Increasing Political Appreciation among High School Students

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The Problem:
Current programs of civic education in high school fail to address politics in a positive way. They may mandate volunteering and encourage civic engagement, but do not attract students into political participation as adults.

Political Appreciation Affects Intention for Future Political Participation:
- Tested in a simple model that controls for:
  - political efficacy
  - political trust
  - political knowledge
- Effect is seen in pre-test and post-test results

The Design:
- Solomon’s 4-group panel design
  - 4 groups completed pre-test in Fall 2002
  - 4 groups completed post-test in Spring 2003
  - About ½ of high schools were located in Virginia
  - Margin of error: +/- 2.6%

The Measures:
Measuring Political Appreciation:
- An index of 7 agree/disagree items
- Chorusbach’s alpha = .71
- Factor analyzed in relation to other predictors
- A 3-item reduced form of the index is based on the factor analysis

The Items:
- “Most politicians act unethically and are just out for themselves.”
- “The American people made their own decisions instead of relying on politicians, the country would be better off.”
- “Compromise in politics is really just selling out one’s principles.”
- “Politics is a good thing.”

Evaluation Design:
- Solomon’s 4-group panel design
- 2 groups of high school civics classes completed pre-test in Fall 2002
- 4 groups completed post-test in Spring 2003
- 2028 students in 107 high schools
- About ½ of high schools were located in Virginia

Discussion:
Limitations:
- Not a randomized experiment
- Non-YLI schools imperfectly matched to YLI schools
- Some effects are partly attributable to sensitization from the pre-test
- Not all of the items were changed in a favorable direction by YLI

Conclusions:
- Political appreciation is an important political orientation, distinct from measures of efficacy and trust.
- Increasing the political appreciation of high school youth increases their intention to participate in the future.
- The effect is strongest for partisan, campaign-related forms of participation.
- The programs of the Youth Leadership Initiative are successful in increasing political appreciation of participating students.

Political Appreciation Positively Effects Participation:
- Participation in mock election decreased cynicism towards politicians and government
- Students participating in mock election were less likely to believe:
  - Most politicians act unethically
  - Government would be better off run by independent experts
  - Compromise in politics is just selling out
- Participation in mock elections had a positive effect on the belief that politics is a good thing
- Congress students were more likely to believe:
  - Our government needs politicians to resolve disputes
  - Politics is a good thing

Pre & After YLI Mock Election:
- “… we need politicians to resolve disputes.”