

Students who take journalism more likely to vote, study shows

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Across the country, adults are encouraging young people to vote. A new study suggests one of the best ways to encourage voting and civic engagement in young people may be to enroll them in a journalism class.

Two University of Kansas professors have [published a study](#) showing that students who took high school journalism classes were more likely to vote later in life and that students from a lower socioeconomic background were even more influenced to do so than their peers who did not take the classes.

Peter Bobkowski, assistant professor of journalism, and Patrick Miller, assistant professor of [political science](#), authored a study that examined [survey data](#) that checked in with students in the 10th grade and followed up three times later in life to see how many voted and were civically active as volunteers. The study is published in the journal Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly. Bobkowski said he had read civics studies that looked at youth engagement and scholarly activities, but they tended to lump together extracurricular activities and subject areas such as debate, student government, school clubs and journalism.

"I wanted to know if there was a unique relationship between journalism and civic engagement and if there was a way to determine that," Bobkowski said.

The researchers analyzed data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, a survey from the U.S. Department of Education of a random

sample of 15,360 students in 750 public and private schools. The survey followed up with the students two years later when they were in the 12th grade, a second time in 2006 and finally in 2012-13, when most respondents were approximately 26. The study also included an analysis of high school transcripts for the students, licensed by the Institute of Education Sciences, to determine how many students were enrolled in journalism classes, how many they took and the degree of social studies classes they took.

A minority of the students took journalism classes, less than 12 percent, and 8.5 percent earned one credit or less. However, participation in journalism classes increased students' voting rates by 9 percent. Those who took part in debate showed an 8 percent increase, and earning more than three units in social studies or taking part in for-credit community service did not show a direct association with voting.

Journalism classes did not, however, indicate an increased likelihood to be civically engaged through volunteering for community organizations. Earning credits in debate and participating in student government were associated with 19 and 36 percent increases in volunteering rates, respectively, while higher credit in social studies showed an 11 percent lower volunteering rate.

The data does not indicate why voting rates were higher and volunteering rates were not different among journalism students, but the authors theorize it is likely because voting requires less commitment and is an easier way to express oneself civically, while volunteering demands more of an individual's time, over a longer period.

Bobkowski and Miller controlled for a number of factors such as how much a student's parents discussed news or politics at home and their socioeconomic background. Being female, having a higher family socioeconomic status, a habit of discussing current events with parents,

higher number of school credits and higher overall education were all positively associated with higher voting and volunteering rates. Among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, those who took journalism classes were more likely to vote.

"Journalism might be more empowering for students from a low socioeconomic standing," Bobkowski said. "Finding out in journalism that they have a voice may have more of an effect on those students than our more affluent students who may be used to being heard."

While the data didn't reveal exactly why there are associations between journalism and voting, the authors say it does provide evidence for the value of supporting journalism and civics-minded curriculum.

"If we want a society where our citizens participate in civic and political life, then it's critical that K-12 education offers courses that teach students those participatory skills and that educators teach citizenship skills even if they are not assessed on standardized tests," Miller said. "Our study also emphasizes how this K-12 experience is especially important for teaching civics skills to demographics of students who are less likely to go on to college and, all things equal, less likely to vote, follow politics, contact their legislators, join community groups, watch the news and engage in numerous other kinds of civic participation."

Journalism classes may be attractive to [students](#) who are more civically inclined naturally, but they also teach skills and encourage behaviors such as being informed, knowing your rights and determining what's important in society, in addition to the standard reading and writing lessons. All of those factors show that journalism classes are valuable and can teach skills and behaviors that are beneficial in nearly all professions.

"I think a lot of us sense that journalism is about a lot more than reading

and writing. It's about [civic engagement](#) and part of the curriculum that is worth supporting," Bobkowski said. "My argument is it's a matter of civic efficacy. Journalism teaches the ability to identify issues that are important and how to communicate those issues in a way that people can understand and will respond to."

Provided by University of Kansas

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