

Stockton Poll: Civic Education Leads to Civic Activity

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Galloway, NJ – New Jersey adults who studied U.S. government or civics in school were more likely to vote in recent elections and to participate in civic activities, according to a Stockton Poll released today by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy.

“With Independence Day upon us, the poll points to the need to reaffirm our commitment to civic education and the importance of our independence and our system of government,” said Daniel J. Douglas, director of the Hughes Center at Stockton University.

A majority of 55 percent said they had taken at least one class in civics, American government, elections or democracy in the United States while in school, while 44 percent said they had not taken such a class. Of those who were taught about government, 89 percent learned about it in high school and 66 percent studied it in college.

Ninety-seven percent of those who had taken a class said they follow government and politics some or most of the time, compared to 85 percent who had not taken a class. Those who had studied civics spend more time following what goes on in government: 33 percent who had taken a class spend six or more hours a week watching or reading about such information, compared to 19 percent who did not study civics.

Higher percentages of people who studied civics in school or college reported voting in the 2012 presidential election (90 percent versus 72 percent of those who never studied government) and in the 2014 election for U.S. Senate and Congress (72 percent versus 56 percent).

Those who studied civics were more likely than those who were never taught the subject to have contributed to a political candidate or campaign in the past year (26 percent to 17 percent), more likely to have written a letter to a newspaper or public official (33 percent to 18 percent), and more likely to have signed a petition advocating policy change (45 percent to 30 percent).

Respondents who had studied civics were only slightly more likely to have attended an organized protest or worked with others in the community to solve a local problem. Six percent

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had worked on a political campaign in the past year, regardless of whether or not they had studied civics. In no instance did those who never took a civics class participate in an activity in greater percentages than those who had taken a class.

“It makes sense that people who are informed about how their government works are more likely to take part in civic activities, including voting,” said Douglas.

The poll was conducted by the Stockton Polling Institute of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy with 876 adults who reside in New Jersey. Live interviewers on the Stockton University campus called both landlines and cell phones. The poll’s margin of error is +/- 3.3 percentage points at a 95 percent confidence level and is lower in subsets of data.

In April, the Hughes Center published research by Stockton political science professors Linda Wharton and James Avery which showed many adults in New Jersey do not know basic facts about the U.S. Constitution and Supreme Court. More than half could not name one Supreme Court justice. (Read the report at stockton.edu/hughescenter.)

Wharton presented the findings at an April 16 conference of social studies teachers cosponsored by the Hughes Center and the Southern Regional Institute & Education Technology Training Center. A number of conference participants, including former Ambassador William J. Hughes and high school teachers, said that standardized tests and other curriculum mandates leave little to no time to teach about American government in the classroom.

Hughes said having an informed and active citizenry is important for the success of the American political system.

In other poll results, adults who had studied civics were more likely to get political news primarily from a print or online newspaper than those who did not take a class (38 percent to 21 percent). Sixty percent of those who never took a class were more likely to get information from TV news, while 43 percent of those who studied civics mainly get government news from TV.

Finally, a majority of respondents opposed a suggestion by President Obama that the United States consider making it mandatory for citizens to vote. Sixty percent opposed mandatory voting, while 35 percent supported it and 5 percent were unsure.

Methodology

The poll was conducted by the Stockton Polling Institute of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy (www.stockton.edu/hughescenter) with 876 adults who reside in New Jersey. Live interviewers on the Stockton University campus called both landlines and cell phones from March 20-27, 2015. The poll’s margin of error is +/- 3.3 percentage points at a 95 percent confidence level and is lower in subsets. Data are weighted based on United States Census Bureau demographics for the New Jersey population.

About the Hughes Center

The William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy (www.stockton.edu/hughescenter) at Stockton University serves as a catalyst for research, analysis and innovative policy solutions on the economic, social and cultural issues facing New Jersey, and promotes the civic life of New Jersey through engagement, education and research. The Center is named for William J. Hughes, whose distinguished career includes service in the U.S. House of Representatives, Ambassador to Panama and as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Stockton. The Hughes Center can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/StocktonHughesCenter> and can be followed on Twitter @hughescenter.

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