

Improving verbal learning in schools can increase political engagement and encourage voting later in life.

*Can education policymakers close achievements gaps in core subjects, and at the same time improve civic education and participation? In new research, **Meghan Condon** argues that they can; students who gain greater verbal skills in school, and who then do better academically, are also more likely to vote and volunteer as adults. She argues that students who are from disadvantaged social backgrounds get fewer verbal learning opportunities in school, which in turn further hurts their chances of being represented in the political process.*



Improving civic education and closing achievement gaps in core subjects, like reading and math, are often viewed as competing educational goals. Policy observers on both ends of the ideological spectrum warn that civics gets lost in the pursuit of achievement gains. Recently, civics education advocates **cheered** the passage of The Every Student Succeeds Act (**ESSA**), which **replaces** The No Child Left Behind Act, because the new law pivots slightly away from math and reading toward a “well rounded” education and includes new federal funding for social studies and civics programs.

But schools’ civic and basic academic missions are not as separate as they may seem. Core subject achievement is promoted because of its powerful effect on the labor market, but in **new research**, I show that it also has an impact in the voting booth. Specifically, young people who gain greater verbal skills in school – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – are more likely to vote and volunteer as adults.

Verbal skills are not often framed as civic skills because they are taught across multiple subjects. They are, however, central to civic life; people apply them to articulate interests, acquire information, and receive mobilization messages, all which increase the likelihood of multiple forms of civic engagement. When young people build such skills in school, they become more adept at synthesizing information and expressing themselves in real-world conversations. They may also become more likely to engage in political talk, which has a **durable mobilizing effect** for youth.

Following Youth from The Classroom to the Voting Booth

To investigate whether verbal learning in school increases civic engagement, I use data from the National Longitudinal Study of 1988 (**NELS**). The NELS collected data from a nationally representative sample of American 8th graders and followed them into adulthood. Studying the same individuals as they age shows that students who acquired greater communication skills in school, as measured by grades and standardized tests, do indeed end up as more participatory adults.

But of course, children who earn high grades or score well on tests often have a host of other advantages that may also make them more engaged citizens. For example, a child with highly educated parents is more likely to do well in school *and* show up at the polls later in life. The relationship that appears between school achievement and civic engagement in the data may simply be due to those family-based advantages rather than a real effect of learning on engagement. In addition to advantages at home, general cognitive and non-cognitive skills, exposure to civic education, or school quality create similar challenges for causal inference. An individual with any of these advantages will likely show up in the data with relatively high verbal achievement measures as well as high civic participation. So seeing the association is not enough; to understand how schooling affects citizenship and inform policy and practice, we need to know whether schools can actually produce engaged citizens by fostering more literacy and verbal learning across the curriculum.



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To tease apart the effect of the verbal learning itself from other family, school, and individual advantages, I hold several factors like family civic engagement, socioeconomic status, and exposure to civics instruction constant across individuals. I also exploit two unique features of the NELS: the fact that data were collected beginning in the participants' early adolescence prior to their high school years, and the fact that several students in the same school were studied. By accounting for lagged (pre-high school) measures of verbal test scores and grades, I can hold constant each individual's pre high-school learning, cognitive, and non-cognitive traits, looking instead at whether otherwise similar students *who learned more* in high school end up as more engaged adults. Additionally, comparing students within specific schools cleans out the differences we might see due to school specific grading norms or cultures.

The findings suggest that verbal learning creates engaged citizens: young people who acquire greater verbal skill in school participate more in political and community affairs later in life, net of family background, cognitive ability, non-cognitive traits, school characteristics, exposure to civic education, and even eventual educational attainment. This result holds up whether I use standardized test scores or English course achievement to capture verbal learning.

For example, consider a group of average children entering high school with family characteristics and achievement levels right at the mean. A student in the group who learns the most in high school, as measured by standardized verbal tests, is 21 points more likely to vote in the first election after high school than the student who learns the least. Looking at grades rather than test scores, one of these otherwise equivalent students who earns a B average in English courses is seven points more likely than the C student to vote in the first election after high school, five points more likely to vote in the election four years later, and three points more likely to volunteer with a civic organization. The same patterns do not exist for mathematics achievement, which, while important to labor market outcomes, appears less important to civic engagement. All of these findings are robust to different methodological techniques that take the differences between schools into account.

Literacy Instruction for Citizenship

This research shows that when young people learn to use their voices in school, they are more likely to speak up as participatory adults. It also helps resolve a major empirical puzzle about education and civic engagement: as educational attainment has increased over the past half century, voter turnout has not. But unlike attainment, the verbal achievement of American high school students has [stagnated](#). Despite changes in attainment, adolescents

enter political maturity today with much the same communication skill set they did decades ago.

Most importantly, this research highlights the political consequences of [educational inequality](#). Students in disadvantaged social groups, already underrepresented in the political process, get fewer verbal learning opportunities in school. Economically and racially marginalized children do more rote work and less advanced communication practice than their more advantaged peers. For example, according to recent national survey [data](#), among the most disadvantaged American 13-year-olds – those whose parents did not graduate from high school – 23 percent report that they have not written an essay even once in any subject in the last school year, and 33 percent report that they have not given an oral presentation. These opportunities increase steadily with socioeconomic status. Addressing such disparities could increase the political engagement of young adults from underrepresented racial and socioeconomic groups.

The [civic achievement gap](#) goes beyond the civics classroom and reaches across all subjects where students learn to read, write, speak, and listen. Federal education policy debates, which often center on verbal achievement measures, are debates about democratic education. Literacy and writing test scores aren't just indicators of [college and career readiness](#); they are indicators of civic preparedness.

This article is based on the paper, 'Voice Lessons: Rethinking the Relationship Between Education and Political Participation', in Political Behavior.

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