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Can Participation in Mock Elections Boost Civic Competence among Students?

Erik Lundberg

Abstract
Mock elections are an increasingly popular form of active learning, adopted in many European countries and the United States. However, we have limited knowledge regarding the extent to which they enhance students’ civic competence. This article analyzes data from over 9,000 students aged 13-19 who participated in a 2022 mock election in Sweden. The goal is to determine the extent to which mock elections boost civic competence, with an emphasis on potential variations related to gender, ethnic background, and educational stage. Results indicate that such participation positively influences students’ self-reported political knowledge and, to a lesser extent, their political interest, engagement, and efficacy. Yet, the impact varies among student demographics. For instance, foreign-born students reported greater effects than their Swedish-born counterparts. Female students displayed heightened political knowledge and interest compared to males, while male students demonstrated higher political engagement. Interestingly, mock elections seemed to enhance political knowledge more in primary school students than in secondary school ones. Conversely, they had a more pronounced impact on the political interests and engagement of secondary school students. The study concludes with suggestions for future research to employ more rigorous methods to assess the influence of mock elections on civic competencies.

Introduction
Robust democratic systems depend on active and informed citizens. A well-informed, critical, and politically active citizenry is often noted as key to resilient democratic societies (Almond and Verba 2015; Niemi and Finkel 2006). The backsliding of democracy and a surge in political inequality across many nations underscore the need to fortify civic competencies. In democratic societies, schools stand as pivotal establishments, guaranteeing that all future citizens, regardless of their origins, possess the essential knowledge, skills, and values for engaged and enlightened citizenship. Furthermore, they...
are instrumental in bridging the gaps created by varied childhood conditions and circumstances (Hoskins and Janmaat 2019).

A common strategy used by schools to stimulate civic competence is to involve students in various forms of active learning, such as political simulations, problem-solving, case studies, and role-play. The mock election is an increasingly popular and relatively widespread form of active learning used in both several European countries as well as the United States (Levinsen 2021; De Groot 2017, 2018; Borge 2016; Coffey, Miller, and Feuerstein 2011). Mock elections serve as a learning opportunity that schools can organize in conjunction with an official election in the political studies classroom to prepare students to vote in future elections, to increase their political interest and knowledge, and to promote democratic attitudes and behaviors (Kerr and Hoskins 2023; Syvertsen et al. 2009). Yet, to what extent does participation in mock elections increase students’ civic competence?

Despite the widespread use of mock elections, our understanding is limited regarding the extent to which they enhance students’ civic competence. Some studies suggest that participation in mock elections boosts students’ political knowledge, interest, and engagement (Levinsen 2021; Deitz and Boeckelman 2012). A study from Norway by Borge (2017) established a positive correlation between mock elections and the desire among students aged 16 to 19 to participate in upcoming real elections. However, other research challenges these findings. Drawing on comprehensive turnout data from Sweden, Öhrvall and Oskarsson (2020) argued that participating in a mock election doesn’t necessarily translate into a higher likelihood of voting in actual elections, irrespective of various socioeconomic factors. Additionally, Dutch studies have noted that teachers often neglect or lack the resources to foster a democratic school culture within the context of mock elections (De Groot and Eidhof 2019; De Groot and Lo 2022). Such divergent findings underscore the need for more empirical data assessing the efficacy of mock elections in bolstering civic competence (Baranowski and Weir 2015; Ishiyama 2013).

This article addresses this gap with an in-depth analysis of a 2022 nationwide mock election in Sweden. In Sweden’s educational landscape, mock elections often feature in the run-up to a national election for primary and secondary students, aiming to immerse them in the democratic process. Although mock elections in Sweden date back to at least the late 1960s, unlike in Norway where they’re mandatory, the decision to conduct one rests with individual Swedish schools. Using self-reported data from 9,885 students in primary (13-15 years old) and secondary schools (16-19 years old), this article evaluates the impact of mock elections on students’ civic competence. It also explores variations based on gender, ethnic background, and educational stage (i.e., primary, or secondary). Specifically, it poses the question: Do mock elections genuinely foster civic competence and are their benefits universally experienced across different student demographics? The article zeroes in on two dimensions of civic competence considered vital in the existing literature: political knowledge and participatory attitudes.

The subsequent section, that is, the second section, delves into prior literature on political simulations and mock elections, setting the stage for the study’s hypothesis. The third section offers background on the 2022 Swedish mock election and outlines the research design. The fourth section presents the analysis results, while the fifth and concluding section offers insights and recommendations for future research.
Previous research and hypothesis

Civic competence has various definitions. Often it is used in conjunction with such concepts as civic skills, civic literacy, political competence, and civic engagement. Almond and Verba (2015) used civic competence to describe a range of attitudes of self-efficacy and citizen norms needed for active citizenship. Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1992) related the concept to civic virtues within a community such as active citizenship, tolerance, and the ability to collaborate. Such variance in definition leads to an investigation of different dimensions. However, central to the concept is the notion that to function properly, the political system needs citizens who have the knowledge, skills, and values required of an active citizen (Amnå 2012; Hoskins et al. 2011; Torney-Purta et al. 2015). Hoskins et al. (2011, p. 84) define civic competence “as a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enables a person to become an active citizen.” More specifically, they give four dimensions of civic competence: knowledge and skills, participatory attitudes, social justice, and citizen values. Knowledge and skills include basic knowledge about democracy and the ability to interpret and take autonomous actions. Participatory attitudes contain internal political efficacy, political interest, and political participation. Social justice draws attention to attitudes and democratic values and beliefs such as equality and tolerance, and citizen values relate to the norms of good citizenship (Hoskins et al. 2011). This article follows this definition and focuses attention on the first two dimensions of civic competence, namely political knowledge, and participatory attitudes.

Schools can provide many opportunities for civic education. Active learning is an approach that has gained a great deal of attention in research on political education. It is often used in combination with concepts such as “experiential learning” and “deep learning”, and scholars frequently highlight the potential of active learning for students to understand theoretical concepts, develop skills, discover political processes, and examine their motivation, attitudes, and behaviors (Shellman 2001). Active learning is based on the theory of constructivism that stresses that learning happens primarily through social interaction and involves students actively engaging with the course content using such methods as political simulations, discussion, problem-solving, case studies, and role-play (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 1999; Bonwell and Eison 1991). Indeed, active learning is more about developing students’ skills than it is about transmitting information to them and instructing them on specific tasks.

The literature provides support for active learning and various forms of political simulations, stating them to have positive effects on various forms of civic competence. Studies have found that political simulations increase students’ knowledge (Levin-Banchik 2018; Sjöstedt 2015; Levintova et al. 2011; Baranowski 2006); their understanding of abstract theories and concepts (Shellman and Turan 2006) and the political process (Baranowski 2006; Kenner 2004); and their ability to communicate politics (Johnson 2016). Lay and Smarick (2006) assessed the effectiveness of the simulation of the legislative process in the United States Senate among 200 university students and found that those who took part scored higher on items assessing knowledge of the U.S. legislative process compared to students who did not take part. Another example is the study on congressional simulations by Baranowski (2006), who found them to have a positive impact on students’ understanding of the legislative process.
Furthermore, active learning has proved useful when it comes to influencing students’ political attitudes, such as their interest and engagement in politics, voting, and political efficacy – that is, the ability to change the government and the belief that they can understand and influence political affairs (Hendrickson 2021; Larsen, Levinsen, and Kjaer 2016; Mariani and Glenn 2014; Bernstein 2008). There are also some indications that experiences from political simulations both enhance students’ ability to remember information over the long term and result in a deeper insight into political processes when compared to traditional teaching (Wunische 2019; Shellman 2001).

At the same time, scholars question the effectiveness of political simulation. After an extensive review, Baranowski and Weir (2015) noted that political simulations contribute to increased knowledge, but some studies tend to be impressionistic. On a more critical note, Ishiyama (2013) argues that more systematic testing is needed to justify the widespread use of political simulation.

There is relatively little research on the effect of mock elections on students’ political competence. Borge (2016, 2017) found in an extensive study from Norway that participation in mock elections increased young people’s wish to vote in an upcoming election. Similar findings have been reported from the United States about mock presidential simulations showing their positive effect on students’ level of political knowledge, interest, and engagement (Coffey, Miller, and Feuerstein 2011; Deitz and Boeckelman 2012). In addition, an evaluation among students aged 14–16 from Denmark found that mock elections served to increase students’ political engagement and political interest even though there was less effect on their knowledge about the political system (Levinsen 2021; Hansen, Hansen, and Levinsen 2015).

However, based on unique population-wide data on turnout in Sweden, Öhrvall and Oskarsson (2020) found that the participation of students in a mock election does not increase the likelihood that they will vote in a future election regardless of a range of socioeconomic factors. Nevertheless, it is still possible that mock elections are useful in the development of skills and abilities that are important for active citizenship. We therefore assume that participation in mock elections stimulates students’ civic competence. This leads us to our first hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1.** Participation in mock elections has positive effects on students’ civic competence.

However, the effects of mock elections may differ between students. The perceived effectiveness of political simulations can vary depending not only on how they are implemented but a range of individual characteristics, societal norms, and the context in which they are used. It is for example well known that students can and do learn in various ways and political simulation tends to favor students who learn best through hands-on experiences or discussions in comparison to those who prefer more structured or individual learning (e.g., Bromley 2013). The Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) is a theory that offers a way to understand why political simulations, such as mock elections, may produce different outcomes on students’ civic competencies. The theory posits that individuals need a combination of resources, psychological and political engagement, and recruitment opportunities to participate in political and civic activities (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Those lacking in any of these areas are less likely to participate, which can lead to inequalities in political involvement. The model has been
influential in the study of political participation, guiding subsequent research and providing insights into the factors that drive or hinder civic engagement.

Applying the CVM to the context of political simulations and mock elections can help explain why different groups of students may experience different effects. If applied to political simulations and mock elections, the theory would imply that different groups of students might bring different types of political resources, engagement, and recruitment networks into the classroom which influence the effectiveness of political simulations. An often-repeated finding in the literature is that political behaviors differ between men and women, with women being less politically engaged than men (Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997). Several factors have been put forward to explain the difference. For one, the assumption is that women are less likely to be politically engaged due to their more restricted access to socioeconomic resources. For another, the claim is that women are socialized into being more passive and rule-abiding in their private roles, while the socialization of men leans more toward self-confidence and public leadership (e.g., Rosenthal, Rosenthal, and Jones 2001).

Yet, it has been noted that the gap in political participation between women and men has narrowed over time, especially among younger generations (Oskarson and Ahlbom 2021). This can be partly attributed to changes in societal norms, educational opportunities, and gender equality efforts. In her study, Borge (2017) found there to be no difference between genders when it came to wanting to vote in a general election after taking part in a mock election. At the same time, gender differences have been confirmed when considering the mode of political behavior: for example, women are more likely to be politically engaged in more informal forms of political participation than men, but men are more likely to become members of a political party (Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010). Furthermore, women generally report lower levels of political interest, and women are also less likely than men to read news about politics or participate in various forms of political activities (Dolan and Hansen 2020). In addition, in a longitudinal study examining the effects of an out-of-school action program on civic and political competence, LeCompte, Blevins, and Riggers-Piehl (2020) found that women showed larger gains than men. Given this background, participation in mock elections may have a greater positive self-reported effect on women’s civic competencies than on men’s. However, this may vary depending on the specific type of civic competencies. This leads us to our second hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 2.** The perceived effectiveness of mock elections on students’ civic competencies is higher for women than men.

Similarly, students from different ethnic backgrounds may have different political resources which could affect their experiences in a political simulation. Belonging to a majority group has been found to relate positively to a range of civic competencies, such as political interest, political efficacy, and political knowledge (Gaby 2017; Barber et al. 2015). Several factors have been shown to explain these differences: for example, limited access to resources, information, and ability to take part in the polity as well as discrimination, lack of political representation, and cultural factors (Dalton 2017; Barber et al. 2015). Similarly, foreign-born residents tend to have lower levels of political engagement compared to the majority population, which is apparent in, for example, voter turnout and level of political knowledge. These factors may in turn explain the
extent to which students are able and willing to absorb the lessons and experience offered by mock elections. However, this is not a universal trend, and the level of civic competence can vary widely depending on the specific minority group and country in question. Sweden is often considered to have a relatively equal society. Nevertheless, foreign-born residents still face barriers to political participation and lower suffrage than Swedish-born residents (Abdelzadeh and Lundberg 2022). As such, it is reasonable to assume that participation in mock elections has a greater positive self-reported effect on foreign-born students given that these individuals tend to have lower civic competencies than students from a majority group. This leads us to our third hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 3.** The perceived effectiveness of mock elections on students’ civic competencies is higher for foreign-born students than for Swedish-born students.

Finally, the perceived effectiveness of mock elections on students’ civic competencies may also vary depending on the context in which they are used. The research underscores the pivotal role that education plays when it comes to generating and sustaining civic competence (Hoskins and Janmaat 2019). While most democracies incorporate some form of citizenship education, the format and scope differ. For instance, in countries like Sweden, there’s a comprehensive school approach where teaching about democracy is a responsibility shared by all teachers across subjects. In contrast, other countries assign this duty specifically to teachers of subjects like social studies and history or relegate it to the realm of extra-curricular activities. Additionally, the stage at which citizenship education is introduced varies across nations (Schulz et al. 2023).

Citizenship education features strongly in Swedish schools and is a core subject in the national curriculum. However, the content and focus of citizenship education differ between primary and secondary schools in terms of the number of allocated teaching hours and subject matter (Sandahl, Tvarana, and Jakobsson 2022). In primary school, citizenship education is usually integrated into other subjects, such as social studies and history. Students at this stage are typically introduced to basic concepts related to citizenship, such as democracy, human rights, and the role of citizens in society as well as Swedish democracy and Sweden’s political institutions. In secondary school, citizenship education becomes more formal and structured and is typically taught separately. At this stage, students are introduced to more complex concepts related to citizenship, such as political systems, civil society, and the workings of government.

Given the differences in citizen education in terms of both scope and curriculum, we expect that the educational stage may relate to the self-reported effects of participation in mock elections on civic competence. More specifically, it is reasonable to assume that participation in mock elections has a greater positive effect on civic competencies for primary school students compared to secondary school students. Secondary school students already have a higher level of civic competencies from the outset because of their education and experience with elections, compared to primary school students. Therefore, the civic competencies of secondary school students will not increase as much because of participating in elections compared to primary school students. The differences may be particularly noticeable for political knowledge. This leads us to our fourth and final hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 4.** The perceived effectiveness of mock elections on students’ civic competencies is higher for secondary school students than for primary school students.
Research design

Mock elections are nationally coordinated by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF) and are financed by the Swedish Government. The agency provides schools with everything from ballots to teaching material, handbooks, and recommendations on how to integrate mock elections into the curriculum. It remains up to each school to decide how to organize a mock election and how to integrate one into their teaching. They can also decide whether or not to invite representatives from political parties to visit. In total, 78 percent (or 500,615 students) of all Swedish students in primary and secondary school were invited to take part in the 2022 mock election and 77.9 (390,120) of these students voted.

To gather data, MUCF distributed a digital nationwide questionnaire in November 2022 to all primary and secondary schools that chose to participate in the 2022 mock election in Sweden. This encompassed 500,615 students, accounting for 68 percent of all students in primary and secondary schools in the country. Ultimately, 390,120 students cast their vote in the mock election. 11,455 students responded to the questionnaire, with 8,979 completing it in its entirety. Although the sample did include students from schools that did not participate in a mock election, the analysis centered on the 9,885 students from schools that did take part in the 2022 mock election. The digital questionnaire was forwarded to the schools, which then disseminated it to their students. We are unaware of the specific circumstances or locations in which students filled out the survey.

The questionnaire is the most comprehensive of its kind. However, it is important to note that the sample is not representative of all students since the response rate was 2.9 percent, which is low given the total number of students who took part in the election. It is also likely that the students in the sample were at a school where there was interest in political education. Another factor that needs to be considered is that the survey was conducted two months after the mock election and captures only short-term and self-reported experiences from participation in the mock election. The use of self-reported experiences to evaluate the effects of political simulations is commonplace; however, they do not carry the same weight as more objective measures, particularly when it comes to measuring political knowledge (Baranowski and Weir 2015). Finally, the mock election took place before the parliamentary and local elections in Sweden and at a time when political activity in society was intense. Therefore, other factors and circumstances besides the mock election may have affected students’ perceived political knowledge, interest, engagement, etc. All these factors need to be considered when the results are interpreted.

The dependent variable in the analysis is civic competence, which is defined as “a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enables a person to become an active citizen” (Hoskins et al. 2011). As clarified above, this article focuses on two dimensions of civic competence: political knowledge and participatory attitudes. Political knowledge was measured by three items. The first two were as follows: 1) “By participating in the 2022 mock election, I have learned more about how to vote”; and 2) “By participating in the 2022 mock election, I have learned more about the Swedish political parties.” The students had to choose between four answers: 0) Do not apply at all; 1) Do not apply particularly well; 2) Applies quite well; 3) Applies perfectly. The
third item was: “Do you know more about how to take part in democracy and politics after the mock election?” and the four answers were: 0) No, not at all, 1) No, not much, 2) Yes, to some extent, 3) Yes, absolutely.

*Political attitudes* included the following three specific areas of competence: political interest; political engagement; and political efficacy. Political interest was measured with these two survey items: 1) “By participating in the mock election, I have become more interested in politics”; and 2) “By participating in the mock election, I have become more interested in what is going on in society”. Political engagement was measured by the statements in the questionnaire: “By participating in the mock election, I have become more politically engaged.” Political efficacy was measured by this item: “By participating in the mock election, I have become more certain that I can influence politics”. For each of these items students had to choose between four responses: 0) Do not apply at all; 1) Do not apply particularly well; 2) Applies quite well; and 3) Applies perfectly.

The survey also included several independent variables, namely gender [male/female], ethnic background [Swedish-born/foreign-born], and educational stage [primary/secondary school]. A question is used that asks students to indicate whether they were born in Sweden [Swedish-born] or abroad [foreign-born]. No distinction is made according to where the student’s parents were born. Primary schools include students between 13 and 15 years old and secondary school includes students between 16 and 19 years of age. Of course, these ages can vary slightly based on when a student starts school and whether they skip or repeat a school year. Since all Swedish citizens who live or have lived in Sweden and who turn 18 at the latest on election day have the right to vote, some secondary school students can also vote in general elections. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for each variable.

In the data analysis process, two main stages were undertaken. First, descriptive statistics were computed for each variable to gauge the extent to which students believed the mock election influenced their civic competence. Subsequently, an independent t-test was performed to identify any statistical differences in students’ self-reported feedback concerning gender, ethnic background, and educational stage. Where pertinent, the magnitude of differences between groups was determined using Cohen’s d (Cohen 1988). This helped estimate the proportion of variance in the self-reported effects of mock elections on civic competence attributable to gender, ethnic background, and educational stage.

### Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political competence</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting</td>
<td>8931</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties</td>
<td>8912</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy and politics</td>
<td>8564</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political attitudes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest – politics</td>
<td>8531</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest – society</td>
<td>8609</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political engagement</td>
<td>8364</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political efficacy</td>
<td>8302</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>9539</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic background</td>
<td>9745</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational stage</td>
<td>9885</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

In the following section, the results of the initial analysis are presented, detailing both the number of students and the mean level for each item. As demonstrated in Table 2, a majority of students expressed that their participation in the mock election bolstered their political knowledge. Specifically, over 82 percent of students believed the mock election enhanced their understanding of voting procedures, while nearly 75 percent felt more informed about the Swedish political parties. Furthermore, over 73 percent felt that their overall knowledge about democracy and politics had grown.

Table 2 also reveals that approximately 43 percent of students felt an increased interest in politics, with 62 percent more interested in what is happening in society. 34 percent of students believed the mock election spurred their political engagement, while 46 percent felt a boost in their political efficacy. However, when juxtaposed with results for political knowledge, the proportion of students resonating entirely with these latter statements is notably smaller. Collectively, these findings affirm the first hypothesis: participation in mock elections positively impacts students’ civic competence, especially when assessed from an individual student’s perspective.

An independent sample t-test was used to compare the self-reported effects of mock elections on civic competence across genders. The results, detailed in Table 3, revealed statistically significant differences between women and men in four out of the seven items measuring civic competence, particularly political knowledge and to some extent political interest, and political engagement. (For instance, in 'Political knowledge – vote': Women $M=2.16$, $SD=0.79$, Men $M=2.06$, $SD=0.91$; and so forth for the other metrics mentioned.)

Effect size calculations using Cohen’s $d$ indicate that women reported nearly 13 percent higher self-perceived effects concerning knowledge about voting procedures compared to men. For knowledge about political parties, the difference was around 4 percent in favor of women. Additionally, women indicated 5.5 percent higher self-perceived effects in political interest. In contrast, men reported a 4.5 percent higher impact on political engagement.

In sum, these findings offer partial support for the second hypothesis, suggesting that the perceived efficacy of mock elections on students’ civic competencies is marginally higher for women than men. However, the discrepancies, aside from those in political

Table 2. Students self-reported effects of mock elections on civic competence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By participating in the mock election</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Percent Applies perfectly</th>
<th>Percent Applies quite well</th>
<th>Percent Doesn’t apply particularly well</th>
<th>Percent Doesn’t apply at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have learned more about how to vote</td>
<td>8931</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have learned more about the Swedish political parties</td>
<td>8912</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know more about democracy and politics</td>
<td>8464</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have become more interested in politics</td>
<td>8531</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have become more interested in what is happening in society</td>
<td>8609</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have become more politically engaged</td>
<td>8364</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have become more certain that I can influence politics</td>
<td>8308</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
knowledge, were relatively minor. The reason women scored higher in political knowledge, and somewhat in political interest, yet not in engagement, isn’t immediately clear. One possibility is that women might initially possess superior education, information, or cognitive abilities, allowing them to benefit more from the election experience. Consequently, the advantages of mock election participation in enhancing political knowledge might be less pronounced for men.

Table 4 showcases the results of the independent-sample t-test comparing the self-reported effects of mock elections on civic competence based on ethnic background. Statistically significant differences emerge between foreign-born and Swedish-born students across all dimensions of political knowledge. For instance, in ‘Political knowledge – voting’: Swedish-born students had a mean \( M = 2.09 \) with a standard deviation \( SD = 0.86 \), while foreign-born students recorded an \( M = 2.23, SD = 0.80 \); similar disparities are evident for other political knowledge metrics. Cohen’s \( d \) effect size calculations indicate that foreign-born students report approximately 18 percent higher effects on all three political knowledge items compared to their Swedish-born counterparts.
Further analysis revealed significant differences between the two groups concerning political interest, political engagement, and political efficacy. As an illustration, in 'Political interest', Swedish-born students reported an $M = 1.29$, $SD = 0.97$, in contrast to foreign-born students with an $M = 1.39$, $SD = 0.98$. Foreign-born students conveyed a 14 percent higher self-perceived effect in political interest than Swedish-born students. Similarly, the gap in political efficacy stood at 14 percent. When examining political interests regarding both politics and society, foreign-born students reported effects higher by 10 and 16 percent, respectively.

These findings substantiate the third hypothesis, which posited that the perceived effectiveness of mock elections on students’ civic competencies would be more pronounced for foreign-born students than their Swedish-born peers. Theoretically, the differential results might be attributed to the foreign-born students’ relative lack of political resources. They potentially have more to glean from the mock elections compared to their Swedish-born counterparts.

Lastly, the t-test results reveal statistically significant differences between primary and secondary school students across all dimensions of political knowledge. Specifically, for 'Political knowledge – voting', primary students had a mean ($M$) score of 2.21 with a standard deviation ($SD$) of 0.8, whereas secondary students registered an $M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.91$. Similarly, differences were observed in 'Political knowledge – political parties' and 'Political knowledge – democracy and politics'. Using Cohen’s $d$ for effect size calculations, primary-school students reported effects that were 27 percent higher for knowledge of how to vote, 39 percent higher for knowledge of political parties, and 17 percent higher concerning knowledge of democracy and politics.

The independent t-test also indicated statistically significant differences regarding political interest (primary: $M = 1.26$, $SD = 0.97$; secondary: $M = 1.35$, $SD = 0.97$) and political engagement (primary: $M = 1.12$, $SD = 0.94$; secondary: $M = 1.18$, $SD = 0.96$). Interestingly, secondary school students recorded higher mean levels than their primary school counterparts in these areas. Cohen’s $d$ calculations demonstrated that secondary school students reported a 9 percent higher effect on political interest and a 6 percent higher effect on political engagement compared to primary school students.

In summary, the data provides partial validation of the concluding hypothesis, which posited a greater perceived effectiveness of mock elections on civic competencies for secondary students compared to primary students. This disparity was especially prominent in political knowledge. Yet, concerning political interest and engagement, secondary students noted more significant enhancements than their primary peers (Table 5).

**Summary**

Self-reported experiences from the 2022 Swedish mock election suggest that participating in such an event positively impacts students’ political knowledge. There are also discernible effects on their political interest, political engagement, and political efficacy, albeit to varying extents. However, notable and consistent statistical differences exist among students. Women, for instance, reported more pronounced effects on political knowledge and political interest than men did. In contrast, men indicated slightly
stronger impacts on their political engagement than women. Moreover, foreign-born students consistently reported higher self-perceived effects across all metrics of civic competence compared to their Swedish-born counterparts. In terms of the educational stage, mock elections seem more effective in enhancing political knowledge among primary school students. Yet, they are marginally more influential in stimulating political interest among secondary school students.

Conclusions and recommendations

The results of this study suggest that participating in mock elections bolsters students’ civic competence, at least when viewed from the perspective of individual students. One of the most salient findings is the overall positive impact of mock elections on students’ political knowledge. Given the emphasis on electoral procedures, this isn’t entirely unexpected. Moreover, it underscores the potential of mock elections in readying young individuals for their roles as active citizens. Political knowledge is an essential foundation for active citizenship for several reasons. The more students understand about politics, the better prepared they are to make informed decisions and grasp the ramifications of voting for specific parties or candidates. Additionally, political knowledge can instill confidence in students, encouraging them to participate in political discussions and express their views.

A notable insight is that foreign-born students perceived considerably more benefits from mock elections compared to their Swedish-born counterparts. This might indicate that mock elections are especially valuable in aiding less resourceful students to catch up with their more privileged peers, ensuring that all students are provided with equal opportunities to engage actively in society. In essence, the findings might suggest that mock elections can help bridge the gap in political resources. This is particularly significant given the trends in numerous democracies where political inequalities are on the rise (Dalton 2017). However, it is crucial to note that mock elections are not a catch-all solution to potential deficits in civic competence among students or broader disparities in political capital. More privileged students might already possess a head start in cultivating such competencies due to favorable home environments. This advantage might

Table 5. Self-reported effects of mock elections on civic competence by educational stage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. D.</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>Mean diff.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>S/M/L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge – voting</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>5063</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>.233**</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>3868</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>.360**</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge – political parties</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>5049</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>.151**</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>3863</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.089**</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge – democracy and politics</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>4879</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>3685</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest – politics</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>4921</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.056**</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>3652</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Political engagement</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>4771</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>3593</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political efficacy</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>4739</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>3563</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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enable them to capitalize on learning opportunities in school more effectively, potentially widening the resource gap between students over time.

Finally, mock elections seem slightly more effective in enhancing primary school students’ political knowledge, while secondary school students report greater impacts on their political interests and engagement. One potential reason is that secondary school students might already possess foundational knowledge, reducing the incremental benefits of mock elections on their understanding. Another possibility is that some secondary school students, being eligible to vote in national elections, have already acquired the requisite knowledge for informed voting. These findings suggest that educators aiming to foster comprehensive civic competencies might need to tailor mock elections according to the age and prior knowledge of their students.

How can we theoretically explain the results? As emphasized above, the perceived effectiveness of political simulations can vary based on their implementation, individual characteristics, societal norms, and the context in which they are used. This study employed the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) to understand why mock elections yield different effects among various student groups. According to this model, the diverse preexisting resources that groups bring to the simulation, the influence of their social networks, their level of political engagement, and how the simulation topic aligns with their interests and experiences can all explain differential outcomes. Applying the CVM in the context of political simulations provides insights into why distinct student groups might experience varied effects. By utilizing the principles of the CVM, educators can better anticipate these differences, thereby designing mock elections and political simulations that cater to, engage, and educate a diverse student population.

This study possesses both strengths and limitations that merit attention. Regarding its strengths, one primary advantage is the focus on the effect of mock elections on civic competence. This article introduces additional perspectives seldom addressed in research concerning mock elections. By emphasizing various facets of civic engagement and the differences between student groups, we obtain a richer understanding of how mock elections can enhance the civic competence of diverse groups. Further research is needed to discern how, and to what degree, mock elections influence the various dimensions of civic competence.

However, the study’s limitations should also be underscored. A key limitation is the reliance on students’ self-reported experiences shortly after the mock election. Consequently, the results, especially those about political knowledge—a challenging aspect of civic competence to measure—should be approached with caution. The study also does not account for external variables that could influence students’ feedback, such as their exposure to news coverage or discussions about the election with peers or family. Thus, comprehensive research is still required to grasp fully how mock elections impact different elements of students’ civic competencies.

Future research and evaluations should employ more robust methods to gauge the effects of mock elections. Given the points discussed above, three measures seem pivotal for future studies:

1. Pre- and Post-Assessment: It is essential to assess civic competencies both before and after the mock election. This facilitates the identification of changes directly attributable to the mock election experience.
2. Short- and Long-Term Effects: Evaluating both immediate and extended effects allows us to better understand the lasting impacts of mock elections on students’ civic competencies. For instance, prior research has not shown effects on students’ future electoral participation (Öhrvall and Oskarsson 2020). Yet, mock elections might exert long-term influences on other democracy-relevant behaviors and competencies. Accordingly, research should increasingly rely on longitudinal studies that track the same individuals over time.

3. Use of Control Groups: Implementing control groups more extensively helps account for external factors unrelated to the mock election. By comparing students who did and did not participate in the mock election, we can more accurately determine the effects of the political simulation. However, these measures also come with challenges. For example, pre-and post-tests do not account for external factors unrelated to the mock election. There is also a potential that students perform better in post-tests due to familiarity with the pretest format. Furthermore, when using control groups, ethical and practical concerns arise. Is it appropriate or even ethical to exclude some students from a potentially beneficial intervention purely for research purposes?

Nevertheless, these measures, whether individually or in tandem, can advance our understanding of the impact of policy simulations and mock elections. Stakeholders, especially government agencies that organize and finance mock elections, should ensure that future evaluations hinge on robust evaluation methods. While this approach may be costlier, the long-term benefits include refining mock elections and political simulations to better prepare future generations to be engaged citizens.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Notes on contributor**

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**PSNow information**

a. A new study on mock elections in Sweden with 9,000 students aged 13-19 reveals a positive impact on civic competence. Results show varied effects based on gender, ethnicity, and educational stage. Valuable insights for enhancing civic education!

b. Dive into the latest research on mock elections in Sweden, where over 9,000 students aged 13-19 participated in a 2022 study. Uncover the positive impact on civic competence, with nuanced effects based on gender, ethnicity, and educational stage. Results show heightened political knowledge in primary school students and increased interest and engagement in secondary school students. Foreign-born students reported greater effects, highlighting the need for inclusive civic education practices. This study suggests valuable insights for refining civic education strategies and calls for rigorous research methods in future assessments.
Can Participation in Mock Elections Stimulate Civic Competence Among Students?

In an era marked by rapid societal changes and a growing emphasis on active citizenship, educators are seeking innovative ways to cultivate civic competence among the youth. One increasingly popular method is the incorporation of mock elections into the educational landscape. A recent study conducted in Sweden sheds light on the transformative potential of this pedagogical tool, revealing intriguing insights into how it shapes the civic competence of students aged 13-19.

Mock elections have gained traction in the U.S. and European countries, providing students with a hands-on experience of the democratic process. The study, analyzing data from over 9,000 participants in a 2022 mock election in Sweden, sought to understand how such simulations enhance students’ civic competence. The findings offer a nuanced perspective on the impact of mock elections, considering factors such as gender, ethnic background, and educational stage.

One of the key takeaways is the positive influence of mock elections on students’ self-reported political knowledge. The study found that participation in mock elections significantly boosted primary school students’ understanding of the election and political concepts. This underscores the potential of hands-on experiences in shaping the foundational knowledge needed for active civic engagement.

Interestingly, the impact of mock elections varied among demographic groups. Foreign-born students reported experiencing greater effects than their Swedish-born counterparts, highlighting the importance of inclusivity in civic education. This observation prompts a crucial reflection on the design and delivery of civic education programs to ensure they resonate with the diverse backgrounds of students.

Gender dynamics also played a role in the outcomes. Female students, on average, displayed heightened political knowledge and interest compared to their male counterparts. In contrast, male students demonstrated higher political engagement. These findings challenge stereotypes about political engagement and suggest that tailored approaches may be needed to address students’ unique needs and interests based on gender.

The study delved into the impact across educational stages, revealing intriguing trends. While mock elections seemed to enhance political knowledge more in primary school students, they had a more pronounced effect on the political interests and engagement of secondary school students. This suggests that the format and content of mock elections may need to be adapted to suit students’ developmental stages for maximum efficacy.

As educators and policymakers navigate the evolving landscape of civic education, these findings offer valuable insights. Mock elections serve as more than just a simulation of the democratic process; they emerge as a dynamic tool capable of influencing the nuanced facets of civic competence, at least when viewed from the perspective of the individual student. The study’s emphasis on the need for rigorous research methods in assessing the impact of mock elections underlines the importance of evidence-based educational practices.

In conclusion, the study on mock elections in Sweden paints a promising picture of their potential to shape informed and engaged citizens. It prompts educators, researchers, and policymakers to consider the multifaceted impact of mock elections and tailor civic education strategies to boost active and informed citizenship.

References


