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The Classroom – Schoolhouse of Democracy?

Paul A. Djupe

January 30, 2018

By Paul A. Djupe

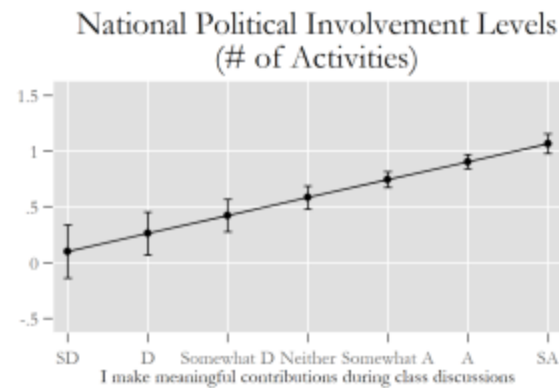
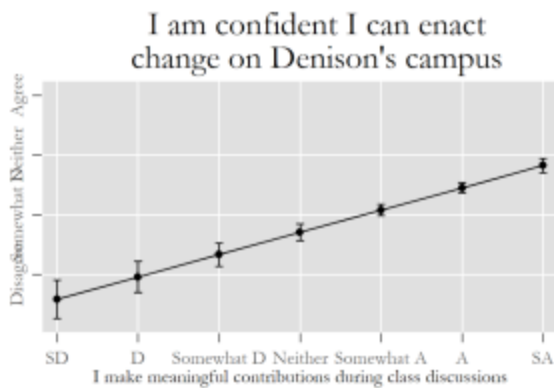
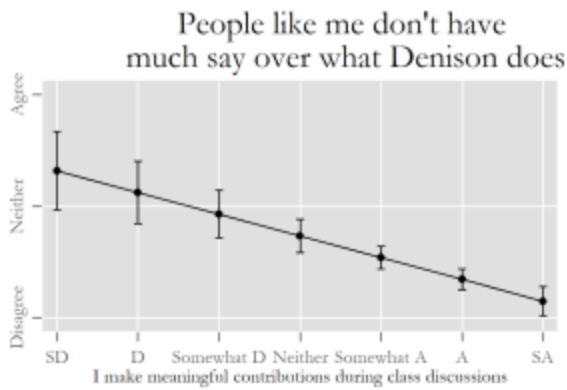
[photo credit: I took the photo in fall 2016 on the quad, but I don't know who drew this – anyone want to take credit?]

My species, the one that stands at the front and brings markers to class, is frequently touting the benefits of education for democracy: the educated are more interested in the world around them, they take care of themselves and lessen the burdens on limited governments, and they hold representatives accountable for their promises and for societal performance. There are many reasons for the tight link between education and citizenship, but a principle component is the metaphorical value of the classroom. To engage with your peers, to share your opinions in public, to contribute to a collective endeavor are features of most classroom experiences at a liberal arts college and they are also strongly reminiscent of essential citizenship activities.

Is that true at Denison?

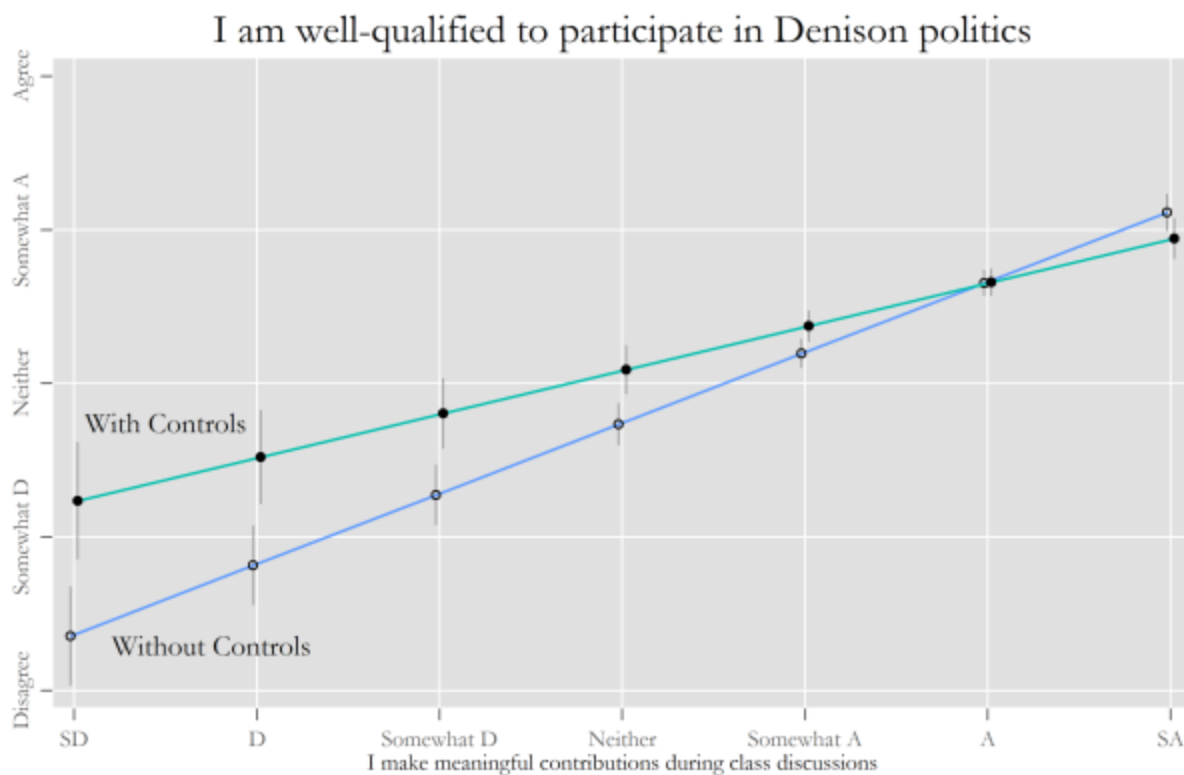
In the fall of 2017, my senior seminar conducted a survey of over 700 students (the sample looked much like the student body with the exception of a higher than average GPA) that asked questions suitable, if not ideal, for this investigation. We measured classroom engagement by asking students to agree or disagree with the statement, “I make meaningful contributions during class discussions.” Denison students are quite likely to agree that they do – about $\frac{2}{3}$ agree or strongly agree and $\frac{1}{3}$ is less confident. From my perspective, this is generally an accurate self-assessment.

The links between robust classroom engagement and participatory orientations and actions is clear. Those who engage in class have more political efficacy, which we measured in terms of their perceived influence, qualifications, and confidence. It's reassuring when a relationship holds across many different measures. And it's not limited to Denison! More active participants in class are also more likely to engage in political activities, such as working for a campaign, displaying a political sign or sticker, or attending a rally.



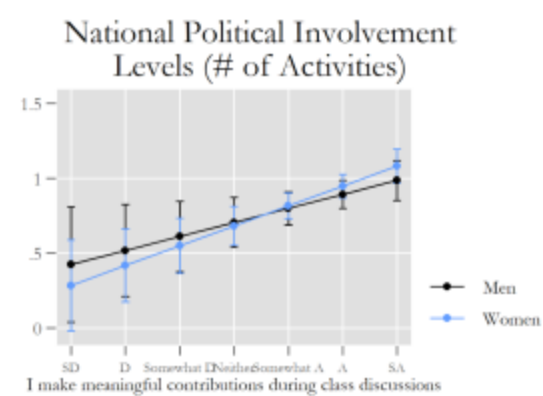
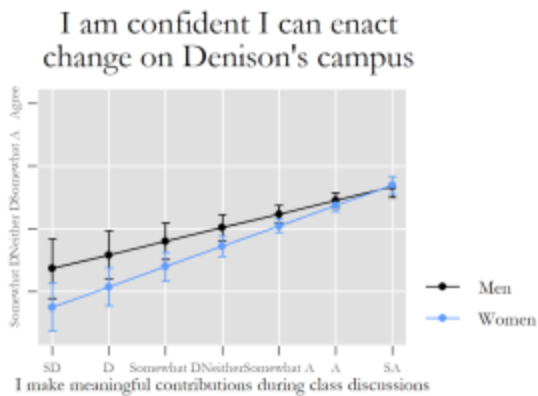
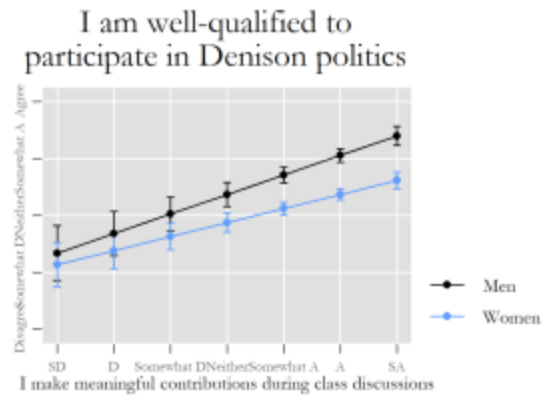
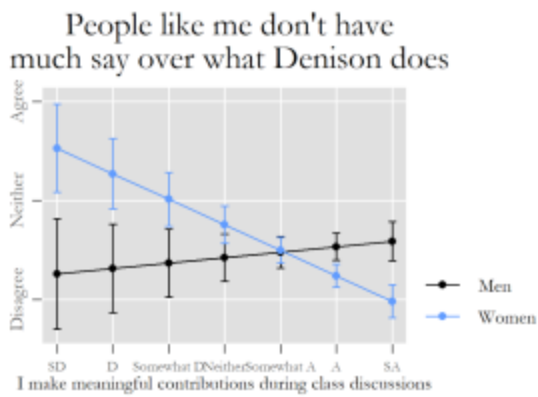
But it's possible there are other factors at play. Maybe this apparent link is just a function of hard work or smarts (e.g., GPA, which is correlated with classroom engagement). It's possible that classroom engagement is a function of personality – extroverts do both politics and talk in class. Maybe it's a function of leadership – the co-curricular movement on college campuses likes to tout how integral those activities are to student development. Maybe it's just a function of class year where the closer you get to graduation the more you both talk in class and engage the world. We'll need to account for all of these possibilities before declaring the democratic successes of the classroom. How does this metaphor that keeps me warm at night hold up in the face of cold, hard, statistical reality?

Really well. The plot below compares a relationship shown above with the estimated relationship after statistically controlling for lots of things.[1] The effect of classroom engagement shrinks a bit, but not by much and only on the low end. Sure, personality does make a difference and helps some engage in class more, but it hurts others (and personality attributes that help public engagement are inconsistently linked to academic performance). Yes, seniors are much more likely to say they are efficacious at Denison than first years, so are those who have held leadership positions on campus. And, sure, there's a gender gap. Wait, there's a gender gap?



Yeah, there's a gender gap, which is weird since women have a higher GPA than men and academic performance is tightly linked to classroom engagement. In the "well-qualified" question, women have a score 10% lower than men do after controlling for many things. What I want to know is one further analytic step – does men and women's classroom engagement work in the same metaphorical way to increase civic engagement?

Yes and no. Classroom engagement has an enormous effect on women's efficacy, that they have a say over what Denison does (notice that steep negative slope in top left graph panel). It has no effect on men; it's startling that men tend to disagree that people like them don't have much say over what Denison does. In the rest of the tests, the effect of classroom engagement works about the same for men and women, though women appear to be more reticent to apply their classroom prowess to their civic qualifications (there's research on something related by [Ondercin and Jones-White](#) though it works a bit differently in their research). Fortunately, and I say 'fortunately' because I like equality, classroom engagement is equally linked to political activity levels outside of Denison. This is the big payoff to me. This is the story I tell and wanted to find evidence for so I could continue telling it.



Students: Find a way to speak up. The classroom is a democratic schoolhouse and your fellow citizens will be happy you went there. Professors: Continue to create opportunities for student engagement in discussion. Then continue to see the payoffs as your students enter the 'real world.'

Paul Djupe is a local cyclist who happens to have taught political science at Denison since the Harry Potter series was first published. You can learn more about his work at pauldjupe.com.

Note

1. The model included the following variables: sex, race, class year, a democratic norms index (e.g., it is essential to consider multiple sides to find the truth), the Big 5 personality dimensions, and leadership positions held on campus.