

THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL STUDIES COURSEWORK ON YOUNG ADULT  
VOTING BEHAVIOR

A Thesis  
submitted to the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences at  
Georgetown University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
Master of Public Policy at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute

By

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Washington, DC  
April 18, 2004

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**ABSTRACT**

Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), with its renewed emphasis on “basic skills” such as reading and math, the importance placed on teaching social studies has declined. Drawing from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88), this study employs logistic regression analysis to examine the relationship between the amount of social studies classes taken in high school and the political engagement of young adults. Results reveal that even after controlling for socio-economic status, race, gender, academic motivation, and educational attainment, increasing amounts of social studies courses led to a higher likelihood that respondents voted in the 1992 US presidential election, the 1996 US presidential election, and in recent local and state elections. The study also examined the possibility that the impact of social studies coursework may vary according to a student’s socio-economic status. While results were considerably more limited in terms of statistical significance, some evidence did point toward a greater negative impact of cutting social studies coursework on the later voting behavior of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Policy implications are discussed, and further study is recommended.

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Michael Puma, as well as Jens Ludwig and Eric Gardner at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute for lending their knowledge, insight, and guidance.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

With the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), President George W. Bush laid out a blueprint for sweeping education reform built on four pillars: stronger accountability for results, more freedom for states and communities, proven education methods, and more choices for parents. Yet accountability has become the true centerpiece of NCLB, and the Department of Education website grandly proclaims that “the new law will change the culture of America's schools so that they define their success in terms of student achievement and invest in the achievement of every child.” In accordance with this new focus on accountability, a host of testing and assessment tools have been implemented throughout the country in an effort to hold schools accountable for the performance of their students. Every year, students in grades three through eight are tested in reading and mathematics, and a determination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is based on their performance. Schools failing to meet AYP are subject to a schedule of mandated reforms ranging from the provision of transfer options and supplemental educational services to staff replacement and school restructuring. Testing therefore plays an integral role in the new push for accountability, and according to the Department of Education, the tests “empower parents, citizens, educators, administrators and policymakers with data” and “give

parents information about the quality of their children's schools, the qualifications of their teachers, and their children's progress in key subjects.”

Yet the determination of what constitutes a “key subject” is the subject of a growing debate among educators and policymakers. The importance assigned to testing the basics under the new law has naturally brought with it a “back to basics” approach to instruction. Of course, this approach is hardly new. In fact, it has deep roots in the nation’s history: the “back to basics” movement is the latest incarnation of what was once known as a classical education. Proponents of a classical approach to education argue that instruction in traditional skills—such as reading, writing, and arithmetic—and subjects—the arts, sciences, and humanities—arms students with the “accumulated wisdom of the human race,” thus empowering them as individuals, citizens, and potential leaders. At one time, this approach represented a revolutionary break with old world European tradition, as these lofty academic endeavors were once reserved for a privileged elite and the vast majority were expected to learn trades and leave governing to their cultural “superiors.”

Equal access to such academic preparation thus became one of the guiding principles behind the notion of the “common school” in a democratic society. A

common school is defined as a public school, but more importantly, it serves figuratively as an educational public square, a place where children of all backgrounds and creeds are brought together to study and learn as equals. Such institutions were thought to play a crucial role in alleviating the effects of social inequalities by offering all students the same knowledge base and skills, and therefore, the same opportunities for self advancement and success.

The core principle guiding NCLB - that the government has a duty to ensure every child access to a rigorous academic education that will prepare them as future citizens and potential leaders - is therefore both a historical goal as well as the subject of a new chapter in education reform. Yet, as Boston (2005) points out, this renewed concern with academics has a blind spot. One of the primary historical purposes of the common school was to equip students with the skills necessary to become informed, engaged citizens. In fact, perhaps the most eloquent advocate of the common school was Thomas Jefferson, who envisioned a system of publicly funded schools that would nurture a dynamic, engaged citizenry by teaching reason and critical thinking skills to all students (Ravitch, 2000). Similarly, John Dewey defined a democratic society as one that ensures and provides for the participation of all of its members equally through the preparatory processes of education (Ravitch, 2000).

This focus on the “civic” role of education has been eclipsed in the newest formulation of what academic knowledge and skills are fundamental to society. For example, the NCLB website identifies reading, math, and science as crucial skills for individuals and for the nation—the keys to “global economic leadership and homeland security in the 21st century.” Yet it is left entirely up to states to determine if, and when, to assess progress in social studies. It is not surprising then that schools are refocusing their attention away from these subjects in an effort to improve student performance “where it counts.” A December 2004 national survey of school districts administered by the Center on Education Policy found that in response to No Child Left Behind, 27 percent of districts report reducing the time devoted to teaching social studies (Center on Education Policy Fall District Survey, 2004). As Chester Finn (2003), President of the Thomas B. Fordham institute writes, “the omission of social studies-and, more importantly, of history, geography, and civics-from NCLB is beginning to have deleterious effects. It's causing some states and schools to downplay these subjects in favor of those for which they'll be held publicly accountable and compared with each other. As the old educator truism puts it, what gets tested is what gets taught.”

In treating social studies as peripheral subject matter, critics thus charge that we are failing to recognize that civic skills are as central to the welfare of individuals and nations as reading and math skills. As Boston (2005) writes, this “recent preoccupation with reshaping academics and raising academic performance has all but overpowered a task of equally vital importance: Educating our young people to become engaged members of their communities, not just as wage earners and taxpayers, but as citizens—people who participate in the civic life of their communities.”

This neglect clearly has its costs. Numerous studies and surveys, including the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (NCES, 1998), the Civic Education Study (IEA, 1999), and the National Youth Survey of Civic Engagement (CIRCLE, 2002), reinforce the conclusion that young people today have substantially less civic knowledge and skills than their peers of past generations. In the most recent NAEP (NCES, 1998) results for civics, a third of all students did not reach a “basic” level of achievement in their knowledge of civics. Only 23 percent of fourth graders, 23 percent of eighth graders, and 26 percent of twelfth graders scored at or above the “proficient” level. Similarly, according to the Civic Education Study (IEA, 1999), a survey administered to a nationally representative sample of 14-year-olds, students in

the United States ranked 10th among 28 countries in knowledge of basic concepts of democracy and government.

There is considerable evidence that this erosion of civic knowledge and preparation has impeded even the most basic feature of democratic citizenship: voting. According to the Current Population Survey (Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Bureau of the Census, 2002) November Voting and Registration Supplements, only 36 percent of youth aged 18-24 voted in the 2000 presidential election, and only 19.4 percent voted in the 2002 midterm elections.

The fundamental failure to prepare students to become informed, engaged citizens degrades the historical aims of equal opportunity and access that are at the heart of this sweeping new educational reform policy. These trends have therefore led many in the academic and policy worlds to address and debate the best course of action for schools. What role should schools play as public institutions in a democratic society to stem the tide of civic disengagement? How should schools restore balance, and better provide students with vital citizenship values and skills?

## **Chapter 2. Prior Research on Education and Civic Engagement**

The existing body of literature on civic engagement among young people encompasses a wide range of practical and philosophical examinations of the respective roles of family, schools, extracurricular activities, religion, and social networks in nurturing a commitment to community and country. Due to its comprehensive, longitudinal analysis of a cohort of young people, the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2000) has been widely used to quantitatively examine the effects of a range of interventions and experiences on civic mindedness, voting behavior, and community service. For example, Smith (1999) uses NELS data and structural equation modeling to identify and weigh the effects of investments in key social capital resources for students, concluding that parental involvement, extracurricular activities, and involvement in religious organizations are all significant predictors of political participation and civic engagement in young adulthood.

Other studies focus specifically on the role of extracurricular activities. Using logistic regression analysis, Zaff, Moore, Papillo, and Williams (2003) find that NELS:88 respondents who reported consistent participation in extracurricular activity were 60 percent more likely to vote and 80 percent more likely to volunteer than those

who reported only occasional participation, and those who never participated were less likely to vote (35%) and volunteer (nearly 60%) than those who were occasional participants. Also using logistic regression models predicting voting and voter registration, Frisco, Muller, and Dodson (2004) find that membership in organizations historically aimed at fostering morality and civic socialization positively predict whether or not young adults register to vote and participate in the first election in which they are eligible to vote. Furthermore, they find that both membership in such organizations and the effects of membership on voting behaviors vary according to race and socioeconomic status.

There are some studies that look at how the characteristics of schools and teachers affect their ability to foster civic engagement. For example, Torney-Purta, Barber, and Richardson (2005) use Hierarchical Linear Modeling (similar to regression analysis) to study the impact of teacher preparation on student civic knowledge. Their results indicate that teacher professional development in civics-related topics does increase student civic knowledge, i.e., those students who had teachers with professional development experience had civic knowledge scores that were half a standard deviation above other students, and were more likely to report that they expected to participate as an informed voter in the United States. School climate has

been identified as another important influence on political knowledge and skills. Torney-Purta (2002) found that those schools that rigorously teach civic content and skills, ensure an open classroom climate for discussing issues, emphasize the importance of the electoral process, and encourage a participative school culture are much more effective at nurturing citizenship skills and values in students. Even school choice has been studied as an element that works to increase civic values and engagement among students (Wolf, Macedo, Ferrero and Venegoni, 2004).

Yet at the heart of this literature on the role schools play in nurturing citizenship skills is a debate over the effectiveness and ultimate potential of academic coursework. While there is widespread agreement on the point that formal education and civic-mindedness are strongly correlated (Neuman, 1986; Zaller, 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry, 1996), some skeptics point to the likelihood that a predisposition toward civic mindedness may also result in the pursuit of more formal education (Luskin, 1990; Smith, 1989), obscuring the true relationship between education and civic behavior. One seminal study conducted in the 1960's to examine the mechanisms of political socialization found that civics courses did not play a significant role in this socialization process (Langton and Jennings, 1968). Yet in their re-analysis of the 1988 U.S. NAEP civics data, Niemi and Junn

(1998) found that each of three civics curriculum variables—including the amount and recency of civics course work, the variety of topics studied, and the extent to which teachers encouraged class discussion of current events— increased student civic knowledge, as measured by the percentage of questions answered correctly on the NAEP test of civic knowledge. Using OLS regression analysis, they estimated that taking a civics-related course increased civics scores by 4 percentage points, even after accounting for gender, race, home environment, and individual achievement measures, such as whether a student plans on attending college after graduation and how much interest the student has in American government.

However, a compelling distinction made in numerous studies is that even if we accept the point that social studies courses do positively impact civic knowledge, they do not necessarily impact civic attitudes (Patrick and Hoge, 1991) or civic participation (Ferguson, 1991). To address such critiques of the role of social studies coursework, some research has sought to measure impacts in terms of civic *behavior* rather than merely levels of civic knowledge. For example, Kurtz, Rosenthal, and Zukin (2003), drawing from a national public opinion survey designed to compare the civic attitudes of those between 15 and 26 years of age, to older generations, demonstrated that for this age cohort, civics courses affected civic knowledge as well as beliefs and

behaviors. In particular, they found that those students who had taken a civics or American government class are much more likely to register to vote, to vote in most elections, to follow what is happening in government, to volunteer, to contact a public official, and to work on a political campaign.

In another study, Chapin (2001) focuses specifically on voting behavior, using NELS:88 data to illustrate a correlation between social studies grades, scores on standardized social studies tests, and units of social studies courses and the likelihood of voting. In particular, she finds that students who had taken three or more years of social studies courses were significantly more likely to be registered to vote, to have voted in the 1992 presidential election, and to have voted in local or state elections. In her conclusion, she writes that “this result needs to be widely publicized to answer the critics who assert that social studies courses are a waste of time and students would be better off taking other courses.”

However, it is necessary to keep in mind that Chapin relies on merely descriptive statistical methods. While illustrating the patterns of increased political participation may point toward a possible relationship between social studies coursework and voting, this type of analysis is unable to control for other powerful

impacts on voting behavior, such as race, socio-economic status, or educational attainment. In order to establish a causal relationship or isolate the effect of any one explanatory variable on an outcome, the analysis must incorporate a mechanism for drawing a comparison between similar respondents that differ only in the amount of social studies courses they took in high school. Therefore, in the literature on civic education there is a need for research using advanced regression analysis techniques to study the true impact of social studies coursework on voting behavior.

## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

### **Research Questions**

To further examine the effectiveness of social studies coursework in developing citizenship skills among youth and young adults, this study focused on two main research questions:

1. What is the relationship between social studies courses taken in high school and the voting rates of young adults?
2. Does the number of social studies courses taken have a greater positive effect on the voting rates of students from low income backgrounds compared to other students?

Specifically, this paper addresses the possible long term effect of social studies coursework in high school by looking at whether such course-taking increases the likelihood that students become politically engaged citizens later in life. Furthermore, this analysis investigates the possibility that social studies are an effective intervention for increasing political involvement among those students most “at risk” for becoming disengaged from society and the political process.

## **Methods of Analysis**

To address these research questions, logistic regression analysis was employed to estimate the effect of increasing Carnegie units of high school social studies on voting behavior, controlling for other differences likely to have an impact on voting participation, including socio-economic status, race, gender, academic achievement, and educational attainment. The three outcome variables under examination are 1) whether or not a respondent voted in the 1992 US presidential election, 2) whether or not a respondent voted in the 1996 US presidential election, and 3) whether or not a respondent voted in any state or local election from 1992 to 1994.

Three different models were employed to capture the effects of 1) one continuous social studies variable, 2) dichotomous variables for having taken either more or less than the average number of social studies units, and 3) dichotomous variables for each of five disaggregated intervals of social studies units. The three estimated regression models are as follows:

Model 1, employing one continuous social studies variable:

Vote =  $\beta_0 + \beta_1$  (Black) +  $\beta_2$  (Hispanic) +  $\beta_3$  (Other race) +  $\beta_4$  (female) +  $\beta_5$  (high school diploma) +  $\beta_6$  (some college/post-secondary education) +  $\beta_7$  (college degree) +  $\beta_8$  (SES Composite) +  $\beta_9$  (Grades Composite) +  $\beta_{10}$  (continuous social studies course-taking, from 0 - 11) +  $u$

Model 2, employing two dichotomous variables for more than average/less than average social studies course-taking:

Vote =  $\beta_0 + \beta_1$  (Black) +  $\beta_2$  (Hispanic) +  $\beta_3$  (Other race) +  $\beta_4$  (female) +  $\beta_5$  (high school diploma) +  $\beta_6$  (some college/post-secondary education) +  $\beta_7$  (college degree) +  $\beta_8$  (SES Composite) +  $\beta_9$  (Grades Composite) +  $\beta_{10}$  (took less than three Carnegie units of social studies) +  $\beta_{11}$  (took more than three Carnegie units of social studies) +  $u$

Model 3, employing 5 separate disaggregated dichotomous variables for social studies course-taking:

Vote =  $\beta_0 + \beta_1$  (Black) +  $\beta_2$  (Hispanic) +  $\beta_3$  (Other race) +  $\beta_4$  (female) +  $\beta_5$  (high school diploma) +  $\beta_6$  (some college/post-secondary education) +  $\beta_7$  (college degree) +  $\beta_8$  (SES Composite) +  $\beta_9$  (Grades Composite) +  $\beta_{10}$  (took up to 1 full Carnegie unit of social studies) +  $\beta_{11}$  (took up to 2 full Carnegie units of social studies) +  $\beta_{12}$  (took up to

3 full Carnegie units of social studies) +  $\beta_{13}$  (took up to 4 full Carnegie units of social studies) +  $\beta_{14}$  (took more than 4 Carnegie units of social studies) +  $u$

In the second part of the analysis, an additional interaction variable between socio-economic status quartile (quartile #1 being the lowest) and social studies coursework is added to the second regression model for all three outcomes to measure whether the effect of social studies coursework varies according to a student's family socio-economic status. Specifically, this part of the research aims to test whether social studies coursework has a larger effect for those students most "at risk" for low levels of civic engagement: students from poor families. This assignment of risk is based on findings that lower socio-economic status is correlated with lower voting participation rates, and the ensuing assumption that students from poorer families therefore have less access to positive "civic" influences at home and within their communities. If the findings support this hypothesis that these students benefit the most from social studies coursework, then it would be reasonable to conclude that social studies are an effective school-based intervention for developing citizenship skills uniquely positioned to reach disadvantaged students.

## **Data Source**

Sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education, the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) is a sweeping longitudinal survey that followed over 25,000 students enrolled as eighth graders in 1988 in both public and private schools throughout the country. After the base year survey in 1988, these respondents were surveyed again five times over the next 12 years: in 1990 (NELS:88/90), when they were tenth graders, in 1992 (NELS:88/92), when they were high school seniors, and than twice more after high school, in 1994 (NELS:88/94), and 2000 (NELS:88/2000). The comprehensive survey questions offer a rich array of information regarding their background, social and academic experiences in middle and high school, and the choices they later made concerning health, college, family, career, and community involvement. In addition to the surveys and cognitive tests administered to the student respondents, NELS:88 collected information from parents and guardians in 1988 and 1992 and from teachers and school administrators in 1988, 1990, and 1992. High school transcripts were also collected in 1992, when most members of the eighth grade class of 1988 graduated. Of particular relevance for this study, NELS:88 offers a rich array of information on instructional practices, school policies and requirements, and student attitudes and outcomes in specific subject areas, including social studies. It also

includes information on participation in local, state, and national elections and other forms of civic engagement.

### **Variables of Analysis**

The dependent variables used in this analysis to gauge political involvement consisted of three measures of voting behavior: whether or not a respondent voted in (1) the 1992 US presidential election, (2) the 1996 US presidential election, or (3) in any local or state election “in the last 24 months”—roughly 1998-2000. Each measure was coded as equal to one if the student reported having voted, and equal to zero otherwise.

The primary policy variable used in the analysis was the amount of social studies coursework taken by a respondent at the secondary level measured in Carnegie Units. A Carnegie unit is a measure used to standardize coursework based on time spent in a class, rather than mastery of a subject. Each Carnegie unit generally equates to one full year spent taking a particular course, normally a minimum of about 130 hours of instruction. In addition, the following covariates were included in the regression models:

- *Socio-Economic Status* A composite measure of family socio-economic status was created by NELS:88 from the following data taken from the parent questionnaire: father's education level, mother's education level, father's occupation, mother's occupation, and family income.
- *Race* To control for the effects of race on voting, four dummy variables were created to study the effects of membership in the following exclusive racial categories: White (not Hispanic), Black (not Hispanic), Hispanic, and “other race”—comprised of Asians, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders.
- *Gender* To control for the effects of gender on voting, a dummy variable was created for female (1=yes).
- *Academic Achievement* A composite measure of academic achievement was created by NELS:88 by equally weighting a respondent’s self-reported grades in English, mathematics, science, and social studies.
- *Educational Attainment* A separate dummy variable was created for each of the four following exclusive groups of respondents: (1) those who had not received

their high school diploma as of 2000, (2) those who had received a high school diploma, (3) those who had pursued some type of post-secondary education, and (4) those who had earned a college degree or higher. Given the fact that the voting behavior, as well as other economic and social characteristics, of GED earners more closely approximates that of high school dropouts rather than those who earn their high school diplomas, respondents who reported earning a GED were excluded from the high school diploma category.

Descriptive statistics for all variables are provided in Tables I-IV.

### **Use of Weights**

In 1988, a sample of over 25,000 students participated in NELS:88, and this sample was representative of the roughly 3,000,000 students who attended the eighth grade in the United States that year. However, certain subgroups of particular interest to policymakers (such as minority groups) were over-sampled to allow for more precise estimates of those students. At the same time, due to budget constraints and other considerations the sample was narrowed substantially in later follow up survey years. This narrowing of the sample was systematic, i.e., a participant's chance of being surveyed in later rounds was not random, but based on such factors as which school they attended. Therefore, due to considerations of over-sampling and a

systematically restricted sample, the use of sample weights is necessary to allow us to generalize the findings to the original full population, i.e., the eighth grade class of 1988. Consequently, all reported analyses were done using weighted logistic regression.

### **Missing Data**

One of the ways that NELS:88 is able to offer such a richness of data is through merging several different individual datasets into one, i.e., each survey year, the different surveys administered to parents, teachers, and students, and datasets that relied on high school transcripts. In the present study, the variable of interest, social studies units, was derived from one such dataset looking at high school course taking. This dataset had fewer total responses than the rest of NELS:88. However, because social studies coursework is our variable of interest, no effort was made to attempt to recapture observations that were missing values on this measure. In addition, all observations that were missing one or more value on any of the explanatory variables were also removed from the analysis, and the final estimates were based on only those observations that had valid responses for all explanatory variables—roughly three quarters of the full sample. To compute the likely bias of the final analysis, the voting patterns of all excluded respondents were compared to those of the group that made it into the final sample. It was found that this excluded group was significantly less likely

to vote. For example, while 55 percent of the final included sample reported voting in the presidential election of 1992, only 37 percent of the excluded group reported voting in this election. This finding was statistically significant and consistent for all three voting outcome variables. Thus, this missing data most likely introduces positive bias into estimates of voting participation, although it is unknown how this overall bias affects the relationship between social studies course-taking and political participation.

## **Chapter 4. Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

A purely descriptive analysis of the voting behavior of NELS:88 respondents indicates that education in general, and social studies coursework in particular, are indeed potential determinants of participation in the political process in young adulthood. To begin with, the likelihood of voting in either of the presidential elections or in local and state elections increases along with educational attainment (See Table IV). For example, while only 24 percent of high school dropouts reported voting in the 1992 US presidential election, 36 percent of those respondents who had earned their high school diplomas reported voted in that election. This voting percentage rose further to 47 percent and 65 percent for those with some post-secondary education or a college degree, respectively.

A similar pattern is observed for the relationship between voting behavior and rising Carnegie units of high school social studies. Looking at the mean and median number of social studies units taken by NELS:88 respondents in Table III, we see that the average amount of social studies coursework is three Carnegie units—a figure that corresponds to the national average. Of those students who had taken the average number of social studies units, 54 percent participated in the 1992 election, compared

to only 36 percent for those who had taken less than three units. Of the students who had taken more than three units, 56 percent reported voting. This pattern is also apparent when we look at participation in local and state elections, a measure of political engagement that arguably requires a higher level of initiative and community connectedness on the part of a voter. While about 38 percent of those respondents that had taken at least the average amount of social studies courses reported voting in local or state elections over a two year period (from roughly 1992-1994), only 25 percent of those with less than the average amount of social studies courses voted at the local or state level.

In looking at the voting behavior of NELS:88 respondents, another trend in voting behavior is also evident. While the National Voter Turnout in Presidential and Congressional Elections Survey (Federal Election Commission, 1960-1996) reports a decline in voter turnout between 1992 and 1996 from about 55 percent nationwide to 49 percent, the percentage of NELS:88 respondents who reported voting rose from about 48 percent in 1992 to 57 percent in 1996, indicative of the well-documented observation that people are more likely to vote as they age. However, the observed pattern of returns to social studies coursework remains. While the percentage of those respondents with less than average social studies coursework that voted grew to 45

percent in the 1996 US presidential election, those respondents with average or above average social studies coursework continued to turn out to vote in larger percentages—61 and 63 percent respectively.

### **Regression Analysis**

Regression results are presented in Tables V-VIII. As expected, the independent variable of interest, Carnegie units of social studies, generally had a positive and statistically significant effect on all three voting behaviors. Looking first at the effect of social studies coursework as a continuous variable, it is found that an incremental increase in Carnegie units of social studies raises the odds that a respondent voted by 13 percent in the 1992 election, 6 percent in the 1996 election, and 12 percent in local or state elections, controlling for all other variables in the model (see Table V). Moving on to social studies course-taking disaggregated by number of Carnegie units (Table VII), the results show that increasing amounts have increasingly positive effects on voting behavior. For example, the odds of voting in the 1992 presidential election for a student who had taken up to one full Carnegie unit or between one and two Carnegie units of social studies were roughly two times higher than the odds of voting for a student who had not taken any social studies coursework, while the odds of voting for respondents in each of the three higher categories, between two and three units, between three and four units, and over four units of social studies

were about three times higher than the odds of voting for a student who had not taken any social studies coursework.

However, there were a few inconsistencies obscuring this picture of the enduring value of social studies coursework. To begin with, while the results for two of the outcome variables are consistent, the regressions estimating the likelihood of voting in the 1996 presidential election are considerably more erratic. Not only are two of the disaggregated social studies variables no longer statistically significant at the  $p=0.10$  level, but the odds ratio estimates are about half of those derived for the other two outcome variables (See Table VII). This may very well reflect a pattern of decreasing returns to social studies course-taking as a student grows older and the lessons of high school social studies classes are forgotten. Alternatively, it may reflect the fact that all NELS:88 respondents, regardless of the amount of social studies courses they took in high school, are more likely to vote as they age, so the positive influence on voting attributable to social studies coursework is likely to diminish with time.

Looking at the other two variables, there is also a slight “plateau” observable between the third and fourth categories of social studies units—while the likelihood of voting rises consistently up to the category of having up to three social studies units,

the next unit increase yields a slightly lower likelihood of voting, from 2.955 to 2.819 for the presidential election of 1992 and from 3.244 to 3.086 for local and state elections from 1992-1994 (See Table VII). While this is most likely a result of the small number of students that take this amount of social studies courses, it may also reflect a pattern of diminishing returns to increased social studies coursework past three Carnegie units.

Finally, to further capture the positive impact of increasing units of social studies observed when the regression models employed disaggregated social studies unit variables with a baseline group of those respondents who had not taken social studies units at all, dummy variables were created that collapsed social studies coursework into two dichotomous variables: less than average and more than average social studies course-taking, with average social studies course-taking (exactly three units) as the baseline. Taking less than the average amount of social studies lowered the odds of voting in the 1992 presidential election by about 29 percent, lowered the odds of voting in the 1996 presidential election by about 22 percent, and lowered the odds of voting in local or state elections by about 33 percent (see Table VI). Yet taking more than the average amount of social studies courses was not found to have a statistically significant effect on any of the three voting behavior variables.

The results for the second part of the study were considerably less promising. The interaction variable, which aimed to capture the increased impact of social studies on the voting behavior of students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds, was rarely found to have a statistically significant effect on any of the three voting outcome variables (see Table VIII). There are a few notable exceptions. An interaction variable added to a regression estimating the likelihood of voting in the 1992 presidential election shows that taking less than the average amount of social studies had a stronger negative effect on the voting behavior of those students in the second and third lowest socio-economic status quartiles than for students in the highest socio-economic status quartile. Meanwhile, taking more than the average amount of social studies courses had a greater positive impact on the voting behavior of those students in the lowest socio-economic quartile for the 1992 presidential election as well as for local and state elections.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion**

Overall, the results of this study indicate that social studies play an important role in nurturing political engagement among young adults. Even after controlling for other powerful indicators of voting behavior, such as socio-economic status and educational attainment, social studies coursework in high school consistently yielded a statistically significant, positive impact on the likelihood of voting. One of the most significant findings was that of increasing returns to the continuous social studies course taking variable. Incremental increases in Carnegie units of social studies raised the odds that a student voted by 13 percent in the 1992 election, 6 percent in the 1996 election, and 12 percent in local or state elections. This pattern was maintained when looking at the increasingly negative effect of having less than the average amount of social studies. This finding is particularly germane as it implies that the decreasing amount of time spent teaching social studies under NCLB is likely to have a negative impact on political engagement.

However, this study falls short of finding increased returns to social studies course taking beyond the average amount of three Carnegie units, which corresponds to roughly three years of social studies classes. Whether or not this is the result of the small number of students that take this amount of social studies courses, it limits our

ability to recommend additional social studies coursework as a way to increase political engagement among young adults.

The results of the second part of the analysis, which employed interaction variables to capture a possible variation in the effects of social studies among different categories of socio-economic status, are also promising despite being somewhat more limited in terms of statistical significance and consistency. Most notably, taking less than the average amount of social studies was shown to have an even greater negative impact for students of lower socio-economic status than for more wealthy students for two of the three voting outcome variables. This is an important finding because it illustrates the potentially disproportionate nature of NCLB's ripple effects. Poor students are less likely to become active voters later on in life. Given traditional patterns of lower voter turnout among people of low socio-economic status, this may be because of a lack of civically active role models in their immediate families or communities. It may also stem from a general sense of social or political disenfranchisement. Whatever the cause, they are certainly more "at risk" for low civic and political engagement. They are also more likely to attend failing schools that, under NCLB, are cutting back on instruction in social studies. Thus, NCLB effectively targets the most at-risk students for the least amount of social studies. In attempting to

address student achievement gaps in reading and math, NCLB may thus end up intensifying the gaps in political representation between the haves and have-nots.

## **Chapter 6. Conclusion**

By providing statistically significant evidence of the relationship between social studies coursework and voting behavior, this examination lends empirical weight to the argument NCLB is likely to further exacerbate the growing political disengagement of young adults by narrowing the curriculum in our school system. This study also found some evidence for the more nuanced theory that cutting social studies courses is likely to have an even greater negative impact on disadvantaged students—those students most at risk for political disengagement. These findings have important and timely policy implications. As NCLB and accountability-through-testing becomes more established in the coming years, policymakers should revisit the near-sighted formulation of math and reading as the sole subjects used to determine the progress of schools.

However, there are several gaps in the findings, including the fact that when looking at the effects of taking social studies coursework beyond the average amount of three Carnegie units, no statistically significant effect could be seen. This may very well reflect a dynamic of diminishing returns past this point, which at three years is a significant amount of coursework. If so, future research should aim to identify specific topics within the branch of social studies or pedagogic practices that could make social

studies courses even more effective at instilling civic knowledge, values and skills in young people. While this study was limited in terms of disaggregating the impact of history versus civics or geography, for example, future research should aim to more precisely measure the impact of different subjects, such as history, geography, or civics. Such a finding would allow us to build a case for not only putting a stop to the erosion of social studies instruction, but for placing increased emphasis on improving the value and focus of social studies courses.

Finally, the body of literature on social studies coursework and political engagement would greatly benefit from further exploration of the ability of social studies coursework to “supplement” the civic knowledge a student receives at home or within their community. Specifically, emphasis should be placed on examining whether social studies make an even greater impact on students that belong to one or more categories identified as “sub groups” of interest under NCLB, such as minority students, learning disabled students, or students from low socio-economic backgrounds. In terms of NCLB’s emphasis on closing achievement gaps and focusing on improving outcomes for these “at risk” students, this would frame the issue in more compelling terms by giving a fuller picture of the power and potential of social studies coursework.

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## Tables

**TABLE I**  
**Personal Characteristics of NELS:88 Respondents**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Valid N</b>	<b>Frequency (Unweighted)</b>	<b>Percentage (Weighted)</b>
<b><u>Sex</u></b>			
Male	11,384	5,349	49.69
Female		6,035	50.31
<b><u>Race</u></b>			
White	11,274	7,908	72.66
Black		1,041	12.13
Hispanic		1,444	10.55
Other		881	4.29
<b><u>Educational Attainment</u></b>			
No High School Diploma	12,137	1,529	12.09
High School Diploma	12,128	1,565	16.30
Some College	12,029	5,436	46.91
College Degree or Higher	12,029	4,060	30.78
<b><u>Social Studies Coursework</u></b>			
Less than 1 Unit	10,310	823	10.25
From 1- 2 Units		1,005	10.32
From 2- 3 Units		3,762	35.37
From 3 - 4 Units		3,497	32.33
More than 4 Units		1,223	11.72

**TABLE II**  
**Voting Characteristics of NELS:88 Respondents**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Valid N</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (Weighted)</b>
<b><u>Registered to Vote (2000)</u></b>	11,825		
Yes		9,277	79.11
No		2,548	20.89
<b><u>Voted in 1992 Presidential Election</u></b>	12,011		
Yes		5,779	48.45
No		6,232	51.55
<b><u>Voted in 1996 Presidential Election</u></b>	11,811		
Yes		6,683	57.07
No		5,128	42.93

**TABLE III**  
**Descriptive Statistics for Continuous Variables: SES, Grades, and Social Studies Units**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Valid N</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
<b><u>Number of Social Studies Units</u></b>	10,310	0.00-11.00	3.15	3.00	1.17
<b><u>Socio-Economic Status Composite</u></b>	11,384	-2.88-2.56	-0.08	-0.08	0.79
<b><u>Grades Composite</u></b>	11,288	0.50-4.00	2.98	3.00	0.73

**Table VI**  
**Voting Behaviors by Educational Attainment Levels and Social Studies**  
**Course-Taking**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>% Voted in 1992 (Presidential)</b>	<b>% Voted (Local/State)</b>	<b>% Voted in 1996 (Presidential)</b>
<b><u>Sample Average</u></b>	48.45	32.81	57.07
<b><u>Educational Attainment</u></b>			
No Diploma	23.95	17.35	35.05
High School Diploma	36.07	26.11	43.42
Some College	47.30	32.63	57.41
College Degree	64.84	42.04	70.55
<b><u>Social Studies Coursework</u></b>			
Less than Average	35.83	24.77	44.89
Average	53.53	38.01	60.80
More than Average	56.16	38.32	63.02

**Table V**  
**Logistic Regression Parameter Estimates for Model 1: One Continuous Social Studies Variable**

Variable	1992 (Presidential)	1992-1994 (Local/State)	1996 (Presidential)
Female (1=yes)	-0.0558 (0.0437)	-0.0258 (0.0444)	0.0991* (0.0442)
Hispanic (1=yes)	-0.3151*** (0.0762)	-0.0819 (0.0795)	0.0279 (0.0758)
Black (1=yes)	-0.2269** (0.0699)	0.1851** (0.0708)	0.3154*** (0.0725)
Other race (1=yes)	-0.9069*** (0.1078)	-0.5670*** (0.1155)	-0.7735*** (0.1045)
High School Diploma	0.5185*** (0.1171)	0.5485*** (0.1291)	0.4783*** (0.1085)
Some College	0.9408*** (0.1060)	0.8360*** (0.1175)	0.9458*** (0.0971)
College Degree	1.2880*** (0.1184)	1.0522*** (0.1291)	1.3029*** (0.1116)
Grades Composite	0.0985** (0.0340)	0.0781* (0.0352)	0.1522*** (0.0343)
Socio-Economic Status	0.3562*** (0.0347)	0.1501*** (0.0352)	0.2676*** (0.0351)
Social Studies Coursework	0.1252*** (0.0214)	0.1174*** (0.0219)	0.0573** (0.0214)

\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$  level, \*\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < 0.01$  level, \*\*\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < 0.001$  level. All other reported estimates are not significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

**Table VI**  
**Logistic Regression Parameter Estimates for Model 2: More than/Less than**  
**Average Social Studies Units Variables**

Variable	1992 (Presidential)	1992-1994 (Local/State)	1996 (Presidential)
Female (1=yes)	-0.0482 (0.0437)	-0.0165 (0.0444)	0.1041* (0.0443)
Hispanic (1=yes)	-0.3283*** (0.0762)	-0.0974 (0.0796)	0.0208 (0.0760)
Black (1=yes)	-0.2202** (0.0698)	0.1906** (0.0707)	0.3169*** (0.0725)
Other race (1=yes)	-0.9164*** (0.1079)	-0.5786*** (0.1156)	-0.7846*** (0.1046)
High School Diploma	0.5883*** (0.1150)	0.5935*** (0.1274)	0.4632*** (0.1063)
Some College	1.0020*** (0.1042)	0.8746*** (0.1161)	0.9266*** (0.0952)
College Degree	1.3597*** (0.1165)	1.0997*** (0.1275)	1.2816*** (0.1096)
Grades Composite	0.1057** (0.0339)	0.0813* (0.0351)	0.1494*** (0.0342)
Socio-Economic Status	0.3655*** (0.0347)	0.1591*** (0.0352)	0.2703*** (0.0350)
<b><u>Social Studies Coursework</u></b>			
More than Average	-0.0367 (0.0515)	-0.0658 (0.0514)	-0.0288 (0.0530)
Less than Average	-0.2944*** (0.0625)	-0.3262*** (0.0651)	-0.2225** (0.0631)

\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$  level, \*\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < 0.01$  level, \*\*\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < 0.001$  level. All other reported estimates are not significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

**Table VII**  
**Logistic Regression Parameter Estimates for Model 3:**  
**Disaggregated Social Studies Units Variables**

Variable	1992 (Presidential)	1992-1994 (Local/State)	1996 (Presidential)
Female (1=yes)	-0.0429 (0.0438)	-0.0128 (0.0445)	0.1063* (0.0444)
Hispanic (1=yes)	-0.3451*** (0.0765)	-0.1136 (0.0797)	0.0008 (0.0761)
Black (1=yes)	-0.2236** (0.0701)	-0.1968** (0.0710)	0.3178*** (0.0726)
Other race (1=yes)	-0.9173*** (0.1077)	-0.5753*** (0.1155)	-0.7840*** (0.1046)
High School Diploma	0.3482** 0.1230	0.4304** (0.1364)	0.3949** (0.1145)
Some College	0.8018*** (0.1109)	0.7445*** (0.1239)	0.8733*** (0.1018)
College Degree	1.1573*** (0.1226)	0.9726*** (0.1346)	1.2316*** (0.1154)
Grades Composite	0.0785* (0.0344)	0.0646 (0.0355)	0.1420*** (0.0346)
Socio-Economic Status	0.3500*** (0.0348)	0.1460*** (0.0353)	0.2640*** (0.0352)
<b><u>Social Studies Coursework</u></b>			
More than 0, ≤ 1 Unit	0.6602*** (0.1709)	0.9824*** (0.1988)	0.2346 (0.1453)
More than 1, ≤ 2 Units	0.7940*** (0.1600)	0.8659*** (0.1896)	0.1725 (0.1366)
More than 2, ≤ 3 Units	1.0836*** (0.1541)	1.1769*** (0.1831)	0.4233** (0.1302)
More than 3, ≤ 4 Units	1.0364*** (0.1553)	1.1268*** (0.1840)	0.4270** (0.1318)
More than 4 Units	1.1256*** (0.1633)	1.1958*** (0.1904)	0.3864** (0.1417)

\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$  level, \*\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < 0.01$  level, \*\*\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < 0.0001$  level. All other reported estimates are not significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

**Table VIII**  
**Logistic Regression Parameter Estimates for Models Employing Interaction Variables**

<b>Interaction Variable</b>	<b>1992 (Presidential)</b>	<b>1992-1994 (Local/State)</b>	<b>1996 (Presidential)</b>
<b>&lt;3 Social Studies Units</b>			
X SES quartile #1	-0.2419 (0.1564)	0.2061 (0.1621)	0.3440 (0.1528)
X SES quartile #2	-0.4502** (0.1515)	-0.0226 (0.1547)	0.0169 (0.1520)
X SES quartile #3	-0.3151* (0.1547)	-0.1401 (0.1610)	0.00782 (0.1553)
<b>&gt;3 Social Studies Units</b>			
X SES Quartile #1	0.2755* (0.1316)	0.2411 (0.1357)	-0.0845 (0.1317)
X SES Quartile #2	0.1756 (0.1215)	0.0344 (0.1205)	-0.0517 (0.1244)
X SES Quartile #3	0.0941 (0.1180)	0.1955 (0.1173)	0.0502 (0.1222)

\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$  level, \*\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < 0.01$  level, \*\*\* indicates statistical significance at  $p < 0.001$  level. All other reported estimates are not significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.