

The U.S. Citizenship Test as a High School Exit Exam: Arkansan Attitudes

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There appears to be a scholarly and popular consensus that that civic knowledge has been declining among young people over the last several decades. While the average American is largely ignorant of its government's history and structure, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services requires foreign-born residents to pass a test covering precisely these topics in order for them to become naturalized U.S. citizens. The disparity between what natural-born Americans and naturalized citizens are required to know about their government has led to proposals that high school students be required to pass the U.S. citizenship exam in order to graduate. In this paper, we present results from an October 2006 survey of 403 Arkansas citizens asking whether all Arkansas high school students should have to pass the citizenship test given to all immigrants who wish to become citizens. The survey also collected information on participants' demographic characteristics, attitudes about the quality of schools, and political and ideological identifications. Overall, nearly 75% of participants supported or strongly supported requiring high school students to pass the citizenship test in order to graduate; only 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and the remaining 5% was undecided. The variables of having a child at home and political ideology influenced respondents' support for a high school citizenship exit exam.

Introduction

A vital area in education often overlooked despite being an intrinsic part of the core mission of our public high schools is that of citizenship¹ skills. These skills give students insight into what American values are, how the United States political system operates, and the responsibilities of each of its

Midsouth Political Science Review, Special Edition, Vol. 13(1), 2012

¹ Citizenship is the state of being vested with the rights, privileges, and duties of a citizen. Civics is the study of the privileges and obligations of citizens. Civic means relating to citizenship.

citizens. They also set a foundation for the civic duties Americans must understand and carry out in a country that values liberty, freedom and equality. In spite of the importance of citizenship for our country's current and future strength, we neglect these essential skills when we focus solely on workplace proficiency.

Nationally, civic knowledge among youth has been declining for the last several decades (Zukin et al., 2006). Recent studies of Arkansas college students corroborate this trend, finding that the best and brightest graduates of the state's high schools have major deficits in civics and citizenship knowledge, both as perceived by those administering courses on these topics (Warner & Sebold, n.d.) and through the testing of this knowledge in state institutions of higher education (Gooch & Rogers, n.d.).

In this paper, we explore whether the citizens of Arkansas are concerned about this deficiency. To do so, this study considers the findings of a telephone survey asking residents of Arkansas whether they would support requiring Arkansas high school students pass the U.S. citizenship test before graduation. Data concerning this "citizenship exit exam" are then analyzed to consider potential relationships between support for this option and demographic characteristics as well as attitudes towards the Arkansas public school system and respondent political ideology. We conclude by considering the implications of these findings.

Theory

Although our study focuses on Arkansas and its need for better civic education, there appears to be a consensus that young Americans in general have much lower levels of civic knowledge than previous generations. Many scholars believe that this lack of basic knowledge of U.S. history and how their government functions impairs people's ability to make informed, rational decisions about who to vote for and what policies to support (Levine, 2007). Thomas Jefferson is famously quoted as saying, "[w]henver the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government." Unfortunately, the inverse of this statement is true as well. Widespread civic ignorance has produced a people who are unable to grasp the complexities of policy making. As a result, politicians have no choice but to pander to the voters that exist, running simplistic campaigns that rarely reflect the complexity of real policy-making (Popkin 1994; Galston 2003). Having just basic civic knowledge, however, goes a long way: a 2006 Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) survey found that students who had recently taken a civics class were more

likely to be registered to vote, trust their government, and volunteer in their community (Levine, 2004).

Though civic education is generally considered to be the responsibility of K-12 public schools, particularly high schools, a 2010 national survey of social studies teachers revealed that “teaching facts is the lowest priority...when it comes to instruction in citizenship” (Farkas & Duffett, 2010). This is relevant because students perform better on civics and citizenship tests “if they have studied a range of subjects such as the Constitution, U.S. History, and Government” (“Quick Facts,” 2010). Furthermore, a 2007 CIRCLE Working Paper reports that a civics achievement gap exists between white and minority students (Levinson, 2007). Just as high-stakes tests have refocused schools’ efforts on math and literacy skills for low-income and minority students, a citizenship exit exam would provide a strong incentive for high schools to place more emphasis on teaching basic civic facts and skills to all students.

The United States’ newest citizenship test provides a promising model for a citizenship exit exam. Though the format of the orally-administered ten question test will most likely have to be modified to be administered on such a wide scale, its fundamental merits still remain. This examination moves beyond asking just simple historical facts as was the case with citizenship exams given prior to 2008. The new naturalization exam includes questions that focus on the concepts of democracy and the rights and responsibilities of being a U.S. citizen. In summary, this citizenship test replaces a test that, in the words of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Director Emilio Gonzalez, “encourages applicants to memorize facts just to pass a test, but that doesn’t guarantee that they understand the meaning behind the question.”

With its focus on what it means to be an American, this exam offers the opportunity to set the standard in citizenship for our students at the same level we expect of those immigrating to this country. By testing Arkansas high school student knowledge and comprehension of such American rights as freedom of speech, religion, assembly, and the right to bear arms, and principles such as the rule of law, separation of powers, and federalism, citizens can ensure the future students, and citizens, of Arkansas have the basic knowledge they need to understand and fulfill citizenship duties.

Methods

To test the attitudes of the citizens of Arkansas towards requiring that “Before graduating from high school, all Arkansas high school students must pass the citizenship test given to all immigrants who wish to become citizens” a public opinion survey of over 403 citizens was conducted from October 1–11, 2006 by Arkansas State University’s Center for Social Research. The randomly selected sample gives 95% confidence in the results with +/- 4.88% margin of error.²

Demographic variables considered include sex of the respondent, whether they had a child under the age of 18 living at home, respondent ethnicity, education level, income and age, which was recoded into four 15-year categories based upon Campbell et al. (1966). To assess how attitudes might affect individual response, participants were asked to grade the Arkansas’ public school system generally, their local public school system, and Arkansas colleges and universities on an A–F scale, with “A” being the equivalent of outstanding, and “F” indicating failure. Participants were also asked to identify their political party identification (Democrat, Independent, and Republican) and their political ideology (liberal, moderate and conservative)

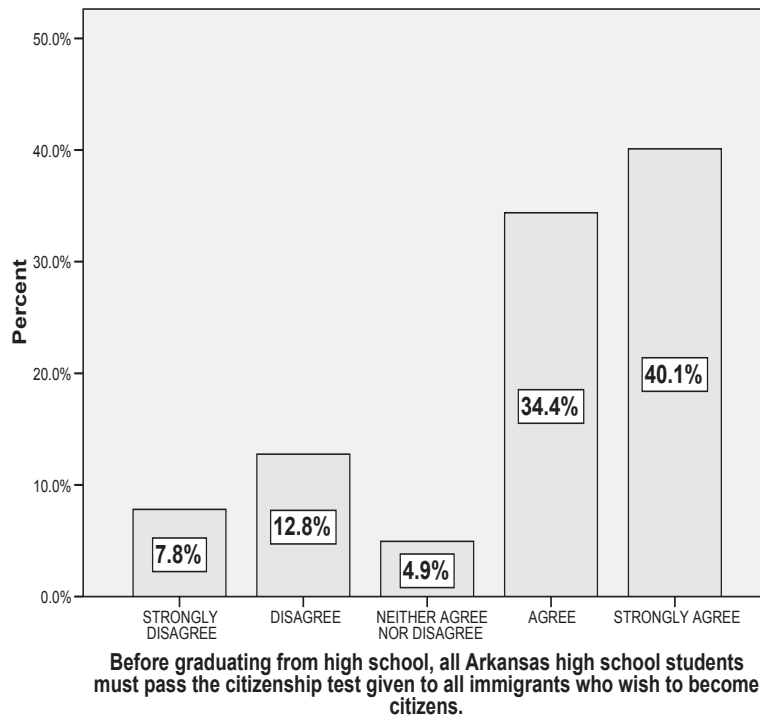
Findings

Findings suggest Arkansans value good citizenship by overwhelmingly supporting the testing of citizenship knowledge and by implication, teaching it. Here, nearly 75% of respondents either supported (34%) or strongly supported (40%) giving the same citizenship test taken by immigrants wishing to become U.S. citizens to Arkansas high school students, with only 20% either disagreeing (13%) or strongly disagreeing (8%) and the rest (5%) undecided (see Figure 1). For the sake of analysis, the 384 participants are grouped into two categories: those who strongly agree or agree with this option (75%) and those who either are neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree (25%).

² The Center for Social Research is a 13 telephone interview facility housed at Arkansas State University and is a joint effort of the Department of Criminology, Sociology and Geography and the Department of Political Science’s Masters of Public Administration (MPA) Program. The study was supervised by Drs. William P. McLean, Associate Professor of Political Science, and Patrick A. Stewart, then Director of ASU’s Masters of Public Administration Program (currently at University of Arkansas), and conducted by trained graduate students from the Department of Political Science as part of their graduate assistantship and course requirements.

Analysis of the influence of demographic variables on support for a high school citizenship exit exam using Chi-square statistics suggest that while the sex of the respondent and ethnicity do not play a significant role, age and education are significant at the .05-level and having children at home and total family income are significant at the .10-level (see Table 1). When age is considered, older respondents, namely those from over the age of 55, are

Figure 1: Attitudes Towards Giving Citizenship Exam To High School Students



more likely to support citizenship exit exams, whereas the younger age groups show progressively less support for this option, with a drop of nearly 10% per age cohort. Education plays an inverse role, with higher levels of education significantly related to decreased support for this form of testing. Specifically, while those possessing an education that ends at high school or less show over 80% support for testing, and nearly three-quarters of those respondents with college and some college education show support, only 60% of those with an advanced degree support this option.

Table 1. Demographic Variables and Support for High School Citizenship Exam

Variables		% Total Sample	High School Citizenship Exam: Strongly Agree or Agree
Sex			
N=383	Female	64.5%	76.5%
$\chi^2=1.620, p=.222$	Male	35.5%	70.6%
Age			
N=381	18-34	14.4%	60.0%
$\chi^2=12.182, p=.007$	35-54	34.6%	70.5%
	55-69	33.3%	81.1%
	70 and older	17.6%	82.1%
Children under 18			
N=383	Yes	70.2%	68.4%
$\chi^2=3.060, p=.080$	No	29.8%	77.0%
Ethnicity			
N=382	Caucasian	89.3%	74.8%
$\chi^2=3.802, p=.149$	African-American	7.3%	82.1%
	Latino, Asian or Other	3.4%	53.8%
Education			
	High School or Less	30.6%	82.9%
N=381	Some College	33.1%	72.3%
$\chi^2=8.710, p=.033$	College degree	26.4%	75.0%
	Advanced degree (MA, MS, JD, MD, Ph.D.)	9.9%	60.9%
Total Family Income			
N=330	Under \$10,000	6.7%	81.8%
$\chi^2=12.494, p=.052$	\$10,001-19,999	8.5%	96.4%
	\$20,000-29,999	9.7%	71.9%
	\$30,000-49,999	25.5%	66.7%
	\$50,000-74,999	21.5%	71.8%
	\$75,000-99,999	10.9%	83.3%
	\$100,00 or more	17.3%	71.9%

Although total family income and having children under the age of 18 living at home only approach significance through the Chi-square tests, findings are indicative of the role both of the variables play in attitudes towards citizenship testing of high school students. Specifically, those with children at home were nearly 10% less likely to support the testing option. When income is considered, those making from \$10K to \$20K a year are most likely to support testing, at just over 95%, followed by those making from \$75K to \$100K. At the same time, only two-thirds of those making from \$30K to \$50K support the testing option followed by those making less than ten thousand dollars a year, whereas the remaining categories are nearly identical in their response, with just over 70% supporting citizenship testing.

When grades given to the school systems of Arkansas are considered, only the grades given to the respondents' local public school system approaches significance at the .10-level. Those giving a "B" or an "F" to the local public school system are less likely to agree with high school students taking the citizenship exam when compared those giving an "A", "C" or "D". Interestingly, those respondents giving a grade of "D" to their local public school supported citizenship testing at the highest rates (86%).

When political party and political ideology are considered, only ideology plays a significant role, here at the .05-level. Consideration of political ideology suggests a nearly linear relationship between how conservative respondent identify themselves as and higher proportion of support for citizenship testing. That political party did not play a similar role likely reflects Arkansas' political culture in which the two-party system has been slow to develop, and hence party identification does not necessarily reflect political ideology.

Table 2. Policy/Political Attitudes and Support for High School Citizenship Exam

Variables	% Total Sample	High School Citizenship Exam: Strongly Agree or Agree	
Grade Arkansas Public School System			
N=362	"A"	10.8%	79.5%
$\chi^2=3.761, p=.439$	"B"	29.3%	75.5%
	"C"	44.8%	72.2%
	"D"	10.5%	84.2%
	"E"		
	"F"	4.7%	64.7%
Grade Local Public School System			
N=361	"A"	22.2%	78.8%
$\chi^2=8.460, p=.076$	"B"	38.2%	68.1%
	"C"	28.0%	78.2%
	"D"	7.8%	85.7%
	"E"		
	"F"	3.9%	57.1%
Grade Arkansas Colleges and Universities			
N=344	"A"	28.8%	76.8%
$\chi^2=3.519, p=.475$	"B"	52.0%	75.4%
	"C"	14.5%	72.0%
	"D"	3.8%	53.8%
	"E"		
	"F"	0.9%	66.7%
Political Party			
N=358	Democrat	47.2%	75.1%
$\chi^2=.612, p=.736$	Independent	23.5%	71.4%
	Republican	30.0%	78.3%
Political Ideology			
N=363	Liberal	17.6%	64.1%
$\chi^2=6.485, p=.039$	Moderate	39.4%	72.7%
	Conservative	43.0%	80.1%

Discussion

Though we cannot offer any definitive explanation for the findings, we can offer some hypotheses about why different groups had varying degrees of support for a citizenship exit exam. Despite the fact the variables of age, education, having children at home, income, attitudes about the local school system, and politically ideology were statistically significant, we discuss only having children at home and political ideology, as the sample sizes of the subgroups of the other variables were too small to likely reflect any differences that are distinct from random noise.

Respondents with children under the age of 18 living at home were probably less likely to support a citizenship exit exam because they are more

aware of how much testing is already taking place in the school system, something that parents and student generally do not like. They also may oppose the measure because they fear their children will not pass the test.

The finding of a nearly linear relationship between how conservative the respondents identify themselves as and higher proportion of support for citizenship testing is not surprising. In education policy, conservatives tend to support accountability measures such as high-stakes testing. Furthermore, distinguishing between the US citizenship exam and a non-specific civics exit exam is also probably an important factor here, since conservatives stress patriotism and tend to support measures like the U.S. citizenship test that require immigrants to assimilate to American culture. On the other hand, civics focuses on the process of being a citizen, and thus may be seen in a less favorable light than a well-defined product, that is, citizenship.

Conclusion

The results of the survey indicate that Arkansans are largely supportive of enacting a requirement that students must pass the U.S. citizenship exam in order to graduate high school. Interestingly enough, there were few significant differences between different types of people; support amongst all groups was relatively high. Overall, this survey suggests that putting a citizenship exit exam into place would garner wide support and thus be politically feasible in Arkansas.

These findings are promising for the future of civic education in Arkansas. As discussed earlier, citizens and scholars alike generally agree that citizens' lack of civic knowledge limits their ability and motivation to fulfill the responsibilities of citizenship. This study indicates that Arkansans are not just aware of this harmful deficit but support efforts to repair it. Though the current state of civic education in Arkansas may be bleak, the fact that citizens strongly support a citizenship exit exam gives reason to be more optimistic about the future of Arkansas civic education.

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