

Managing Political Information as a Pathway to Political Participation

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Abstract

The central purpose of an introductory American government course should be to prepare students to be citizens in a democracy; students ought leave the course confident in their ability to understand political issues and participate in the political system. To that end, I use simulations that explicitly aim to build skills for managing political information and using different perspectives to inform position-taking. Students who engage in the simulations emerge much more confident that they can weigh the pros and cons of political positions, write about politics and, to a lesser extent, explain their positions (compared to a control group that did not do simulations). I also examine the relative impact of skills versus objective knowledge in determining students' perceptions that they understand and feel qualified to participate in politics; in general, skills are a more important determinant than knowledge. Finally, I compare the impact of self-assessed versus objectively-measured information skills, finding both have an independent, significant effect on how qualified a student feels that he/she is to participate in politics.

Classical democratic theory suggests that citizens in a democracy ought to devote attention to following politics, forming opinions, and participating in the process of government by the people. But do they? And, more importantly, do they possess the ability to do so? From the early studies of voting behavior in American politics, a central area of inquiry has concerned the ability of voters to make sense of politics and make intelligent choices (for example, Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Lippman 1922 [1949]; Schumpeter 1950). Voters are portrayed as woefully uninformed on political issues and unsophisticated in their thought processes; the general conclusion has been that citizens lack the ability to play the role demanded of them in a democratic system. It is, as we know, common for pundits and observers to lament this fact and suggest dire consequences for democracy if citizens do not know more about politics.

This paper responds to the alarmist literature by asking whether these dire predictions and concerns are warranted. I do not dispute that Americans fail tests of political knowledge (Bennett 1988; Delli Carpini 1996; Graber 1994), nor do I doubt that levels of ideological thinking in the American mass public are quite low (Converse 1964). Still, if Americans cannot answer simple questions of political knowledge, and if they cannot use ideological terms correctly in structuring their opinions, how important is this in actuality? Can citizens get where they need to get even with low levels of objective political knowledge and a lack of ideological thinking?

In this paper, which is heavily influenced by the work of Arthur Lupia (2001, 2006; Lupia and McCubbins 1998) and others in his tradition (such as Popkin 1991; Zaller 1992), I argue that the biggest question to ask is if citizens possess the skills needed to understand the issues that confront them. If citizens can learn to do what they must do without needing to know “the facts,” or with needing to know only a small subset of these facts, that should be good enough. Asking them to memorize more facts may have very little purpose and contribute little to their overall levels of civic competence. What is needed is not more facts, but more *skill* to process information and reach intelligent conclusions. With this skill will come an increased sense of efficacy that one *can* participate in politics and influence the political system. Once citizens

believe they can understand the political world, they will be more likely to participate in it when they are moved to do so.

This paper uses a panel study of introductory American government students, surveying them at the beginning and end of the course to determine their political knowledge and civic skills. My class, the experimental group, used simulations of the American government process to build these skills; other classes, my control group, used more traditional approaches. I examine the impact of self-assessed skill levels, objective measures of knowledge and objective measures of skills in order to determine the mechanism by which students come to feel that they can understand political issues and participate in politics. The work has very clear implications for civic education, a critically important area for our discipline and for society in general.

I begin this paper by reviewing the theory of civic competence and its relationship to the possession of political information. The paper then discusses the simulations used in the class, focusing on the goals underlying them and how the simulation is designed to build civic skills. Following a discussion of the data used in the paper, I present results drawn from panel studies of students from the 2005-06 and the 2006-07 academic years; these data include surveys of students in both the experimental and control groups. I also analyze student essays and student performance in the simulations to more objectively assess skill levels. I conclude by summarizing my results, outlining the limitations of this analysis, the implications of the results, and directions for future research.

The Problem Redefined

Why don't people participate in politics? The answers are many. For some, politics is frustrating, since the political structure leads parties to offer choices that are more polarized than most voters (Dionne 1991; Fiorina 2005). Others argue that it is the political processes, as opposed to policies, that turn people off. In addition to images of special interests governing politics and the average citizen being shut out, the simple image of partisanship, arguing, compromise and debate repel many (Funk 1998; Hibbing and Theiss Morse 1995). Some argue that political disaffection results from a decline in social capital and a general tendency of citizens to pull back their involvement from all

things civic (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003). These answers are all compelling, and certainly contribute to the problem. In this paper, I address one other piece of the puzzle – citizens do not participate in politics because politics is viewed as complicated and beyond the reach of all but the most intelligent and informed citizens. I argue, however, that this need not be the case.

An old aphorism teaches – “Give a man a fish, he’ll eat for a day. Teach him to fish and he’ll eat for a lifetime.”¹ Feeding people information on one issue will help them understand politics for the day; this is certainly valuable. But teaching someone the skills they need to understand politics more generally, and come to grips with their own positions, is even more important. This aphorism guides my approach to the American government class; rather than asking students to learn and memorize a bunch of facts (who really cares if students know exactly how many Cabinet members there are?), I concentrate on building students’ skills in creating their own understanding of politics and political issues. I expect that the information they construct on their own will prove more useful and accessible to them in future decision making.

The central issue, often overlooked in discussions about democratic competence, is how citizens *learn* these skills. To be sure, there are many notable contributions on how citizens use information to make political decisions (for example, Ferejohn and Kuklinski 1991; Graber 1993; Kuklinski 2001; Lodge 1995; Lodge, Steenburgen and Brau 1995), and on the types of information citizens pursue (Hutchings 2003). Sadly, we know less about how information is learned in the first place (see Niemi and Junn 1998 for an exception) and on the mechanism by which it can translate into increased internal efficacy and a greater likelihood of one day participating in politics. That is the gap this paper attempts to fill.

Civic Competence

In defining civic competence, Lupia (2006) argues that we need to view civic competence not in terms of what we might *want* citizens to know, but rather in terms of what citizens *need* to know in order to perform the job expected of them. At its most basic level, the job of the citizen is to take the choices presented to them and make a

decision which best represents their interests. Simplifying matters, if Bush runs against Kerry for president, or Jennifer Granholm runs against Dick DeVos for governor, the system presents the voter with a binary choice (third parties aside). The voter is called upon to choose the better of these two options; if she casts the ballot that best represents her interests, she has made a competent choice. When framed as a series of binary choices, the job of the citizen becomes easier. One need not have ideas on how to reform Social Security or ensure racial diversity in universities; one only needs to decide which of two options is the most palatable.

It is helpful at this point to differentiate between skills required to understand the issues and vote as opposed to the skills required for higher level political participation. The person who wishes to become an activist must learn how to work collectively with other to achieve a common aim. She must learn the rules that govern the system – for example, what level of government or what office has the power to change the law – and act accordingly to that knowledge. She must learn how to best comport oneself to be taken seriously by the officials she hopes to convince. The task of voter is simpler. He must simply decide what issues matter to him, how he feels about them, and how the candidates feel about the issue relative to his position.

An extensive literature on voting behavior suggests that doing this requires considerably less work than some would naively believe. It would certainly be possible for this voter to outline all issues of importance to her, weigh the importance of each of these issues, carefully research each candidate's positions, and calculate which candidate provides the most utility. While some (such as most of the people reading this paper) may derive pleasure from doing such an analysis, its instrumental benefits are quite limited when one considers the other shortcuts a voter can use to make a decision.

For example, voters could use party identification to cast their votes; while parties are not completely monolithic on their issue positions, they are more similar than not such that pro-affirmative action voters can usually vote “correctly” by choosing the Democrat. Following from this, voters can choose to be single-issue voters, thus rendering a large amount of the available information unnecessary for their decision making. Voters could also rely on recommendations from trusted friends, or from trusted groups, in making a decision. And, voters have also been known to rely on cues like race

and sex to infer candidate positions and cast their voting choices (Koch 2000); while this approach is probably less dependable than the other ways cited above, it would typically be a good bit more accurate than random guessing.

While these heuristics are shortcuts, most do require *some* information. In the case of voting by party, the voter must be able to act on a view of what the parties believe. It could be a simple framework (i.e., I'm a working man and the Democrats are the party of labor) or a more complex one, but it does require at least some information. Single issue voters must know where the candidates stand on that issue, sometimes even getting down to levels of nuance in their positions (all candidates might favor "a decisive response to terrorism" but the differences may be in the details of their approaches). And, as Lupia (2006) notes, using recommendations of others as cues requires not only knowing what one believes and what the cue-giver believes, but also requires the voter to understand the relationship between his or her position and the position of the cue-giver.

Aside from using heuristics to participate in elections, there may be other times citizens wish to examine information on their own. President Bush's recent State of the Union Address, for example, may have sent a few people scurrying to the newspapers and Internet to get a sense of the likely impact of the surge of troops to Iraq, or how their pocketbooks might be affected by the economic proposals Bush put on the table. Getting some answers is easy – everybody who wants to offer answers can begin a blog and share them with others. The difficult task of the citizens becomes not finding information, but rather processing and using that information. It becomes a matter of assessing the different sources, weighing their credibility, understanding how the values and assumptions used have led to the final conclusion, and ultimately using it to update (or choosing not to have it update) prior positions.

For these purposes, I place the ability to do this at the heart of my understanding of civic competence. (At a more advanced level, individuals may need to learn skills such as working with other people in collective action or understanding how to strategize, but understanding the development of those skills is not the central purpose of this paper.) We ask citizens to do certain things in a democracy, whether that means reaching intelligent voting decisions or just reaching a conclusion on how to view the political world. Here, I use the concept of civic competence to ask how skilled the citizen is at

gaining information and learning what he/she *needs* to learn to make sense of politics, form intelligent conclusions, and open the pathway to political participation.

It is important at the outset to be clear about what civic competence means and what it does not mean. First, saying a citizen is civically competent does *not* necessarily imply that she has extensive knowledge, unless that knowledge is *required* for making intelligent decisions about the issue at hand. Knowledge is helpful, to be sure. I would be better off as a driver if I knew how to change a tire or check the oil in my car. But I can be a perfectly competent driver, able to get to work safely and run my errands, if I did not know this. Other information, of course, is required for performing the task at hand; I could not be a good driver if I did not know the gas pedal from the brake.

Likewise, imagine a single-issue voter using abortion to determine who to vote for in a Senate race. While it might be nice for that voter to know the length of a senator's term, or that the Senate votes to confirm judicial appointees, he or she does not *need* to know this information to cast an intelligent vote. On the other hand, such a voter needs to know the candidates' respective positions on the issue. One could imagine the task being easy – if one candidate identifies himself as pro-choice and the other identifies herself as pro-life, the voter's choice is clear. If, however, both offer different “shadings” under the pro-choice tent, our voter may need to gather more information about candidate positions (and introspectively examine his or her own) to cast an intelligent vote. But, as Lupia (1994) notes, voters need not be encyclopedias filled with knowledge; what is needed, rather, is the ability to use shortcuts and retrieve information as needed.

Second, possessing civic competence does not imply that voters should be using any externally-imposed way of making sense of the political world. Converse's (1964) argument that citizens do not use ideological terms and structures to make sense of politics can be read to say citizens do not think ideologically. It could, however, also be interpreted that voters may organize politics in their own ways, using a structure that may be unique to them. Lane's (1962) interviews with the “American common man” suggests that these individuals do have their own, mostly internally consistently, ways of organizing the political world; Luker (1984) finds the same for abortion activists. Accordingly to this, then, Converse's test for voters may well be too restrictive; for

many, ideological thinking *a la* Converse may not happen very often. This does not, however, imply political incompetence.

Finally, my conceptualization of civic competence does not imply that everyone must exercise these skills at all times. We must, of course, accept that many citizens will *choose* to fall short of this goal. Gaining knowledge is not easy; undertaking to do so often requires some extrinsic motivation. When politics is perceived as uninteresting, or as too remote from someone's life to be worth pursuing, the motivation to learn is understandably lower. Politics is not interesting to some, remote to many, and complicated to most. However, for many people, the time may come when some issue activates their attention and passions. Voters who have learned how to make sense of politics, and process information, will then be at an advantage over those who have not learned this lesson.

Concern about low levels of political interest, participation, engagement, knowledge, etc., is a problem worthy of academic research. But in addition to being an empirical problem, it also presents a normative challenge. As a teacher of political science, as well as an engaged and concerned citizen, these are problems that call out for solutions. It does no good to lament the lack of political learning in the populace without offering some sense of how to correct this problem. In the following section, therefore, I report on one approach to teaching that shows promise in addressing these larger issues. Following this, I assess the impact of this approach.

The Teaching Experiment

The teaching innovation reported here includes a series of simulations in which the students in the introductory course engaged. The American Government course at Eastern Michigan University has, until the fall 2007 semester, been required for all students at the university.² It is commonly taught in one hundred-student sections. As a regional comprehensive university, Eastern draws a wide range of students. For some good students, it is a cheaper alternative to the state's research universities and, particularly for first-generation college students, may seem less intimidating. Eastern's strongest students are every bit the equal of top students at any school in the country. Its

weakest students can show an appalling lack of preparation for college, and may also exhibit questionable motivation and effort. It is, in short, very much a microcosm of universities throughout the country; therefore, the results we present here may be viewed as at least somewhat representative of other schools.

The design of the simulation used in this paper is very much motivated by Wiggins and McTighe's (1998) backwards design model. The basic goal of the class was first identified – to cultivate the civic competence students bring to the class and teach them the skills they will ultimately need to be effective political actors when and if the spirit moves them. Specifically, I aim to teach students how to do the following:

- Manage political information – given all of the information out there in the political world, how can the novice effectively learn to form positions on issues they might not previously have thought about?
- Working with others – achieving desirable political results cannot be done alone. Students need to learn how to work with others to pool their skills and knowledge and achieve what they hope to achieve.
- Working with the rules – in politics, rules determine outcomes. The class aims to teach this fact to students, and to help them understand that effective political action requires understanding the rules which structure political interaction.

The design of the simulation reflects the desire to help students gain skills in each of these three areas.

During three weeks of the semester (four in the 2005-06 academic year), students would take a one-week break from the regular part of class and participate in a three-day simulation. The simulation would be organized around a hot political issue – either affirmative action, school prayer or the war on terrorism (eminent domain was also used during the 2005-06 year). The class of one hundred was broken up into four groups of twenty-five, each of which would remain intact for all the simulations. The simulations were facilitated by undergraduate honors students, who received extensive training in civic education issues, as well as in teaching and learning issues. (More information on the simulations and the role of the student facilitators can be found in Bernstein 2006.)

Before the simulation, students would be given a packet of 8-10 short readings. The readings would, collectively, represent the “noise” that exists in the political world

on the issue (virtually all readings, at one time or another, were top-30 Google hits when typing in the issue). The articles were deliberately chosen to be from different genres (news accounts, opinion pieces, press releases, even a pro-school prayer poem) and from different ideological perspectives. Readings the articles helped to expose students to a wider range of views than most had ever confronted. After doing the readings, students wrote a three-page paper on the issue. The assignment called for them to address their own views on the issue, specifically using the articles to build their arguments and to address the counter-arguments on the other side of the issue.

During the simulation, the students would begin with the “status quo” on the issue, which consisted of 5-10 bulleted points summarizing current policies. They would spend most of the first day of the simulation talking with their fellow students about their views, in an attempt to build their confidence that they could explain their opinions and engage in productive debate with others. The remainder of Day 1 and all of Day 2 would consist of writing proposals that attempted to amend the status quo, typically in concert with others. Day 3 would find the class discussing the various proposals that had been made and then voting on each one. Through the debates and the votes, students would gain experience in making the hard choices that all politicians face on a daily basis, albeit in an artificial setting.³ Following the simulation, students in the 2005-06 academic year wrote three-page debriefing papers on what they had learned and what they now believed about the issue; this assignment was discontinued during the current academic year.

To summarize, the simulations aimed to build the students’ political skills. By giving students material to read before the simulation and forcing them to grapple with multiple perspectives, it represented, at least crudely, the task citizens face in making sense of a wide array of conflicting information. This work was extended when students were asked to draft written proposals to amend the status quo to bring it more in line with their policy positions. While not as central to this particular paper, the simulation activities in which students engaged – forming alliances, attempting to gain votes for their proposals, managing the different procedural rules laid out by the facilitators – also helped students achieve important competencies. The goal, in essence, was to help students find their political voices and build the skills necessary to become effective political actors should they one day be motivated to become active on an issue.

Data and Methods

The data used in this paper are drawn from three major sources. First, students in my American government class during the fall 2006 semester were surveyed on the second day of the course and then again right after the final exam. A total of 73 students completed both surveys and are included in the data I analyze; of these, 42 were female and 26 were African-American. The survey asked the students a variety of questions about their political attitudes, values, and behaviors. Most central to my purposes here, the survey presented students with an array of nine skill items (for example, “weigh the pros and cons of various political positions”) and asked for their self-assessment of their own skills on a 1-6 scale (where 1 was labeled “Cannot do this” and 6 was labeled “Can do this very well”). The survey also presented students with eight multiple-choice objective questions of political knowledge (for example, “Who is the Prime Minister of England”). These questions will help assess the relative importance of skills versus knowledge in the enhancement of internal efficacy and civic competence.

During the same semester, I administered the same survey, in the same manner, to seven other sections of the introductory American government class. Six faculty colleagues (one of whom taught two sections) kindly gave me permission to survey their students. Participation rates were high, reflecting a generosity of spirit among the students; they were also induced to participate by the promise of Hershey’s Kisses. A total of 278 students were part of this control group, which included 56 African-American students and 162 women. The seven faculty were purposefully selected to be a diverse group in terms of age, race, sex, years of teaching experience and, as near as I could tell before beginning the project, general orientation toward the course. In addition to the surveys, I also observed each of their classes and interviewed each about how they approached the class to add richness to the data.

Finally, I incorporate some data from the 2005-06 academic year. The survey was administered to students in my fall and winter term classes that year, much as it was last year. For 2005-06, however, I also have available variables based on the analysis of student essays. Four research assistants and I coded each pre-simulation and post-

simulation essay, looking at how well they used information and explained their positions. Each essay was read by two coders; the following scores were created:

- (Pre-simulation) – How well does the author hew to their position in the paper (as opposed to flip-flopping all over the place)?
- (Pre-simulation) – How well does the author use the assigned articles to defend his/her position, and to address opposing arguments?
- (Post-simulation) – How well does the author appear to understand the issue in question?

An average of scores on these items was then used to form a score for actual information skills (as opposed to the more subjective measures at use in the rest of this paper).

In the section that follows, I report the results of the analysis, in four stages. First, I use the fall 2006 data to assess the relative gains in self-assessed political skills and objective political knowledge enjoyed by students in both the experimental and control groups. I then turn to a discussion of the determinants of political information skills. In the third part of the empirical analysis, I examine the role of information skills and objective knowledge in determining a students' confidence that he/she can understand politics and participate in the political process. Finally, using the data from the 2005-06 classes, I incorporate more objective measures of political skills and assess their importance, again relative to self-perceived skills and objective measures of knowledge.

Results

Table 1 examines self-perceived skill gains for both the experimental and control groups. Skills are grouped into three categories. First, informational skills include items regarding how well students feel they can explain their views, write about politics, and weigh the pros and cons on political issues. People skills refer to the ability of students to persuade others, help groups work together, deal with conflict, talk about social barriers, and reach compromise.⁴ Finally, one item is listed as a strategy skill, specifically dealing with how confident one feels in his/her ability to develop strategies for political action. While the primary focus in this paper is on information skills, an examination of gains in the other skills is useful for comparison purposes.

Table 1 about here

The first two columns of the table show the pretest and posttest scores for each of the skill items among the experimental group (the simulation class); the skill levels are measured on a 1-6 scale, where the higher scores indicate more self-perceived skill. The tests of statistical significance show differences between the pretest and the posttest for the experimental group. On all items save for reaching compromise, the experimental group's gain in self-perceived skills is positive and statistically significant, indicating that the experimental group believes it has benefited significantly from the course, perhaps particularly from the simulations. The largest single gain is for the strategy item, on which they gained over one point on the six-point scale. All information items showed especially large gains as well.

The third and fourth columns of the table indicate that the control group also improved its perception of its political skills, although not as much as the experimental group did. The control group also made large gains on the informational items, albeit not nearly as large as the experimental group's gains. They gained significantly on two of the five people skills (persuading others and helping groups work together) and on the strategy skills item. Once again, however, all of these gains were not as large as the gains for the experimental group.

Finally, the last column of the table indicates the significance of the differences in self-perceived skills between the experimental and control groups on the posttest. As none of the differences were significant on the pretest, any statistically significant differences on the posttest would indicate that the experimental group gained significantly more than did the control group. We see this to be the case for two of the three information items (writing about politics and weighing pros and cons). A few items showed larger gains for the experimental group, albeit at a level short of statistical significant (explaining political views, dealing with conflict and talking about social barrier). All other items showed no meaningful differences by the end of the course. Summarizing, it appears that the students who have gone through the simulation believe their information skills to be superior to those who did not experience the simulation.

Having established significant gains in the knowledge skills for the experimental group, the next step is to examine the relative gains each group made in objective political knowledge. Table 2 reports these gains for eight closed-ended items. In deference to Mondak's (1999) argument that different people have different proclivities to guess, all responses are multiple choice items and respondents were encouraged to guess if they did not know the answer; if the respondent left the item blank, a random answer was chosen, to simulate guessing. Consequently, since correct guesses are included in the correct answers, the table does not indicate the true percentage of respondents who knew each item. Comparisons across items, and across the different groups and time periods, are possible and utilized below.

 Table 2 about here

In Table 2, we see wide variation across individual items. The subject matter of the first ten Amendments to the Constitution (individual rights) was known by the vast majority of students. Other items were answered correctly by 30-70 percent of students, with only the fact that the most money was spent on Social Security being unknown by the vast majority of students. There were no significant pretest differences between the experimental and control groups, although the control group was more likely (by a nearly significant margin) to identify Tony Blair as England's Prime Minister.

By the end of the course, some significant learning had taken place within each class. The experimental group ended up much more likely to know that Congress has the power to declare war, to know that each state's representation in the House is determined by population, that Blair is Prime Minister of England, and that Kofi Annan is Secretary-General of the UN (he was replaced by Ban Ki-moon just after the semester ended; to avoid errors by students who knew of him before he took over, Ki-moon was not included as an answer option on the survey). The control group showed gains on each of these items except Tony Blair, which may be because they were more likely to know Blair's identity in the pretest. The control group experienced significant gains in knowing that Congress has the power to tax and in knowing how the Supreme Court Chief Justice is selected, while the experimental group did not.

When comparing the experimental group to the control group at the end of class, two significant differences were observed. The control group was more likely to know who had the power to declare war, a disappointing result considering that the war on terrorism simulation should have given the students the opportunity to learn this fact well. And, tellingly, the control group was much more likely to know that Congress had the power to tax. Given the class time spent on the simulations, something had to give; more than anything else, the sacrifice was less time spent on the institutions. Fewer correct answers on this question reflect the sacrifice entailed in using the simulations.

While the experimental group experienced greater gains in self-assessed political skills, they answered fewer objective questions of political knowledge correctly by the end of the class (about one-third of a question out of eight). My theoretical perspective is that this will not be a problem for the experimental model – the possession of political skills should prove more important than the ability to answer knowledge questions in determining feelings that one can understand politics and participate in the political process. I now turn to this discussion, first focusing on the determinants of skill gains in managing political information and then moving to an examination of the impact of skills and knowledge on these larger questions.

Table 3 presents a multiple regression model of the determinants of self-perceived political information skills (the dependent variable is the average of a student's three information skill responses reported in Table 1). The first variable, a dummy measuring whether or not the student is in the experimental group or not, is intended to test whether the simulation class experienced more knowledge gains than the control group classes, *ceteris paribus*. The next three demographic variables examine whether white females, African-American males and African-American females experienced smaller gains (white males are the omitted reference case). In earlier incarnations of the simulation, there were significant differences across racial and gender lines, with African-American women in particular ending up less confident in their skills than did other students (Bernstein 2007). These variables are meant to test if the effect continued into this year.

Table 3 about here

I include variables in the model to control for students' levels of political participation, as measured both by their self-report of how closely they followed government and public affairs (on a 1-6 scale) and how many days per week they reported discussing politics with others. I include an affective measure of how important it was for them to influence the political structure (on a 1-4 scale). Finally, to determine how much the possession of political knowledge contributed to a sense that one can manage political information, I include the summary measure of political knowledge (the number of questions, from 0 to 8, that the student answered correctly).

Table 3 reveals that even controlling for all of these other variables, being in the experimental group has a significant, positive effect on one's perception of how skilled they are in terms of managing political information. Members of the simulation class wind up almost half a point higher on a six-point scale of how comfortable they are managing political information. This result is both substantively and statistically significant. Students who follow government and public affairs also, not surprisingly, believe themselves more capable at managing political information (each point on the scale for following government resulted in a gain of 0.3 points on the political information item). We see a similar result for the item for discussing politics with others – each extra day per week one reports discussing politics with others results in a 0.1 gain on the political information scale. Both of these results are statistically significant.

Table 3 also shows that the importance one places on influencing the political structure has a significant effect on how capable one feels in skills in managing political information. This may be interpreted to mean that the more one believes in playing a role in the system (representing some degree of affect), the more one may be motivated to learn about and build the skills necessary to follow politics. The final statistically significant variable is for political knowledge – the more one knows about politics, as measured by the knowledge items, the more confident one is that he or she can manage information. This result cautions against a conclusion that objective knowledge has nothing to do with the development of efficacy; clearly, the more knowledge one has, the more confident they will be that they can manage political information. Finally, these results demonstrate no race or gender bias in self-perceived information skills; this is a heartening result, particularly considering my previous results in this area.

Understanding the determinants of knowledge skills is important, but the central purpose here is to make students confident that they can understand the political issues and participate in politics. Theoretically, the more important question to be asked is “What is the comparative impact of objective knowledge and perception of skills on the growth of confidence that one can understand and participate in politics?” In Table 4, I present a pair of regression models, the first using one’s ability to understand the issues as the dependent variable, the second using one’s feeling of being qualified to participate in politics as the dependent variables (both measured on a 1-6 scale). The concepts are related, yet different enough to be worth exploring separately.

Table 4 about here

Considering the model for how well someone understands the issues first, two variables show a statistically meaningful effect. First, the more students follow government and public affairs, the more they believe they can understand political issues. This may well be a case of practice makes perfect – students who spend time following politics learn about pressing policy matters and therefore gain confidence that they can understand political issues. Second, the more information *skills* one brings to the table, the more confident he or she is that they can understand political issues. I do not believe this result is tautological, although it may seem so at first blush. But the information items do not ask students if they understand political issues; rather, it asks them to assess their skills in working with political information (weighing pros and cons, writing about politics, explaining their views). I draw the distinction between *substantive* expertise (as reflected in the dependent variable) and *processing* expertise (as reflected in the independent variable). These results demonstrate that the more confident people feel in their ability to process information, the more they can understand the substance of issues.

Perhaps the more interesting result from the first model in Table 4 is the number of variables that are not significant. Members of the experimental group show no greater confidence that they understand political issues; it may well be that the effect of being in the simulation group was subsumed by the information skills variable. Race and gender once again play no role in determining how well a student believes he/she understands

the issues. While following politics once again has a positive effect on understanding issues, the amount one discusses politics with others does not. The importance one attaches to influencing the political structure has no effect on understanding issues, nor, interestingly enough, does political knowledge. Finally, information skills are the only kind of skills that affect one's belief in being able to understand political issues – people skills and strategy skills, not surprisingly, do not affect this.

The second model presented in Table 4 investigates the determinants of feeling qualified to participate in politics. This item is broader than the previous one, as it encompasses a wider range of competencies (including working with others, strategizing, etc.) than the first. It is also more central to the goals of the class – while having students understand the pressing political issues is certainly important, the ultimate goal is to make students feel comfortable that they can get out there and participate in governing when the spirit moves them.

The results for the analysis of feeling qualified to participate are fairly similar to the first model, with two exceptions. First, the more importance one attaches to influencing the political world, the more confident they are in their ability to do so. Affect matters; it once again seems that the more importance one attaches to participating in politics, the more one may be motivated to build the skills necessary for doing this. Second, political knowledge does matter here, albeit far less than does information skills; each correct answer on the knowledge items increases confidence in being qualified to participate by 0.111 on a six-point scale – a shift of one point on the information skills item leads to an increase of 0.390 on the dependent variable. Table 4 also reveals that other skills – in terms of managing people and strategies – do not have a statistically significant impact on feeling qualified to participate, although the coefficients associated with both of these variables are higher than they were in the previous model.

What is left is to incorporate measures of *actual* skills into the model. Model 1 in Table 5 uses two such measures. First, I consider the average simulation participation score earned by each student in the simulations. At the end of every simulation, the facilitators would recommend a score between 0 and 5 for each student, with the higher score indicating more activity, and more effectiveness, during the simulation.⁵ This can serve as a proxy measure for how well the student mastered the in-class aspect of the

simulation. Second, I include a variable that averages three scores from student papers (described above) – how well the student held to a position, how well they used the articles as evidence, and how much of an understanding they seemed to show about the issue.⁶ This measures a different, but equally important, element of skills. Since only students in the simulation class had the writing assignment, the analysis is restricted to students in the 2005-06 academic year.⁷

Table 5 about here

The dependent variable in this analysis is the student's feeling that they are qualified to participate in politics. The variables are much the same as presented above, with the addition of the actual performance data noted above. In Model 1, the variables for white female and African-American female show a negative coefficient, indicating that women are less likely to feel qualified to participate in politics. These data, while important, are explored more deeply elsewhere (Bernstein 2007); to summarize that discussion, I believe they reflect issues of both stereotype threat and vulnerability (Davis and Silver 2003; Steele and Aronson 1995), both of which were addressed in redesigning the simulation.

In terms of knowledge and skills, the variable for self-perceived information skills proved the most important in the model. For each one-point gain in this variable, the student made nearly a half-point gain in feeling confident that they were qualified to participate in politics. Political knowledge (measured based on number of closed-ended questions answered) had no impact. The participation score did matter – each one-point gain in the simulation score corresponded to a 0.167 gain on the qualification index, a gain that was statistically significant at the very modest .10 level.⁸ The variable based on the essays was not significant in this model.

As a final piece of empirical analysis, I re-ran the model, excluding the variable for the participation score. Given the high correlation between this variable and the one measuring performance on essays ($r=.40$), it would be useful to examine if the essay variable is statistically significant once the participation variable is excluded. Model 2 reveals that it is, albeit once again only at the .10 level. Political knowledge once again

proves insignificant. Table 5, then, reveals that it is skill, both self-perceived and actual, that drives qualification to participate in politics more than knowledge, supporting one of the central contentions in this paper.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper has examined the impact of political skills and political knowledge on the development of internal political efficacy – does having more political knowledge and skill, or even just believing that one possesses more skill, lead to people feeling they can understand politics better and participate in the process? The results have shown that an individual’s assessment of their ability to manage political information is a critical determinant in their feelings of political efficacy, trumping political knowledge. Moreover, when considering actual skills in managing political information and working politically, this was found to have a significant effect, along with self-perceived information skills. Knowledge once again does not have a significant impact.

Perhaps the most central question to be asked here is what implications this work has for civic education. It is very tempting to address deficiencies in student preparation in any subject, such as civics or social studies, by ratcheting up the amount of material we teach and information students must know. This equates somewhat with the “teaching by mentioning” idea; if students do not know enough about the Electoral College, we’ll mention it one day in class and assume the knowledge will stick. Seasoned educators know, of course, that what is learned best is the knowledge students play a role in creating (Bain 2004) and that is reinforced and *experienced* in multiple ways (Fink 2003). The simulations presented here seem to do better at teaching and reinforcing the most important course goals, and thus should strongly be considered, along with other active learning techniques, in American government classes. They will likely be most effective in helping students gain what we want them to gain in our classes.

In addition to this, future work should address how citizens actually make sense of politics. Think-aloud methods (Wineburg 2001) show promise for helping us to understand how students confront political tasks and make sense of the information we give them. Currently, I am working with students, asking them to “think-aloud” about

their political thought processes. They read articles, reacting aloud to what they see in the articles, and then articulate the process by which they pull the articles together and reach conclusions. This can show us how students work through these processes, and thus can help us guide our teaching work to teach students what they really need to know.

Future work needs to continue the efforts begun here. As Shulman (1993) reminds us, and as the scholarship of teaching and learning movement makes clear, pedagogical innovations must constantly be evaluated and assessed against data, such as is done here. I hope others will build on my efforts here to innovate in the classroom, and to share those innovations with others. By doing so, we can turn the literature on teaching political science into a more cumulative, *scholarly* body of work that builds on previous finding and gives us leverage on the central issues that concern us. The importance of this work for our discipline, and for a thriving democratic society, demands no less.

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Table 1: Self-Perceived Skill Gains, Experimental and Control Group					
Skill Item	Experimental Group		Control Group		Posttest Diff. Experimental vs. Control
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	
I. Information Skills					
Can explain political views	3.75	4.44***	3.79	4.20***	t=1.518
Can write about politics	3.07	4.04***	3.03	3.60***	t=2.603***
Can weigh pros and cons	3.68	4.44***	3.74	4.09***	t=2.137**
II. People Skills					
Can persuade others	3.19	3.78***	3.32	3.68***	t=0.682
Can help groups work together	3.34	3.89***	3.55	3.83***	t=0.392
Can deal with conflict	4.26	4.55**	4.35	4.36	t=1.316
Can talk about social barriers	4.21	4.68***	4.45	4.48	t=1.277
Can reach compromise	4.41	4.58	4.42	4.54	t=0.279
III. Strategy Skills					
Can develop political strategies	2.63	3.66***	2.74	3.38***	t=0.694
<p>All answers scored on 1-6 scale, where 6 indicates highest level of confidence in the skill. N for treatment group = 72 or 73; N for control group ranges from 271 to 274 ** denotes $p < .05$ ***denotes $p < .01$ No differences between experimental and control groups in pretest were significant.</p>					

Table 2: Knowledge Gains, Experimental and Control Group					
Knowledge Question	Experimental Group		Control Group		Posttest Diff. Experimental vs. Control
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	
Who can declare war?	64%	81%**	71%	91%***	t=2.136**
How many reps. per state?	56%	77%***	61%	73%***	t=0.637
How is Chief Justice selected?	67%	74%	63%	73%***	t=0.102
Who has the power to tax?	44%	44%	44%	63%***	t=2.984**
Area where most money spent?	10%	14%	11%	11%	t=0.602
Prime Minister of England?	62%	71%*	73%	76%	t=0.751
Secretary-General of UN?	33%	44%*	37%	54%***	t=1.541
First 10 Amendments concern?	95%	99%	93%	94%	t=1.554
Total for all 8 knowledge items	4.30	5.03***	4.54	5.36***	t=1.68*
<p>Cell entries indicate percent of respondents answering the item correctly.</p> <p>N for treatment group = 72 or 73; N for control group ranges from 271 to 274</p> <p>* denotes $p < .10$</p> <p>** denotes $p < .05$</p> <p>***denotes $p < .01$</p> <p>No differences between experimental and control groups in pretest were significant.</p>					

Table 3: Determinants of Self-Perceived Informational Skills			
Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t
Constant	1.20	0.260	
Treatment group (1=yes, 0=no)	0.407***	0.114	3.576
White female (1=yes, 0=no)	0.097	0.106	0.918
African-American male (1=yes, 0=no)	0.113	0.185	0.612
African-American female (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.116	0.146	-0.796
Follow government and public affairs (1-6)	0.316***	0.047	6.739
Discuss politics with others (0-7 days/week)	0.100**	0.029	3.459
Importance of influencing political structure (1-4)	0.354***	0.070	5.081
Political knowledge (0-8)	0.111**	0.034	3.264
N=322			
Adjusted r-squared = 0.421			
** denotes p<.05			
***denotes p<.01			

Table 4: Determinants of Understanding Political Issues and Feeling Qualified to Participate in Politics				
	Understand Issues		Feel Qualified to Participate	
Variable	Coeff.	Std Er	Coeff.	Std Er
Constant	1.150	0.292	-0.734	0.368
Treatment group (1=yes, 0=no)	0.104	0.111	0.137	0.140
White female (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.005	0.103	-0.103	0.130
African-American (1=yes, 0=no)	0.124	0.178	-0.284	0.224
African-American (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.055	0.140	-0.280	0.177
Follow government and public affairs (1-6)	0.398***	0.048	0.311***	0.061
Discuss politics with others (0-7 days/week)	0.026	0.028	-0.048	0.036
Importance - influencing political structure (1-4)	-0.038	0.070	0.281**	0.088
Political knowledge (0-8)	0.017	0.034	0.111**	0.042
Self-perceived information skills (1-6)	0.316***	0.066	0.390***	0.083
Self-perceived people skills (1-6)	-0.001	0.013	0.023	0.017
Self-perceived strategy skills (1-6)	-0.003	0.015	0.033	0.019
N	318		318	
Adjusted r-squared	0.470		0.472	
** denotes p<.05				
***denotes p<.01				

Table 5: Determinants of Feeling Qualified to Participate in Politics, Using Actual Performance Data

	Model 1		Model 2	
Variable	Coeff.	Std Er	Coeff.	Std Er
Constant	-1.343	0.772	-1.477	0.776
White female (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.448**	0.204	-0.354*	0.199
African-American (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.229	0.285	-0.267	0.286
African-American (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.626**	0.307	-0.620**	0.300
Follow government and public affairs (1-6)	0.147	0.100	0.142	0.101
Discuss politics with others (0-7 days/week)	0.052	0.057	0.047	0.057
Importance of influencing political structure (1-4)	0.170	0.143	0.211	0.142
Political knowledge (0-10)	0.048	0.063	0.058	0.063
Self-perceived information skills (1-6)	0.488***	0.140	0.493***	0.141
Self-perceived people skills (1-6)	0.094	0.141	0.121	0.141
Self-perceived strategy skills (1-6)	0.103	0.096	0.115	0.096
Average simulation participation score (0-5)	0.167*	0.092		
Average score from paper assignment (1-3)	0.368	0.307	0.510*	0.301
N	116		117	
Adjusted r-squared	0.554		0.541	
* denotes $p < .10$				
** denotes $p < .05$				
***denotes $p < .01$				

Notes

¹ Rabbi and philosopher Moses Maimonides' (1138-1204) ladder of charitable giving reflects this – the highest form of giving in his philosophy is helping someone to develop the skills so they can support themselves and no longer need to depend upon charity.

² A new General Education program takes effect in the Fall 2007 semester. Under this program, the American government course is part of a menu of courses students may take in the social science category. The relatively unique opportunity we have had to civically educate all of our school's students will be gone.

³ The process of selecting proposals for debate would be coordinated by a Rules Committee, sometimes elected by the students and sometimes selected by the instructor. Much like the Rules Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives, this committee would set procedures for determining the order in which proposals would be debated and, sometimes, the amount of time to be devoted for each one. By changing how the Rules Committee would be selected, and varying the way the votes would be conducted (simple majority vs. two-thirds, secret ballot versus show of hands), students gained experience in how the rules used (a) were not neutral; and (b) helped determine outcomes.

⁴ The items for explaining political views (grouped as an informational skill) and persuading others (people skills) are certainly similar. I group them differently since I view the first as involving the use of information to explain views to others, while the persuasion item involves more skill in trying to change the views of others.

⁵ Students were specifically told that their evaluation would not be based on how successful they were in achieving their goals; this seemed as if it would make grades be determined by the popularity of views. Students were told their grades would be based on effort, and on how effective we thought their work was. Thus, writing a strong proposal, shopping it around with others, and arguing for it in debate, would be valued more than would a weaker (albeit successful) proposal behind which little effort was exerted.

⁶ The items for using the articles and holding to one's position were originally coded on a 1-3 scale, while the item for how well a student seemed to understand the issue was

coded from 1-4. This final item was converted to a three-point scale before being averaged with the other responses to form this variable.

⁷ These data do not include students from fall 2006 since those essays have not yet been coded. In revisions to this paper I will include those data, which will increase the sample size and tighten up some of the coefficient estimates.

⁸ Other preliminary work I have done on these data (not presented) suggest that simulation participation scores are an important intervening factor in determining the impact of the simulation on student learning. Students who attended and participated, not surprisingly, experienced more of a jump in their knowledge and skills than those who did not. This result will be explored further as I attempt to enhance the empirical data analysis in a future incarnation of this paper.