

On Introduction of Education and Engagement for High School Students on City, County, and State Governments

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‘ A Proposed Bill for the

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1 Executive Summary

As national issues dominate Californian citizenry's outlook on the surrounding politics, there seems to be a dearth of attention given to the entities of city, county, and state, thereby limiting political participation in this area.

Unfortunately, such participation is far more relevant and imminent to the average citizen. Matters such as housing prices, education, and taxation are directly controlled by bodies below the federal government. Yet, a report by Pew Research finds that 50 % of average Americans are disillusioned by the federal government for its inability to "run programs efficiently" and its "[economic] priorities".¹ This negative outlook on the federal government is further troubling when considering that Californian voter turnout has been sharply declining for state general and primary elections (See §3.2). There is no other justification for the existence of political discontent simultaneous with a meager participation in local elections than the general ignorance of the powers of such local bodies.

In response to this growing problem, we propose to educate young citizens with local education, concerning the city, county, state, and school bodies of government. High school students, many of which turn 18 at the end of high school, become eligible voters and ought to be well-educated in matters that they can and should directly participate in. Therefore, the California Education Code should include education on city, county, school board, and state governments and politics, integrating it with the curriculum of Government/Politics education that is currently regarding only federal governments.

We analyze the forecasted effects of such a bill on metrics such as voter turnout, political competitiveness, and employment. Using data analysis via Python of statewide elections and voter turnout alongside research of expert opinions on the matter, we find that the implementation of such a policy would be a net benefit to students in the state education system. We believe that a simple change in curriculum serves as a long term investment in the awareness and engagement of our voters-to-be.

After presenting a series of arguments that suggest the positive effects of implementing such a proposal, we look at a case study where high school students were introduced to this knowledge through the Young American Policy Advocates summer program (YAPA), which then empowered them to become civilly active citizens by helping them write legislation and white papers.

Towards the end, the bill with its specificities are presented for closer analysis. This degree of precision is along the lines of how we wish for the bill to be implemented in state legislature.

By integrating elements of local government and its engagement, the State Assembly would initiate a trend of inspiring students to be prepared for the future: a knowledge of local government is essential to every young adult. Through this bill, we pave the way for young Californians to engage in public service.

¹<https://www.peoplepress.org/2010/04/18/distrust-discontent-anger-and-partisan-rancor/>

2 Proposal Overview

We propose that education of local governments (city, county, state, school boards) be integrated with the standard government and politics courses in California. We will refer to such education as *local education*. We first look at the status of current education and its breadth. From there, we propose the edits we hope this bill will mandate to the education.

2.1 The Status Quo

In California, students typically take a government and politics class in their senior year of high school. For many schools, this course is only a semester long, and students often use the other semester to take an Economics course. To analyze the content that is being studied by students in government/politics classes, we look at the curriculum for the AP Government and Politics exam.²

Although not every student decides to take government classes at the AP level, a significant portion of them do. Because the curriculum of such AP courses are more or less standardized, studying such curricula provides us a objective view of what is being taught in a typical government class. Analysis of the AP content **reflects that which is being taught in the respective classes**, as most AP classes are designed to prepare students for the exam itself.

Collegeboard has recently updated a Course and Exam Description (CED) Report on this AP course. Looking over the table of contents, there is no mention whatsoever of entities other than the federal government itself. A deeper analysis of the report can be conducted however. We looked at all instances of certain key word strings that perhaps may be designed in the curriculum but simply not highlighted in the overview of the course. Our findings from this exploration are tabulated below. We searched for key words then reported the contexts in which these words appeared.

| Key Term | Appearances in Text | Neighboring Terms and Contexts |
|------------------|---------------------|--|
| state government | 27 | U.S. Constitution, power between federal governments, role of government |
| city | 0 | NA |
| county | 1 | Pottawatomie County v. Earls (2008) |

Although this analysis is simple, it is overall telling of the absence of local government education in the school system. Most discussion of “state government” is limited to the balance of powers mandated by the 10th Amendment. Discussion of even smaller bodies, such as county and city, are completely absent in this curriculum. Because this course is often a high schooler’s only exposure to government, it is troubling to anyone who believes in the importance of governmental education at the local level.

2.2 Ease of Implementation

Education of political systems is information based (see §4). In other words, proficiency in this field comes simply from awareness of elements of government, rather than a complete immersion in material.

Thus, it is certainly plausible that the entirety of the bill’s proposed curricula could be taught in a unit that lasts no more than a week or two. As we will see in the case study in Section 4, the entire curriculum was taught to a group of high school students during a weekend summer camp: they have now gone on through the program to become adept citizens, drafting bills and white papers.

²<https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/courses/ap-united-states-government-and-politics/exam>

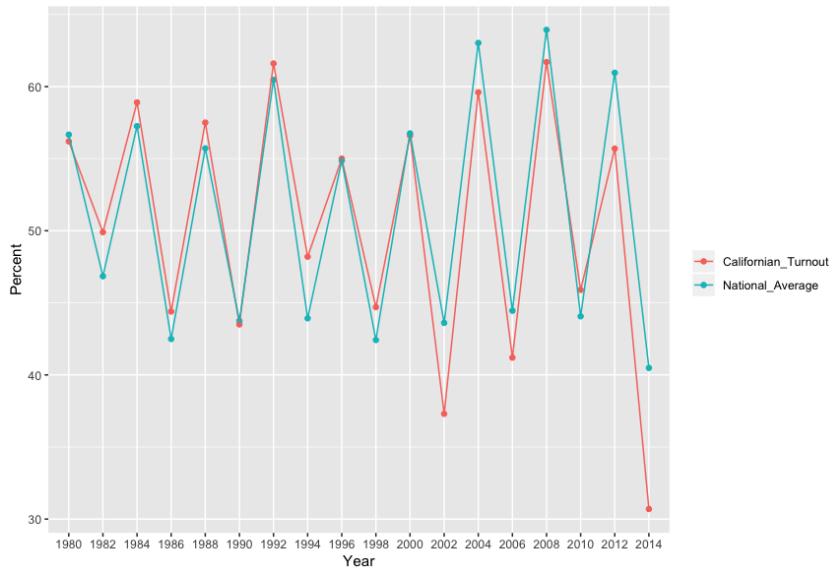
Hence, we believe that this bill serves as a lucrative educational investment not purely because it brings about valuable knowledge to students but also that it does not threaten to displace other teaching points that already exist in the curriculum.

2.3 Political Education Leads to Voter Turnout

By introducing education that is more relevant to issues of local government, students become more aware of their role as a citizen. Currently, voter turnout at the local level has been declining.

According to the Atlantic, the key driving factor for voter participation in elections is the amount of exposure they have to education in those fields of policy and government. Although the article itself analyzes the turnout of the 2016 presidential argument, it still draws on this critical link from a holistic perspective: more aware citizens tend to participate in elections.

Figure 1: Election participation at the election participation seems to be on the decline on years where there is no presidential primary, on both state and national levels.



The graph above is election participation percentage at the state level, by year. In the blue is the national average for such participation, whereas the red represents participation in only the state of California.

There appears to be two natural groupings of the data, as well. Turnout, in general, is always greater during years of presidential elections (2008, 2012) but lower during midterms. Midterm participation in California is below average, with the most recent midterm approaching 30 percent in turnout.

Conversely, the data of national elections does not exhibit this decrease and is often increasing over time. This is doubly problematic because it suggests a tendency for voters to resort to presidential elections as a catalyst of change in their community rather than midterms. This is based on the fundamental misconception that midterms are less effective for generating change, and suggests the general neglect of government structures at the local level. Without the caveat of national elections, people are consistently less likely to vote, even if both elections forms have similar effects on policy.

This empirical finding, taken together with the analysis conducted by the Atlantic, suggests that an appropriate response to low and declining voter turnout at the local level is to increase awareness of that very government through education.

Voter turnout is directly linked to a representative democracy to all social classes and groups.³

2.4 Participation in Government Increases Accountability and Competitiveness

When more young people participate in government structures, there is inevitably more future participation in government, which increases competitiveness.⁴ According to the American Political Science Review, competitive elections lead to improvements in policy and government services. They conclude that in elections with more candidates and uncertain outcomes, politicians inevitably must be more accountable for their actions and representative of the population as a whole.⁵

Thus, it is in each democratic community interest to encourage competitiveness in its elections.

Additionally, in competitive elections, voters themselves will also be more aware of the policies of their representatives. Professor Jones of the University of Delaware conducted a study that surveyed voters on the policies of their senators on seven large bills.⁶ Across voting districts that were competitive, voters answered 4.5 of the questions correctly, on average. On the other hand, voters from non-competitive voting districts only answered 3.5 of the questions correctly, on average. This certainly suggests a statistically significant difference between the political knowledge of voters with respect to the competitiveness of their districts.

This, combined with the forecasted increased voter turnout, would imply a much more cohesive democracy as a whole.

3 Case Study: Young American Policy Advocates (YAPA)

YAPA is an educational program based in the Silicon Valley that is designed to provide such education to local high school students.⁷

YAPA is composed of the following three facets:

1. Lectures on City, County, and State Level Governments
2. Workshops on Public Speaking, Writing Bills, Interacting with City and County Councils
3. Mentorship Program: Students matched with policymakers to research and compose bills on pertinent issues

The YAPA program during the summer of 2019 took place in the Cupertino City Hall and had about 50 members. We hypothesize that YAPA, which highly correlates with the proposed education framework, has helped students gain more insights in their communities, perhaps even engaging in their own initiatives.

³<https://www.demos.org/research/why-voting-matters-large-disparities-turnout-benefit-donor-class#Voter-Turnout-and-Policy>

⁴<https://gai.georgetown.edu/the-houses-competitiveness-problem-or-lack-thereof/>

⁵<https://theconversation.com/competitive-elections-are-good-for-democracy-just-not-every-democracy-106225>

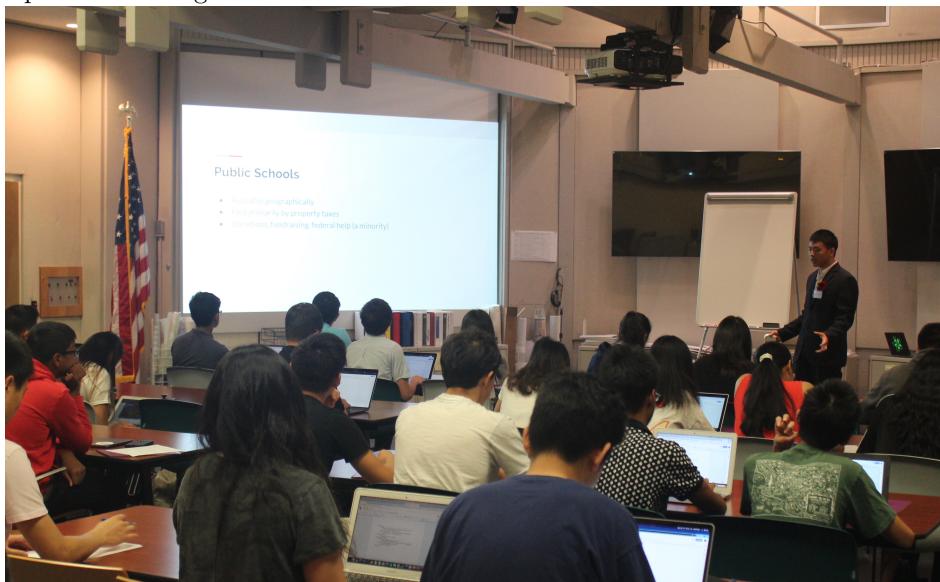
⁶<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2013/11/21/voter-knowledge-competitive-elections/>

⁷<https://sites.google.com/view/apapa-san-jose/young-american-policy-advocates>

Figure 2: Group-wide Picture of YAPA 2019



Figure 3: A lecture during the YAPA program on local government forms. This snapshot is of a lecture of public schools given 2019.



We present here a testimonial from one of the YAPA students in 2019:

As a student in YAPA, I learned the fundamentals of government at the local level, which was a unique experience. Through its mentorship program, I enjoyed learning hands-on how many of our laws are formed. I can say that I have the tools necessary to pursue public service or social change (A.K., YAPA 2019).

Important to understand here is that students often emerge from such education with inspiration and knowledge needed for potential action in their community. An entire state with this education will inevitably lead to more students' involvement in local politics. Arguably, that is what society's future ought to be doing.

4 Bill in Action

This bill proposes that education of local government be integrated into traditional government and politics classes. Such education need not be extremely advanced, but students should emerge aware enough to participate in local politics competently.

Fortunately, it is not a time-consuming task to transfer this critical knowledge. We outline here a list of key teaching points that should occur in any education system that adopts such a bill. Students should have a sense of familiarity of the entities and policies below:

1. City Government

- (a) Students should be able to define what a city is, including what its powers are relative to the county and the state.
- (b) Students should know how a city is established and thus be familiar with LAFCO and how incorporation occurs.
- (c) Students should be able to differentiate between general-law cities and charter cities in their powers.
- (d) Students should be able to define what ordinances are and how they are implemented at the city level.
- (e) Students should be familiar with the main elected officials at the city level, such as: city clerk and city treasurer.
- (f) Students should be able to differentiate between an elected official and an appointed official. They should also have a general understanding of which officials are elected and which are appointed.
- (g) Students should be able to define what a city council is and what its powers are.
- (h) Students should be able to identify the powers of the city electorate; thus, they should understand the similarities and differences of initiatives, referendums, and recalls.
- (i) Students should know the difference between impeachment and recall for elected officials.

2. School Board

- (a) Students should be able to define what school boards are and how they relate to public schools.
- (b) Students should be able to identify the powers of school boards.
- (c) Students should be familiar with key roles in the school boards, such as the Superintendent.
- (d) Students should understand the responsibilities of the school board, including but not limited to: curriculum, finances, lunches, and equipment.
- (e) Students should understand how school districts are structured and function.
- (f) Students should be familiar with how public schools are funded.

3. County Government

- (a) Students should understand the powers of the county, in relation with the state and the city. Students should also be familiar with the county in which they reside.
- (b) Students should understand that the county is a corporate entity and its implication on local politics.
- (c) Students should understand the structure and the role of the Board of Supervisors in the County and how they pass ordinances for the county.

- (d) Students should be familiar with key roles in the county governance, such as but not limited to: district attorney, public defender, sheriff, and public administrator.
- (e) Students should be familiar with the election processes that occur at the county level and how it compares to elections at the city, state, or federal levels.
- (f) Students should be familiar with the justice system at the county level. This includes knowledge of the Superior Court, small claims court, and the use of Grand Jury.
- (g) Regarding court proceedings, students should be able to identify the roles of key officials, such as the court bailiff and clerk.

4. State Government

- (a) Students should be able to identify the powers of the state, in relation to city and county governments as well as the federal government, as mandated by the 10th Amendment.
- (b) Students should understand the role of parties in state politics, particularly the influence of parties in State elections and positions.
- (c) Students should be familiar with key roles in state governance, including but not limited to: state governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, treasurer, senators, assemblymen
- (d) Students should understand the difference between senators and assemblymen and how their respective Senate and Assembly differ.
- (e) Students should be able to discern between a bill and act.
- (f) Students should understand what a proposition is and how it compares to measures of the county like referendum and initiative.
- (g) Students should be aware of certain executive powers of the Governor, such as veto and moratorium.
- (h) Students should be familiar with the Supreme Court of California and how a court case becomes tried in the Supreme Court. Students should also know the function of the State Courts of Appeal.
- (i) Students should understand what it means to be a state voter and what powers it entails; they should also understand the definition of a political party.
- (j) Students should know how different states conduct their state elections, including the logistics involved in closed primaries, open primaries, and top-two primaries.

5. Miscellaneous

- (a) Students should be aware of the local bodies they have access to in order to effect change in their communities (e.g. city councils, school boards). They should understand what their powers are as constituent of these bodies and how they can benefit their surroundings through them.
- (b) Students should be able to draw parallels between the government structures of the city and county level (e.g. city council v.s. Board of Supervisors, city mayor v.s. Chair of the Board of Supervisors)
- (c) Students should be able to visually represent the structure of a state government and the flow of precedence regarding ordinances and jurisdictions.

5 Conclusion

Having explored the existing data on voter turnout and its impact on American politics, it seems evident that something should be done about the problematic trends in our turnout as state and nation. We are, according to the data and its analysis alone, evolving into a more disheartened community yet **taking less action to resolve it**.

Through YAPA, we have demonstrated the simplicity with which one can implement such curricula into their own schools and communities. Yet, with a small commitment, communities can earn a marked improvement in their political awareness and inspiration.

We encourage the state legislature to look upon this bill not as a change to existing education but merely an *addition*. By integrating elements of local government and its engagement, educators can more effectively inspire their students to be prepared for the future: a knowledge of local government is essential to every young adult.