

Findings: Students in the LS program became more politically engaged and open-minded than students in the traditional government course. Whereas studying and exploring various political issues was especially helpful for the development of political engagement, considering diverse political perspectives in an open classroom environment was helpful for the development of political open-mindedness. However, if students in the LS were encouraged to be partisan, they were less likely to develop greater political open-mindedness.

Conclusions: Repeated opportunities to examine diverse political ideas with peers can foster the development of open-minded political engagement. Educators can support such exchanges not only through structuring substantive sharing of diverse political perspectives but also through creating emotionally "safe" classroom environments, encouraging the expression of minority viewpoints, and de-emphasizing partisan uniformity. Encouraging careful *listening* – rather than polite hearing – may be central for the development of political open-mindedness.

“For too many of us, it’s become safer to retreat into our own bubbles . . . surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. . . . Without a willingness to admit new information and concede that your opponent is making a fair point, and that science and reason matter, we’ll keep talking past each other, making common ground and compromise impossible.” – Barack Obama, *Farewell Address*

In democratic political systems, citizens’ values inevitably clash as they strive to make consequential decisions about the future (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). In the United States, such clashes have become increasingly acrimonious as both activists and non-activists have become more partisan and polarized (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Pew, 2014). Political scientists have found that this polarization has contributed to national discord (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2008; Bishop, 2009) and hindered bipartisan compromise on major policy and budgetary issues (Binder, 2003; Harbridge, 2015). Educators have long aimed to foster students’ engagement in civic and political affairs, but given our increasingly divided citizenry, it is now also important for them to help young people bridge partisan differences and become politically open-minded. In this paper, we describe a study examining adolescents’ development of *open-minded political engagement* during their experiences in a semester-long legislative simulation. Although numerous societal trends well beyond educators’ control contribute to political polarization (Barber & McCarty, 2015), it is important to explore the ways and extent to which educational experiences can help to bridge political divides among adolescents, who are in a vital period of political identity development (Jennings & Stoker, 2004).

Prior cross-sectional research indicates that individuals who are highly engaged politically tend to be more partisan and less open-minded (e.g., Campbell, 2005; Mutz, 2006; Pew, 2014), but few longitudinal studies have explored how educational programs might be able to simultaneously foster both political engagement and open-mindedness. This study begins to address this research gap by exploring students' outcomes and experiences in an innovative civics curriculum. Developed in the 1990s and currently used at a dozen schools, the Legislative Semester (LS) enables students to play the role of legislators as they research, discuss, and debate various controversial public issues (see Appendix A). Whereas civic educators have developed numerous programs to support youth civic learning, such as Project Citizen (Morgan, 2016) and Issues to Action (Author & Colleagues, 20xx), the LS is unique in its capacity to consistently provide participants opportunities to explore and discuss diverse viewpoints on a wide variety of issues. Although its emphasis on legislative processes offers students a limited notion of politics, the ongoing design and discussion of various bills enables students to explore their own and others' civic values and perspectives in ways that few curricula do. In this longitudinal study of two high schools' enactment of the LS, we employed qualitative and quantitative methods to identify how students' political engagement and open-mindedness developed during their experiences in the program and how teachers guided the program in ways that fostered these attitudes.

Background

Theoretical Framework

Underlying this paper is the notion that educators should help students learn to creatively, responsibly engage in the political world (Hinchliffe, 2010) by guiding their active participation in democratic life and pursuit of initiative (Biesta, 2007). To conceptualize how such experiences

can support open-minded political engagement and its development, we draw on literature in political science, psychology, and education. Central to our argument is the concept of enlightened political engagement, first developed by Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry (1996) through their large-scale analysis of US citizens' characteristics and attitudes. These scholars argue that sustaining democratic systems requires citizens to develop two key characteristics: political engagement and democratic enlightenment. Whereas the former includes "behaviors and cognitions necessary for identifying political preferences, understanding politics, and pursuing interests" (p. 11), such as voting and discussing political affairs, the latter involves "qualities of citizenship that encourage understanding of and adherence to the norms and principles of democracy" (p. 5-6), such as religious tolerance and a commitment to shared governance.

There are numerous ways to conceptualize civic and political engagement, but like other scholars of social studies education (e.g., Parker, 2003; Webeck, Hasty, & French, 2012), we support Nie et al.'s conception of enlightened political engagement because we believe its broad enactment – though gradual in effecting change – could support the development of a more equitable, peaceful, and robust democratic society. Tightly aligned with Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) notion of participatory citizenship, it is also compatible with their conception of justice-oriented citizenship – positioning civic actors as potential change agents.

Furthermore, during times of political polarization, we argue, openness to ideas that differ from one's own – i.e., moving beyond mere tolerance – is an important element of democratic enlightenment. Dewey (1933) argues that to be open-minded is to be hospitable to new ways of understanding and accepting of the limitations of one's own perspective. This does not mean individuals are empty-minded or blindly accepting of new ideas; rather they are prepared to entertain different perspectives and not to cling too tightly to their own (Rodgers,

2002). In the political domain, this means that individuals are willing to revise their opinions and stances – and to consider reasoning and information that may challenge their current views.

Thus, we define open-minded political engagement (OMPE) as *the propensity to explore and participate in political affairs while maintaining a willingness to adjust one's political views*.

Our exploration of how OMPE develops is informed by several overlapping theories of learning, including those related to social cognition (Bandura, 1997), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), motivation (Eccles, 2005), and intergroup contact (Allport, 1954). First, social cognitive theory argues that observation is vital to learning and cognitive shifts – and that individuals' self-efficacy, or judgements of their own abilities to competently perform certain tasks, affect their motivation to engage in such tasks. Various experiences can influence self-efficacy, including social modeling (Schunk, 1987) and verbal encouragement (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Cox, 1986), and educators' approaches to political issues during coursework may thus affect students' political attitudes.

Similarly, theorists and researchers exploring communities of practice (e.g., Wenger, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991) have found that participatory group experiences can support not only the development of knowledge but also shifts in attitudes and identity. For instance, Calabrese Barton and Tan (2010) found that low-income youth who completed an interactive, exploratory summer science program developed a greater sense of agency and began to identify as community science experts. Likewise, Christens, Peterson, and Speer (2011) found that involvement in community organizations influenced psychological empowerment. These findings suggest that through participating in certain structured, social learning experiences, young people could become more engaged and open-minded towards political issues.

Meanwhile, the expectancy-value theory posits that individuals are motivated to pursue and perform certain actions based on expectations of success and valuing the tasks at hand. This evidence-based theory (e.g., Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) comports with political science research indicating that two of the most consistent predictors of political participation (e.g., voting, political activism) are political interest and political efficacy (Hirlinger, 1993; Stromback & Shehata, 2010). Whereas political interest is commonly defined as “citizens’ willingness to pay attention to politics at the expense of other endeavors” (Lupia & Philpot, 2005), political efficacy is conceptualized as the extent to which individuals believe that their actions can influence the government (Beaumont, 2010). Researchers have found that political interest increases when individuals participate in political discussions (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2012) and consume informational news (Stromback & Shehata, 2010) and that political efficacy develops when individuals discuss political issues (Morrell, 2005) or participate in authentic or simulated political processes (Ikeda, Kobayashi, & Hoshimoto, 2008; Stroupe & Sabato, 2004). Although these activities occur in some government and social studies courses, they are central features of the Legislative Semester curriculum examined in this paper.

Despite the potential of such experiences, there is little empirical evidence on how political open-mindedness develops. As noted above, studies suggest that adults who are highly engaged in political issues are less open-minded to political ideas that differ from their own (Mutz, 2006). Rather, evidence suggests that those who encounter multiple political perspectives tend to be less politically engaged due to ambivalence about issues or conflict avoidance (e.g., Campbell, 2005; Conover & Searing, 1998; Mutz, 2006). Nonetheless, one hopeful large-scale study in 17 countries suggests that individuals become more politically tolerant through activism (Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003), and another found that when individuals feel “safe” – as

opposed to feeling “threatened” – they are more likely to consider views different from their own (Haas & Cunningham, 2013).

Furthermore, in secondary school classrooms with “open” climates – where students feel comfortable sharing ideas, youth tend to develop civic knowledge (Galston, 2007), civic engagement (Torney-Purta, 2002), and a greater appreciation of political conflict (Campbell, 2009). Although no published classroom-based studies have directly examined how such climates can support OMPE, Allport’s (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory argues that building direct relationships among opposing groups can support mutual respect and understanding among them. This prominent theory, supported by a meta-analysis of 515 studies (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), has inspired numerous exchanges among disparate groups (e.g., ethnic groups), most notably through discussion-based intergroup dialogs (e.g., Walsh, 2006, 2007). Studies of these programs have found that through ongoing discussions, participants can develop a more nuanced appreciation for their own *and* others’ perspectives (Checkoway, 2009). Thus, despite the negative association among adults’ open-mindedness and engagement, it may be possible for a supportive educational environment to foster OMPE by enabling young people to formulate their positions on issues and deliberate with others who hold opposing views. The study described herein examines this issue.

Political Simulations

Political simulations, long categorized as a “best practice” in civic education (e.g., Levine, 2007), involve many of the experiences that researchers have found to be related to the development of political engagement and political open-mindedness. Wright-Maley (2015) defines simulations as “pedagogically mediated activities used to reflect the dynamism of real

life events, processes, or phenomena, in which students participate as active agents whose actions are consequential to the outcome of the activity” (p.8). During political simulations, students typically have opportunities to voice perspectives on controversial issues, work together with peers, consider others’ opinions, and take action to resolve conflicts, and numerous studies indicate that these experiences can facilitate positive attitudinal changes (e.g., Author, 20xx; Patterson, 1997). As social learning theorists point out (e.g., Rogoff, 2003; Wenger, 1998), individuals have historically developed skills, knowledge, and values through interactive experiences with others, and educators can shape and guide such experiences (Author, 20xx).

Since the 1960s, researchers have examined and documented how political simulations can support students’ political efficacy (Boocock, 1968; Dressner, 1990), interest in social studies and politics (Festa, 1976; Author, 20xx), and content learning (Frederking, 2005), and research in this area has continued to expand. Bernstein (2008) found that college students who participated in a political simulation made significant gains in political efficacy and political attention, and in a study of students simulating various roles in a political campaign, Mariani (2007) found that participants developed greater interest in campaigns, course content, and politics in general. Likewise, Morrell (2005) found that students’ internal political efficacy increased when they participated in a simulation involving mock voting and substantial deliberation – but not when they voted without also deliberating issues. In addition, prior studies of the Legislative Semester suggest that participants develop more political interest (Ganzler, 2010; Hess & McAvoy, 2013) although they participate in widely different ways (Reimer, 2002). Despite the plethora of research on political simulations, no prior published research examines the extent to which these experiences can support the development of students’ political open-mindedness. The research describes below begins to address this gap.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

- (1) To what extent and in what ways does students' participation in the Legislative Semester relate to changes in their political engagement and political open-mindedness?
- (2) How does the political engagement and open-mindedness of different youth change (or not) as they participate in the Legislative Semester?
- (3) In what ways do teachers facilitate the Legislative Semester in ways that support or hinder students' political engagement and open-mindedness?

Methods and Data Sources

To address these questions, we gathered and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data in high school classrooms during the fall 2014 semester. Our main research sites were two Midwestern high schools that offered the Legislative Semester instead of a traditional government course (LS sites), Green High School and Gomez High School. (All names of locations and individuals are pseudonyms.) Whereas Green required students to complete the LS in 10th grade, Gomez made the course optional for juniors and seniors. For purposes of comparison, we included another Midwestern school site, Standard High School, where students completed a traditional required government course. We selected these research sites because the educators in these settings stated (in their own words and terms) that they aimed to enact courses that supported students' open-minded political engagement, as conceptualized above.

In all three schools, we administered surveys to students, conducted interviews with students and teachers, and observed class meetings. At the beginning and end of the term, participants (N=405) completed surveys measuring their political engagement (political efficacy,

interest, expected future political participation, and frequency of out-of-class political discussion), political open-mindedness, strength of political opinions (labeled “political identity”), and background characteristics. Most survey items were adapted from the American National Election Study (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990), the Civic Education Study (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001), and studies of the expectancy-value model (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). To measure political open-mindedness, we used several new, pilot-tested items. (Our pilot test involved administering 10 items to 30 adolescents, asking them for feedback about the items’ meaning and clarity, and then selecting the 4 items that students’ comments indicated were closely aligned with our conception of political open-mindedness.) Appendix B includes the items we used to measure each construct.

Interviews and observations provided more specific information about how certain classroom experiences related to students’ levels of political engagement and open-mindedness. At Green, we observed five different classes about twice per week, and at Gomez, we observed major events, such as the committee hearing day, as well as five meetings of each class. Meanwhile, at Standard, we observed three different classes five times. At all schools, we recorded field notes documenting teachers’ pedagogy, students’ interactions, and time spent on various activities. Our notes attended closely to the tone and substance of verbal exchanges and how teachers managed political disagreements and rivalries.

In addition, we conducted one-on-one interviews with 32 students from Green, 12 students from Gomez, and five students from Standard. We purposefully selected student interviewees (Patton, 1990) to provide diversity, particularly regarding political perspectives, sex, and initial levels of political engagement. Interview questions examined issues related to our research questions, including students’ levels of political engagement and open-mindedness and

their civic learning experiences in school. Some questions asked students to reflect on specific experiences during class, such as debates, discussions, or other instances of political disagreement (see Appendix C for sample student interview questions).

To examine quantitative changes in students' political engagement and open-mindedness during the semester, we conducted principal component analysis (PCA), t-tests, and OLS regression analyses with our survey data. Whereas PCA enabled us to identify robust quantitative indicators for our key constructs, we used t-tests to explore longitudinal changes in political engagement and open-mindedness and to compare students from the LS sites to those at Standard High. Then we conducted regression analyses to further examine these changes and the influence of background characteristics. (To reduce the number of control variables in the regressions, we created a "home education environment" composite score by combining both parents' education levels and the reported number of books at home.)

To analyze interview transcripts and observation field notes, we conducted constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1999), which involved several rounds of coding, recording and sharing analytic memos, and research team discussions. We undertook different but parallel processes to examine (1) pedagogy and (2) student learning in our research sites. To examine pedagogy, we read through our observation and teacher interview data, conducted open coding, and wrote memos on prospective codes and their relationships to one another – during the data collection process and for several months afterwards. Through discussion, we decided how to revise, narrow, and define these codes. For example, when analyzing teacher challenges through our observation and interview data, we developed five broad categories (e.g., management procedures, colleague collaboration, building students' political knowledge) and 31 sub-codes. Initially these analyses enabled us to summarize teachers' pedagogy.

Meanwhile, we conducted open coding with student interview data, beginning with our initial constructs (e.g., political interest, internal political efficacy, political open-mindedness) and then developing sub-codes. For example, within the political open-mindedness category, we coded some interview segments as relating to othering/sides, the use of evidence, strong opinions, and assigned roles. Through ongoing memos and discussions, we refined and combined some codes and analyzed relationships among those that remained, and we also explored how these codes related to our findings about teachers' pedagogy. Finally, drawing on analyses of our qualitative and quantitative data, we drafted and refined our major claims, which are detailed below.

Findings

Characteristics of Students and Teachers

Our student sample was diverse and included some differences between those who participated in the Legislative Semester and those who did not (see Table 1). Students in the LS and the comparison site had parents with similar levels of education, but LS students were more likely to be female and non-white. The interviewees largely reflected the demographic populations of their school samples. All the students that we interviewed at Gomez were Latino/a, seven of 32 interviewees at Green were non-white (two African-American, two Asian-American, one Latino/a, and two biracial), and the five interviewees at Standard were white. Data from our observations indicated that at all three schools, the majority of students identified as politically liberal (similar to the voting patterns in their metro areas), but at least one in five students expressed predominantly conservative views. (We did not ask all students about their political opinions, so these are estimates based on our observations and teachers' comments.)

All teachers were white but had varying levels of experience. Gomez’s two male teachers, Mr. Williams and Mr. Stewart, were both in their mid-40s, and each had over 15 years of experience. They had worked together for over a decade and had brought the Legislative Semester to Gomez in the early 2000s after participating in professional development with the curriculum’s developer, retired teacher Steve Arnold. Meanwhile, Green’s teachers – Ms. Alton, Ms. Weinberg, and Mr. Hill – were all under 35. The latter two teachers had fewer than five years of classroom experience, and all three teachers were in their second year of teaching the Legislative Semester, which had been adopted by their school’s previous government teachers three years earlier. Standard’s one government teacher, Mrs. Dillon, was in her mid-50s and had spent nearly two decades teaching. Her class was fairly traditional, involving interactive lectures as well as some discussions and small projects. Despite these differences in teachers’ backgrounds and school settings, all were energetic classroom leaders and expressed firm commitments to preparing students for well-informed political engagement.

Table 1

Description of Samples from Participating Schools (Total N=405)

Characteristics	Green HS (N=224)	Gomez HS (N=94)	Standard HS (N=87)	Total Sample (N=405)
% Female	54	46	41*	50
% Non-white Minority	22	96	17***	38
% GPA 3.5 or higher	74	68	56**	69
% Mothers Graduated College	75	6	54	55
% Fathers Graduated College	74	6	50	53
% Under 20 Books at Home	9	31	29*	19
% Plan to Attend 4-Year College	90	86	72***	85

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05 (Indicating significant differences between Standard HS and the two other schools combined.)

Teachers' Pedagogical Strategies and Challenges

Overview of classroom pedagogy. Teachers in this study used some similar strategies to support students' engagement in substantive discussions of public issues, but overall, the LS courses featured interactive discussions more regularly than the classes at Standard. Mrs. Dillon's Standard classes emphasized the function and structure of government through exploring textbook chapters and listening to teacher lectures about the federal government. Aware of the importance of student participation, she did structure interactive activities, such as mock trials and discussions, but these were not regular features of the course. Once during the semester, she asked students to participate in a "fishbowl" discussion, where they observe and analyze peers having a productive discussion, and to prepare students for this, she provided them a handout detailing the differences between dialog and debate – emphasizing the importance of dialog in her classroom. In October, she guided students through a mock trial of Edward Snowden, but only about six students participated actively in the trial, with the others serving as silent jury members (Field notes, October 28, 2014).

Drawing on current events, there were occasional teacher-led discussions. Mrs. Dillon had established rules emphasizing that students must respect each other's views, and exchanges tended to remain polite and teacher-dominated. By the end of the semester, students did not appear to consider or respond to one another's points, but a handful did vocalize their opinions (Field notes, December 3, 2014). To help students develop their political identities, Mrs. Dillon designed a lecture about the political parties, including significant third parties, and then asked students to complete a "political spectrum" survey and write a paper about their likely party membership. Her hope was that this experience enabled them to feel connected to the political system and its major organizations (Interview, September 18, 2014). Overall, the government

course at Standard involved a variety of activities aimed at developing students’ political identities and engagement, but the emphasis appeared to be on learning about the fundamental structure of the government.

On the other hand, teachers at LS sites made “civil discourse” a central goal and activity of their courses and enabled students to practice this continually. Before exploring the structure of government, the course involved 2-3 weeks of students using parliamentary procedure to debate controversial issues, such as community-police relations. Building on this foundation of respectful interaction and sharing perspectives on issues, the rest of the semester involved choosing a political party, electing party leaders, writing bills on self-selected issues, discussing their own and classmates’ bills, and considering how the federal government works, including how it differs from the LS (see Appendix A and Table 2).

Table 2

Topics of Selected Bills Debated in “Full Session” at Legislative Semester Schools

Gomez High School	Green High School
Ban the Death Penalty	Revise Obamacare
Clean Air Act	Cut National Debt
Welfare Reform	Abolish the Death Penalty
Ban Weapons Sales to Foreign Countries	Net Neutrality
Legalize Prostitution	Decriminalize Drugs
Raise the Minimum Wage	Same Sex Marriage
Increase Funding for Stem Cell Research	War Against Poverty

Figure 1 summarizes the overall structure, goals, and pedagogy of the Legislative Semester. In the center is a chronological list of major events in the curriculum, including the day when students declare their political parties and the Full Session, when all classes of the Legislative Semester met for large, inclusive debates. The elected student Rules Committee, noted alongside these events, met outside of class and played an important role in managing the issues that cut across classes, such as choosing issues for Full Session (e.g., banning the death

penalty, welfare reform, net neutrality). The figure also includes major goals mentioned by nearly every teacher, such as civic skills (e.g., public speaking, civil discourse) and political attitudes (e.g., political interest, political opinions). Meanwhile, the figure’s outer rings connote contextual factors as well as teachers’ pedagogy, specifically the ongoing tension they faced between managing students’ participation (e.g., giving assignments, directing student learning) and fostering autonomous civic engagement (e.g., letting students make their own choices).

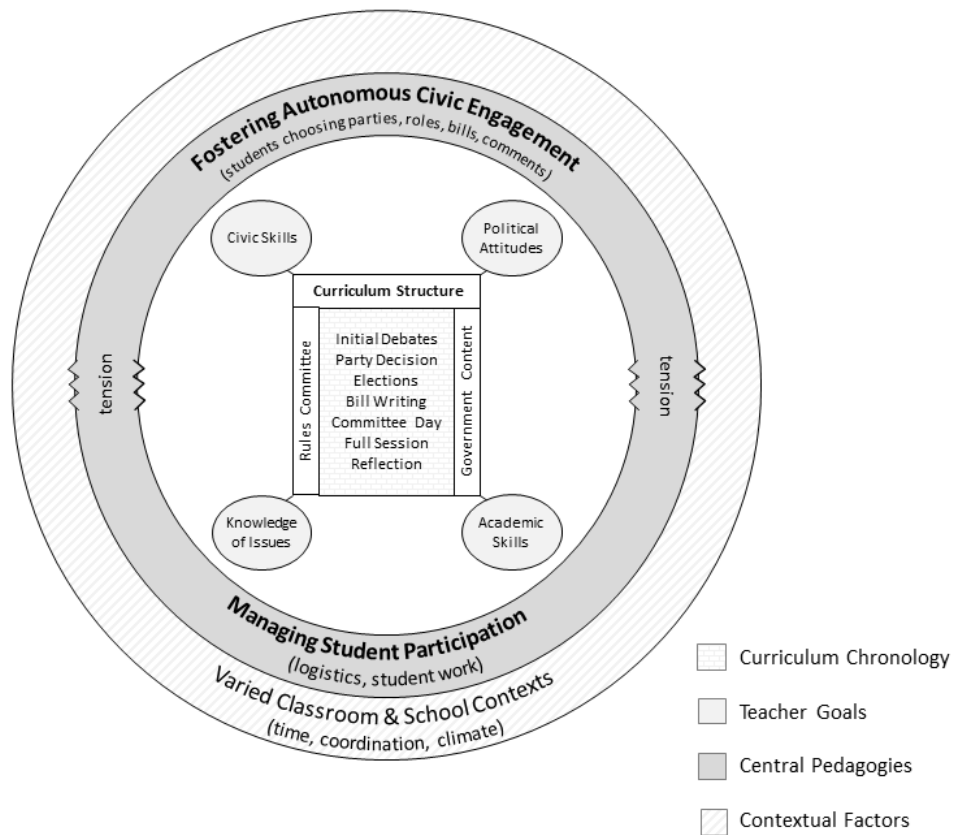


Figure 1. Conceptual model of structure, goals, and pedagogy of the Legislative Semester

Indeed, this tension was among the primary challenges that teachers encountered when teaching in the LS program. Ms. Weinberg, for example, told us that she thought many of students' bills portrayed a superficial understanding of the issues they addressed "because they don't know how to always research it or think about it outside of themselves" (Interview, September 9, 2014). At the same time, though, she acknowledged that there were many student groups for her to manage simultaneously and that intervening would have required not only substantial time but also could have discouraged students' developing sense of autonomy. Other teachers, including Ms. Alton, made similar remarks about this tension. Thus, while teachers were enthusiastic about the curriculum overall, they realized that guiding students through it involved various challenges.

Differences among LS classrooms. Despite these common structures and practices in LS classrooms, there were several differences between the two schools' programs and among each school's teachers, and these appear to have contributed to different student learning outcomes (detailed in the following sections). First, whereas the teachers at Gomez frequently asked students to read from a government textbook, students at Green were not asked to do so. Secondly, although all five LS teachers emphasized the importance of civil discourse, they pursued this end through different means. Two teachers at Green expected students to use formal parliamentary procedure daily throughout the semester, as the LS curriculum suggests, but both Gomez teachers and one Green teacher took a more fluid approach to managing class.

For example, during the vast majority of our observations of Ms. Alton and Mr. Hill, these teachers appointed individual students to serve as the "chair" of class for the day. Then, while wielding a gavel, this student would propose an agenda for the class period (pre-designed

by the teacher), call for a vote on the agenda, and sit at the front of the room while moving through the agenda and recognizing fellow students to speak (e.g., addressing a peer as “Representative Miller”). This structure provided numerous students with leadership opportunities, but at times these formal procedures appeared to discourage the participation of some students who disliked this enforced rhythm of interaction. Thus, Ms. Weisberg, Mr. Williams, and Mr. Stewart opted to use parliamentary procedure in class only occasionally, usually on the eve of grade-level interactions in which student self-governance required familiarity with such practices (i.e., Committee Hearing Day, Full Session; see Appendix A).

Another difference among teachers of the Legislative Semester was the extent to which they emphasized students’ party identities. In both schools’ programs, teachers reserved about 30 minutes of class time early in the semester (around week 3 or 4) for Party Declaration Day, in which each student stood before their class and declared their political party while physically pinning their names along a left-right political spectrum and explaining their reasons for doing so. Students’ stated rationales for their party identities often involved positions on issues previously discussed in class, such as LGBTQ rights, increasing the minimum wage, offshore drilling, and racial profiling (e.g., Field notes, September 29, 2014). Following this declaration, teachers at Green encouraged political party solidarity and coordination, requiring students to sit in class by party and having regular partisan caucuses to discuss their parties’ positions on issues (e.g., Field notes, October 1, 2014). Mr. Hill took this partisan emphasis one step further, emphasizing that Party Declaration Day was “the magical day where everything changes.” He explained further to his students:

You are no longer thinking about yourself, but your party. ‘I am a Democrat and these are the issues that we care about, I am Republican and these are the issues we care about, or I

am an Independent and both parties have it wrong, but I'll be caucusing with the Democrats or the Republicans' (Field notes, September 29, 2014).

Although the tone in his class was positive and energetic – with some opportunities for bipartisan collaboration, he was more likely than other teachers in the study to subtly or directly stoke competition between the parties.

At one point, Mr. Hill joked with students about “revenge bill killing” during student-led committee hearings (Field notes, November 25, 2014). Later in an interview, he expressed discomfort about playing devil’s advocate and raising new points for discussion, preferring to leave this task to the students themselves. Indeed, he was not sure about the importance of fostering political open-mindedness at all: “Should my goal be to make them more open-minded and willing to compromise? I don’t know. I don’t think I’d be good at teaching that because I don’t know how good I do that in my own life.” (Interview, February 13, 2015).

In similar ways, Ms. Alton emphasized interparty competition, but she was more encouraging of minority voices than Mr. Hill. During in-class debates, she would regularly ask members of the Republican Party to express their views despite being consistently outnumbered. In one session, she suggested that the Republican students win the vote (which they did) by taking advantage of a divided Democratic caucus (Field notes, October 14, 2014). Ms. Alton’s comments during interviews indicate that she feared members of the minority party would “shut down” and not “put their voice in the mix” if not explicitly encouraged to participate:

Then you have one or two kids . . . on the other side. I purposely take that opportunity to put my arms around those kids that are standing alone. Because of my personal politics, I don’t agree with that stance [usually], and so it feels like, “Really, you guys?” inside. But I know I have to put that aside because what I see potentially happening in that moment

is that those kids see themselves as the other in that ‘nobody agrees with what I think, and nobody’s going to listen to me.’ That just puts up . . . the shield . . . Then [they] aren’t as available to hear other perspectives that might be more moderate or that might help them be more compassionate to a different perspective (Interview, September 22, 2014).

As in the other Green LS classrooms, Alton’s students still sat by party daily, but she directly asked students to think beyond their party affiliations.

On the other hand, teachers at Gomez did not require students to sit in class by party, and they rarely asked students to hold party caucuses. Rather than asking students to speak primarily from their own perspectives, as at Green, Mr. Williams and Mr. Stewart regularly played devil’s advocate and encouraged students to do the same. For example, if a debate or discussion seemed one-sided, Mr. Williams would assume the role of “Left-Wing Larry” or “Right-Wing Raúl” in order to present a different perspective or new information (Field notes, August 28, 2014). These different practices among classrooms may have played a role in the degree to which students developed certain political attitudes.

Students’ Development of Political Engagement

Analyses of our quantitative and qualitative data suggest that students who participated in the LS curriculum had greater gains in political engagement than students in the more traditional government class. Many of these positive changes in students’ political attitudes were related to their numerous opportunities to explore a variety of political issues with their peers.

Quantitative findings on students’ political engagement. Our quantitative analyses indicate that participating in the Legislative Semester was associated with gains in expected future political participation, political interest, internal political efficacy, and frequency of political discussion (see Table 3). Specifically, results of our OLS regressions show that students

in the LS had end-of-semester expected future political participation that was nearly .18 standard deviations higher than that of government students at Standard High, controlling for home education environment, sex, GPA, age, minority status, and initial levels of expected future political participation and political identity ($p < .001$).

Table 3

Standardized Coefficients (and Standard Errors) of OLS Regression Models Examining Changes in Students' Political Engagement

Independent Variables	Political Interest, Time 2 (N=398)	Internal Pol. Efficacy, Time 2 (N=398)	Pol. Discussion Freq., Time 2 (N=398)	Expected Pol. Particip., Time 2 (N=397)
Home Ed Environment	-.134 (.011)**	-.037 (.010)	.046 (.015)	-.068 (.011)
Non-white Minority	-.003 (.085)	.013 (.079)	.007 (.118)	-.024 (.085)
Female	.020 (.070)	-.046 (.069)	-.013 (.098)	0.59 (.070)
GPA	.037 (.034)	.051 (.032)	-.032 (.047)	.018 (.034)
Age	-.076 (.047)~	-.102 (.043)*	-.035 (.064)	-.005 (.047)
Pol. Interest, T1	.656 (.041)***	--	--	--
Internal Pol. Effic., T1	--	.598 (.039)***	--	--
Pol. Discussion Freq., T1	--	--	.526 (.041)***	--
Expected Pol. Particip., T1	--	--	--	.601 (.043)***
Political ID, Time 1	.075 (.044)*	.155 (.040)***	.119 (.055)**	.108 (.044)**
LS Class	.189 (.091)***	.229 (.083)***	.133 (.122)**	.175 (.090)***
Constant	1.35 (.317)***	1.32***	1.282 (.419)**	.840 (.315)**
Adjusted R ²	.575***	.573***	.362***	.504***

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, ~ $p < .1$

Our regression analyses also indicated that, controlling for various background characteristics and initial political engagement levels, students in the LS had substantially greater gains in political interest ($\beta=.189$; $p<.001$), internal political efficacy ($\beta=.229$; $p<.001$), and frequency of out-of-class political discussion ($\beta=.119$; $p<.001$) than students in the more traditional government class. (For the models that examined students' political interest, internal political efficacy, and expected future political participation at Time 2, the variables in each model explained more than half the variance of the outcome variable. In the model examining the frequency of out-of-class discussions at Time 2, the variables in the model explained about 36 percent of the variance.) Furthermore, when we conducted regression analyses that separately compared student outcomes at each LS school to the comparison school and controlled for the same set of background variables, our findings were virtually the same (with only slightly different β values). Nonetheless, we also found that participating in the LS was unrelated to students' external political efficacy. Thus, whereas the LS experience appears to have strengthened students' likelihood of pursuing political activities, it did not necessarily support their belief that these actions will effect political change.

There are several other notable findings from these quantitative analyses. First, in the regression models examining students' gains in political interest, internal political efficacy, expected future political participation, and frequency of out-of-class political discussions, we found that students' political identity (i.e., strength of political opinions, see Appendix B for items) was positively related to all four outcome variables. This suggests that students who entered these government classes with stronger political opinions were, on average, even more likely than other students to become increasingly engaged politically during their experiences in these courses.

Another notable finding is that students who reported being from homes with higher parental education levels and greater numbers of books (i.e., the home education environment composite variable) developed less political interest than other students ($\beta = -.134$; $p < .01$). This suggests that government classes were especially important for bolstering the political interest of students from lower SES backgrounds – and that, given our other findings, the LS was especially valuable for the civic engagement of these young people. Overall, these findings suggest that the LS curriculum provides students with experiences that support various dimensions of political engagement and could enhance their likelihood of becoming involved in political action. The qualitative findings below examine these experiences more closely.

Qualitative findings on students' political engagement. Our analyses of data from interviews and observations begin to illuminate the processes involved in LS students' increasing political engagement – and the lack thereof at Standard High. Most students in the programs at Gomez and Green participated actively in political debates, discussions, and other activities (see Appendix A) – and thus had numerous opportunities to engage in thoughtful deliberations about political issues that they and/or their peers cared about. Although some seldom participated in full class discussions, the small group work of writing bills, preparing for committee hearings, and party caucuses provided ways for every student to have their voices heard. Furthermore, all students were required to speak to their classmates to declare their parties, give practice speeches, and present their bills. At Standard, on the other hand, few students had the chance to openly express their views and explore issues that personally interested them. The following broad claims are warranted from our analyses.

First, when students had experiences exploring political issues independently and with peers, they became more confident in their political knowledge as well as their ability to analyze

political issues. This greater confidence, or internal political efficacy, made them more interested in seeking political information and exchanging political ideas with others. In interviews, students regularly told us that their experiences in the LS classes had made them more interested in political issues and more confident in their ability to learn about and understand them.

For example, Ernesto, a senior at Gomez, told us that in the LS, he had started to learn about issues that mattered to him, such as immigration. He had begun to read more news, especially online, and initiate political discussions with his mother and girlfriend in ways that he had not done previously. For the first time, he believed that his political opinions were well-informed and that “somebody else should hear what I have to say” (Interview, December 16, 2014). In one interview, he told us about a recent time when he was learning about an issue on television news and then “I had to go pick up my girlfriend from work and I actually put [the news] on the radio so I could listen to it. . . . I kind of want to do that more” (Interview, December 16, 2014). Ernesto said that before taking the class, he never discussed politics but that now he did so regularly.

Similarly, Helen, a student at Green, indicated that the LS had enhanced her interest in political issues. At the beginning of the semester, she told us, she identified as a Democrat “but I didn’t really know why,” noting that the course was helping her to “understand my position a little bit more” (Interview, October 14, 2014). By the end of the semester, she had switched parties and was caucusing with the Republicans. In her view, the experiences she had had in class examining a range of political issues had “definitely” fostered the habits and skills required for exploring such topics, such as considering the bias of articles that she found online. Several weeks after the course had ended, she told us the course had had a lasting effect on her engagement in political issues:

I think a lot of the debates that I have at, like, dinner with my family definitely increased because of the government class, and now my brother is in that [LS class], so it's increased a bunch of times (Interview, March 12, 2015).

Furthermore, LS students' increased confidence in their own political knowledge and communication skills strengthened their desire to be involved in governmental decision-making processes. Hilary, one of Mr. Stewart's students at Gomez, indicated that her experiences in the class had made her much more willing to share her political perspectives and more likely to become engaged in politics. Before the class, she told us, "I never wanted to get into [political discussions] because I – either I didn't know what to say or I felt like maybe I would just end up like, trying to raise my voice instead of like, getting my point proven" (Interview, November 19, 2014). By the time we spoke mid-semester, however, she had engaged in substantial issue-oriented political research and discussion and had not only become "more willing to talk about politics" but also aware that "[t]here always has to be a reason and some type of evidence to support your like – your statement" (Interview, November 19, 2014). Moreover, by the end of the course, she expressed a commitment to participating in the political process:

[B]efore, I really didn't care about voting or any of that stuff, but for sure, I want to be that person who votes – that actually cares how the government is run and everything (Interview, December 16, 2014).

Several other students indicated that the course had affected them in similar ways. For example, Ernesto shared that the course had enabled him to "definitely feel more comfortable" talking about politics "because, like, I'm able to say what I have to say but it's, like, accurate [and] intelligent" (Interview, November 19, 2014). His enthusiasm for political action was so

strong that he even thought he might “make a career out of it” (Interview, November 19, 2014). One of Ernesto’s classmates, Manuel, whose peers elected him Speaker of the House (which required moderating the Full Session), said that his experiences in the LS had been “kind of an epiphany” and that he had deeply enjoyed hearing his classmates’ varied perspectives on a wide variety of issues. In addition, he thought the experience had definitely influenced his perceptions of his potential role in the political sphere:

Since we started learning about government and everything . . . we started watching [broadcasted] debates about how Republican and Democrats tackle issues and everything. I always felt that my opinion was kind of the same as some of them, and I always felt like my voice should be heard because I—since mine is the same as them, that means millions of other people have the same kind of like, thought process I do on like, issues. So, that kind of made me want to be a politician (Interview, November 19, 2014).

Thus, Manuel’s growing political understanding and awareness had begun to convince him that he would enjoy being involved in political affairs.

On the other hand, students in Standard High’s government class expended considerable effort examining the mechanics of government through readings and lectures but had only limited opportunities to explore political issues of interest, consider differing perspectives, and have their views heard. By the end of the class, many of their comments reflected cynicism and disinterest towards political involvement. Martin, one of Mrs. Dillon’s students, explained his views:

What I’ve learned through this class is that politics are really jumbled and really hard to get through. If you want to accomplish something, there’s a ton of red tape and stuff like

that that you need to get through. . . . After this class, I am probably less likely to vote. . . . Because I thought – like, before, I thought, like, I mean, one vote matters, but like, a lot of people don't vote, so the world hasn't ended yet because a lot of people don't vote (Interview, January 12, 2015).

Martin's perceptions of the challenges of political change appear to have overwhelmed any belief that he could make a difference, and his experiences in a class that offered him little voice may have contributed to this feeling of disempowerment. This offers a stark contrast to the perspectives of students in the Legislative Semester, whose numerous opportunities to engage in political discussion and simulated political action had fostered greater political engagement. Although many students in the LS, just like Martin, expressed doubts about their ability to influence authentic political processes (hence their static external political efficacy, as noted above), their experiences engaging repeatedly with numerous peer-selected issues seems to have sparked their overall political engagement substantially.

Students' Development of Political Open-Mindedness

Analyses of our quantitative and qualitative data also indicated that students who participated in the LS curriculum had greater gains in political open-mindedness than students in the traditional government class at Standard High. However, we found that outcomes for students in different LS classrooms were not always the same, and these differences may have been related to classroom-level factors. Below are details about these findings.

Quantitative findings on political open-mindedness. Results of OLS regression analyses indicate that, on average, students who participated in the Legislative Semester course had end-of-semester political open-mindedness that was nearly .15 standard deviations higher

than those of students who completed the more typical government class, controlling for home education environment, sex, GPA, age, and initial levels of political open-mindedness and political identity ($p < .01$, see Table 4). We also found that if students had stronger beginning-of-semester political identities, they were less likely to become increasingly open-minded ($p < .05$). These overall findings, common across school sites (see Table 4, Models B and C), suggest that providing students numerous opportunities to hear differing perspectives, as they did in the LS, helped to expand their willingness to revise their own political views, but they also indicate that entering the program with strong political opinions can reduce this outcome.

Table 4

Standardized Coefficients (and Standard Errors) of OLS Regression Models Examining Changes in Students' Political Open-Mindedness

Independent Variables	Political Open-Mindedness, Time 2			
	Entire Sample (N=397)	Gomez & Standard (N=175)	Green & Standard (N=297)	
	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D
Home Ed Environ	-.018 (.010)	-.039 (.017)	.058 (.013)	.054 (.013)
Female	.059 (.065)	.055 (.105)	.072 (.074)	.066 (.074)
Age	.108 (.042)*	-.075 (.100)	.084 (.059)	.074 (.059)
GPA	-.003 (.032)	.036 (.048)	-.046 (.038)	-.041 (.037)
Pol. Identity, T1	-.123(.041)*	-.002 (.057)	-.161 (.040)**	-.162 (.040)**
Open-Mindedness, T1	.534 (.046)***	.507 (.068)***	.569 (.051)***	.567 (.051)***
LS Class	.146 (.081)**	.268 (.154)**	.120 (.099)*	.154 (.102)**
Mr. Hill's Class	--	--	--	-.116 (.102)*
Constant	1.619 (.319)***	2.076 (.533)***	1.637 (.378)***	1.684 (.375)***
Adjusted R ²	.357***	.372***	.365***	.375***

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, ~ $p < .1$

Nonetheless, certain school and classroom environments had different effects on the development of political open-mindedness. For example, students at Gomez experienced a more positive shift in political open-mindedness than did students at Green (see Table 4, Models B and C) – with an effect size more than twice as large. Furthermore, we found that being in Mr. Hill’s class was associated with decreased end-of-semester levels of political open-mindedness, controlling for background variables, initial levels of political identity and open-mindedness, and being in the LS. Thus, it appears that students’ experiences at Green, especially in Mr. Hill’s class, were less conducive to fostering political open-mindedness than students’ experiences at Gomez. In the qualitative analyses that follow, we examine possible explanations for these different outcomes.

Qualitative findings on political open-mindedness. Overall, our qualitative data indicate that having many opportunities to openly and respectfully exchange political ideas with peers supported students’ development of political open-mindedness. Students at both Gomez and Green regularly participated in discussions and debates about a range of controversial issues, such as stem cell research, and in these contexts they had many opportunities to have their views challenged and to revise those views. Hilary from Gomez explained her own development as follows:

I’m more open-minded to listening to others than before. Like, I’m pretty sure before the class, I was a whole lot more stubborn about trying to get my point across, but now, you know, I’m learning, take a deep breath. Listen to others. Common ground. Maybe something, work it out. Not just try to drill my ideas into somebody else’s head (Interview, December 16, 2015).

Likewise, at Green, Helen had numerous experiences reconsidering her own views by listening to her peers' perspectives. When preparing for Committee Hearing Day at the beginning of the semester, she thought that she knew how she would vote on each bill, but "it turned out that a lot of my opinions were kind of swayed by the Republican side, so I ended up voting more Republican on a lot of the bills" (Interview, December 11, 2014). Nearly every student that we interviewed from Green and Gomez could recall at least one issue on which they had changed their minds during the semester, and this experience likely contributed to their general willingness to consider perspectives that differed from their own.

Despite the numerous structures within the LS curriculum that provided opportunities for students to consider diverse political perspectives, students' experiences in different schools and classrooms may have facilitated different outcomes for their open-mindedness. For example, the comments of some Green students suggested that sitting by party on a daily basis emphasized partisan differences and may have limited openness to ideas from across party lines. In one interview, Eliana, a strong Democrat, indicated that she had developed a stereotype of Republicans, suggesting that "you can tell the difference" between members of different parties and then linking this to the layout of her classroom:

Well, I mean, we're always divided, right. So you see one side of the room and you see the other side of the room, and I think on just one side of the room you see a lot more diversity, a lot more . . . and then you see kind of a group who is more fortunate or more religious and that's kind of the other side, I don't know (Interview, January 13, 2015).

Whereas some students accepted partisan seating as an ideological guide, some grew to question its value. Mel, who told us he really enjoyed the class, said that, "probably the only think that I

really disliked was the separation of the two parties.” He described this classroom structure as “kind of wrong” because it emphasized differences among his peers when “a lot of us were in the middle” (Interview, January 20, 2015).

This seating arrangement as well as the predominance of student-led discussions may have concretized ideological differences and sparked rivalries rather than collaborative deliberation – an experience that climaxed at the Full Session. Reflecting on the latter, Jerry, one of Mr. Hill’s students, spoke of his experiences “working like a team” with his fellow Republicans and, when uncertain about a bill, voting for his party to “get a *victory* in one of the bills” (Interview, January 16, 2015; emphasis added). Such behavior and language suggest the presence of a competitive, partisan climate at Green.

On the other hand, students at Gomez did not sit in class by party and rarely mentioned partisan competition, instead focusing more on the substance of the issues. In one interview, Hilary mentioned that watching Mr. Stewart play Devil’s Advocate – role-playing as “Right-Wing Roberto” and “Left-Wing Leonard” – had helped her attend to the reasoning behind two sides of every issue (Interview, December 16, 2014), not necessarily the party. Manuel explained further that the process of observing and participating in open, non-partisan debates had strengthened his sense of political empathy by the middle of the semester:

I learned that instead of looking only from my side of the argument, but to see it through their side of the argument, too [*sic*]. . . . I see what they’re thinking, how they’re seeing this – the way they’re seeing it, so like they’re probably seeing it from a different angle than I am. . . . So then, how they’re feeling about it can make me see – *can make me feel the same way* (Interview, November 5, 2014; emphasis added).

Indeed students from both LS schools said that their experiences in the LS had taught them to engage in civil, respectful discussions about contentious issues – and our observations confirmed these claims. But our analyses suggest that whereas most students at Gomez thoughtfully considered their peers’ differing perspectives, many Green students instead politely heard and responded to peers. Eliana, for instance, was civil in debate but told us that the class “probably made me, like, less open to the other side” (Interview, January 13, 2015).

Nonetheless, our qualitative analyses – like our quantitative findings, suggested that when students began the LS program with milder political opinions, they were more likely to remain or become more politically open-minded. Helen, for example, at the beginning of the semester didn’t “really know where I am on the [political] spectrum. I’m, like, more moderate than anything” (Interview, September 23, 2014). On Party Declaration Day at the end of September, she declared as a Democrat, but through listening to her peers in numerous debates, she switched parties in January. Similarly, Mel declared as a moderate Democrat in September but remained flexible throughout the term (Interviews, September 22, 2014; December 4, 2014). Eliana, on the other hand, had strong political convictions at the beginning of the semester and, after encountering various value conflicts with her peers, considered herself to be even more liberal by the end of the course (Interview, January 15, 2015).

While students in the LS were hearing a variety of opinions on numerous issues, those in Standard High’s government class rarely shared their views on political issues so had few chances to expand their political perspectives. On occasions when controversial issues were raised, students’ inexperience examining such topics made for fairly low-energy, narrow discussions. In one interview, Lance explained that, “At times I felt like I was not oversharing, but I was the only one sharing. So, it’s kind of hard to keep that sort of discussion open with one

person” (Interview, January 12, 2015). Similarly, Mary told us that class debates usually involved only a small handful of students, and when we asked her about the dynamics of political disagreements in class, she indicated that her classmates did not listen to each other and that she had learned “how to nicely tell them that you don’t really want to speak with them” (Interview, January 12, 2015). Given that Standard’s government course included more typical classroom activities, such as lectures and small projects, students had not focused on practicing civil discourse and engaging with divergent viewpoints. Thus, compared to students in a more traditional government class, those in the LS had many more opportunities to analyze controversial political issues from diverse perspectives, experiences that appear to have strengthened their political open-mindedness.

Discussion

Scholarly Contribution

This study offers several unique contributions to the research literature on civic engagement and learning. First, whereas numerous scholars have previously explored how young people become politically engaged, there has been limited prior research on the development of political open-mindedness or open-minded political engagement. Some earlier work suggests that when individuals are politically open-minded, they are less likely to be politically engaged (Mutz, 2006). However, the study described above challenges this notion, providing evidence that certain experiences, especially repeated opportunities to examine diverse political ideas with peers, can foster the development of both political engagement and political open-mindedness.

Whereas previous research indicates that exposure to multiple perspectives on issues can cause conflict avoidance (Campbell, 2005), our findings suggest other possibilities. Indeed, we

found that repeated, constructive exploration of conflicting political ideas can both facilitate the development of political opinions and reduce the stigma associated with such inevitable conflicts. Such experiences, our findings suggest, could make individuals more likely to consider differing political ideas and pursuits.

Prior scholars (e.g., Haas & Cunningham, 2013) have noted that the emotional and personal “safety” within classroom environments can play an important role in supporting students’ sharing and consideration of various political views, and our study confirms this contention. Furthermore, we found that political open-mindedness was more likely to develop in classrooms where teachers regularly encouraged the expression of minority viewpoints and de-emphasized partisan uniformity. Overall, this study suggests that educators can support open-minded political engagement, and below we expand on the implications of this work for educators and researchers.

Practical Implications

Our findings have numerous implications for educational practice. First, this study’s findings indicate that participating in an extended discussion-based political simulation can support various dimensions of high school students’ political engagement as well as their political open-mindedness (as conceptualized in this paper). However, we also found that having a strong political identity at the beginning of the semester and engaging in partisan activities during the experience may constrain students’ development of political open-mindedness. Furthermore, in classes where teachers emphasized partisanship, students became less open-minded over the course of the semester. Thus, although the structures and experiences during LS can support OMPE, this may not always be the case. Educators interested in fostering adolescents’ open-minded political engagement should aim to facilitate open, civil exchanges of

diverse viewpoints but should avoid encouraging strong partisan loyalties. (They may even consider delaying or eliminating students' identifying their political parties.) Indeed, encouraging students to carefully *listen* – rather than politely hear – may be central for the development of political open-mindedness. Teachers aiming to build multifaceted political understanding should aim to guide such thoughtful civil communication.

Nonetheless, the Legislative Semester can provide an ideal curriculum for ongoing civil and intellectual exchanges among youth about political and social issues. Some educators and school leaders, however, may be hesitant to undertake a program involving multiple class sections and potentially sidelining more traditional content learning. Even so, there are many ways to facilitate open, regular exchanges of ideas among students, including structured academic controversies (Author & Colleagues, 20xx), controversial public issues discussions (Hess, 2009), and seminar discussions (Parker, 2010). It is also possible to include some elements of the Legislative Semester without adopting the entire program. For example, some teachers may choose to have students practice civil discourse, engage in numerous debates, and propose bills for their own classmates to discuss. There are many ways that educators can enhance students' political engagement and political open-mindedness, and this study provides insights into the processes and structures that can support these aims.

Research Implications

Future research should continue to examine various curricula and experiences that could support students' political engagement, political open-mindedness, and other aspects of enlightened political engagement. Indeed, this study and others (e.g., Fehrman & Schutz, 2007; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006) have found that supporting students' external political efficacy can be challenging when students encounter barriers to their politically oriented goals, so it is

important to explore methods of supporting young people's capacity to participate in political activities without becoming overwhelmed by the challenges involved in such action. In addition, whereas the present and prior research have examined students' development of knowledge (Parker, Lo, Yeo, Valencia, Nguyen, Abbott, et al., 2013) and attitudes (e.g., Kahne et al., 2012; Author & Colleagues, 20xx) over short periods of time, there have been few multi-year studies that have explored the potential long-term effects of civic education experiences. Developing a stronger understanding of how certain experiences, in and out of school, can support enlightened political engagement over time could strengthen educators' ability to play a role in ameliorating political polarization and indifference in the US.

Furthermore, given the important role of mass media and social media in shaping and informing individuals' political perspectives and engagement (Prior, 2013; Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014), it is important for researchers to examine how educators can support students' critical news consumption skills and OMPE. Recent research has documented that consistent liberals and consistent conservatives not only have different news sources but are also more likely to hear views similar to their own on Facebook (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014), but it may be possible for educators to help young people seek information beyond their "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2012) by strengthening their understanding of the media landscape. However, even if all students do become more media savvy and have opportunities to openly explore diverse political perspectives, it is certainly possible that political polarization will continue to increase, given the complex causes of these national trends, such as economic and cultural differences between the two major parties (Barber & McCarty, 2015). Thus, to support a robust democratic polity, it would be valuable to explore how and if educational programs can

support understanding across party lines at a time of growing animosity and distrust across these boundaries (Pew, 2016).

And although the effects of educational programs on broad political trends may be limited, it is important to explore the potential of such experiences. Given the promising findings of this and prior studies of the Legislative Semester (Ganzler, 2010; Hess & McAvoy, 2013, 2015), it would be valuable to continue exploring the program, including how students experience and learn from it as well as how educators adopt and adapt it within their schools. To help schools aiming to enhance their students' civic learning, researchers could compare outcomes of the Legislative Semester with other innovative programs, such as the Knowledge in Action project (Parker et al., 2013), Democracy in Action (Colleagues & Author, 20xx), and Project Hip-Hop (Kuttner, 2016). And studies could also explore the initial and ongoing opportunities and challenges involved in launching and maintaining such programs in educational settings with varying institutional constraints. Difficulties involved in introducing such programs, especially the LS – currently functioning in only 12 schools, include logistical, pedagogical, and cultural nuances, and it would be valuable to examine how different institutions manage these. Furthermore, unique adjustments or enhancements of the LS, such as eliminating political parties or holding bill discussions online, could be analyzed for their potential value both beyond and within the program.

Conclusion

Over the past several decades, political polarization in the United States has increased, and this trend is emerging in other nations, as well (Stokes, 2016). The resulting tension not only corresponds with greater acrimony but has also diminished the likelihood of bipartisan compromise and high-quality lawmaking (Epstein & Graham, 2007), so it is important to explore

how individuals and groups with divergent perspectives can learn to consider differing viewpoints and find common ground. Although numerous forces beyond the educational realm contribute to political polarization (Barber & McCarty, 2015), this study suggests that educators can help to plant the seeds of open-minded political engagement by employing certain strategies, such as guiding well-informed discussions of controversial public issues that include a variety of perspectives. Whereas some educators readily engage in such teaching, others avoid raising potentially controversial issues despite their interest in them (Hess, 2004). Thus, if we would like to support students' open-minded political engagement, it is important for policymakers, educational researchers, and teacher educators to consider ways to best support teachers to structure and guide such learning experiences.

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Appendix A**Approximate Schedule of Key Legislative Semester Activities**(For more details, visit www.legislativesemester.com.)

Month	Student Tasks
September	Learn and practice parliamentary procedure. Explore current political issues through debates, discussions, and research. Select topics to develop into bills. Study Constitutional and governmental principles.
October	Form bill-writing groups based on common interests. Conduct group research on selected issues to produce arguments to support bills. Write bills to propose to committees. Explore counter-arguments to proposed bills.
November	Prepare for presentation to committees. Present bills in committees that will discuss and vote on which bills will be forwarded to the “Full Session” (all classes doing the LS) in December/January. Debate merits of bills with fellow students.
December - January	Design speeches and presentations to promote selected bills at the Full Session. Prepare to address arguments against bills. Present, debate, and vote on a variety of issues at Full Session.

Appendix B

Survey Items Related to Key Constructs

Scale & Alpha Values	Item Question(s)/Statement(s)	Response Choices (6 levels unless otherwise indicated)
<p>Political Interest</p> <p>T1 Alpha: .870</p> <p>T2 Alpha: .896</p>	<p><i>Generally speaking, how interested are you in political issues or current events?</i></p> <p><i>How much do you like learning about political issues?</i></p> <p><i>For me, understanding political issues is:</i></p> <p><i>Compared to most of your other activities, how useful is learning about political issues?</i></p>	<p>Not at all Interested – Very Interested</p> <p>Dislike Extremely – Like extremely</p> <p>Not at all Important – Extremely Import.</p> <p>Very useless – Very useful</p>
<p>Internal Political Efficacy</p> <p>T1 Alpha: .841</p> <p>T2 Alpha: .857</p>	<p><i>I often don't feel sure of myself when talking with other people about politics and government. [reverse coded]</i></p> <p><i>I can write clearly about political issues.</i></p> <p><i>I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.</i></p> <p><i>I am confident that I can construct good arguments about political issues.</i></p>	<p>Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree</p> <p>Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree</p> <p>No Understanding – Excellent Underst.</p> <p>Not at all Confident – Extremely Confident</p>
<p>External Political Efficacy</p> <p>T1 Alpha: .746</p> <p>T2 Alpha: .818</p>	<p><i>Public officials care what people like me think.</i></p> <p><i>People like me don't have any say about what the government does. [reverse coded]</i></p> <p><i>If there's a serious local problem, I can do something to get local elected officials to improve the situation.</i></p> <p><i>If there's a serious problem in my state, I can do something to get state elected officials to improve the situation.</i></p> <p><i>If there's a serious national problem, I can do something to get federal elected officials to improve the situation.</i></p>	<p>Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree (for all in this category)</p>
<p>Expected Future Political Participation</p> <p>T1 Alpha: .868</p> <p>T2 Alpha: .867</p>	<p><i>When you think about life after high school, how likely is it that you will do each of the following?</i></p> <p><i>Vote on a regular basis</i></p> <p><i>Volunteer for a political party or candidate</i></p> <p><i>Participate in political activities such as a protest, march, or demonstration</i></p> <p><i>Talk to others about why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates in an election</i></p> <p><i>Participate in an online discussion about a political issue or candidate</i></p>	<p>Not Likely at All – Very Likely (for all in this category)</p>

	<p><i>Support a political issue or candidate by posting information online</i></p> <p><i>Sign a petition related to a public or political issue</i></p> <p><i>Attend or organize a meeting about a public or political issue</i></p>	
<p>Political Open-Mindedness</p> <p>T1 Alpha: .569</p> <p>T2 Alpha: .679</p>	<p><i>In general, I like to talk only with people who share my perspectives. [reverse coded]</i></p> <p><i>People who have different political opinions from mine often have good reasons for their views.</i></p> <p><i>How open are you to changing or revising some of your political beliefs?</i></p> <p><i>Do you like or dislike reading things or listening to people who challenge your opinions on political issues?</i></p>	<p>Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree</p> <p>Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree</p> <p>Not Open at All – Extremely Open</p> <p>Dislike Very Much – Like Very Much</p>
<p>Political Identity</p> <p>T1 Alpha: .689</p> <p>T2 Alpha: .718</p>	<p><i>In general, when it comes to politics, I do not have strong opinions. [reverse coded]</i></p> <p><i>When I think about the political parties in the United States, I like one party more than the others.</i></p> <p><i>Indicate whether or not you have an opinion on each of the following issues:</i></p> <p><i>Abortion</i></p> <p><i>Tax rates</i></p> <p><i>Same sex marriage</i></p> <p><i>Gun control</i></p>	<p>Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree</p> <p>Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree</p> <p>No Opinion at All – Very Strong Opinion (for 4 issues listed)</p>
<p>Political Discussion Frequency</p> <p>T1 Alpha: .817</p> <p>T2 Alpha: .748</p>	<p><i>About how often do you talk to the following people about politics or current events outside of class?</i></p> <p><i>Your Teachers</i></p> <p><i>Your Classmates</i></p> <p><i>Your Parents</i></p> <p><i>Your Friends</i></p>	<p>Hardly Ever</p> <p>Once a Month</p> <p>Once a Week</p> <p>2-3 Times a Week</p> <p>Daily</p> <p>Several Times a Day</p>
<p>Demographics</p>	<p><i>To the best of your knowledge, what is your mother's (or female guardian's) highest level of education?</i></p> <p><i>To the best of your knowledge, what is your father's (or male guardian's) highest level of education?</i></p>	<p>Middle School – Completed Graduate Degree</p>
	<p><i>How would you describe your ethnicity?</i></p> <p><i>Do you identify as male or female?</i></p> <p><i>Approximately how many books do you have in your home?</i></p>	<p>6 options plus mixed (with text box)</p> <p>Male - Female</p> <p>Fewer than 10 – More than 100</p>

Appendix C

Sample of Student Interview Questions (Used Across Study Sites)

Topic	Interview Question
Political Interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When you think about government, politics, and current events, would you say that you're interested in them or not really? Could you please say more about that? - When you think about government, politics, and current events, would you say that you have strong opinions about them, or not really? Could you please say more about that?
Political Open-Mindedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you feel about (or what's your level of comfort) getting into political disagreements? (Are you afraid of political tension/conflict, or does it not really bother you?) Does it make you feel uncomfortable? Have any experiences in class affected this? - When you hear or read the views of someone who disagrees with you on an issue, how does that affect your perspective on that issue? - Have any experiences in this class made you feel more connected to a certain political party? Please explain. - Have you ever changed your mind about a political issue? Can you say more about that? (Would you be willing to share an example?)
Political Efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When you think about government, politics, and current events, do you think you have a pretty good understanding of what's going on, or not really? Please say more about that. - When you think about government, politics, and current events, do you think that there's anything that citizens can do to have an impact on what elected officials do, or not really? Do you think there's anything that you can do to make a difference? What about in five or ten years? Please say more about that.
Government Class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think of this class so far? (Just a reminder: Everything you say is anonymous and will not be shared with your teachers, peers, or parents.) - In general, have you felt comfortable sharing your views about social and political issues in class, or not really? What about outside of class? Has this changed at all? - Has anything that you've done in class made you feel like you could make a difference in politics? - Has anything that you've done in class made you feel more interested in politics, or would you say not really?