

# **The Impact of Civics Education on the Attitudes, Behaviors and Disposition of Youth**



**Deb Markowitz  
Vermont Secretary of State  
April 2009**

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By Deb Markowitz, Vermont Secretary of State

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***“Democracy is not a spectator sport. A democracy without active citizens is not a democracy.”***

- Secretary of State Deb Markowitz, Brattleboro Reformer, May 2000

Our schools can play a critical role in motivating young people to become involved in the political process by teaching the value and mechanics of voting and by providing opportunities for students to develop and practice the skills necessary to be engaged citizens.

Over the last decade I have visited most of the schools in our state, talking to students about the importance of participating – whether by voting, volunteering or by speaking out on issues of importance. I have seen, first hand, the excitement our kids feel when they realize that they too can make a difference.



After ten years of conducting mock elections in schools across Vermont we finally have good evidence that these types of civics education programs make a real difference when it comes to the civic behaviors, attitudes and dispositions of our youth. It is my hope that the findings of this report will encourage educators, government and opinion leaders to see the importance of civics education so that in future years every Vermont student is given an opportunity to participate in a civics education and mock election program.

I want to thank the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, and in particular, their research team Wanda Arce and Robert Walsh for graciously allowing us to participate in their survey of the senior class of 2007. I also want to thank Professor Bud Meyers of the University of Vermont Education Department for his help in developing the survey questions. Finally, I want to thank the members of the Vermont Council on Civics Education for their help in analyzing the results of the survey.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which reads "Deborah L. Markowitz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Deborah L. Markowitz  
Vermont Secretary of State

## I. Historical Context

*“What will . . . help get more youth voting is changing their image of politics – to show them that politics doesn’t have to be uncool . . . young voters might be more willing to get involved in the election process if they had a better understanding of it.”*

- Jared Rousseau, BUHS senior, Brattleboro Reformer, May, 2000

In 1998, political scientists and pundits were alarmed that the newest generation of adults aged 18 to 24 were opting out of political and civic life. At that time, youth voter turnout had plummeted to an anemic 21 percent. Four out of five young people were disengaged. Even in a presidential year, youth voter turnout lagged well behind all other groups with fewer than 33 percent participating.

In response to this trend the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) commissioned a major research study. The New Millennium project was designed to help determine the causes of youth voter apathy and to provide political organizations and government leaders with information about what should be done to help reverse this trend. Among its findings, the New Millennium study reported;

*Among the top reasons young people cite for not voting are schools that no longer teach the importance of civic participation, parents who do not discuss voting with their children, and a lack of understanding of how the actual process of casting a ballot works.*

Specifically, the study found that young people suffer an information and skill deficit about politics and the process of voting. The study pointed to the failure of schools and parents to teach children the mechanics of democracy and the importance of taking part in the political process.

In response to the New Millennium report, secretaries of state across the country began investing time and resources in developing and promoting the use of new voter education and mock election programs. Many secretaries partnered with existing programs, such as Parent Student Mock Election and Kids Voting, and others, like Vermont, developed state-specific programs.

The New Millennium study pointed to the failure of schools and parents to teach children the mechanics of democracy and the importance of taking part in the political process.



Secretary of State Deb Markowitz partnered with Kids Voting to launch Vermont’s first mock election program for the 2000 election. The Secretary of State’s office ultimately developed a Vermont specific program, Vermont Votes for Kids (VVK), an experiential learning program for kindergarten through high school students that culminates in a mock election in school or at the polling place.

Vermont Votes for Kids includes web-based lesson plans for teachers that are available for download from the Secretary of State's Office's Kid's page. It also includes a six-week newspaper in education program developed by the Secretary of State's office and published by most of the daily newspapers in the state. To make learning fun there is also a board game that was developed specifically for Vermont that teaches kids what it takes to campaign for Congress and activity books for younger students.

Vermont Votes for Kids is a voluntary program: Schools are encouraged to participate but are not required to do so. Hundreds of schools and tens of thousands of school children participate in the Vermont Votes for Kids mock election program every election year.

Now, ten years after the New Millennium study was issued and mock election programs were established and/or expanded in Vermont and across the country, a new study shows the effect of civics education and, more specifically, of mock election programs on the behaviors, attitudes and dispositions of youth.

In 2007, in partnership with the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, the Secretary of State's Office undertook a study of high school seniors to see what impact the Vermont Votes for Kids mock election program had on their civic attitudes, behaviors and dispositions.

Looking broadly at the responses, there is good reason to feel optimistic. The results suggest that the newest generation of Vermont adults will be more active and engaged than the ones before it. It also affirms the value of civic education programs and, in particular, mock election programs that teach kids the importance of voting to our democracy.



**The VSAC survey affirms the value of civic education programs. It also shows that we can expect the newest generation of Vermont adults to be more active and engaged than the ones before it.**

## II. The VSAC Senior Survey.

VSAC has conducted a periodic survey of every Vermont high school senior\* since 1978. The survey is given to students as part of a class during the spring of their senior year. The survey is completed by students in every school that serves Vermont including public, private and parochial schools.

**Civic Engagement**

**25. I have participated in a mock election:**  
(Please mark all that apply.)

- In elementary school (1)
- In middle or junior high school (2)
- In high school (3)
- At a polling place (4)
- None of the above (5)

**26. I have: (Please mark all that apply.)**

- Been at a polling place with a parent (1)
- Met an elected official (2)
- Researched candidates' qualifications for political office (3)
- None of the above (4)

The 2007 survey included a number of questions developed by University of Vermont Professor Bud Meyers. These questions were designed to measure the impact of the Secretary of State's Office's mock election program and to provide information about how Vermont's youth think about government, politics and their responsibility to be active citizens.

In the following report, key findings from the research are divided into three sections in which we: 1) provide a snapshot of the civic beliefs, behaviors and disposition of the Vermont class of 2007; 2) Assess the impact of mock election programs on young people's civic attitudes, behaviors and dispositions; and 3) consider other factors that make a difference including parent involvement, depth of coursework and having experience in a polling place.

## III. The Findings.

***“Our schools are the only places in which future voters are a captive audience. It's a golden opportunity to get them involved in their communities and to understand the importance of the political process.”***

- Editorial, St. Albans Messenger, March 17, 2000

### **1. A snapshot of the civic attitudes, behaviors and disposition of the class of 2007.**

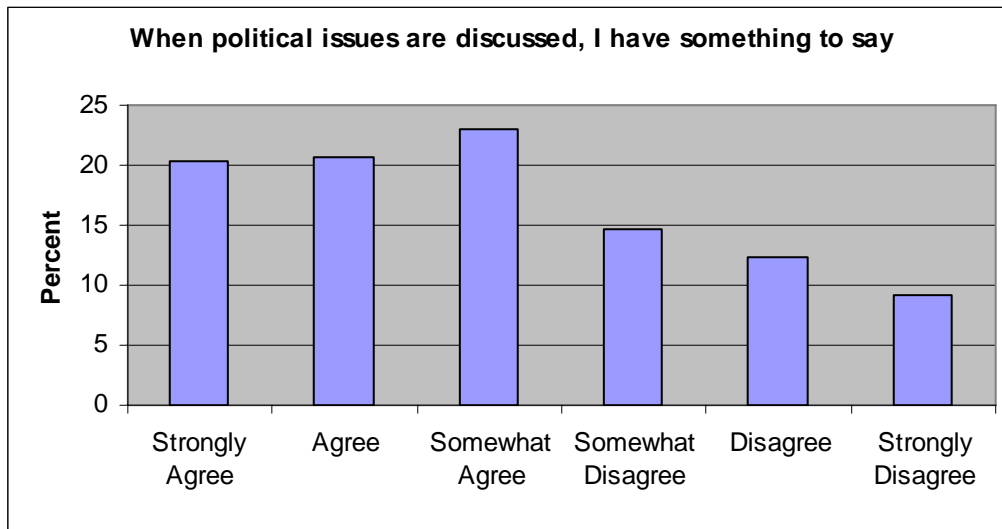
The VSAC survey was designed to reveal whether exposure to the political process through mock election programs and other civic education opportunities affects students' attitudes and behaviors. The survey provides a great snapshot of our youngest citizens.

Here is some of what we found:

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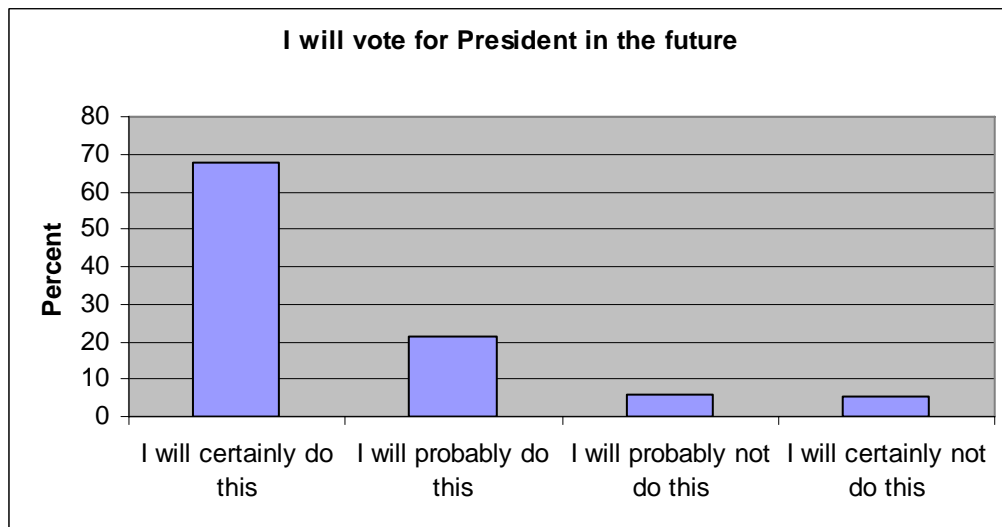
\* Students who were absent on the day the survey was given did not participate in this study.

As a group, the class of 2007 speaks out about politics. Sixty-four percent agreed, somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that “when political issues are discussed I have something to say.”



The majority, 53 percent, believed that they were “better informed about politics than most students.”<sup>†</sup> Most of these young people also reported that they planned to be active in civic and political life in the future.

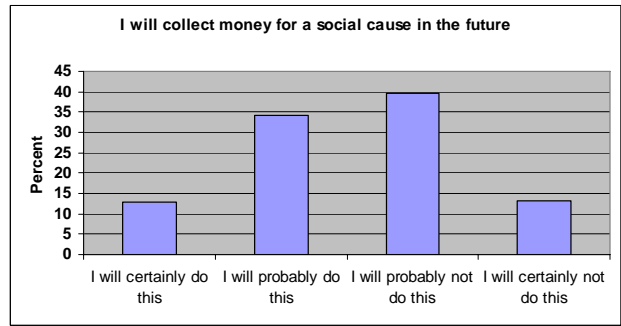
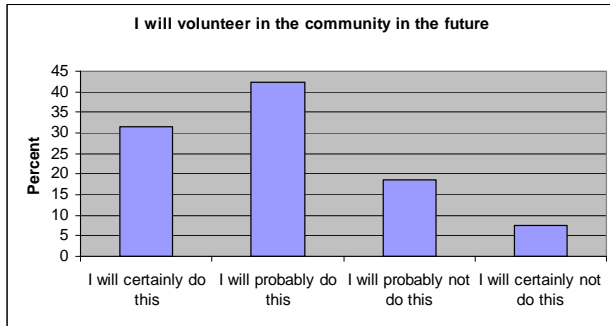
Sixty-eight percent said that they would certainly vote for president, with an additional 21 percent saying that they probably would vote for president.



Not quite as many of this group were certain they would vote in a state election – with 55 percent saying they would certainly do this, and an additional 28 percent saying they would probably do this.

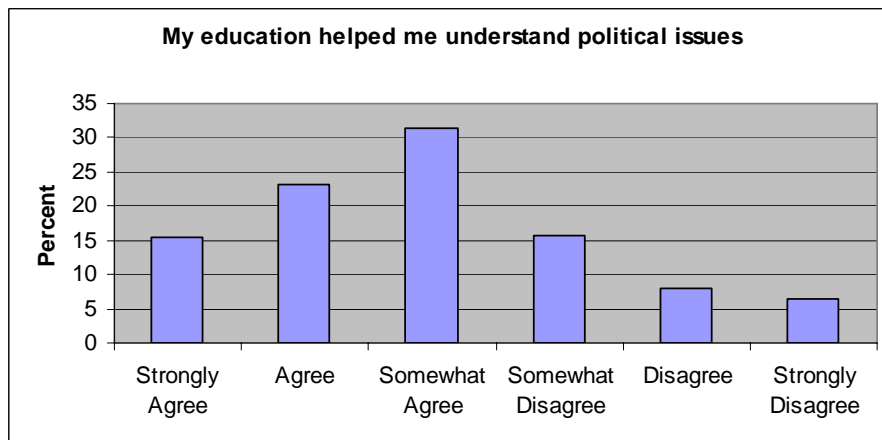
<sup>†</sup> 13% strongly agreed, 15% agreed and 26% somewhat agreed with this statement.

The class of 2007 also sees the value of community organizations. Seventy-three percent of students said they would probably or definitely volunteer in the community at some time in the future and 47 percent said they would probably or definitely collect money for a social cause.



There was a drop-off when it came to involvement in political organizations with only 15 percent saying that they would certainly or probably work on a political campaign, and 20 percent would certainly or probably collect signatures for a petition.

Students reported that their education made a difference. Nearly 70 percent strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed with the statement that “my education helped me understand political issues.”

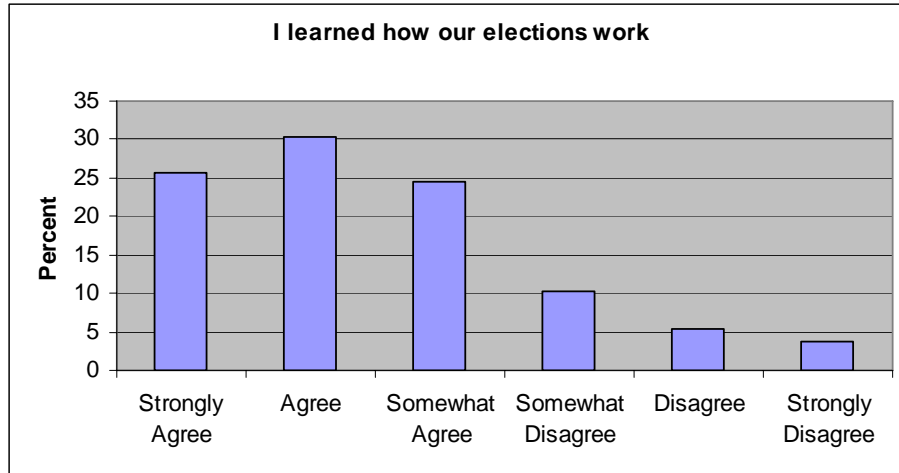


Schools that hold mock elections generally require every student to participate. The survey showed that most students have participated in a mock election at some point during their school career and some students had been to a polling place with a parent.

- Three out of four students reported participating in at least one mock election during their years in school.
- Nearly half of the students reported that they participated in a mock election program in high school.
- Forty-five percent reported going to a polling place with a parent.

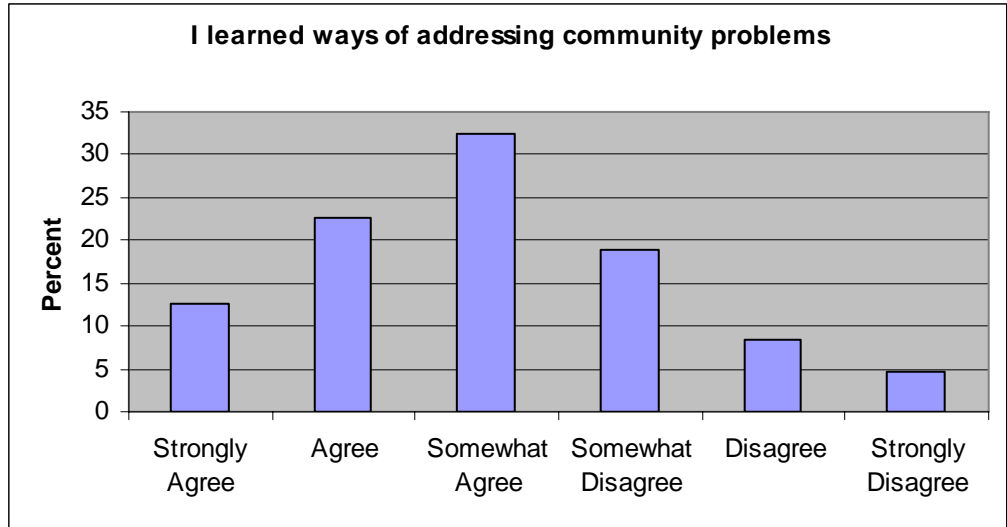
We asked students some specific questions about what they learned in school. The results indicated that schools were making headway in teaching kids the fundamentals of how to be engaged citizens.

Fifty-six percent strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “I learned how our elections work.” This is in contrast to the 1998 New Millennium survey in which only 45 percent of respondents believed that schools do a good job of giving young people the information they need to vote.



The survey showed that students had some appreciation of the responsibility individual’s have to community including examining social problems, addressing community problems, as well as learning how political action groups can help to solve problems.

- Forty-four percent strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “I learned about individuals’ responsibility to community.”
- Thirty-five percent strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “I learned ways of addressing community problems.”
- Thirty-nine percent strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “I learned how to examine social problems.”
- Thirty-four percent strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “I learned how political action groups can solve problems.”



What does this all really mean? Looking broadly at the responses, there is good reason to feel optimistic. These results tell us that this newest generation of Vermont adults will be more active and engaged than the ones before it.

**2. Mock elections make a difference.**

*"This will help solve the mystery of voting. Even though the votes don't count, voting and seeing an outcome will help students see the power of their voice."*

- Montpelier High School Principal Peter Evans, Nov 3, 2004, Times Argus.

Vermont’s first statewide mock election program was developed in 1999<sup>‡</sup>. Consequently, for most high school seniors graduating in 2007 there were potentially four opportunities to participate in a mock election program, starting in the fifth grade with the 2000 election. The VSAC survey showed that 72 percent of the seniors remembered participating in at least one mock election over the course of their school careers.

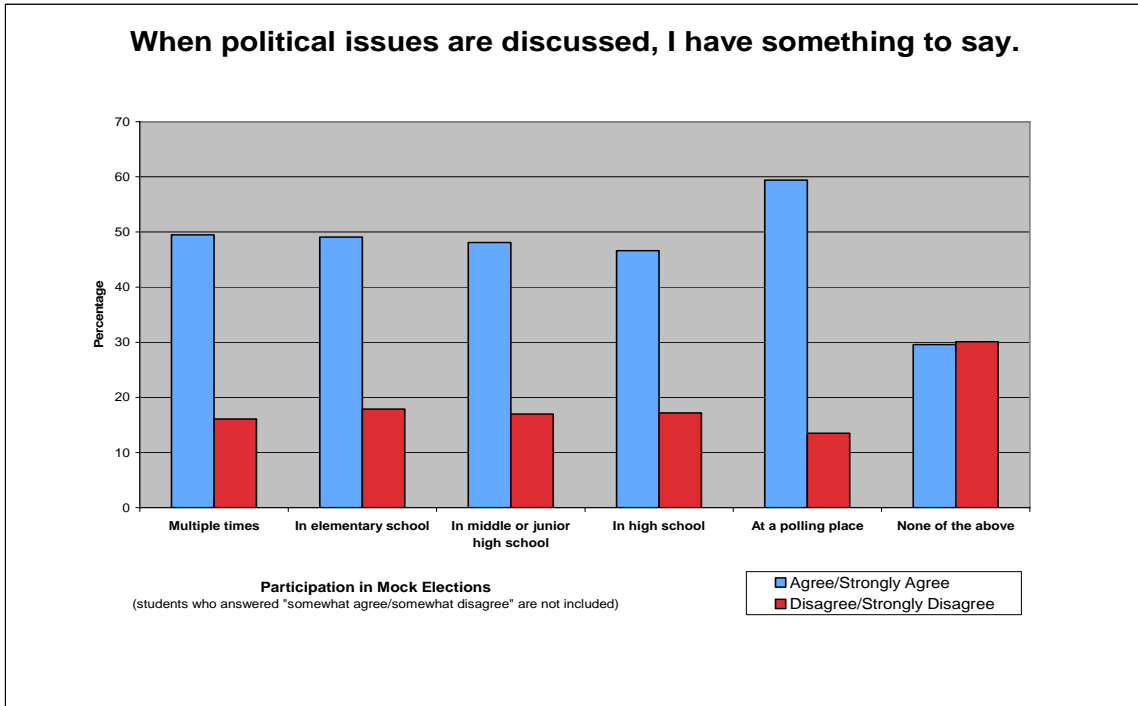
The key finding of the VSAC survey is that there is a strong correlation between students’ participation in a mock election program and their positive feelings about their civic skills, knowledge and dispositions.

Students who participated in more than one mock election were 68 percent more likely than students who did not participate in a mock election to agree with the statement “when political issues are discussed I have something to say.” These students were also 84

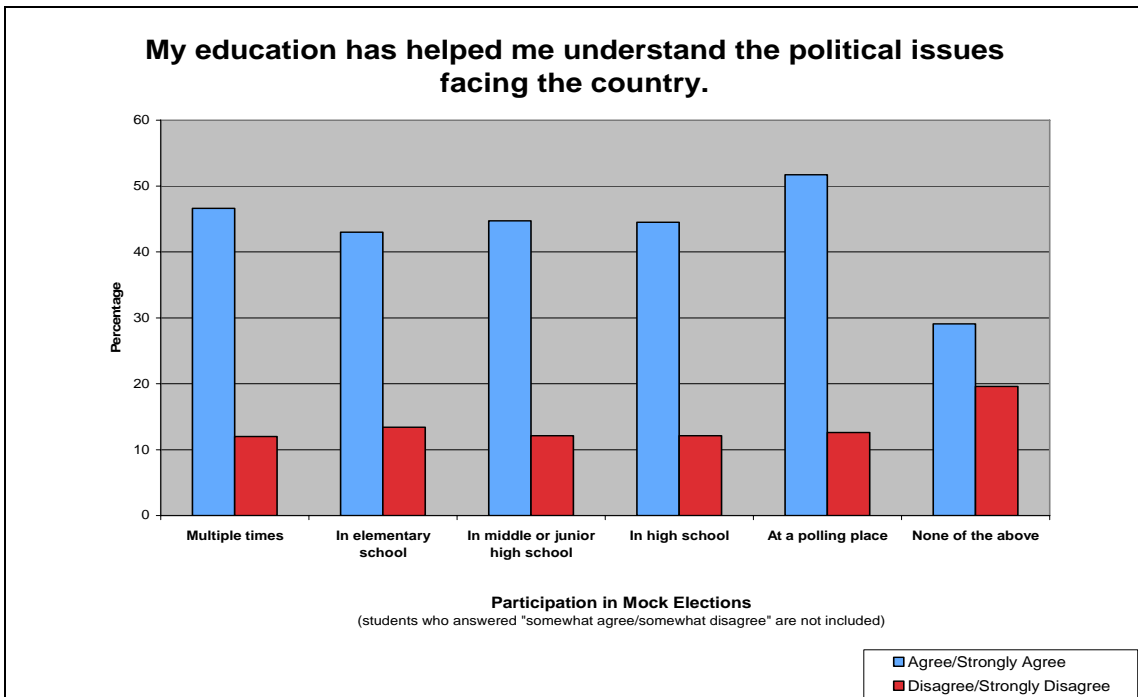


<sup>‡</sup> For the first two years the Vermont Secretary of State partnered with Kids Voting Vermont mock election program. The office developed its own program, VVK, in 2002 to meet the unique needs of Vermont’s educators.

percent more likely than non-participants to agree with the statement “I am better informed about politics than most students.”



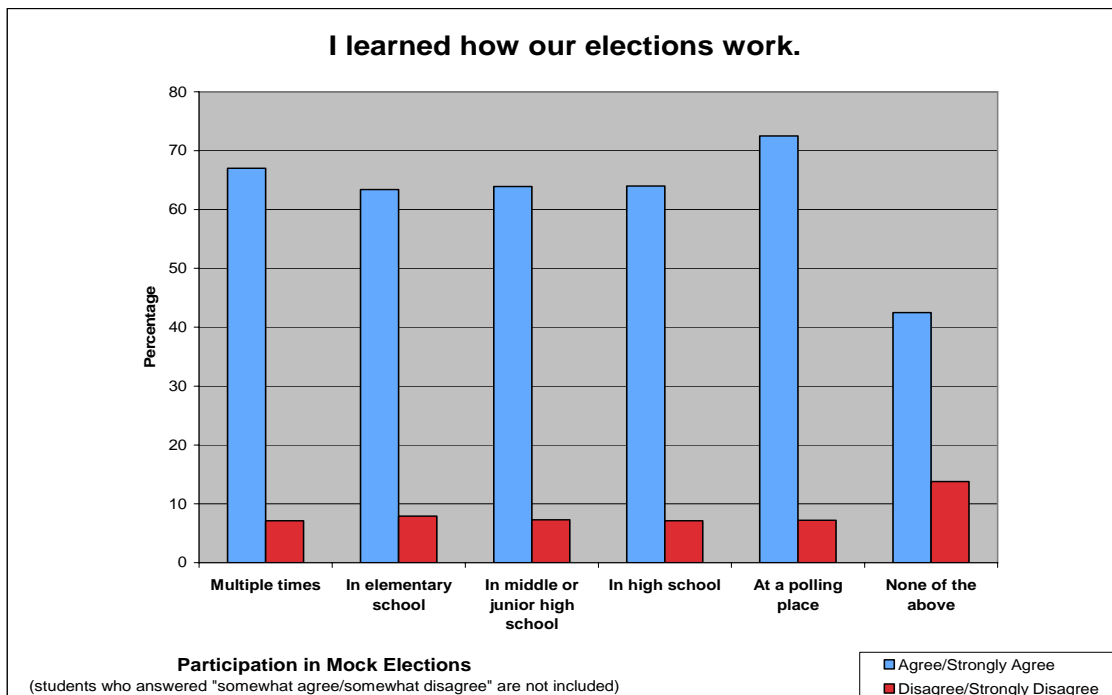
Students who participated in multiple mock elections were 62 percent more likely than non-participants to agree with the statement “my education has helped me to understand the political issues facing the country.”



Students who participated in mock election programs reported greater civic knowledge and skills than their counterparts who did not experience a mock election program. Students who participated in mock elections were

- Seventy-eight percent more likely to say that they had learned how to research candidates for political office than those who had not participated in a mock election program; and
- Sixty-five percent more likely to say that they had learned how to examine social problems than those who had not participated in a mock election program.

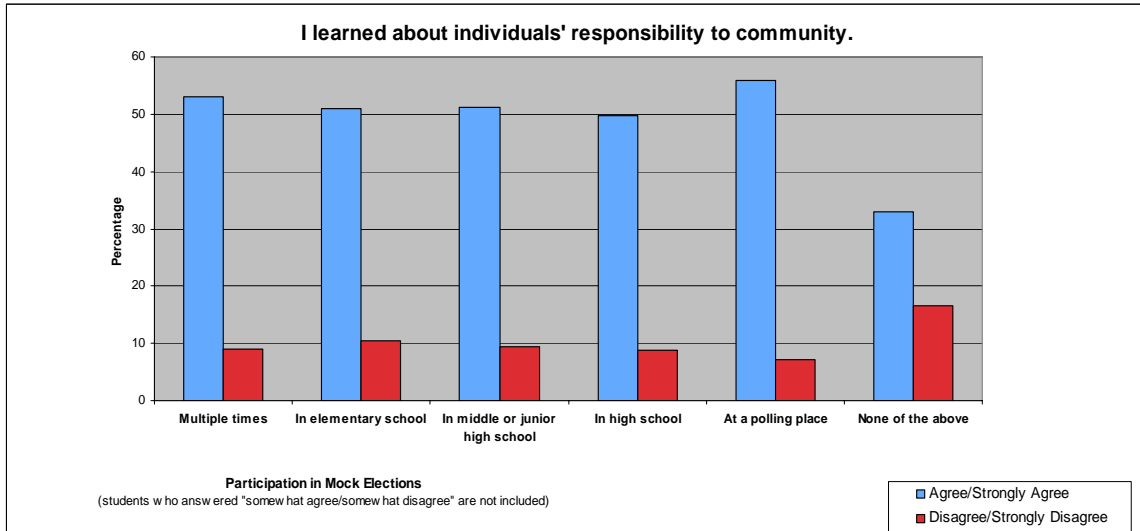
These students were also 59 percent more likely to agree with the statement “I learned how our elections work” than those who did not participate in a mock election program.



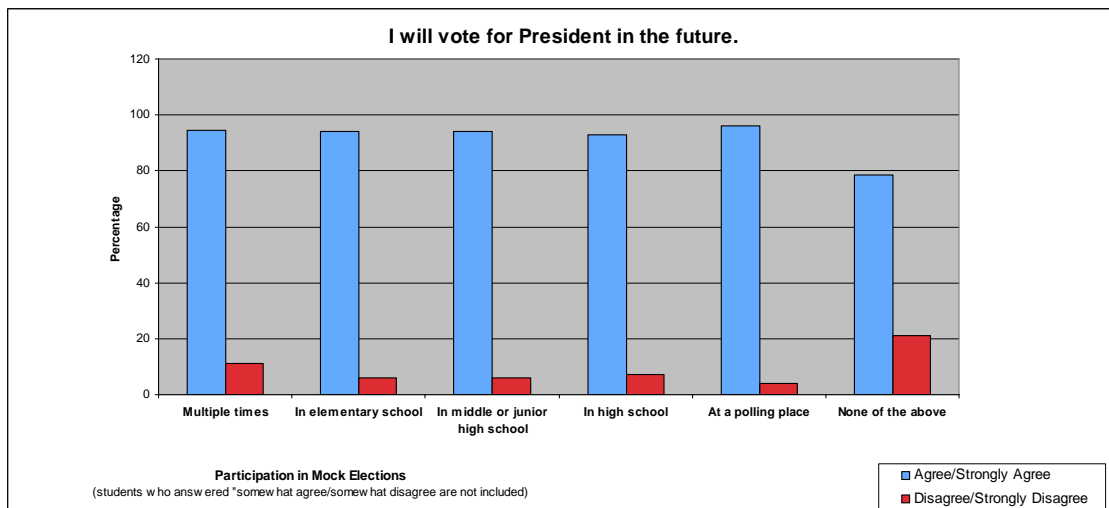
Students who experienced more than one mock election reported a better understanding of how to solve problems in their communities than their non-participating counterparts. These students were:

- Fifty-five percent more likely to report that they had learned ways of addressing community problems than students who had never experience a mock election; and
- Seventy-seven percent more likely to say that they had learned how political action groups can solve problems than students who had never experience a mock election.

- It is also notable that students who participated in mock elections were 61 percent more likely than nonparticipants to agree that they had learned about individuals' responsibility to community.



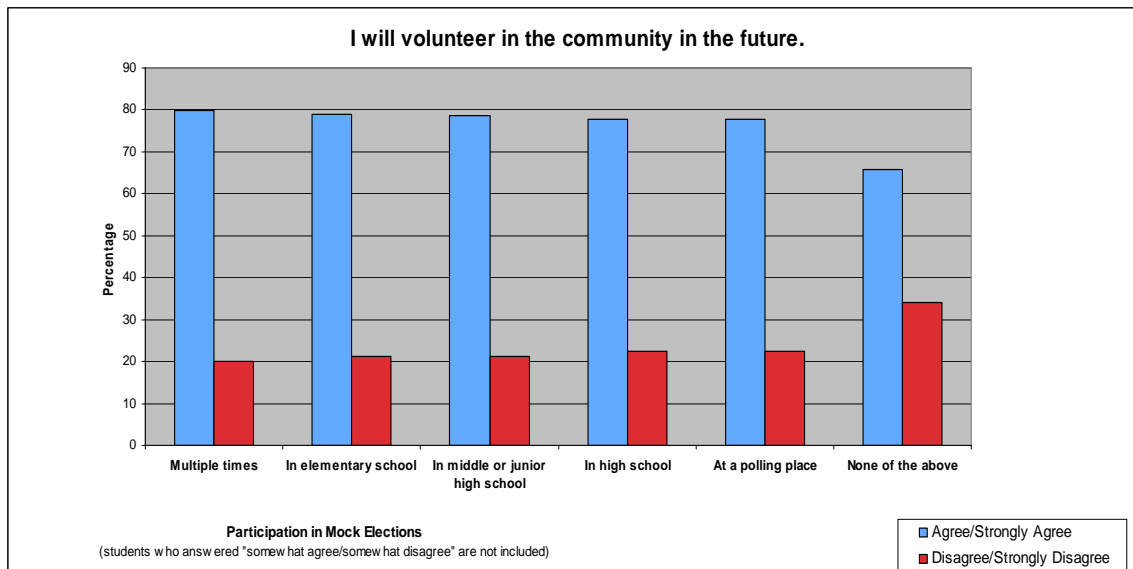
The vast majority of students reported that they would vote in the presidential election. However, of those students who participated in at least one mock election, 96 percent reported that they planned to vote for president, while only 78 percent of those students who did not participate in a mock election reported that they would do so.



In addition, 70 percent of the kids who did not participated in a mock election reported that they planned to vote in a state election, while more than 90 percent of those who participated in at least one mock election reported that they would do so.

Students who participated in a mock election program were also more likely to collect money for a social cause (53 percent compared to 39 percent), collect signatures for a petition (34 percent

compared to 23 percent), volunteer in the community (80 percent compared to 66 percent), and work on a political campaign (18 percent compared to 11 percent).



What does this mean? This data tells us that students who participated in a mock election are, in most cases, more civically engaged than those that have not. These students:

- believe they know how voting works,
- they appear to understand the value of voting and
- they also seem to understand the importance of community and political organizations in solving problems.

The data does not tell us whether the mock election program alone was sufficient to instill these values, knowledge and skills. It may be that schools that conduct mock elections are more likely to include other lessons and activities that reinforce civic knowledge, behaviors and values.<sup>§</sup>

The data does not tell us whether a mock election program is sufficient. It may be that schools that conduct mock elections are more likely to include other lessons and activities that reinforce civic knowledge, behaviors and values.

That being said, the data clearly affirms the worth of the Secretary of State’s civic education programs, and in particular, mock election programs which teach kids the importance of voting to our democracy, how an election works and the mechanics of casting a ballot.

<sup>§</sup> The data shows that students who participated in a mock election at a polling place have the highest civic indicators. This may be because it takes a significantly greater commitment of time and resources by both the school and the community, and in some cases, the parents, to conduct a mock election in the polling place. This suggests that the greater the commitment of the school, parents and community to teaching civics, the more the students will value civic participation.

### 3. Other factors that make a difference: parental and community involvement.

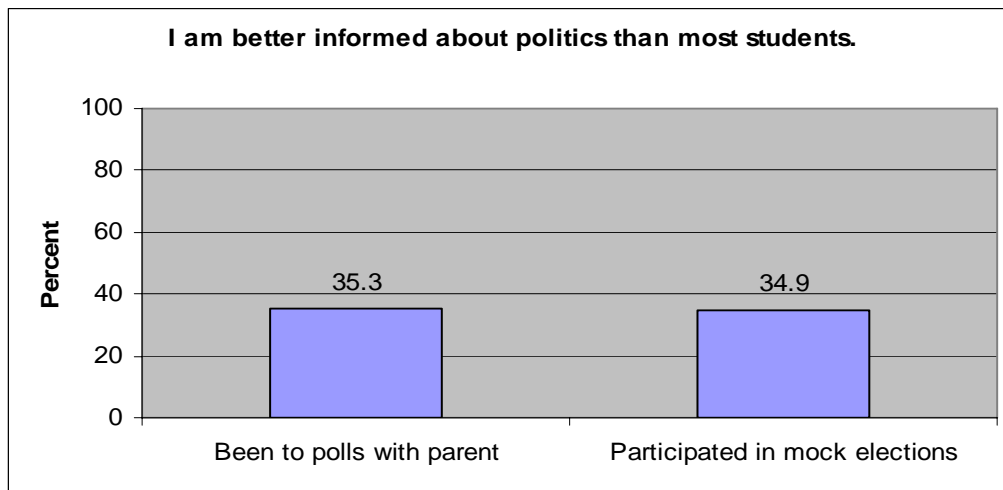
*“Students are cultivating a genuine interest in the political process. They ask questions and chat about the candidates even when they don’t have to do so.”*

- John Terko, Allen Brook School Principal, Burlington Free Press, Nov. 3, 2006.

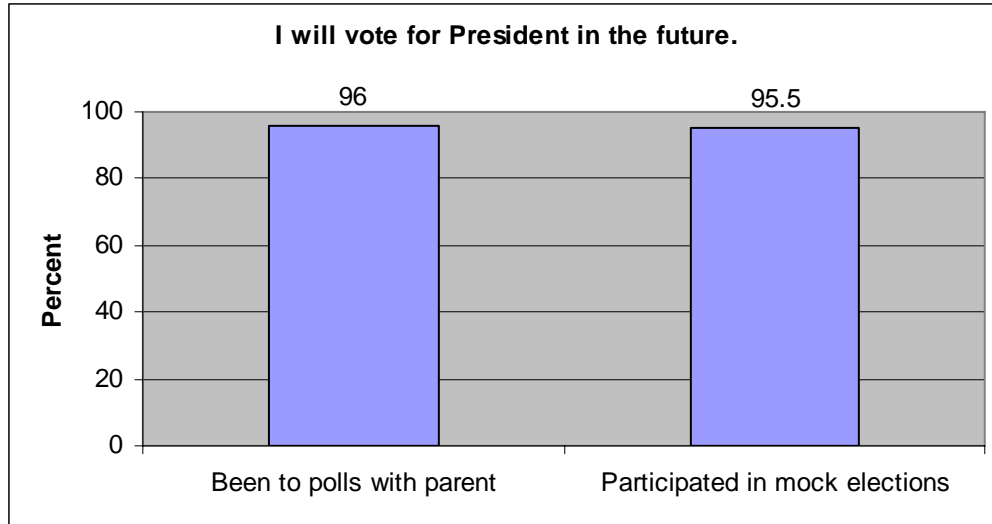
The VSAC survey provides information about other factors that can affect youth attitudes, behaviors and dispositions. We have long believed that parents play a significant role in instilling values relating to civic engagement. The civic survey asked whether a student had been to a polling place with a parent to help us measure whether our assumptions about parental involvement are borne out in fact.

The civic survey data confirmed that students who had been to a polling place with a parent positively answered our civic indicator questions at a slightly higher rate than other students, including those students who reported participating in multiple mock elections. These students, however, did not score as high when it came to indicators of civic knowledge such as learning how our elections work and learning how to research candidates.

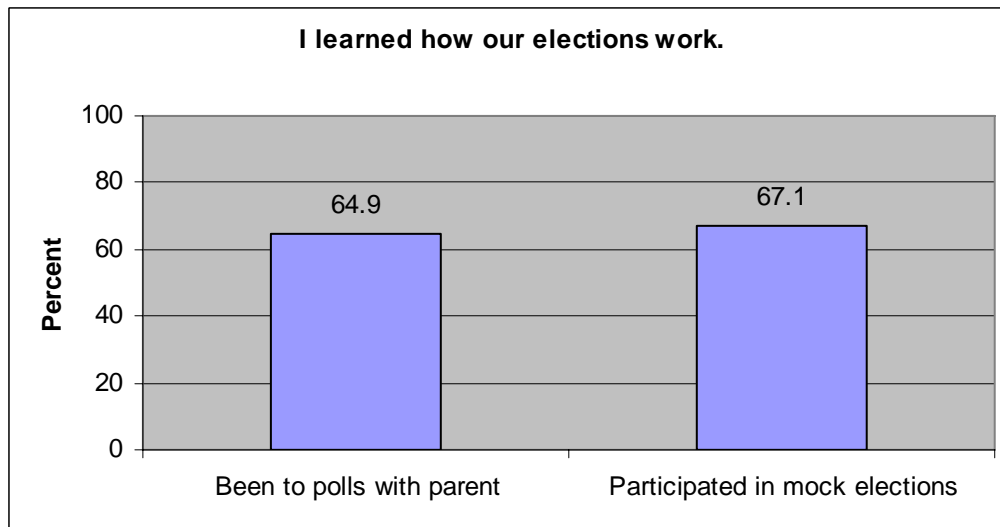
For example, a student who had been to a polling place with a parent was slightly more likely to agree with the statement “I am better informed about politics than most students” than a student who had participated one or more mock election programs. Over 35 percent of students who went to a polling place with a parent strongly agreed or agreed with this statement while 34.9 percent of students who participated in multiple mock elections strongly agreed or agreed.



Ninety-six percent of students who went to a polling place with a parent reported that they would vote for president and 93 percent said that they would vote in a state election. These numbers are slightly higher than those reported by students who said they participated in more than one mock election.



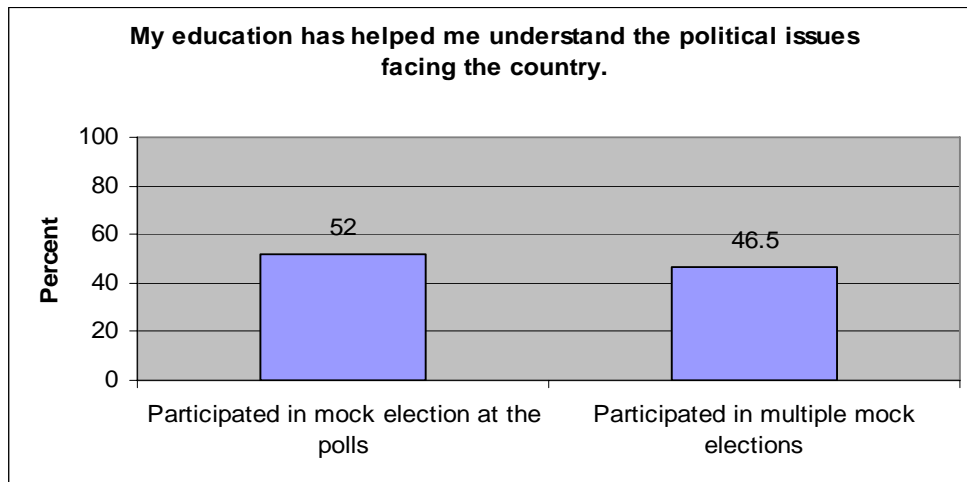
When it came to students reporting about learning how elections work, nearly 65 percent of students who visited a polling place with a parent agreed or strongly agreed compared to over 67 percent of students who participated in multiple mock elections.



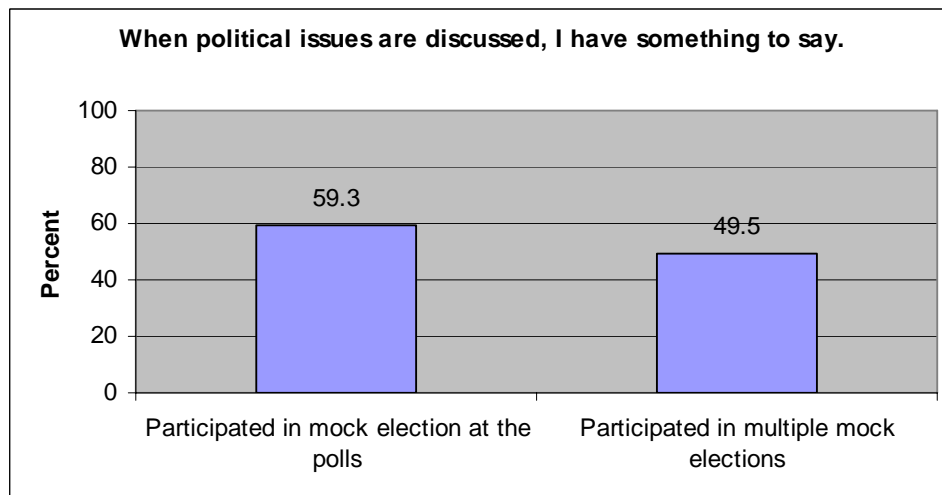
In addition 52 percent of students who went to the polling place with a parent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I learned how to research candidates for political office" as compared to a slightly higher number, 53 percent, of students who participated in more than one mock election.

We also wondered whether community involvement made a difference in student responses, so we asked if they had participated in a mock election in a polling place. A polling place mock election requires a much greater degree of community involvement than a mock election held in a classroom or school.

Although fewer students experienced a mock election in the polling place than students who participated in school or classroom based mock elections,\*\* these students positively answered the civic indicator questions in the highest percentages. For example, 52 percent of students who participated in a mock election at a polling place agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “my education has helped me understand the political issues facing the country” as compared to 46 percent of students who participated in multiple mock elections.

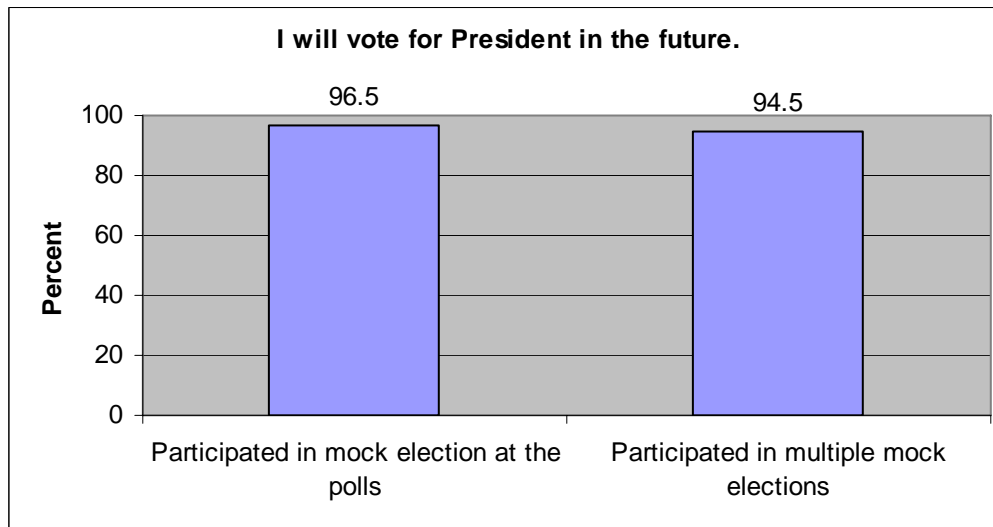
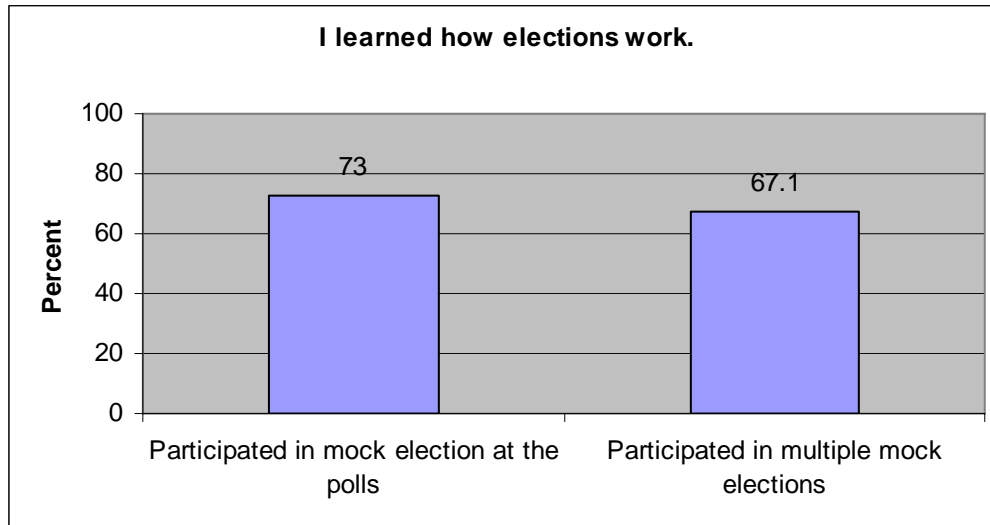


Over 59 percent of students who participated in a mock election at a polling place agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “when political issues are discussed, I have something to say,” as compared to 49 percent of students who participated in multiple mock elections.



\*\* Only 204 of the 6,603 students who answered the survey reported having participated in a mock election at the polling place.

Seventy-three percent of students who participated in a mock election at a polling place agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I learned how our elections worked” as compared to 67 percent of students who participated in multiple mock elections, and 97 percent said they would vote in a presidential election as compared to 95 percent of students who participated in more than one mock election.



It is hard to know whether community involvement alone is what gave students who participated in a mock election the boost, or the fact that holding a mock election at a polling place requires a greater commitment of time and resources by the school and is generally only viable for schools that serve a single town.

## Recommendations

The VSAC survey demonstrates the value of investing in civics education programs like Vermont Votes for Kids. When we teach young people the mechanics and value of voting and when we provide them opportunities to develop and practice the skills necessary to be engaged citizens we see results.

It is our hope that the findings of the VSAC survey and this report will encourage educators, government and opinion leaders to see the importance of civics education so that in future years every Vermont student is given an opportunity to participate in a civics education and mock election program.



Secretary Markowitz and students of Main Street Middle School in Montpelier at a Vermont Votes for Kids event.