Engaging youth for positive change: A quantitative analysis of participant outcomes

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Abstract

Engaging Youth for Positive Change is a local civic engagement program focused on youth and young adults in the U.S. state of Illinois, and guides them through the process of adopting a local ordinance by working with their local city councils or other governing bodies. Researchers collected two waves of data from EYPC participants to quantitatively assess associations between program participation and changes in a variety of key factors relating to civic engagement. Initial findings indicate participants reported significant increases in variables associated with civic participation, including teamwork, leadership, and internal political efficacy. Furthermore, participants at more rigorous implementation sites reported significantly higher levels of critical civic engagement indicators compared to their peers at less rigorous implementation sites. This paper discusses EYPC in detail, findings from analyses and program evaluation, and concludes with a discussion on next steps regarding how EYPC and similar programs may enhance civic engagement among youth and young adult populations.

Introduction

Since the beginning of this century, scholars have expressed concern with citizens withdrawing from civic and democratic participation among many democratic societies (Albacete, 2014; Kisby and Sloam, 2014; Norris, 2001; Pontes et al., 2019; Torney-Purta and Amadeo, 2013). More specific concerns center on young people, whose civic and electoral participation trends lower than the general population, and relative to previous generations of youth (Pontes et al., 2019; United States Census Bureau, 2017). According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning

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and Engagement (CIRCLE), only 28.2% of youth turned out to vote in the most recent midterm elections (2020). In comparison, 63.8% of U.S. citizens over 65% and 55% of those between ages of 45 and 64 voted in the 2018 midterm elections (United States Census Bureau, 2019). This electoral engagement gap has persisted across generations as well (United States Census Bureau, 2019). In conjunction with these decreased levels of electoral participation, youth civic engagement and action remains low as well (CIRCLE, 2020). According to recent data—while an estimated 61.2% of young people reported discussing sociopolitical issues with friends or family members—only 11.2% reported contacting or visiting public officials to discuss local issues or voice their civic opinions (CIRCLE, 2020). Based on these estimates, there appears to be another concerning gap between engaging in sociopolitical discussions versus engaging in sociopolitical action. Motivating young people to act in the civic lives of their communities is even more crucial due to historically low rates of local civic and electoral participation (Hajnal, 2018). In a global context, a plethora of evidence demonstrates the positive effects of youth participation in government in regard to heightened policy effectiveness, political justice, and accountability for elected officials (Berthin, 2021). Despite these indications and despite young people comprising over 50% of the population in much of the majority world (i.e. low- and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs); Silver, 2015), young people frequently experience marginalization from traditional politics and avenues for policy making (Berthin, 2021). All this leads to the notion that political engagement—like many other phenomena—is crucial and exists on a spectrum. According to Youniss et al. (2002), political action exists on a continuum comprising formal political actions like voting, organizational political actions like protesting social injustices, and performing service work such as volunteering in local public health campaigns. In other words, youth may be civically or politically active in some ways, but less so in others. EYPC encourages young people to creatively engage with existing bureaucratic structures in ways that may expand their interest and efficacy regarding civic engagement as a whole.

Cultivating positive changes in one's own community may be one of the most rewarding experiences for a young person. Active engagement in local community advocacy shows youth that civic transformation is possible. Additionally, such experiences can provide youth and young adults with the information and skills necessary for a lifetime of civic engagement. Recent research suggests promoting civic participation may enhance citizens' perceptions regarding access to local officials and bureaucratic entities (Protik et al., 2018). In addition, some scholars suggest increased civic participation among youth may enhance pro-social behaviors that some consider antecedents to prolonged civic engagement (Astuto and Ruck, 2010). Particularly among historically marginalized communities, prior research has found positive correlations between increased civic participation during adolescence and academic achievement, life satisfaction, and civic participation throughout one's life (Chan et al., 2014). These findings bear particular relevance because previous explorations of the civic development of young people reveal consistently lower rates of involvement in traditional political systems, more negative attitudes toward politics in general, and an overall decreased awareness of traditional political systems than their higher socioeconomic status (SES) and often white peers (Levinson, 2007). This 'civic achievement gap' is important to consider and address, considering the preponderance of empirical research on the topic suggesting minority youth are often more skeptical of mainstream political participation, lack trust in government officials and traditional bureaucratic entities, and report overall lower levels of external political efficacy (Diemer and Li, 2011; Gaby, 2017). Educators, scholars, and politicians must reinvigorate the relationship between civic engagement and young people, especially considering the powerful effects that youth engagement can have on bureaucratic processes.

This article presents a participant-level evaluation of the impacts and outcomes of Engaging Youth for Positive Change (EYPC), a local civic action and education program based in the U.S.

state of Illinois that guides junior high and high school aged young people through the processes of adopting a local ordinance and thereby effecting positive change in their communities. Designed by the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, this evaluation summarizes 7 years (2014–2020) of participant-level data from sites across the state of Illinois to assess the programs' potential impacts on participants. Researchers sought to answer whether student participation in EYPC would enhance political involvement and beliefs, as well as other developmental skills such as teamwork and leadership. Further, this project sought to explore associations between levels of exposure to the EYPC program and both political and developmental skills and attitudes. As a null hypothesis for this project, researchers postulated that students who participated in EYPC would experience no significant increases in these variables over time (e.g. teamwork, community bonding, political efficacy). Additionally, researchers hypothesized that varying degrees of exposure to EYPC would have no significant associations with changes in these variables from baseline to posttest. Null hypotheses predict no significant relationships between youth immersion in the EYPC program and the variables of interest for this project.

EYPC background

EYPC stems from research literature and experimental observations indicating significant lack of civic engagement between youth and their local governments. In fact, youth rarely engage at all with local political processes. A primary goal of EYPC is adopting local ordinances by governmental decision-making bodies (e.g. city councils, county boards, school boards, or park district boards). Youth in the EYPC program progress through four dimensions of a typical advocacy campaign over the course of several weeks or months. In a full implementation of the program, students actively engage in four dimensions of a typical advocacy process, as follows. First, they *define the issue* by researching their policy proposals. Second, they *determine decision-makers* through learning about their local governments or the political bodies they seek to influence. Third, they *discover data* by gathering the data necessary to demonstrate both the need for and public support for their advocacy efforts. Finally, students *deliver the message* through preparing and formally presenting their proposal to decision-makers and members of their communities. Each dimension comprises six to eight hands-on, experiential advocacy activities designed to make their efforts into a 'teachable moment' for youth civic education, but that are also essential components of any effective advocacy strategy. The program consists of 28 suggested activities in all.

Ideally—throughout their time in the program—students meet public officials face-to-face, which would likely include local elected officials and community leaders. In addition, they visit their local city council or other local decision-making body. Students gather data about their community and broader advocacy efforts from a variety of sources (e.g. local or national periodicals, peer-reviewed research articles, press releases) and using different methods (e.g. observations, interviews, surveys). Additionally, youth may organize a community forum, present their proposal and their supporting data to their local community, and ultimately make their presentation directly to their city council or other governing body. In 2013, the Illinois Department of Public Health's *Reality Illinois* youth anti-tobacco program adopted EYPC as their required program model. Between the fall of 2014 and the summer of 2020, over 130 sites began the EYPC program, and participants from these sites are the subjects of this evaluation.

Theoretical foundation

The need for political awareness and knowledge regarding local government is strong (Hope and Spencer, 2017; Pontes et al., 2019). This is noticeably evident in the declining trends in political

participation among youth and young adults, many of whom feel alienated from traditional electoral politics in Western societies (Albacete, 2014; Hylton, 2018; Pontes et al., 2019; Sloam, 2014; Wattenberg, 2003). These concerning patterns limit the potential of political engagement as a means to improving key markers of positive development for youth and young adults. Prior research on political engagement suggests such civic participation can improve young peoples' abilities to work and think collaboratively, promote leadership skills, enhance feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy, improve relationships with their communities, increase political involvement, and create more favorable political attitudes overall (Brennan and Barnett, 2009; Brennan et al., 2007, 2009). Through the lens of hierarchical leisure constraints theory, increasing youth engagement in civic processes could disintegrate the deliberate hindrances of youths' active citizenship, all of which seek to constrain young people into established and expected modes of behavior and decorum (Hickey and Pauli-Myler, 2019).

Prior research suggests youth not only benefit from engaging in political processes, but so do their communities, and thus governmental bodies and advocacy groups should create wider and more expansive avenues for youth participation in community decision-making (Augsberger et al., 2017). Furthermore, these avenues should be sensitive to the non-traditional ways many youth engage in civic and electoral activities (e.g. protests and demonstrations, consumer activism, social media activities, charitable work, or volunteerism in their communities). These innovative new means of engagement should be fused with traditional local government processes, as the latter is the primary mode of governance accessible to young people, and therefore should receive greater attention (Clark et al., 1997). Additionally, youth should be engaged in more than classroom instruction about their local governments. Tangible, experiential projects in their local communities allow youth to see the public impacts of their efforts and to witness their own abilities to influence local policies (O'Donoghue et al., 2006). EYPC accomplishes this by engaging youth in advocating for public policy changes at local levels.

Methods

EYPC program facilitators recruited participants for this study primarily from middle schools and high schools, community organizations, and public health departments. Participation was voluntary, students self-selected into the program when it became available in their area, and facilitators largely conducted their programs outside of regular school hours. All participants were between the ages of 13 and 18 and anonymously completed both baseline and post program surveys. Researchers excluded participants who completed only one or the other. Evaluators matched youth pretest and posttest surveys based on four unique and anonymous marker variables. Between summer 2014 and summer 2020, members of EYPC recruited and collected matched baseline and post program surveys from 455 adolescents and young adults. Researchers conducted descriptive analyses and paired samples *t*-tests to determine changes in scores on EYPC Program Survey measures and whether these changes were statistically significant. We reverse scored specific items when appropriate.

Additionally, analysts computed site-level implementation scores to determine how program exposure varied across sites, and used those scores to categorize sites into either a 'high implementation' or 'low implementation' group. Researchers calculated implementation scores by creating an implementation index, which represented the product of the number of activities implemented at a particular site, the final activity implemented at a particular site (i.e. how deeply a site progressed into the program), and the number of dimensions in which a site completed two or more activities (i.e. how broadly a site implemented the program). Categorization stemmed from standardizing these implementation scores, with sites above the mean level of implementation

considered high implementation sites and sites below the mean level of implementation considered low implementation sites. This standardized comparison allowed researchers to differentiate and compare outcomes between levels of implementation. Finally, we conducted tests of skewness and kurtosis to determine the normality (or non-normality) of the distribution of various measures. For variables with normal distributions (i.e. skewness and kurtosis values between ± 1.0), we compared means via paired samples, parametric *t*-tests. For those with non-normal distributions we conducted Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks tests, which are more appropriate here, as they do not require any requisite assumptions about the distribution of the data.

Measures

The baseline and post program surveys comprised basic demographic items, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and some self-reported measures of academic performance and living situation. We also asked program participants how often they attended the EYPC program (Range = 3; 1 = Rarely, 4 = Always). Substance use and healthy behavior items—while not specifically discussed in this manuscript—came from the Center for Disease Control's (2019) Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS). In addition, researchers adapted items from the YRBSS to develop subscales pertaining to prosocial behaviors such as teamwork (five items; 1 = Never, 4 = Always), leadership (four items; 1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Strongly Agree), and community bonding (six items; 1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Strongly Agree). Prior research surrounding the methodology and psychometric properties of the YRBSS indicate it demonstrates a high level of face validity as well as good test-retest reliability ($\kappa = 0.61$; Brener et al., 2013; Fleiss et al., 2003; Underwood et al., 2020). Participants scored these subscale items on four-point Likert scales. Finally, items relating to political activities and attitudes came from the American National Election Studies (ANES), a valid compendium of survey items and data from a nationally representative sample of adults in the United States (DeBell, 2013). The ANES demonstrates almost perfect levels of inter-rater reliability ($\kappa > 0.94$; DeBell, 2013; McHugh, 2012) and acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.65$; DeBell, 2013; Gliem and Gliem, 2003). Again, participants scored items relating to political beliefs (12 items; 1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Strongly Agree) and activities (five items, 1 = Rarely or Never, 4 = Daily or Almost Daily) on four-point Likert scales. Data analysts conducted reliability analyses on all subscales of the full survey to determine further levels of reliability for each.

Teamwork. Social scientists define teamwork as a young person's perceptions regarding their abilities to work collaboratively with others in order to achieve commonly held goals within a group context (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2016). Prior research links this developmentally important outcome to a variety of distal markers of success across one's lifespan (Cater and Jones, 2014; Lower et al., 2017). Examples of items from the teamwork subscale (five items, $\alpha = 0.82$) used in this project include 'I enjoy helping others through life's challenges and problems', 'I like to organize people to do positive activities', and 'I can work with a group that pulls together to accomplish a goal'. In sum, higher scores on the teamwork subscale indicate a general propensity toward working with others in constructive ways and accomplishing tasks as part of a group.

Leadership. In simple terms, leadership is the act of leading a group of people to an identified and desired end. It is about mapping out where a group needs to go, and it is a largely dynamic process. In the context of positive youth development, leadership may also mean having the respect of one's peers as well as the requisite confidence to speak up in front of both peers and adults. Prior research links youth leadership development to enhanced self-efficacy, which in turn may increase one's confidence in their abilities to make positive changes in their communities or neighborhoods (Osofsky

et al., 2018). Furthermore, past examinations of leadership programs suggest participating students may experience a variety of positive psychosocial outcomes like enhanced feelings of responsibility, autonomy, and self-efficacy (Bean et al., 2017). According to a recent systematic review of leadership development programs for youth—while quantitative results are mixed—qualitative findings reinforce the notion that participating in leadership development programs may aid youth by enhancing their critical thinking, communication, and leadership skills (Curran and Wexler, 2017). For the purposes of this project, items from the leadership subscale (four items, $\alpha = 0.78$) included 'I am not afraid to voice my opinions to older youth or adults', 'I have the skills and ability to communicate and express my opinions to adults', and 'My peers consider me a leader'. Higher scores on the leadership subscale indicate an overall belief in one's own abilities as a leader and speaker for others.

Community bonding. Youth who possess strong bonds with their communities tend to invest more strongly in collectively shared standards and values (Cooper and Hays, 2007). Community members create and strengthen these bonds by providing sufficient and meaningful opportunities for youth to be involved in community life and development, as well as by bestowing upon youth essential skills trainings and vital recognition for their participation (Cooper and Hays, 2007; Walker et al., 2018; Zaff and Michelsen, 2002). Additionally, youth involvement in community development may have reciprocal effects on the communities themselves. In other words, while youth may benefit from engaging with their communities in productive and meaningful ways, communities may experience positive effects of youth engagement as well (Zeldin, 2004). Furthermore, past research found positive correlations between social capital and many youth outcomes, including academic achievement, overall community efficacy and well-being, and intergenerational relationships (Crooks et al., 2010; Krasny et al., 2015). Examples of items from the community bonding subscale (six items, $\alpha = 0.84$) of this project's full survey included 'I care about what people in my community think about my actions', 'Adults in this community pay attention to the opinions of youth', and 'A group of people working together can make changes in my community'. In general, higher scores on the community bonding subscale reflect more positive attitudes and perceptions of one's own community.

Political involvement. Despite continuing debates over whether youth political engagement is on the decline or rather is simply changing shape, youth activism and civic participation is vital to healthy, progressive, and functioning democracies and communities (Earl et al., 2017). As noted earlier, youth civic engagement frequently connects with youth agency and efficacy as well (Crooks et al., 2010; Earl et al., 2017; Krasny et al., 2015). In this current project, items relating to political activities and involvement included 'How often do you engage in discussions, face-to-face or online, about political issues, political parties, or political candidates?', 'How often do you read political news or commentary in print or online?', and 'How often do you share political posts, news, opinions, or articles through any form of social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram?)'. Higher scores on the political involvement subscale (five items, $\alpha = 0.87$) reflect increasing frequencies of participation in political discussions, dissemination of political information and opinions, and a general increase in attempts to stay informed regarding political developments.

Political beliefs. Broadly speaking, political beliefs are a personally or collectively held set of ethical ideals, values, beliefs, or symbols of social movements, ideological groups, or bureaucratic institutions outlining the ideal functioning of a society and offering a semblance of a cultural foundation for a predetermined social order. Through the lens of this project, political beliefs (12 items, $\alpha = 0.78$) comprise three distinct domains: internal political efficacy, external political efficacy, and

political trust. Internal political efficacy refers to an individual's sense that they possess necessary knowledge and skills to communicate effectively with government, and to mold those communications into political and social changes within their communities (Niemi et al., 1991; Watts et al., 2011). We measured internal political efficacy with items like 'I have a good understanding of the political issues facing our community' and 'I have a good understanding of the ways I might influence government'. Conversely, external political efficacy refers to individual perceptions that political officials are effectively responsive to the demands and desires of the electing populace (Craig et al., 1990; Diemer and Rapa, 2016; Kahne and Westheimer, 2006). Examples of external political efficacy items included 'Most public officials are truly interested in what the public thinks' and 'If public officials are not interested in hearing what people think, there is really no way to make them listen'. Finally, political trust is believing that political officials are generally honest and not abusive of their public responsibilities (Craig et al., 1990). We measured political trust with items such as 'You can generally trust the people who run our government to do what is right' and 'When government leaders make statements to the U.S. public on television or in the newspapers, they are usually telling the truth'. Together, these concepts are at the core of healthy political attitudes as well as a thriving civic community. Decreased efficacy and political trust, conversely, likely leads to lower levels of civic engagement. Furthermore, this civic recession contributes to the widening of the civic achievement gap, wherein young people who are historically more distrusting of elected officials (who are largely white; DiAngelo, 2018) may be less likely to participate in traditional political arenas. Prior studies on political beliefs and identification suggests that higher levels of political efficacy and confidence in societal fairness correlated positively with some young people's commitments to long-term goals and overall levels of academic achievement (Diemer et al., 2019). Furthermore, political research indicates that bringing youth together to work on policy change efforts can change these political attitudes and enhance feelings of political efficacy (Mattes et al., 2017; McLeod et al., 1998).

Results

The University of Illinois Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved all evaluation protocols prior to their use. We successfully matched baseline surveys to post program surveys from 62 sites around the state of Illinois. Program facilitators at each site reported youth attendance by session over time in their facilitator logs. Among the sites reporting data, average attendance at the start of programs was 11.2 (SD = 8.8) and the average attendance at the conclusion of the programs was 8.5 (SD = 7.2). This attrition rate of roughly 24% is statistically smaller than attrition rates reported in recent studies examining youth-oriented programs (Yohannan et al., 2017). Furthermore, we identified three outlier sites with attrition rates greater than 75%, with dropouts occurring largely after initial sessions at sites that recruited broadly and may have still been self-selecting the most engaged participants. Excluding these sites yields an average attrition rate of 7.1%, which is quite remarkable for a civic engagement program for high school and middle school aged youth. For comparison, prior analyses of community-based, youth-focused interventions found attrition rates ranging from 15% to 63% (Suter and Bruns, 2009; Yohannan et al., 2017).

As mentioned, this project focuses on assessing participant outcomes associated with participation in the EYPC program. Specifically, the EYPC program survey—a close-ended attitudinal and behavioral survey administered at the beginning and the conclusion of programing—measured these outcomes. Researchers assessed differences in item level and scale scores after matching individual baseline surveys to their respective post program survey responses. The EYPC program survey includes scales to assess self-reported attitudinal changes in the six areas of: teamwork, leadership, community bonding, internal political efficacy, external political efficacy, and political

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of full EYPC sample (*N* = 455).

Descriptor	Sample characteristics	
	n (M)	% (SD)
Age	16.01	1.43
Grade	10.09	1.75
Gender (Female)	293	64.4
White	302	66.4
Black/African-American	81	17.8
Asian/Asian-American	17	3.7
Other	8	1.8
Latinx	41	9.0
Letter grades (mostly A's or mostly A's and B's)	344	75.6
Living situation (both parents)	278	61.1
Program attendance (always or usually)	300	69.1

trust. It also measures political involvement with a series of items measuring political attentiveness and a series measuring political participation. Finally, participants provided basic demographic information, summarized in Table 1. These items included respondents' average grades (1 = Mostly A's, 8 = Mostly F's), living situation (1 = Both Parents, 5 = Legal Guardian), and EYPC program attendance (1 = Rarely, 4 = Always).

Across all EYPC sites with matched pretest and posttest surveys, 18.9% (*n* = 86) of participants reported being enrolled in middle school, with the remainder (81.1%, *n* = 369) reporting enrollment in high schools. Just under two-thirds of participants identified as female (64.4%, *n* = 293) and White (66.4%, *n* = 302). Of participants who identified racially as something other than White, most identified as Black or African-American (17.8%, *n* = 81), while relatively fewer identified as Asian or Asian-American (3.7%, *n* = 17) or 'other' (1.8%, *n* = 8). Regarding ethnicity, 9% of participants identified as Hispanic or Latinx. Youth in EYPC are mostly high achievers academically, with over three-quarters (75.6%, *n* = 344) reporting their average grades consist of 'mostly A's' or 'Mostly A's and B's'. Just over 60% of participants reported living with both biological parents (*n* = 278), with others reportedly living in households headed by single parents (20.8%, *n* = 95) or with a biological parent and stepparent (11.2%, *n* = 51). Finally, a majority (69.1%, *n* = 300) of participants reported attending EYPC sessions 'always' or 'usually'. Thus, EYPC youth were more likely to be older females with higher scholastic aptitudes from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The average EYPC program length for sites included in the analysis was 20.8 weeks (SD = 15.5 weeks), and Table 2 reports item means and standard deviations for all subscales comparing the baseline EYPC Program Survey to results from the post-program survey. It contains full subscale level results as well. Two columns representing baseline and post-survey results summarize the item and subscale scores. The table shows measured improvement from baseline to post-program results across a vast majority of the items (80%), with the remaining items relatively unchanged (as opposed to decreasing) between baseline and post-program. Data shows increases in teamwork, leadership, and community bonding between baseline and post-program. Political involvement, internal political efficacy, and political trust all increased somewhat, while external political efficacy remained flat or even declined. We further discuss this result below.

Table 3 contains mean comparisons between our variables of interest measured in the post-program survey compared to baseline. For the sake of parsimony, we deliberately report only mean

Table 2. Teamwork, leadership, community bonding, political involvement, efficacy, and trust item and subscale scores by time.

Items	Item/subscale means (SDs)	
	Baseline	Post program
T₁ (I enjoy helping others through life's challenges and problems.)	3.27 (0.71)	3.34 (0.70)
T₂ (I trust my ability to solve new and difficult problems.)	3.06 (0.70)	3.19 (0.68)
T₃ (I like to organize people to do positive activities.)	3.02 (0.85)	3.19 (0.81)
T₄ (I like to set a good example for other young people.)	3.51 (0.70)	3.55 (0.70)
T₅ (I can work with a group that pulls together to accomplish a goal.)	3.52 (0.64)	3.50 (0.65)
Teamwork Subscale	3.27 (0.52)	3.36 (0.54)
L₁ (My peers consider me a leader.)	3.02 (0.71)	3.15 (0.72)
L₂ (I have the skills and abilities to communicate and express my opinions to adults)	3.30 (0.67)	3.35 (0.65)
L₃ (I am not afraid to voice my opinions to older youth or adults.)	3.25 (0.75)	3.26 (0.77)
L₄ (I am comfortable speaking in front of an audience.)	2.73 (0.95)	2.84 (0.95)
Leadership Subscale	3.08 (0.57)	3.15 (0.60)
C₁ (My community is a good place to live.)	3.20 (0.63)	3.18 (0.64)
C₂ (I care about what people in my community think about my actions.)	3.13 (0.74)	3.15 (0.77)
C₃ (I recognize people who live in my community.)	3.19 (0.66)	3.27 (0.69)
C₄ (The youth in this community can influence local government.)	2.84 (0.76)	2.94 (0.76)
C₅ (Adults in this community pay attention to the opinions of youth.)	2.67 (0.74)	2.81 (0.74)
C₆ (A group of people working together can make changes in my community.)	3.37 (0.60)	3.32 (0.66)
Community bonding subscale	3.07 (0.45)	3.12 (0.52)

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Items	Item/subscale means (SDs)	
	Pretest	Posttest
PI subscale: How often do you. . .		
PI_1 (Engage in discussions, face-to-face or online, about political issues, parties, or candidates?)	1.95 (0.99)	2.07 (1.01)
PI_2 (Read political news or commentary in print or online?)	2.21 (1.03)	2.20 (1.05)
PI_3 (Listen to political news or commentary online, on the radio, or elsewhere?)	2.17 (1.10)	2.17 (1.05)
PI_4 (Watch online videos or television programs about political issues, parties, or candidates?)	2.17 (1.07)	2.18 (0.10.03)
PI_5 (Share political posts, news, opinions, or articles through any form of social media?)	1.64 (0.97)	1.75 (0.98)
Political involvement subscale	2.01 (0.80)	2.07 (0.83)
IPE_1 (I have a good understanding of political issues facing our community.)	2.61 (0.77)	2.67 (0.80)
IPE_2 (Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me cannot understand what is really going on.)	2.44 (0.85)	2.52 (0.83)
IPE_3 (I have a good understanding of the ways I might influence government.)	2.54 (0.76)	2.68 (0.77)
IPE_4 (People like me do not have any say about what the government does.)	2.69 (0.80)	2.63 (0.86)
IPE_5 (I could do as good a job in public office as most other people could.)	2.55 (0.83)	2.73 (0.83)
Internal political efficacy subscale	2.57 (0.49)	2.65 (0.50)
EPE_1 (Public officials do not care about what people like me think.)	2.60 (0.76)	2.54 (0.79)
EPE_2 (Most public officials are truly interested in what the public thinks.)	2.59 (0.70)	2.60 (0.78)
EPE_3 (If public officials are not interested in hearing what people think, there is really no way to make them listen.)	2.61 (0.81)	2.61 (0.82)
EPE_4 (Elected officials lose touch with the public quickly.)	2.52 (0.69)	2.50 (0.76)
External political efficacy subscale	2.58 (0.45)	2.56 (0.53)
PT_1 (Whatever its faults may be, the American form of government. Is still the best for us.)	2.81 (0.70)	2.82 (0.75)
PT_2 (You can generally trust the people who run our government to do what is right.)	2.35 (0.77)	2.49 (0.77)
PT_3 (When government leaders make statements to the American people. . .they are usually telling the truth.)	2.25 (0.71)	2.42 (0.78)
Political trust subscale	2.47 (0.56)	2.57 (0.61)

T: teamwork; *L*: leadership; *C*: community bonding; PI: political involvement; IPE: internal political efficacy; EPE: external political efficacy; PT: political trust.

Table 3. Mean comparisons of pre- and posttest subscale measures for full EYPC sample (*N* = 455).

Subscale	Mean Δ	SD	SE mean	Paired *t*-test		
				t Value	df	*p* Value
Teamwork	0.085	0.461	0.022	3.86	436	<0.001
Leadership	0.074	0.455	0.022	3.44	444	0.001
Community bonding	0.036	0.456	0.022	1.59	411	0.114
Political involvement	0.040	0.786	0.045	0.89	303	0.374
Internal political efficacy	0.073	0.535	0.026	2.83	427	0.005
External political efficacy	−0.026	0.585	0.029	−0.90	412	0.366
Political trust	0.091	0.651	0.032	2.82	411	0.005

Mean Δ = posttest mean − pretest mean.

comparisons between full subscale scores, excluding item level comparisons. However, only six item level variables had a non-normal distribution. Results from non-parametric tests with those variables were non-significant, indicating that median post-program survey ranks for the item level variables on the teamwork and political involvement subscales were not significantly higher than their corresponding baseline survey ranks. Parametric test results show that statistically significant increases in teamwork ($t(436)=3.86$, $p<0.001$), leadership ($t(444)=3.44$, $p=0.001$), internal efficacy ($t(427)=2.83$, $p=0.005$), and political trust ($t(411)=2.82$, $p=0.005$) from baseline to the post-program survey within the matched sample. These findings indicate that throughout their participation in the EYPC program, participants experienced significant increases in those scales, which leads to a rejection of the hull hypothesis for these key variables.

Finally, Table 4 reports results from independent samples *t*-tests comparing post-program survey subscale means between high and low EYPC implementation sites. The results indicate that students enrolled in higher implementation programs reported significantly higher scores in teamwork ($t(357)=2.54$, $p=0.018$), leadership ($t(364)=2.13$, $p=0.034$), community bonding ($t(355)=2.33$, $p=0.020$), internal political efficacy ($t(361)=2.09$, $p=0.037$), external political efficacy ($t(355)=3.32$, $p=0.001$), and political trust ($t(352)=2.01$, $p=0.046$) compared to their peers at low implementation sites. Political involvement was the only subscale that did not exhibit any significant difference between the two groups. Overall, these data suggest that EYPC functions optimally when implemented more thoroughly rather than halfheartedly or in piecemeal fashion.

Discussion

After data compilation and analysis, the EYPC team successfully rejected the null hypotheses of no significant associations between exposure to the EYPC curriculum and various sociopolitical skills and attitudes. First, youth participation in EYPC was significantly associated with increases in teamwork, leadership, internal political efficacy, and political trust. These changes are important, as prior research suggest that by working together with others to accomplish jointly shared goals like adopting local ordinances, youth may increase their sense of working more effectively as part of a team. Genuine teamwork and use of leadership skills helps to enhance and promote the use of other social skills like negotiating, complex problem solving, receiving and providing feedback, and modeling responsibility and accountability (Lower et al., 2017). Teamwork can also reinforce and build trust, especially as team members illustrate their commitments and efforts to the shared cause through dedicated work and communication with other team members (Lower

Table 4. Mean comparisons of posttest subscale measures between high and low implementation sites.

Subscale	Mean Δ	SE Δ	t Value	df	p Value
Teamwork	0.146	0.058	2.54	357	0.018
Leadership	0.144	0.068	2.13	364	0.034
Community bonding	0.144	0.062	2.33	355	0.020
Political involvement	0.066	0.136	0.481	234	0.631
Internal political efficacy	0.126	0.060	2.09	361	0.037
External political efficacy	0.206	0.062	3.32	355	0.001
Political trust	0.143	0.073	2.01	352	0.046

Mean Δ = High implementation site mean − Low implementation site mean.

et al., 2017). Changes in community bonding and political involvement—while statistically non-significant—remained positive.

Second, compared to their peers at 'low' implementation sites, students enrolled at 'high' EYPC implementation sites reported significantly higher scores on post-program measures of all variables except political involvement. The significant differences in political efficacy were particularly relevant for the EYPC program because empowering youth through civic engagement is one of its primary goals. Moreover, these significant paired mean differences may represent a significant dosage effect, which demonstrates that higher levels of program implementation and exposure may have a significant effects on positive youth traits like teamwork and efficacy. Youth-led policy change campaigns can raise the profile and awareness of issues affecting young people in communities and can alter constituent's sentiments regarding proposed changes. They can also transform adult perceptions of youth participation in policy-making processes. For example—in the case of EYPC—city councils passed ordinances developed and proposed by youth in the program that focused on smoke free public parks, limiting the sale of tobacco and alcohol at public events, and public beautification/rejuvenation projects. Providing youth leadership opportunities in policy campaigns and ordinance proposals can have significant effects on a municipal government's decisions to adopt such proposals (Hays and Hays, 2002; Pratt and Freestone, 2000; Rogers and Peterson, 2008; Ross et al., 2015). EYPC and similar programs like youth leadership workshops in other parts of the world can have positive impacts on youth participation in local government, which can, in turn, encourage more widespread progress within governmental institutions (Berthin, 2021; Sam et al., 2019). In summary, the program appears to have positive effects on youth, with mean changes in positive directions for almost all subscales in the analysis.

The measured non-significant decrease in external political efficacy could be random, but could also represent a general sense of disappointment or disillusionment stemming from a perceived experience of failures or shortcomings in the local political process. Previous literature suggests political engagement and exposure can have little to no impact on political efficacy, and may actually *decrease* feelings of efficacy (Buntaine et al., 2018; Protik et al., 2018), so our non-significant findings regarding an overall decrease in external political efficacy has some grounding in extant research. EYPC provides youth with a tangible, 'real-world' experience, which can result in real-world negative outcomes. Sometimes, witnessing bureaucratic processes or even the failure of their proposed ordinance in front of their city council may lead youth to feel discouraged, disillusioned, and marginalized from political processes. These feelings may—if left chilled—lead to civic isolation (Metzger et al., 2020). Prior research regarding international civic engagement with young people produced similar findings, suggesting lower levels of civic or political efficacy are

linked to decreased civic engagement (Sam et al., 2019). These findings highlight the importance of cultivating youth civic engagement, both in the United States and around the rest of the world.

However, the largely positive results reported here indicate that EYPC can have a consistently positive impact on youth development and political engagement. Social science researchers could replicate these findings if the program expands more broadly. In addition, testing the program via a randomized-controlled trial research design would strengthen the current findings. As the state of Illinois moves toward implementing a heightened civic education standard across all public schools, EYPC would seem ideally poised as a program schools can administer to help meet that requirement. Ultimately—assuming youth achieve success—adopting an ordinance which effects positive change in their communities is an accomplishment for anyone, much less a committed group of young people. EYPC is a program that can facilitate such positive youth and community development.

In the end, we reiterate that bringing about positive changes in their communities may be one of the most valuable experiences young people can have. For youth in the EYPC program, they not only had an opportunity for a valuable and experiential civics education, but they witnessed how empowered individuals who unite and advocate for their communities can influence local policy changes. While it remains to be determined whether this experience provides youth with what they need for a lifetime of active civic participation, early indicators suggest this program has the potential for putting them on a brighter path toward a more fully engaged civic life.

Limitations

Overall, we observed high rates of baseline survey completion across sites, but post-program survey completion was much lower. Further, we could not match several of the returned post-program surveys with any submitted baseline surveys. Difficulties in post-program survey administration and completion typically resulted from meeting planning and timing issues, as programs typically terminated near the end of the student school years. During these times, many sites attempted to schedule formal presentations before local governing bodies that only meet once or twice per month while simultaneously convening sessions to ask youth to complete post-program surveys. This combination of factors likely contributed to lower completion rates for post-program surveys. Furthermore, the voluntary and extracurricular nature of EYPC made attendance highly optional and student groups fairly fluid in terms of composition. Due to difficulties stemming from attendance and participant tracking, reasons for participant-level attrition were not collected for this project.

Regarding unmatched surveys, likely explanations surround either respondent error or attrition. Although program developers instructed program facilitators not to administer post-program surveys to youth who had not taken the baseline survey, it is very likely this occurred at some sites. Regardless, data analysis excluded unmatched surveys, and the resulting data set was the best available to the EYPC team. To increase the number of cases in the analysis, recruiting more sites would have been beneficial, but retaining youth in the program and encouraging them to complete post-program surveys would have significantly increased our analytical power for the participant evaluation in this round of implementation.

Finally, we acknowledge that our self-selected sample tended to be academically higher achieving, white females, which likely introduced some error stemming from self-selection bias into our findings. With roughly a third of our sample identifying as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), this evaluation of EYPC suggests that the civic achievement gap persists across time, particularly as it pertains to engagement with the traditional political models that EYPC partially employs (Gaby, 2017). Prior research supports this notion, since lower SES youth from historically

marginalized communities are often invested in their communities, but the conventional political language of civic participation may not resonate with them as much as their higher SES peers (Baskin-Sommers et al., 2021; Morimoto and Friedland, 2013). Consequently, we feel a program like EYPC could benefit a wide spectrum of young people, since it includes opportunities to engage with public policy in traditionally less conventional ways. There are explicit avenues for final projects to culminate outside of ordinance proposals to city councils if the participants feel it would be in their best interest to conduct an alternative activity as well (e.g. stage a demonstration, make a public safety announcement or program, create a social media network for community support). Nonetheless, a more targeted intervention for civic engagement among less represented youth (i.e. racial/ethnic groups, those with lower scholastic aptitudes, lower SES students) would provide important and necessary information to existing literature on the subject. In addition, the authors recognize this is a civic engagement program for youth and the results apply only to the voluntary youth participants in the program, all of which were within the state of Illinois, so findings would not necessarily generalizable to any larger or broader population.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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