

Gary A. Homana

## Youth Political Engagement in Australia and the United States: Student Councils and Volunteer Organizations as Communities of Practice

- Analyzes representative samples of 14-year-olds in Australia and the United States.
- Conceptualizes student councils and volunteer organizations as *communities of practice*.
- Political trust and expectations for political participation are the outcomes.
- Participation in these communities of practice associated with higher scores on outcomes.
- Associations between organizational membership and outcomes vary for males and females.

**Purpose:** Lave and Wenger's Communities of Practice is presented as a conceptual framework for examining extracurricular activities as a part of democratic schools' contribution to students' civic engagement. Data from the IEA Civic Education Study is analyzed to investigate research questions on the association between participation in two civic communities of practice (student council and volunteer organizations) and two types of expected adult political participation as well as trust in political institutions in Australia and the United States.

**Method/approach:** The methodology examined data from students in nationally representative samples of schools that surveyed 14-year-olds in 1999. This was the most recent large scale study of civic education in which these two countries participated. Analysis of variance examined main effects and statistical interactions, especially by gender.

**Findings:** Findings were that in both countries, participation in the two civic communities of practice was associated with higher levels of trust in political institutions and greater expectations to become an informed voter and an active citizen. The results also suggest that male and female students in the United States experience these communities of practice in different ways. Practical advantages to encouraging democratic communities of practice are important to the experience of democracy at school.

### Keywords:

Civic education, communities of practice, democracy at school, political participation, gender differences

### 1 Introduction

Political participation is essential for healthy democracies. While most adults remain generally supportive of the democratic process, they are becoming less satisfied with the associated core institutions (Norris, 2010; Oliver, 2016). Equally important, engagement in traditional forms of political participation such as voting and contacting political representatives appears to have declined in established democracies (Pew Research Center, 2017). At the same time online politics has increased dramatically.

In the United States, turnout among younger eligible voters has declined since 1972 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017; Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning, CIRCLC, 2016<sup>1</sup>). In addition, there is ongoing concern about young people shying away from political campaigns and contacting elected officials (Carnegie Corporation of New York & Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning, 2003; Oliver, 2016; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Carpini 2006). In Australia, despite compulsory voting, there is concern about youth

voting in an informed and responsible fashion (Denniss, 2016; Print, 2007; Saha, Print, & Edwards, 2007). In 2004, 82% of Australian youth expected to vote in that country's federal election. By 2010, only 53% of 18-19 year olds intended to vote in regional or national elections (Brooker, 2013). The Australian Electoral Commission (2016) indicated that this trend has continued.

There are also civic engagement differences between males and females (Saha & Print, 2010; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001; Zaff, Kawashima-Ginsberg, Lamb, Balsano, & Lerner, 2011). Since 1972 young women in the United States have had higher rates of voter turnout in presidential elections. This trend continued in the 2012 national election when 41% of single young men (ages 19-24) voted compared to 48% of single young women (CIRCLC, 2013). In Australia the situation differs with approximately equal proportions of males and females voting (Australia Institute, 2013).

There continues to be a preponderance of males holding political office in both countries. In the 2016 Australian Parliament women comprised 27% of the House and 39% of the Senate (Hough, 2016). In the 2015 114<sup>th</sup> United States Congress, women comprised 19% of the total House members and 20% of the Senate. Sweet-Cushman (2016) explores reasons why females are less likely than males to run for political office. Importantly, Damico, Damico, and Conway (1998) found that women's political engagement later in life was associated with their experiences as leaders in school activities.

Gary A. Homana, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor with research interests in civic engagement, democracy in schools, communities of practice, and school climate, especially within the context of diversity. *College of Education, Towson University, 8000 York Road, Towson, MD 21252, USA*  
Email: [ghomana@towson.edu](mailto:ghomana@towson.edu)



Curricular programs integrating civic engagement have the potential to enhance youth political participation that goes beyond voting and to promote gender equality more broadly. Researchers have found that schools that rigorously teach civic content and where classrooms encourage participatory action are more likely to achieve high-quality civic engagement outcomes (Hess & Avery, 2008; Torney-Purta, et al., 2001). In addition, studies confirm that respectful discussion about issues is associated with higher expectations of later voting, and with community activism, political interest, and commitment to the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (Campbell, 2008; Kennedy, Hahn, & Lee, 2008; Knowles, Torney-Purta, & Barber, in press; Print, 2008).

Recent large-scale international studies present an opportunity to study these issues. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study (CIVED) measured political knowledge, attitudes, and engagement among approximately 90,000 14-year-old students in 28 countries in 1999 (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Although IEA conducted a 2009 International Civic and Citizenship Study (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010) neither Australia nor the United States elected to participate in that study or subsequently in 2016. Utilizing the communities of practice framework (Lave & Wenger, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2014; Wenger, 1998), this article reports a secondary analysis of the 1999 CIVED data, the most recent comprehensive international dataset available for these two countries. The purpose is to examine adolescents' civic beliefs and anticipated political participation in Australia and the United States, looking especially at school participation and at gender differences.

Since many political attitudes are formed during early adolescence, these data collected in 1999 are useful for understanding the formative years of young adults who entered their thirties in about 2015. Furthermore, this analysis can inform educators about the importance of experiences where students become engaged learners expressing ideas, making decisions regarding real-life concerns, and developing leadership skills. Understanding how communities of practice at school could influence political attitudes and participation can provide teachers, principals, policymakers, and researchers with information allowing them to foster the civic capacities of all students.

## 2 Purpose of the study

This cross-national analysis takes a socio-cultural approach to conceptualizing participation in two civic communities of practice (*student councils* and *volunteer organizations*). The associations of these experiences with anticipated adult political participation and with trust in political institutions among 14-year-olds in Australia and the United States are explored. The conceptual framework associated with the idea of *communities of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2014; Wenger, 1998) is elaborated. Framing school student councils and volunteer

organizations as communities of practice allows a nuanced understanding of processes of civic and political development. In particular, this theoretical position emphasizes that sense of identity, purpose, and direction are shaped by the social processes within a community of practice; students coalesce around issues that are important to them and develop understanding and strategies for collective action. Furthermore, exploring the role of these two civic communities of practice reveals challenges and possibilities for schools.

Examining data from Australia and the United States supports a clearer idea about how civic communities of practice operate. Both are Federal states and have histories of well-developed civic education programs. Additional similarities and differences are presented in the methods section. Analysis by Kennedy, Hahn, and Lee (2007) found differences in youth attitudes and contexts between the two countries. These differences included less support among Australian youth than among youth from the United States for civic behaviors (e.g., engaging in political discussion, following political issues through newspapers and other media) and for social movement engagement (e.g., participation in peaceful protest or in activities that promote human rights, and the environment). The current article builds on these findings to look at associations within the two countries in parallel and does not explicitly compare levels of trust or participation.

Sections present the conceptual framework describing the concept of communities of practice, and overviews of research on gender differences in political attitudes as well as students' reported membership in student councils and volunteer organizations. The communities of practice framework has a robust notion of participation. However, the measures available did not allow that to be fully explored. Next are sections on the methods and results. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for educational practice, policy, and research and with limitations of the study.

## 3 Conceptual framework

Young people need a range of academic, social, and emotional competencies for civic and political participation (Smith, Faulk, & Sizer, 2016). Educators need information about contexts where students engage in meaningful learning, try to understand others' points of views, make decisions about issues and acquire a sense of identity as someone prepared to take action. Schools are uniquely positioned to provide these types of learning opportunities.

This article explores the idea that the communities of practice into which youth enter, along with the relationships those communities foster, relate to their civic attitudes and behavior. This builds on the recognition that students create normative expectations during their interactions, a process with potential to influence later adult political participation (Levine, 2010). *Communities of practice* is a broad conceptual framework to understand these social processes. This includes how young people draw meaning from their experiences, develop a



sense of community, initiate collective action, and form identities. In short, the concept of communities of practice helps to operationalize what democracy at school means (Torney-Purta, 2006; Torney-Purta, Amadeo, & Andolina, 2010).

The concept of communities of practice also suggests explicit opportunities for learning within educational organizations. The specific characteristics central in communities of practice include: acquisition of socially situated meaningful learning, enhancement of individual and group identities, and the individual's transition from peripheral to central participation. This last characteristic is of special importance (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Peripheral participation consists, for example, of observing others' skilled practices and participating in apprentice-like activities. Well-functioning student councils should provide an apprenticeship in governing, where students formulate statements to support their point of view and vote according to the interests of the electorate. It is plausible that the integration of young people into communities of practice at school, in interaction with peers and mentors, could be a positive step toward more active political and civic involvement.

Communities of practice can facilitate a sense of belonging built on trust. Trust is positively associated with concerns for others, conflict resolution and social competence (Batistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schap, 1997; Finnan, Schnepel, & Anderson, 2003). Other research among adolescents found trust to be associated with increased expectations to vote, write letters on political issues, read newspapers, volunteer, and hold positive beliefs about the value of school participation (Torney-Purta, Barber, & Richardson, 2004; Uslander & Brown, 2005). Communities of practice have the potential to build this trust.

Engagement in one civic community may also have implications for participation in others. Wenger (1998) emphasizes the capacity of individuals to move from one community of practice to another. This boundary crossing civic participation can result in students' involvement in issues that they care about, which shapes the information they seek, and the individuals with whom they develop connections. Communities of practice have the potential to provide embedded learning opportunities consistent with the goals of political and civic participation. Students engage in open dialogues that can foster the development of more sophisticated civic knowledge and action. Communities of practice may also facilitate a sense of belonging built on respect for others who bring different experiences, ideas, and beliefs. This has the potential to keep civic learning dynamic.

The central research question for this analysis is the following: Is participation in two types of civic communities of practice (the *student council community* and the *volunteer organization community* of practice) associated with expected adult political participation (of two types) and with trust in political institutions among students in Australia and students in the United States? Do these associations vary for male and female students within each country?

## 4 Overviews of research

### 4.1 Research on gender and political attitudes or participation

Studies of gender differences from several historical periods assist in interpreting the current analysis. Hahn's (1998) extensive review examined gender differences in a range of political attitudes and civic participation. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments in the early 1970's found that adolescent female students in the United States displayed less knowledge about certain aspects of government and law, but scored higher than males on others (Education Commission, 1971, 1978). By 1988, however, the NAEP assessment revealed smaller gender differences in political knowledge (Educational Testing Service, 1990). Other studies found small gender differences regarding political trust, confidence in political decision-making, expected participation in voting, joining political parties, or contributing to political campaigns (Hahn, 1996; Hepburn, Napier, & Cremer, 1990; Orum, Cohen, Grasmuck, & Orum, 1977).

Researchers have analyzed gender differences using data from the CIVED study. Barber and Torney-Purta (2009) found female students across all 28 participating countries were more supportive of women's rights, but males in 23 of the countries had higher levels of internal political efficacy. Mellor, Kennedy, and Greenwood (2001) found that Australian adolescent female students reported more involvement in school organizations and scored significantly higher on scales measuring support for women's political rights, confidence in the value of school participation, and the government's responsibility for dealing with social or economic issues compared to males. No gender differences were found for expected political participation or anticipated voting as an adult in national elections. Kennedy (2006) found that females across countries had more positive attitudes toward ethnic groups. In another study, Kennedy and Mellor (2006) found few gender differences for trust in government institutions. More recently, Torney-Purta and Barber (2011) labeled a group consisting disproportionately of male students as *alienated* - having little trust in government, lacking respect for laws, and possessing negative attitudes about their neighborhoods and schools. Similarly in a large sample tested in a major United States city, Voight and Torney-Purta (2013) found that males were disproportionately found in a cluster of students with negative attitudes toward social action. Cicognani, Zani, Fournier, Gavray, and Born (2012) examined data from Italy and found that membership in clubs, and other similar social activities, was especially likely to be associated with adolescent males' political interest and their political participation.

The current analysis focuses primarily on gender as a moderator, that is, whether certain associations between variables hold true for males but not for females (or vice versa). This expands upon the previous analysis, most of which has focused on statistical main effects for gender but not statistical interactions.

#### **4.2 Research on youth participation in school student councils and volunteer organizations**

Theoretically, student participation in extracurricular activities, and especially student councils, should enhance adult political participation especially when such participation involves examining and making decisions on issues. Participation may be linked to the development of civic knowledge, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

Evidence indicates that youth are abandoning traditional forms of political participation (Pew Research Center, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017), but are engaging in alternative forms of civic participation. This includes volunteer community service organizations and also the internet/social media (see for example, Bureau, Cole, & McCormick, 2014; Finley & Flanagan, 2009; McBride & Sherraden, 2007). However, little research has investigated the extent to which participation in school councils or volunteer organizations is associated with political trust or engagement other than voting.

#### **4.3 Research on student councils and political engagement**

Early research suggested that students develop political attitudes well before high school. Connell's research in Australia (1971) and Hess and Torney's research in the United States (1967) reported studies of children and considered differences between males and females. Other work in the field suggested that school extracurricular activity can positively influence future adult political participation and decrease political alienation (Dejaeghere & Tudball, 2007; Homana & Barber, 2007). More narrowly defined studies found that involvement in high school extracurricular activities was associated with adult political participation, including political discussion, campaign participation, voting, and attending political events (Hart, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007). In a classic and heavily cited study, Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) found associations between retrospectively reported involvement in high school student council and traditional adult political participation such as voting. McIntosh, Berman, and Youniss (2007) reported significant associations between school governance participation and students' confidence about writing letters to public officials, beliefs in political efficacy, and intended community service.

In Australia voting is mandatory, but enforced with minor penalties. Saha and Print (2010) found that students who voted or were candidates in school council elections were better prepared to vote as adults, more likely to intend to vote, and more knowledgeable about politics compared to students who didn't engage in these school-based activities. Reichert (2016a, 2016b) identified patterns in views about the norms of citizenship among 10<sup>th</sup> graders surveyed in an Australian national assessment. Also females were especially likely to support norms of conventional citizenship behavior while males were especially likely to eschew it. His analysis did not examine students' expected participation or political trust.

Hahn (1998) found that students' participation in student councils provided opportunities to develop leadership skills, especially in the United States. However, Scheerens (2011) voiced concern about teachers' influence on school councils in England. He suggests that the context for decision-making should be constructed to promote autonomy of students' action.

As noted, female students are more engaged in civic activities, consider community service more important, and are prompted by different motivations compared to males (Malin, Tirri, & Liauw, 2015; Metzger & Smetana, 2009). However, there is little research exploring the association between gender and the contextual school factors related to civic participation. Rosenthal, Jones, and Rosenthal's (2003) study with adolescents participating in a Model United Nations revealed that context shapes opportunities. When female students served as committee chairs there was greater turn-taking during discussion and an increased focus on issues important to women. The percentage of females on committees appeared less important than equitable opportunities for females to actively participate in discussions.

Although associations have been found between membership in student councils and adult political participation, studies have used retrospective data or studied non-representative samples. A few studies have examined participation in Australian student councils and there are findings from Denmark, Germany, England, and the Netherlands (for example, Hahn, 1998).

#### **4.4 Research on volunteer organizations and political engagement**

Evidence supports an association between volunteer program participation and stronger civic identity and sense of responsibility. An early study (Roker, Player, & Coleman, 1999), argued that youth volunteer participation promoted political awareness, knowledge, and understanding. Other early work on school-related volunteer activities in the community, sometimes called service-learning, also found greater awareness of community issues (Melchior, 1999; Simon & Wang, 2002). Associations with conventional political participation were not substantial, however. Other research revealed an association between school-related community service and voting and commitment to civic participation (Hart, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007; Henderson, Pancer, & Brown, 2013). Annette (2008) argued in a review that what appears crucial is whether programs are of high quality and designed to support the development of political participation.

Recent research also supports the value of youth involvement in volunteer organizations finding correlations with adult voting, political interest and membership, motivation to engage in future service, and campaign involvement (Kim & Morgül, 2017; Malin et al., 2015; Thomas & McFarland, 2010). Other studies have found support for volunteer involvement and "expressive" political activities such as peaceful protests, signing petitions, or participating in youth forums (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013; Keating & Janmaat, 2016).





A few empirical studies conducted outside the United States have considered connections between student involvement in volunteer programs and political participation. Quintelier (2008) found that students participating in volunteer organizations were more likely to sign petitions, protest, and connect with politicians in Belgium. Similarly, using CIVED data from five European countries Hoskins, Janmaat, and Villalba (2012) found that students who volunteered were more likely to expect to vote and be future political participants.

The current study extends the research utilizing nationally representative data on the civic knowledge, skills, and behaviors of adolescents in Australia and the United States. In addition, it examines ways in which male and female students' experiences are associated with different types or levels of political and civic engagement, an issue not investigated previously. In particular, this study is an opportunity to more closely examine two civic communities of practice - student councils and volunteer organizations - and their association with two aspects of expected future political participation (expected voting and more active involvement in the political process) as well as political trust.

#### **4.5 Research on student council participation and political trust**

There are only a few systematic examinations of associations between participation in student council and political trust. Damico, Damico, and Conway (1998) looked at democratic values, but not at generalized political trust. Niemi and Junn (2005) found that participation in student council and in mock elections was associated with higher political trust and greater civic knowledge in the United States. The current study fills a gap in research concerning student council participation and its potential role in developing both adolescent political trust and anticipated political participation.

#### **4.6 Research on volunteer organization participation and political trust**

There is also limited evidence regarding the association between student involvement in volunteer associations and political trust. Brehm and Rahn (1997) found a positive connection between civic engagement and interpersonal trust. Torney-Purta, Barber, and Richardson's (2004) analysis of political trust across six primarily European countries found trust was a positive predictor of expectations of informed voting, writing a letter on political issues, and joining a political party. Some researchers in Europe have investigated similar issues (Maiello, Oser, & Bidermann, 2003; Menezes, 2003). However, relatively little is known about the association between student involvement in volunteer organizations and political trust. This study provides an opportunity to examine this association.

#### **5 Summary of the contribution of this study**

This analysis seeks to expand understanding of adolescent political and civic development by exploring

the correlates of participation in two communities of practice at school - student councils and volunteer organizations. Overall, the literature regarding adolescent participation, is difficult to compare across studies. This study uses nationally representative samples and overcomes the limitations of some earlier studies on student councils and volunteer organizations. Furthermore, although research suggests the potential utility of examining the link between participatory structures in schools and the development of civic capacities (Homana, Barber, & Torney-Purta, 2006), the concept of communities of practice remains under-explored. Wenger (2010) expanded discussion of communities of practice in general but has not made a link to civic engagement. In addition, this study considers the cultural and identity-related aspects of schools as they are experienced by students. Two independent variables (student council participation and volunteer organization participation) and three dependent variables (trust in political institutions, expected likelihood of voting and getting information about candidates, and expected likelihood of contacting a political official to express an opinion and of running for political office) are investigated. The analysis also examines whether student council experience and volunteer experience have different associations with these aspects of participation for males and females.

#### **6 Methods**

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study (CIVED) (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001) provides a comprehensive archived source of data on the civic behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge of approximately 90,000 14 year-old students from 28 countries. It is the most recent international civic dataset to include both Australia and the United States using a common cognitive and attitudinal instrument validated by a multinational group of scholars. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was the statistical method utilized given its ability to examine both main effects for the two types of participation (student council membership and volunteering) and also the significance of interactions by gender. Many previous studies using regression models either controlled for gender or used complex statistical methods that make it difficult to understand how males and females differ in their political engagement.

##### **6.1 Country selection, context**

Comparative international work is valuable in understanding similarities and differences among students across countries. Torney-Purta and Amadeo (2013) and Knowles, Torney-Purta and Barber (in press) consider the benefits of extensive secondary analysis of international large-scale datasets such as CIVED. The intention here is to use parallel analyses in two countries to examine the theoretical and empirical utility of the communities of practice framework to address the question of how two organizations in schools enhance students' capacities for civic engagement.



Australia and the United States were selected for several reasons. Both have established democracies based on similar political principles and have comparable economic systems; both countries can be characterized as immigrant societies. Both have high proportions of students attending secondary school and similar literacy rates (NationMaster, 2017). Both countries are experiencing declining rates of youth civic and political participation, yet view education as key in addressing these concerns. In addition, among all 28 countries participating in CIVED, Australia and the United States had the highest rates of involvement in student councils and in volunteer associations. In Australia, 34% of students participating in CIVED reported taking part in a student council; 33% of students in the United States reported participation in student council. In terms of volunteer organization participation, 33% of Australian students and 50% of United States students reported involvement.

## 6.2 Sampling and variables chosen for analysis

The current investigation used an archived dataset from CIVED containing data collected in 1999 from nationally representative samples of schools. The data for this analysis is available from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (Humboldt University of Berlin and University of Maryland-College Park). In Australia, 3,331 students average age 14.6 years in 142 schools participated in the survey. In the United States, 2,811 students average age 14.7 years in 124 schools participated.

The primary independent variables are respondents' reports of school council involvement and of volunteer organization participation. Gender is included to highlight differences in levels of expected political participation and trust between female and male students as well as possible differences in the associations between participation in communities of practices and the three civic outcomes for males and females. Student council and volunteer organization involvement were each measured with single items on the IEA survey (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Item A, within a section of items regarding participation in various organizations, asked whether the student had participated in "a student council/student government [class or school parliament]" and item H queried students about participation in "a group conducting [voluntary] activities to help the community." Both questions had yes/no options.

The dependent variables in the study were political trust and two aspects of anticipated adult political participation. Trust was measured using the mean of responses to three questions on the IEA survey. These questions were in a section with the following stem: "How much of the time can you trust each of the following institutions?" The three items of interest were: "The national [federal] government [in \_\_\_\_\_ (the national seat of government)]," "the local council or government of your town or city," and "National Parliament [Congress]." Responses to each included

"never," "only some of the time," "most of the time," "always," and "don't know." The scores for each item ranged from 1 for "never" to 4 for "always", with "don't know" coded as 0 (treated as missing). In the original report of CIVED these items were part of a highly reliable scale on Political Trust (Torney-Purta, et al, 2001, p. 201). A simpler scale was constructed for the current study to focus on representative institutions (omitting items asking about trust in political parties).

Expected adult political participation was measured using two scales: anticipated informed voting and conventional participation. Past analyses had shown the importance of these types of involvement (Torney-Purta, Barber, & Richardson, 2004). The IEA instrument included the question "When you are an adult, what do you expect that you will do?" in reference to various political activities. Item response choices were 1 to 4: "I will certainly not do this," "I will probably not do this," "I will probably do this," and "I will certainly do this," with "don't know" treated as missing. The expected informed voting scale was created using the mean of answers to the items "Vote in national elections" and "Get information about candidates before voting in an election." The expected conventional participation scale was created using the mean of responses to the items "Write letters to a newspaper about social or political concerns" and "Be a candidate for a local or city office." Each mean could vary from 1 to 4. Students with missing data on any item were not included in the analysis. Tables 1 and 2 indicate that in both countries the scale scores on expected informed voting were higher than those on expected conventional participation. This is understandable since relatively few adults extend themselves to becoming a candidate or even to writing letters about political concerns (these data were collected before omnipresent social media). Voting and learning about candidates, on the other hand, is accepted as a basic and vital part of democratic participation.

SPSS was used for all analyses. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the trust, informed voting, and conventional participation scales were 0.71, 0.74, and 0.69, respectively. Parallel analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted in the two countries to explore whether students' reports of involvement in school council and in volunteer organizations were related to higher levels of political trust and to higher levels of expected adult political participation. It also allowed for the examination of different patterns of organizational involvement for male and female students. ANOVA requires a preliminary check for homogeneity of variance (Pedhazur, 1997). Although this assumption was not met, the results can be considered valid because the higher errors were associated with cells with larger sample sizes (biasing the results against finding statistically significant effects). The relatively conservative  $p$ -value of 0.01 was adopted (Lomax, 2001).

## 7 Results

Tables 1 and 2 present the analysis of variance results for the three dependent variables.

Table 1: ANOVA Results in Australia for Political Trust, Informed Voting, and Conventional Participation: Cell Means, F ratios, and Ns

		Student council participation			Volunteer organization participation		
		Trust	Informed voting	Conventional participation	Trust	Informed voting	Conventional participation
	N	1973	1826	1826	1953	1813	1813
<b>Participation</b>							
	Yes	2.73	3.31	1.97	2.69	3.25	2.02
	No	2.58	3.06	1.78	2.60	3.08	1.76
	F	23.95*	59.67**	40.70**	8.23**	25.63**	70.16**
<b>Gender</b>							
	Male	2.67	3.15	1.87	2.66	3.12	1.89
	Female	2.65	3.22	1.88	2.62	3.22	1.88
	F	0.58	4.79	0.35	1.48	8.05	0.05
<b>Interaction</b>							
	Y/Male	2.74	3.31	1.98	2.67	3.21	1.78
	N/Male	2.55	2.99	1.75	2.58	3.03	1.99
	Y/Female	2.72	3.31	1.97	2.71	3.30	1.73
	N/Female	2.62	3.13	1.80	2.62	3.13	2.05
	F	0.81	4.93	0.92	0.02	0.01	3.09
<b>df</b>		1, 199	1, 243	1, 237	1, 197	1, 241	1, 235

\*\* p < .01

Table 2: ANOVA Results in the United States for Political Trust, Informed Voting, and Conventional Participation: Cell Means, F ratios, and Ns

		Student council participation			Volunteer organization participation		
		Trust	Informed voting	Conventional participation	Trust	Informed voting	Conventional participation
	N	2158	1679	1679	2138	1663	1663
<b>Participation</b>							
	Yes	2.82	3.38	2.10	2.82	3.32	2.09
	No	2.74	3.22	1.92	2.71	2.99	1.86
	F	8.89**	57.06**	15.58**	17.30**	111.29**	53.50**
<b>Gender</b>							
	Male	2.75	3.10	2.03	2.73	3.06	1.95
	Female	2.81	3.30	1.99	2.80	3.25	1.20
	F	6.16	33.77**	1.30	7.57	35.78**	2.22
<b>Interaction</b>							
	Y/Male	2.82	3.28	2.13	2.82	3.21	2.06
	N/Male	2.67	2.93	1.85	2.64	3.03	1.85
	Y/Female	2.83	3.38	2.07	2.83	3.30	2.12
	N/Female	2.80	3.22	1.99	2.78	3.13	1.88
	F	4.65	8.48**	10.80**	5.28	1.92	0.18
<b>df</b>		1, 216	1, 240	1, 222	1, 214	1, 238	1, 219

\*\* p < .01

### 7.1 Political trust

Main effects for the associations between participation in student council and in community volunteering with political trust were statistically significant in both countries (Tables 1 and 2). There were no significant main effects for gender or gender interactions when trust in political institutions was the dependent variable.

### 7.2 Informed voting

For both Australia and the United States, the main effects indicate that those students who had participated in the student council community of practice had a statistically significantly higher mean likelihood of informed voting than those who had not participated in this community of practice (Tables 1 and 2). In addition,

female students in the United States had a higher informed voting score overall than male students (Table 2). In the United States there were also significant statistical interactions (Table 3). Females who participated in student council had the highest mean score on this basic political participation (with male student council members slightly lower). Males who did not participate in school council had the lowest mean scores (significantly lower than all three other gender by participation groups). The difference in the likelihood of voting between those who participated in student council and those who did not was quite substantial for males (3.28 compared with 2.93). For females it was a smaller difference (3.38 compared with 3.22).

Table 3: Cell Means on Expected Informed Voting in the United States Illustrating Significant Interaction

	Participant/Student Council	Non-Participant/Student Council
Male	3.28	2.93
Female	3.38	3.22

The main effects findings for participation in the communities of practice within a volunteer organization indicate that students in both Australia and the United States who participated had statistically significant higher mean informed voting scores than those students who did not participate. No significant interactions were found between gender and volunteer participation in relation to informed voting in the United States or in Australia.

### 7.3 Conventional political participation

In both countries, the main effects indicate a statistically significant association between student council involvement and expected conventional participation that extends beyond voting (i.e., communicating with political officials and intending to run for office). Students involved in the student council communities in both countries had higher mean scores than those who were not involved (Tables 1 and 2). There were no significant main effects for gender in either country. There were no significant interactions by gender in Australia. There was, however, a significant gender interaction in the United States accounted for by the fact that male members of student councils had the greatest intension of becoming politically active (including running for office). Males who were not involved in student councils had the lowest mean scores of all four groups on this more active conventional participation. Among participants in student councils there was a relatively small gender difference with males slightly more likely to communicate with elected officials and run for office themselves.

Table 4: Cell Means on Expected Conventional Participation in the United States Illustrating Significant Interaction

	Participant/Student Council	Non-Participant/Student Council
Male	2.13	1.85
Female	2.07	1.99

The main effects analysis indicates that students in both countries who were involved in volunteer organizations as communities of practice had statistically significant higher mean conventional participation scores than those students who did not participate. No significant interactions were found in either country.

### 7.4 Summary

In both Australia and the United States, involvement in the *student council community of practice* is associated with adolescent civic development for all three civic outcomes - higher political trust, expectation of informed

voting, and expectation of conventional political participation. The same positive association with the three outcomes is observed for involvement in a volunteer organization. This is encouraging for proponents of school-based extra-curricular civic initiatives as part of school democracy. It suggests a potential role for communities of practice in preparing young people for political and civic engagement.

The main effects and interactions involving gender are more complex. In the United States (but not in Australia) females were more likely than males to report that they expected to become informed voters. There were also some interactions between participation in the two communities of practice and gender in the United States. Male students who did not participate in student councils had the lowest average scores on expectations of informed voting and also the lowest average scores on expectations of conventional participation of all the gender by extra-curricular participation groups. Female students who had experience on student councils were the group most likely to expect to vote. Although experience in volunteer groups was associated overall with political trust, with informed voting, and with conventional participation, this was equally true for males and females.

### 8 Discussion

Although youth involvement in traditional forms of political participation has declined in many countries, these findings suggest the potential value of participation in student council and volunteer organization in reversing that trend. In both Australia and the United States, participation in these two communities of practice was associated with higher levels of political trust, with greater expectations to become an informed voter, and with higher expectations to become an active citizen who expresses political opinions and runs for office. Creating councils and volunteer organizations with the potential for students to solve problems can build a positive sense of commitment and identity. These results also suggest the value of learning communities that involve students in collaboration. By cultivating an active voice in discussion students practice skills required in real life problem solving. An essential mechanism may be the opportunity to observe adults in political and civic activities, what Lave and Wenger (1991) call *legitimate peripheral participation*.

Gender differences are of interest. Rosenthal, Jones, and Rosenthal's (2003) assert that having females in leadership roles can lead to increased civic engagement, but primarily if they are working on issues that are important to them. Although both female and male students reported participating in school student council and volunteer organization communities the correlates were somewhat different especially in the United States. Females, especially those who were involved in student councils, reported the highest level of expectation to vote in the United States. Gender difference, although small, still showed males as being more likely to contact elected officials and run for office. Participation on a





student council may engage young women in a political community of practice but the real world of politics still appears to be male dominated, at least in the United States. In Australia, there were no significant differences by gender in either voting or more active political participation.

There is another way to look at some of these findings. The statistically significant interactions between gender and student council participation indicate that males in the United States who did not participate were the least likely to have strong inclinations toward later political participation (either by voting or through more active involvement). One possible explanation is that this is a manifestation of general alienation on the part of a group of male students in the United States (Torney-Purta & Barber, 2011). Membership in student communities of practice may not be able to counter this negative orientation, perhaps reinforced by informal peer groups.

### **9 Implications for education practice and policy**

Schools can provide rich opportunities for students to learn from engagement in interactions and to forge a sense of community based on respect and trust. Those interested in enhancing democracy at school should consider providing more avenues for young people to become involved in these activities.

The concept of civic communities of practice explored in this study could be the basis for future work to cultivate the skills helpful for students to become involved adult citizens. Youth need opportunities for learning that facilitate robust partnerships where they are involved in shared decision-making and building of identity. This may require creating democratically engaged communities of practice enmeshed into a school's social fabric so that political and civic engagement can be widely practiced. One mechanism may be the integration of experiences with classroom and school discussion-based learning coupled with action to address school and neighborhood issues. However, not all school civic-related experiences will necessarily support political engagement. If volunteer participation in the community is to become a viable option to enhance political participation, it will require more intentional design strategies that encourage youth to explore and develop the skills associated with civic action.

This analysis suggests several opportunities. First, schools should consider providing a comprehensive range of communities of practice explicitly fostering discussion, collaboration, and real-world participation. This may require targeted focus on the inclusion of students in decision-making processes. Equally important is mobilizing support from parents and educators, to promote the development of positive civic capacities through communities of practice. This may require careful navigation of different groups' views about values such as equality and social justice, including feminist or critical perspectives.

### **10 Future research**

Researchers could benefit from examining more closely how schools can design curriculum and other learning opportunities that embody the ideals of communities of practice and direct them to enhance civic outcomes. Civic engagement researchers could deepen the field by identifying specific characteristics of communities of practice that promote civic development through student councils and volunteer organizations. Perspectives from a range of fields may be helpful.

There are also cross-national issues. Should we expect that school councils and volunteer organizations create the same types of communities of practice in different national contexts? There were differences even between the two relatively similar societies examined here. What can be learned from different types of communities of practice regarding specifics of demographic composition, pressing issues, and processes for addressing them? The study which followed CIVED was the International Civics and Citizenship Study (conducted by IEA in 2009 and in 2016). Data are released within about two years by IEA and are freely available for analysis. European, Latin American and Asian countries are well represented in these datasets (although Australia and the United States did not participate in either study). Further analysis of these data could provide guidance for policymakers, teachers, administrators, and community members hoping to encourage civic engagement.

Small-scale and mixed-method research could build on the findings of this study. Complex social and cultural interactions exist within schools and classrooms that could be investigated to refine conceptualizations of communities of practice. Possible areas include dimensions of the classroom and school environment where students explore ideas through open discussion, build positive relationships, and develop strategies for school and community change. Especially important is investigating how to make student councils more effective in enhancing female students' engagement. There are also considerations regarding issues of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status that could benefit from investigation. Future research should consider observations, focus groups, and interviews with students, teachers and administrators regarding instructional practices as well as informal interactions. The purpose would be to assess the potential of communities of practice to promote civic learning and engagement across groups.

The students who responded to CIVED are currently adults in their thirties, and they live in a world transformed by technology and social media, which this investigation could not address. Researchers could consider issues pertaining to capacity building of communities of practice on the internet, as well as issues of sustainability when technology is the platform. Other research questions could address the types of interaction among individuals most likely to result in political action.



## 11 Conclusion

The central purpose of this study is to understand whether communities of practice have the potential to make a difference in students' political trust and participation. It provides evidence that both the *school council community of practice* and *volunteer organization community of practice* are associated with these civic capacities. Although the design does not permit claims for causality, it does provide support for examining communities of practice as a potential policy and practice lever for the development of political and civic capacities in Australian and United States schools (and perhaps more broadly). Next steps may involve examining schools and classrooms as more nuanced civic teaching and learning environments marked by dis-course, affective, and participatory communities of practice (Homana, accepted).

Framing student council and volunteer organizations as communities of practice also allows the exploration of the broader normative structures in schools. Learning is linked to expectations, and attitudes across school contexts. Understanding the cultural dimensions of schools, either through surveys or interpretive studies, has the potential to enhance understanding of communities of practice within schools.

## 12 Limitations of the research

First, students' surveys cannot capture the full experience of a community of practice in discussing issues, collaborating, or serving as a source of identity. The team designing CIVED did utilize Lave and Wenger's general conceptualization of communities of practice in formulating the study (Torney-Purta, 2006), but the measures were not designed to capture specific attributes of these groups. Mixed methods studies could more fully consider capture the pervasiveness of communities of practice across the school. This could lead to a more nuanced depiction of the socio-cultural environment for the development of civic engagement.

Second, as these students (and future generations) become young adults, their actions and attitudes toward political and civic engagement will adjust to new circumstances. Since these two countries did not participate in the two more recent IEA studies, and since there are few (if any) more recent nationally representative studies that include these measures, it is necessary to rely on these older findings. However, more recent studies have not shown substantial changes in the gender differences observed here, for example.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Reports no evidence of decreased youth voting since 2016 which remains around 50%.