Building Community to Support Civic Engagement in an American Government Course

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Introduction

One of the more established findings of political science has been the unequal political participation of youth in the U.S. (for a summary see Wattenberg, 2008). Although youth voting surged in 2018 (Misra, 2019) and 2020 (CIRCLE, 2021), the gap between young people's voting rates and older adults remains a consistent feature of American politics. Since democratic theorists argue that elections are the central mechanism for ensuring that democracies reflect the views of their populations (Downs 1957), this persistent inequity in voting turnout poses an ongoing challenge to the nation's democratic vitality. Moreover, political scientists have also long recognized that socio-economic and racial/ethnic inequalities – economic and social - are also replicated in political participation gaps between more affluent and lower socio-economic populations, and between white and non-white groups (Schlozman, Brady and Verba, 2018; Verba, Brady and Schlozman, 1995; Verba and Nie, 1972).   The political and policymaking consequences of these gaps have also been established with devastating evidence that political representation and national policies consistently reflect the preferences of the affluent over lower socio-economic groups (Page and Gilens, 2020; Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012).

Efforts to address the youth "civic engagement gap" (Gaby 2017), have naturally gravitated toward educational achievement, which has stood out as the most significant variable in separating those who participate from those who don't participate, in study after study. In 2012, the Obama administration held a White House conference focusing on the importance of civics education as a means for increasing political knowledge and engagement. Organized by the Department of Education, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Global Perspectives Institute, Inc., this conference focused on two reports: *The Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, which laid out a framework for civics education through the university level, and *Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy,* which identified a plan for the Department of

Education's involvement in making civic education a national priority (Kanter and Schneider 2013).   -

Although the federal government's involvement in shaping the civic education landscape was essentially

disbanded when President Trump took office, a number of national organizations have continued to

expand civic education on college campuses: Campus Compact, a consortium of more than a thousand

universities and colleges; the American Association of State Colleges and University's (AASCU)

American Democracy Project (ADP); the American Association of Colleges & Universities' (AACU)

Core Commitments program; Pericles – a consortium of liberal arts colleges committed to expanding

their civics education offerings; and the AASCU's Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE)

project, to name just a few of the more prominent ones (AASCU 2019; Anft 2018; Flanagan and Levine

2010, pp. 169-70).   In 2015, Tufts University founded the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education

(IDHE), and their National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) collects data on the

voting participation of participating colleges and universities, and analyzes how overall campus climate

around civics might affect these critical voting participation outcomes (https://idhe.tufts.edu/nslve).

This renewed attention for an old idea – civic education – is in part an effort to counter the slow

post-war decline in social capital and civic engagement (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003). It also responds

to declining levels of voter participation and civic knowledge more generally (National Association for

Education National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012). All of these

efforts highlight the importance of robust and immersive participatory civic education programs as the

sine qua non in generating long-term trajectories of political engagement for young people.

Political science had been noticeably absent in earlier national efforts to promote civic education

(Rogers 2017), but in the last two decades the discipline has been committed to developing and

researching quality higher education programs focused on civic engagement.   In 2013, The American

Political Science Association (APSA) published *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active*

Citizen, an edited volume gathering the work of 27 political scientists exploring a broad array of approaches for connecting students to public affairs in meaningful ways that leave lasting impressions. In 2017, APSA published a follow-up volume to this – *Teaching Across the Disciplines* – to summarize new developments in pedagogy and research on these efforts. These twin volumes were only the most recent culmination of a two-decade focus of the APSA on civic and political engagement education, launched by the APSA's President Elinor Ostrom in 1996 (Task Force 1997).   Ostrom's call for involving political science scholars in developing meaningful and effective civic and political engagement curricula has led to an explosion of activity in creating new ways to engage students in public affairs, through innovations in service learning and other pedagogies incorporated in political science courses and in broader campus initiatives (Matto et al., eds., 2017, Introduction; McCartney, et al., eds., 2013, Preface). Despite the variety of approaches, a unifying theme is that political science as a discipline should take a leadership role in shaping new efforts to engage students in public affairs.

Aligning ourselves with this movement, we argue that the introductory course in American Politics presents an exciting vehicle for this work. What could be more central to the mission of renewing attention to civic engagement in higher education than the involvement of political science faculty teaching introductory courses in American politics to millions of young people every year?[1] This paper presents results from a study of a program designed to promote political engagement through a Town Hall Meeting (THM) program included as a required component in three large lecture-hall sections of the Introduction to American Politics course at California State University, Fullerton. Several political science faculty teach the introductory American Government course at CSUF

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[1] According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2019 there were approximately 16.6 million undergraduate students enrolled in degree-granting post-secondary institutions.
https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cha

incorporated this *Town Hall Meeting* (THM) program as a conscious effort to make civic engagement a priority in their political science instruction. The purpose of the program was to help students feel a greater connection to one another, creating a model of social capital within the classroom environment, and thereby increasing students' sense of their political efficacy. Our hope was that students' involvement in the THM would inspire greater interest in public affairs, to think more intentionally about politics and engage in meaningful political discussion both within the classroom environment and outside of the classroom.

California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) provides a unique opportunity to assess the potential for participatory civics programming to encourage young people and traditionally disadvantaged populations to increase their political interest and engagement. CSUF is not only the third largest university in California and the largest of the 23 CSU campuses in the state, with close to 41,000 students enrolled in the fall of 2021, but it also has a very diverse population. Forty-seven percent of the student population is Hispanic, 21.8% are Asian-American, and 17.5% are white. Moreover, over 1/3 are "first-generation" students: the first of their family to pursue a 4-year bachelor's degree (CSUF 2022). Unlike many of the service-learning or civics programs highlighted in the APSA's volumes on *Teaching Civic Engagement* and *Teaching Across the Discipline* (2013, 2017), CSUF's campus population allowed the Town Hall meeting program to reach a large number of racial/ethnic minority students with lower socio-economic backgrounds.

This paper summarizes findings from a 2017 quasi-experimental study of this program, using close-ended and open-ended surveys. The experimental design revolved around two nearly identical Introduction to American Politics (POSC 100) courses taught by the same instructor, with one course including the Town Hall meeting project (THM), and the other course without the Town Hall (non-THM). For the non-THM course, students were assigned a short paper on public affairs focused on the

same topic areas that students in the THM program focused upon (see below for more details). The quasi-experimental design was intended to overcome the problem of instructor-related effects. Institutional research data on student demographics were added to the data from the quantitative and qualitative survey responses from students in these two American government sections. Findings from a 2013 survey-based research project on the Town Hall comparing responses from THM and non-THM students, showed that incorporating a fully developed civic education component into the Introduction to American Politics course had significant positive effects. Not only did the THM seem to improve academic performance, it also had less potent but still significant impacts on political motivation, political efficacy, and interest in continued civic engagement. However, because different faculty taught the THM and non-THM courses in the 2013 study, we were unable to separate out the impact of the individual instructor from the impact of the THM program itself. For this reason, we designed a 2017 follow-up study that would control for instructor-related effects – a quasi-experimental design that would hold the instructor constant and vary only whether the students in the course had a THM or not.

The quasi-experimental design yielded more insight into how the THM affects students, highlighting the impact for all students, for Hispanic and Asian-American students compared to white students, and for first-generation university students compared to non-first-generation students. We found that students in the THM were significantly more likely than students in in the non-THM section to feel that they had been involved in a collaborative experience with other students. Moreover, this impact was more pronounced for white students, and first-generation students, raising some important questions about the way civic engagement programs at universities address gaps between more advantaged and less advantaged students. Moreover, looking at the qualitative responses to open-ended survey questions administered at two points during the semester, we were able to identify some of the dynamics that were occurring over the course of the semester – comparing THM to non-THM students.

We found that in both courses, students increased in their political efficacy, political interest, and in their engagement with politics (thinking and discussing politics outside of the classroom). However, in the THM these increases were more pronounced. Moreover, the impact on white students and first-generation students were also more pronounced, while Hispanic and Asian-American students were less likely to be impacted by the THM in these ways. Perhaps most importantly, the reasons behind this increase were related to an increased self-confidence (political efficacy) flowing from a broader understanding of the experience of participation: in the non-THM course, students' political efficacy was increased because of their improved knowledge of American government, rather than through their experience of the classroom community. These effects were more pronounced, again, for white students and first-generation students than for Hispanic or Asian-American students.

This paper reviews these findings in detail. Beginning with a description of the CSUF THM program and its implementation, the paper then reviews the non-experimental survey-based research findings from 2013. We then describe the quasi-experimental design and summarizes the findings from that project. Finally, suggestions for further research and for ways to improve upon the THM program are discussed.

The Town Hall Meeting (THM) at California State University, Fullerton

In the summer of 2011, California State University Chico's Town Hall Meeting program was presented at the American Democracy Project (ADP) annual conference. That presentation illustrated long-term positive academic effects for the program: students who had gone through their introduction to American Politics courses with the THM program were more likely to remain in school and graduate than those who did not have the exposure. In 2010-11, their THM participants had a cumulative 91% retention rate and a 93% graduation rate (CSU Chico n.d.). Based on this positive record, in the spring

and fall of 2012, CSU Fullerton began a pilot adoption of the THM program in a single section of Introduction to American Politics (POSC 100).   By 2014, the program at CSU Fullerton involved students from three THM participating POSC 100 courses. In each participating THM course, students were assembled into small learning communities of 7 students, and those groups each focused on one of three public affairs issues identified by their faculty. At the culminating Town Hall Meeting event, 30 breakout sessions were held simultaneously. Each breakout session included three student teams – one from each participating THM course. Student teams each made a prepared presentation on one of three broad public affairs issues. In each breakout session a faculty member or graduate student moderated, and a local public affairs leader responded to the student presentation and engaged the students in discussions. These leaders included elected and non-elected public affairs leaders: members of local city councils, state legislators, city managers, and non-profit leaders. Student team presentations identified political and policymaking challenges for addressing their issue, and advanced potential solutions. The breakout sessions were followed by a larger culminating event, involving all participating students and participating public affairs leaders, and featured a closing address from a prominent local leader in public affairs.

The 2017 THM event involved nearly 600 students, 30 public affairs leaders, and 30 faculty/graduate student moderators. The core components of the semester-long program included:

- Research, writing and group discussions of policy issues throughout the course.

- Involvement of faculty and graduate students from multiple disciplines as moderators of student-led breakout sessions.

- Involvement of local elected and appointed government officials as discussants in the student-led breakout sessions.

- Presentation of policy analysis and proposed solutions to other students, faculty and local government officials in small breakout sessions involving three student teams.

- Participation in a culminating large-scale public keynote address.

In the spring of 2017, the THM program course section which was the subject of our research study organized into 30 teams, with 7 members in each team. Other participating THM course sections organized their students slightly differently and had different kinds of assignments during the semester. In the course section studied here, each team was responsible for producing a team research brief, with each member of the team contributing a 2–3-page paper as part of that brief. In addition, each member of the team had a specific role on their respective team. These roles were as follows: speaker (2 people), research coordinator, creative project coordinator (2 people), secretary, and group leader. Most of the THM work was done outside of scheduled class, but four sessions during the semester were set aside for supervised and guided THM teamwork. Students were provided with specific instructions related to their individual contribution to the team research brief, and for their individual team role.

The groups in each of the three participating POSC 100 sections during the spring of 2017 worked on one of three different issue areas – the environment; immigration; and the economy/fiscal policy. At the culminating Town Hall Meeting event, towards the end of the semester, student groups for all three participating POSC 100 course sections were joined by 30 government or non-profit leaders, and 30 faculty moderators. All participants heard a keynote address from the state senator representing the district that included CSUF, and then went into 30 different simultaneous breakout sessions, lasting one hour. In each breakout session, there were three student teams – one from each of the POSC 100 sections. Teams focused on similar issues were placed in the same session along with a local leader as a discussant, and a faculty member or graduate student as the moderator. In each breakout session, student teams each presented to the other students, a local government or non-profit leader, and faculty

or graduate student moderator, and discussions led by the local government or non-profit leader followed each presentation. Table 1 provides examples of the participating local public affairs leaders who were part of the Spring 2017 Town Hall.

Table 1. Examples of Local Leaders, Discussants, and Faculty moderators
Mayor Pro Tem – Tustin
CEO for The American Muslim Women's Empowerment Council
Director, Fresh Beginnings Ministries (Program for the Homeless)
Community Development Director – Brea
Sergeant - Brea Police Department
Council Member – Fullerton
CSU Assistant Vice Chancellor, Academic Research and Resources
Mayor Pro Tem - Yorba Linda
Resource Archivist - Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum
Director, Project Hope Alliance
Chief of Police, Brea
Senior Vice President and General Counsel - FSB Core Strategy (former Mayor of Tustin)
District Coordinator - Office Assemblywoman Sharon Quirk-Silva
CSU Fullerton, Interim Director of Academic Technology
Police Officer - City of Brea
Detective - City of Brea
Regional Director, Anti-Defamation League - Long Beach & Orange County
CSU Fullerton, Project Rebound Program Coordinator
Mayor - City of La Habra
City Manager - City of Laguna Beach
Executive Director, Olive Tree Initiative (OTI) - UCI
Government Affairs Director - La Habra
Council Member - Yorba Linda
Faculty members/Graduate Students from CSU Fullerton's Departments of: Political Science, Public Administration, Criminal Justice, American Studies, History, and Geography

The THM project offers students a civic educational intervention that focuses on three dimensions of civic education: knowledge, skills, and collective action. The POSC 100 curriculum is modified to illustrate the connections between traditional American government course instruction and

students' efforts to explore prominent public affairs issues. In the process, students are required to develop basic research skills for learning about their selected issue; discuss the political and policy dimensions of their issue with students who are often from different racial/ethnic backgrounds; present their team's work to their peers, faculty, and local government leaders; and to produce and participate in a large-scale community event for the university.

Creating Social Capital in the Classroom

In some ways, the entirety of the THM program is geared to producing a kind of mock-up of the social capital that undergirds a robust democracy (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003). Putnam argued that when societies are rich in social networks, democratic engagement is more robust and meaningful. For Putnam, the central features of meaningful social networks are trust, reciprocity, communication/information sharing, and social connection. While a classroom intervention cannot create social capital in the fullest sense of the term, it can replicate some of the essential elements in an effort to encourage political engagement. The centerpiece of this effort is to create connections between peers, and to encourage students to call upon those networks collaboratively.

The Town Hall Meeting and Political Efficacy

The THM is centered, therefore, around an innovative approach to promoting political engagement. Most civic education efforts have not focused on increasing social capital. Rather, they have focused on increasing political knowledge and involving students in civic activity. This naturally flows from the observations of political scientists that education is the most important variable shaping political participation and political knowledge. In numerous studies, education levels are correlated with voting turnout, political knowledge, and democratic attitudes and opinions (Nie et al., 1996; Verba,

Schlozman and Brady 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). As Hillygus (2005) argues, however, the mechanism by which education affects political engagement is unclear: all we know for sure is that education is the central variable explaining differences in participation and political knowledge. She finds that higher levels of education provide individuals with greater capacity to navigate complex political and policy environments but does not find strong effects for civic education influencing individual motivation for participation.

Niemi and Junn (1998) find that civic education can in fact increase political engagement, but also observe that it varies in effectiveness. If one's objective with civic education programs is to foster greater engagement, then students require: 1) the capacity to understand the issues and processes involved in public affairs; 2) the necessary skills for civic involvement; and 3) the motivation to engage politically. Educational interventions that provide students with an introduction to government institutions, political processes, and public policies address the first pre-condition – understanding. Programs that teach students how to engage politically are essential to addressing the second. These programs should teach students a mix of strategies and skills: how to organize in groups, research issues of concern, develop their own positions, discuss and present their views with/to others, discuss issues with others that hold differing views, and identify political actions and processes where they can advance their views meaningfully, i.e. voting, letter writing, attendance at public meetings, joining advocacy/interest groups; etc.

We argue that the third pre-condition – motivation for political engagement – is most important. One's political efficacy, closely associated with the motivation to be politically active, is acquired as part of the process of political socialization, along with other more rooted aspects of political identity such as partisanship and ideological disposition (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). Therefore, students enter college with either a well-developed sense of political efficacy or lower levels, and for

students with lower levels, this predisposition is difficult to dislodge with a single intervention. As Beaumont (2005) found, a student's initial political efficacy, prior to the educational intervention she studied, was the strongest predictor of a student's political efficacy after they experienced the studied educational intervention. In other words, students who are unlikely to feel empowered, and who are therefore less motivated to participate politically, are very difficult to reach with classic civic education models focused on increasing knowledge and skills.

It is particularly important that civic educators recognize that students enter the university with unequal resources for political engagement, and that any educational intervention intended to increase political efficacy, interest, and activity will be more or less effective given the resulting predispositions for political engagement that students bring with them into the university (Beaumont 2011). More generally, a "civic engagement gap" between youth of varying socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds has been a persistent component of American politics (Gaby, 2017). As Levinson (2010) observes, this gap is pervasive and persistent among the broader population beyond young people, exacerbated by inequities in social networking. This civics gap is particularly important for efforts to promote civic engagement in higher education since the demographics of higher education have been shifting markedly in recent decades. Hispanic undergraduate enrollment more than doubled from 2000 to 2015, while the percentage of white students fell: from 84% to 56% (NCES 2015, cited in Chan and Hoyt, 2021, p. 985). CSU Fullerton was designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in 2004 (campuses with over 25% Latinx students), and currently nearly half the student population there are Hispanic, with another 22% Asian-American (CSUF Institutional Research, 2021). As such, it offers an excellent opportunity to investigate the relative impact of a civic engagement intervention – the THM – on traditionally advantaged and disadvantaged students. In other words, we should be able to assess

potency of the THM to address the unequal political engagement of youth based on socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity.

Research by Beaumont (2011) finds that programs offering opportunities for engaging in political discourse, which situate students in a diverse learning community, and which connect students directly to community groups and/or government are effective in elevating political efficacy. The situating of students within networks approximating social capital seems to provide the strongest impact in raising political efficacy. This may be particularly important for first-generation college students, non-white students, and for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. As the foregoing suggests, an effective civic education intervention would address more than simply giving students a basic understanding of government and politics but would provide opportunities for them to actively engage in political discussion and action, preferably in connection with community groups and/or government. In other words, social networks – the core feature of social capital – is what undergirds youth political engagement.

We argue that classroom-based civic education is hard-pressed to produce social capital for young voters. Instead, social capital, which is predicated on bonds of trust and reciprocity, must be established over time. The THM project is embedded within a General Education required course on American Government. The traditional Introduction to American Politics course, however, only addresses the most elementary component of civic education: teaching basic knowledge of government and the political system. This, in and of itself, does not encourage or create social capital formation. However, the collaborative aspects of the THM program, taking place within the context of small groups of student teams embedded in the larger course, does simulate social capital formation. The THM program, therefore, potentially creates small communities within the context of the class and links these

communities to an intentional process that culminates in the large THM event, where students are empowered to present their ideas in meaningful interaction with public leadership.

Analysis of the THM program's Impact

To evaluate the program's impact, a survey was administered to CSU Fullerton students in the spring of 2013. Students enrolled in the THM POSC 100 sections and students enrolled in two other POSC 100 sections without the THM were asked to voluntarily answer a 65-question survey at the end of the semester, following the THM culminating event. Results indicated modest differences between students in sections of POSC 100 with the THM and students in sections of POSC 100 without the THM. But the outcome of this research also illuminated the strong impact of the different instructors offering the THM. One THM instructor offered a far more involved THM program – with a team research paper and presentation as part of the curriculum. His THM students showed the largest advances over the other THM students and non-THM students in terms of academic engagement and internal political efficacy measures.

Overcoming Instructor-Related Effects: The Quasi-Experimental Design

To correct for the problem of instructor-related effects, in the spring of 2017 we designed a new study of the THM program that would hold the instructor constant. In this quasi-experimental design, the Town Hall Meeting (THM) instructor with the most rigorous THM project in 2014 taught two identical sections of Introduction to American Politics (POSC 100) – one with the THM program and one without (NTHM).

The experimental design called for holding as many details of these two courses constant as was feasible, with the only significant variation being the presence or absence of the THM program.

There were no prior announcements during course registration that the THM program would be offered in one of these POSC 100 sections. Students who enrolled did not know. Most importantly, the same faculty member taught each course, with identical materials and substance. The two courses were taught in consecutive morning time slots: from 9 am – 9:50 am; and then from 10 am – 10:50 am, both on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Both courses had the exact same textbooks, the exact same quizzes, and the exact same exams (with the same questions). While the THM group was asked to write a 2-3-page paper each, as part of a larger team research paper – with each contributor assigned one aspect of that team research brief – in the non-THM group each student was asked to write a 2-3 page paper on one of the three issue topics that the THM groups were focused upon.

Holding these features constant allowed us to isolate the causal influence of the THM in shaping students' civic dispositions. We developed a 67-question quantitative survey, utilizing questions from other surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Higher Educational Research Institute's College Freshman Survey, and other measures replicated from the American National Election Study. The survey was administered late in the semester (May 10 – 19, 2017), just after the Town Hall "public event" in the THM section. To maintain comparability in responses, students in the section without the THM program were administered the survey at the same time during the semester. Survey respondents from both course sections were predominately women (55.5%) and mostly freshman (34.9%) and sophomores (42.4%). Importantly, most of the respondents are nonwhite--49.5% Hispanic and 30.3% Asian. Over one-third were first generation college students (36.4%), and a majority received Pell grants (53.8%). Analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between the demographics of two groups, which supports that these are comparable groups, despite the absence of a strict randomized experimental design.[2] Furthermore, the survey response rates for the THM section and the

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2 Chi Square analyses all revealed p > .05. A p ≤ .05 is needed for statistical significance. Since there is an absence of random assignment between participants and nonparticipants, we recognize the possibility of selection bias in the results. However, we are convinced that

section without Town Hall were the same—83.2% and 82.6%, respectively. During the 2017 spring

semester, 214 students were enrolled in the Town Hall section and 201 students were enrolled in the

comparison section without the Town Hall program.

To measure how well the THM created the elements of social capital, we focused on the

students' sense of community in the classroom. This was measured through a series of items in the

survey replicated from previously published measures (Rovai 2002) and created by averaging scores

across these items. Table 2 reveals that students in the THM section exhibited a significantly higher

sense of classroom community than students who were in the section without the THM.

Table 2. Classroom Community Scale* Mean Score Comparisons			
Program	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**	**n**
Town Hall	56.4	20.5	163
No Town Hall	48.4	22.7	157

*Statistically significant difference in means ($t = 3.3$, p = .001)
Note: See Appendix 2 for scale indicators and methodology.

Did the Town Hall Meeting "move the needle" in students' political motivation?

In addition to the quantitative surveys administered to both sections of POSC 100 in this

experimental design, a set of 5 open-ended qualitative questions were also asked of each student group

(Table 3 below). These questions were asked twice during the semester in each course section: once in

late March, and once in late April – before the culminating Town Hall event and before the quantitative

survey was administered. These questions allow us to not only probe the diverse ways that students

perceived and described their own political motivations (or lack thereof), but also to trace increases or

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students were not able to pre-select themselves into a THM course, or not, and our comparison group did not vary significantly from the
participant group.

decreases in their political engagement during their studies in both the Introduction to American Politics

course and, for one section, the Town Hall Meeting project.

Table 3. Written Reflection Questions
1. Do you feel like you can participate meaningfully in politics, at the local, state and/or national level? Explain why or why not.
2. Do you feel like our elected leaders are focused on what is important to their voters? Why or why not?
3. Are you finding the material in this course interesting so far? Do you feel it is useful to you in some way?
4. Have you found yourself thinking and/or talking about government and politics more than you had before you started this course? If so, when and how? If not, why do you think you aren't?
5. Are you more interested now in getting involved in public affairs – at either the local, state or national levels – than you were when you started this class? Explain why or why not.

Response rates to these surveys were nearly identical, with no statistical differences between the

THM and non-THM sections: 72.9% of THM students answered the qualitative surveys and 69.5% of

the non-THM students responded. Moreover, as table 4 shows, the demographics of the qualitative

survey respondents closely approximated each other.

Table 4. Demographics of Respondents to Written Reflections		
	Town Hall	No Town Hall
Female	61.0%	51.8%
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian	0.0%	0.7%
Asian	26.0%	29.5%
Black	1.3%	0.7%
Hispanic	49.4%	41.7%
Multi-racial	4.5%	7.2%
Pacific Islander	1.3%	0.0%

White	11.7%	12.2%
Class Level		
Freshman	39.0%	30.2%
Sophomore	41.6%	43.2%
Junior	12.3%	18.0%
Senior	7.1%	8.6%
First Generation	34.4%	36.2%
Received Pell Grant	51.9%	53.2%
Mean High School GPA	3.60	3.58
Mean Campus GPA	3.04	3.01
Smallest n	*149*	*126*

Note: There are no statistically significant differences in any of the above demographics for the Town Hall section compared to the section without Town Hall, except for gender. A significantly higher number of females responded in the Town Hall section compared to the section without Town Hall.

The THM and Political Efficacy

The first open-ended response question asked students if they felt they could participate meaningfully in politics and asked them to explain their answer. This question was intended to measure whether or not they felt that they had *political efficacy* and whether they felt that they could engage politically in meaningful ways. This question, along with the other open-ended response questions, were posed twice during the semester, in the first month of the course and then again just before the THM culminating event. Responses were coded and analyzed to understand the student's own sense of their political efficacy, whether or not it increased during the semester, and the reasons for any increase or decrease (see Appendix 1).

In coding the responses, notable differences emerged between the student respondents in the THM and those who were in the non-THM section. Table 5 shows that 38.7% of the THM respondents showed an increased sense of their political capacity, compared to 29.7% of the non-THM respondents.

Moreover, a greater proportion of the students in the non-THM course had no shift at all in their self-perceived political capacity, and equal numbers in each section experienced a decreased sense of their ability to participate meaningfully.

Table 5. Change in Political Efficacy		
	Town Hall	**No Town Hall**
Increased Capacity	38.7%	29.7%
Stayed the Same	47.9%	56.8%
Decreased Capacity	13.4%	13.6%
N	*142*	*118*

When we disaggregated the results for political efficacy by sub-groups of students, moreover, we found that the THM's positive impact was not equally distributed. Table 6 shows that white students and Asian-American students in the THM section had increases in political efficacy, but students receiving Pell Grants (low-income) and Hispanics did not have similar increases in political efficacy. Beaumont (2011) argues that students who come into a course with low levels of political efficacy to begin with are less likely to be affected by efforts to promote civic engagement. As the literature on the civic engagement gap suggests, low-income students and Hispanics are less likely to have a positive sense of their capacity to engage politically. The results summarized in table 6 suggest that this may have occurred in the experiment. In particular, comparing students in the THM course with students in the non-THM American government course, we find that whites were more likely to have increased levels of political efficacy, as were first generation students. However Hispanic students and students receiving Pell grants (low income) in the THM had no increased political efficacy, even while whites, Asian-Americans, and first-generation students experienced notable increases.

	Town Hall	No Town Hall	
Increased Political Efficacy (Q1)	**38.7% (54)**	**29.7% (35)**	**+9.0%**
Men	29.1% (16)	32.1% (17	-10.0%
Women	44.7% (38)	27.7% (18)	+17.0%
Pell Grant	27.0% (20)	32.8% (21)	-5.8%
No Pell Grant	51.5% (34)	25.9% (14)	+25.6%
Asian-American	40.5% (15)	33.3% (1)	+7.2%
Hispanic	35.8% (24)	36.5% (19)	-0.7%
White	27.8% (5)	14.3% (2)	+13.5%
First Generation	37.9% (33)	27.9% (19)	+10.0%
Not First Generation	43.6% (17)	27% (10)	+16.6%
Hispanic x First Generation	40.4% (19)	37.5% (15)	+2.9%
Non-Hispanic x First Generation	34.2% (4)	14.8% (13)	+19.4%

Table 6. Increase in Political Efficacy

Political Interest and Activity among THM vs non-THM students

Increased political efficacy is only one important component in the broader concept of political engagement. Did then THM also increase students' interest in being politically involved, compared to non-THM students? Question five of the open-ended questions was intended to get at this dimension of political engagement, and responses were coded in a similar way to the coding of question one (see Appendix 2). The results are presented in table 7, and they show that the THM seems to have encouraged a greater increase in being politically involved compared to the straight American government course without a THM program. However, Hispanic students and low-income students

(Pell grant) in the THM were not any more interested in "getting involved in public affairs" than non-THM Hispanic and low-income students.

Table 7. Increase in Interest in Getting Involved in Public Affairs			
	Town Hall	**No Town Hall**	
Increased Political Interest (Q5)	**57.8% (89)**	**51.8% (72)**	**+5.9%**
Men	48.3% (29)	52.2% (35)	-3.9%
Women	63.8% (60)	51.4% (37)	+12.4
Pell Grant	55.0% (44)	54.1% (40)	+0.9%
No Pell Grant	60.8% (45)	49.2% (32)	+11.6%
Asian-American	52.5% (21)	36.6% (15)	+15.9%
Hispanic	61.8% (47)	63.8% (37)	-2.0%
White	55.6% (10)	47.1% (8)	+8.5%
First Generation	62.6% (57)	50.7% (38)	+11.9%
Not First Generation	48.9% (22)	56.1% (23)	-7.2%
Hispanic x First Generation	62.7% (32)	71.4% (30)	-8.7%
Non-Hispanic x First Generation	65.8% (25)	21.9% (7)	+43.9%

A third dimension of political engagement is actual political activity. While we can't assess whether the THM students were more likely to vote or engage in politics directly in other ways, question 4 of the open-ended questions asked if students were thinking about and/or discussing politics more – outside of the classroom – than they were before they took the course. Again, table 8 reports that the THM resulted in increased political activity, compared to the straight American Politics course without the THM. And again, the civic engagement gap was apparent in these results. While Hispanic and Asian-American students in the THM increased their thinking and/or talking about politics more than they did in the non-THM course, these increases were much less pronounced than for white students. Moreover, socio-economic inequality was also slightly overcome by the THM, with students receiving

Pell Grants and first generation students in the THM more likely to report increases in their political

activity (thinking and/or talking about politics) than in the non-THM meeting. However, first generation

Hispanic students' political activity was increased much less than non-Hispanic first generation students.

Table 8. Increases in Political Activity: Thinking and/or Talking about Politics			
	Town Hall	No Town Hall	
Increased Thinking/Talking (Q4)	**73.1% (114)**	**66.2% (92)**	**+6.9%**
Men	63.3% (38)	58.2% (39)	+5.1%
Women	78.7% (74)	73.6% (53)	+5.1%
Pell Grant	75.0% (60)	70.3% (52)	+4.7%
No Pell Grant	70.3% (52)	61.5% (40)	+8.8%
Asian-American	62.5% (25)	61.0% (25)	+1.5%
Hispanic	80.3% (61)	75.9% (44)	+4.4%
White	66.7% (12)	47.1% (8)	+19.6%
First Generation	74.7% (68)	65.3% (49)	+9.4%
Not First Generation	66.7% (30)	73.2% (30)	-6.5%
Hispanic x First Generation	80.4% (41)	76.2% (32)	+4.2%
Non-Hispanic x First Generation	68.4% (26)	53.1% (17)	+15.3%

Responses to question 4 - thinking and/or talking about politics reflect a more powerful impact

of the THM than the responses to question five – interest in government and/or politics. One reason

may be that the very tangible act of discussing politics, or even thinking more about politics, was clearer

to students than the more ambiguous question of "interest". Numerous students interpreted the question

of interest in government and/or politics (question 5) as asking whether they would consider a political

career – running for office, working in government, or even just majoring in political science. Other

students, however, interpreted question 5 the way we intended: as simply asking if they were more

interested in increasing everyday political activity such as voting. Hispanic students answering this question seemed to be less likely to interpret this question as asking about everyday political activity, but were clearer on the meaning behind question 4: whether or not they increased their thinking about and discussions of politics during the semester (in both the THM and non-THM courses). White students, on the other hand, were more consistent in their responses to both questions. This suggests that traditional understandings of political engagement do not match Hispanic students' understanding of political engagement.

Reasons cited by students for increased or decreased levels of efficacy, interest and activity

Finally, the coding of these questions also identified the reasons why students increased or decreased their political efficacy, interest and activity and whether the reason(s) were related to the course as opposed to non-course related factors. Across the board the students in the Town Hall meeting are more likely to say the reasons are related to the course for each dimension (efficacy, interest, and thinking/talking about politics, see Appendix 3).

The reasons for increased political efficacy and interest reveal similar results with respect to increasing knowledge (see Appendix 3). However, a greater percentage of Town Hall students (25% compared to 13.6%) identified a greater understanding of ways that they might participate meaningfully. This suggests that the THM resulted in increased engagement because it provided students with an experience that illustrated ways to develop their own views on political issues and effectively discuss these ideas with their peers and present these views to local political leaders.

Social Capital in the Classroom and Political Engagement

Finally, we used responses to the quantitative survey questions to create a classroom community index, which we argue serves as a measure of a kind of social capital in the classroom (see Appendix 2). The sense of a classroom community was greater for students in the THM section than in the non-THM section. However, we found some important co-variation in this classroom community index when looking at students in the THM and non-THM who expressed increased political efficacy. As Table 9 indicates, for THM students who were coded as having expressed an increase political efficacy, they were significantly more likely to identify a sense of community in their classroom than those who had not increased their confidence that they could participate meaningfully. We found the same significant correlations between the classroom community index and political interest and political activity (thinking and/or talking more about politics outside of the classroom). There were no such correlations for the non-THM students who increased in their confidence that they could participate meaningfully, who were more interested in politics, or who increased their political activity. We interpret these findings to indicate that when students feel connected to their peers within the classroom environment that they are significantly more likely to be civically engaged by the THM.

Table 9. Qualitative Reflections Coded Change in Students' Efficacy, Interest, and Thinking/Talking by Quantitative Survey Measure of Sense of Classroom Community		
	Mean Classroom Community (Standard Deviation)	
	Town Hall**	**No Town Hall**
Increased Political Efficacy		
No	53.98 (20.93)**	48.14 (24.62)
Yes	65.63 (17.77)**	50.62 (20.39)
Increased Political Interest		
No	52.65 (21.72)*	43.25 (23.18)*
Yes	60.50 (18.29)*	52.21 (22.35)*

Increased Thinking/Talking

No	46.91 (20.99)***	45.87 (22.44)
Yes	60.74 (18.59)***	48.80 (23.51)
N	*126*	*110*

* Statistically significant difference (*t*-test) at p <= 0.05.
** Statistically significant difference (*t*-test) at p <= 0.01.
*** Statistically significant difference (*t*-test) at p <= 0.001.

Conclusions: the effectiveness of civics education for Hispanic students

Our analysis of the results from this quasi-experimental design study of the CSU Fullerton Town Hall meeting in 2017 indicate that the THM was a qualified success in generating increased political engagement. We conceive of political engagement as consisting of three inter-related components: efficacy, interest, and activity. We measured this through quantitative and qualitative survey responses, from students in the Introduction to American Politics courses with and without the THM. Our results illustrate the persistent barrier of the civic engagement gap for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and from traditionally disadvantaged minority groups. However, while the THM generated significant increases in civic engagement for some lower-socioeconomic groups – Pell grant recipients, first generation students – it did not motivate Hispanic students to be more civically engaged. This unexpected finding from our research highlights the persistent barrier that the "civic engagement gap" poses for educators seeking to move the needle for student civic engagement. We believe that these results suggest that traditional higher education courses in American Government are ill-suited to engaging the fastest growing population in undergraduate populations: Latinos and Latinx students. Even an innovative and effective civics program embedded within such a course – the Town Hall Meeting program – was ineffective for this group. While it was effective in mobilizing young people, first generation students who are white or Asian-American, and who were Pell grant recipients, the same

did not hold true for Hispanics. Our findings regarding the essential mediating influence of social

capital in the classroom, measured by an index of students' sense of community in the classroom,

suggest that this relationship is attenuated for Hispanics. Overall, students who felt an increased level of

social capital in these classes, especially in the class with the THM, were significantly more likely to

express increased levels of political efficacy, interest, and political activity (thinking and/or discussing

government and/or politics more than they did before the course). However, in general Hispanic

students did not feel a greater sense of political efficacy, even when they perceived a greater sense of

community in the class, and even when that increased social capital was generated in the course with the

THM. This suggests that Introduction to American Politics courses that find ways to create a sense of

connection among their students – either through a Town Hall program or another pedagogical

instrument – will be more likely to find that their instruction in government and politics generates an

increased sense of their own capacity to act politically, an increased interest in being more involved, and

an increased political activity. But for Hispanic students, the civic engagement gap cannot be easily

overcome in a single course. In our future research, we hope to more clearly identify reasons for this

persistent civic engagement gap among Hispanic students, and to redesign the Town Hall Meeting in

ways to address this challenge successfully.

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APPENDIX 1: Coding Rules for Open-Ended Qualitative Questions 1, 4 and 5

Written Reflection Question 1. Do you feel like you can participate meaningfully in politics, at the local, state and/or national level? Explain why or why not.

Did the student's sense of their political efficacy increase over the semester?
0 = no; 1 =yes

If they felt their ability to politically participate increased, what were the reasons?
0 = increased knowledge
1 = class showed them how to engage
2 = their experience in the Town Hall Meeting (only relevant for one section)
3 = other reasons, outside the class experience
4 = increased understanding of various ways to participate politically
5 = other

If they felt that their ability to politically participate did not increase, what were the reasons?
0 = lack of knowledge
1 = lack of access to government and politics
2 = current national politics
3 = conservatives prevented them from participating
4 = liberals prevented them from participating
5 = not a citizen
6 = other

Were the reasons for increased or decreased efficacy related to the course?
0 = no; 1 = yes

Written Reflective Question 5. Are you more interested now in getting involved in public affairs – at either the local, state or national levels – than you were when you started this class? Explain why or why not.

Did the student's interest in getting involved in public affairs increase over the semester?
0 = no; 1 =yes

If they felt their political interest increased over the semester, what were the reasons?
0 = increased knowledge
1 = class showed them how to engage
2 = their experience in the Town Hall Meeting (only relevant for one section)
3 = other reasons, outside the class experience
4 = increased understanding of various ways to participate politically
5 = other

If they felt that their political interest did not increase, what were the reasons?
0 = lack of knowledge
1 = lack of access to government and politics
2 = current national politics
3 = conservatives prevented them from participating
4 = liberals prevented them from participating
5 = not a citizen
6 = other

Were the reasons for increased or decreased interest related to the course?
0 = no; 1 = yes

Question. 4: Have you found yourself thinking and/or talking about government and politics more than you had before you started this course? If so, when and how? If not, why do you think you aren't?

Did the student find themselves thinking/talking about government/politics more than before?
0 = not at all
1 = limited circumstances
2 = yes I am, but only some
3 = yes I am – stronger
4 = other (see column K w/comments)

Increased interest?
0 = no; 1 = yes.

Reasons for why thinking and/or talking more about government/politics
0 = class increased knowledge
1 = watching / listening to news/ reading social media; but NOT posting or discussing
2 = social media posting, discussions w/classmates, family or peers
3 = current state of politics encourages more thinking and/or discussion
4 = town hall meeting group – specific mention of this
5 = some other time/way -- see comments for explanations

Reasons why they are not thinking and/or talking more about government/politics
0 –lack of knowledge (don't feel able to talk about it; don't feel able to think about it beyond class requirements)
1 –dislike politics, don't want to think or talk about it
2 –want to avoid conflict; too controversial; depressing, etc.
3 –already thought about politics/discussed politics – class didn't change anything
4 - current state of politics
5 –some other reason -- see comments for explanations for reasons why not –

Were the reasons for increased thinking and/or talking more (or not) related to this course?
0=yes; 1=no

APPENDIX 2: Classroom Community Scale

Methodology
The Classroom Community scale is modeled after the scaling methodology utilized by NSSE for their Engagement Indicators and is scored on a 60-point scale. To produce a score, the response set for each item is converted to a 60-point scale (e.g., Strongly Disagree = 0, Disagree = 20, Agree = 40, Strongly Agree = 60), and the rescaled items are averaged. Thus, a score of zero means a student responded at the bottom of the scale for every item, while a score of 60 indicates responses at the top of the scale on every item. The "Neither Agree nor Disagree" response category is dropped from the analysis. Items in the scale are replicated from Rovai 2002 and are as follows:

Survey Questions
Indicate the level to which you agree with the following statements:
(strongly agree, agree, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)
1. I feel connected to others in this course.
2. I feel confident that others will support me.
3. I feel that members of this course depend on me.
4. I trust others in this course.
5. I feel that I can rely on others in this course.
6. I feel isolated in this course.

APPENDIX 3: Qualitative written responses: reasons for increased efficacy, interest, activity

Reasons Related to the Course for Increased Efficacy, Interest, and Thinking or Talking		
	Town Hall	**No Town Hall**
Increased Capacity - Reasons related to the course (Q1)	30.1% (47)	24.1% (33)
Increased Interest - Reasons related to the course (Q5)	60.0% (93)	50.0% (69)
Increased Thinking or Talking - Reasons related to the course (Q4)	70.5% (110)	64.7% (90)

Reasons for Increased Political Efficacy		
	Town Hall	**No Town Hall**
Class increased knowledge	26.1%	32.2%
Increased understanding of ways to participate	25.0%	13.6%
Other, outside the class experience	5.4%	10.2%
Class showed me how to engage	3.3%	3.4%
Town hall meeting project experience	3.3%	---
N	92	59

Reasons for Increased Interest in Getting Involved in Public Affairs		
	Town Hall	**No Town Hall**
Class increased knowledge	24.4%	29.5%
Class showed me how to engage	23.1%	25.2%
Town hall meeting experience	10.9%	0.7%
Current State of Politics	8.3%	10.1%

Interested already/intrinsically interesting	3.2%	3.6%
Other	10.9%	6.5%
N	*156*	*139*

Reasons for Increased Thinking or Talking about Politics

	Town Hall	No Town Hall
Social media posting; discussions with classmates, family, or peers	53.2%	31.7%
Class increased knowledge	45.5%	39.6%
Current State of Politics	25.6%	21.6%
Watching; listening to news; reading social media, but NOT posting or discussing	11.5%	9.4%
Town hall meeting experience	4.5%	0.0%
N	*156*	*139*

Reasons for No Change in Political Efficacy

	Town Hall	No Town Hall
Lack of knowledge	37.5%	33.8%
Not a citizen	7.8%	4.1%
Liberals	4.7%	2.7%
Conservatives	1.6%	0.0%
National politics	1.6%	2.7%
Lack of access	0.0%	5.4%
N	*64*	*74*

Reasons for No Change in Interest in Getting Involved in Public Affairs

	Town Hall	No Town Hall
Not interesting intrinsically	21.2%	28.1%
Lack of knowledge	4.5%	5.8%
Current state of politics	3.8%	2.2%

Don't really know how to participate	1.9%	2.2%
N	*156*	*139*

Reasons for No Change in Thinking or Talking about Politics		
	Town Hall	**No Town Hall**
Dislike politics; don't want to think or talk about it	10.9%	16.5%
Lack of knowledge	1.9%	6.5%
Want to avoid conflict; too controversial, depressing, etc.	1.3%	8.6%
Already thought about or discussed politics – class didn't change anything	9.0%	14.4%
Current state of politics	3.2%	3.6%
N	*156*	*139*