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Kick Starting Student Self-Governance: The Student Advisory Board

Paul A. Djupe

September 21, 2020

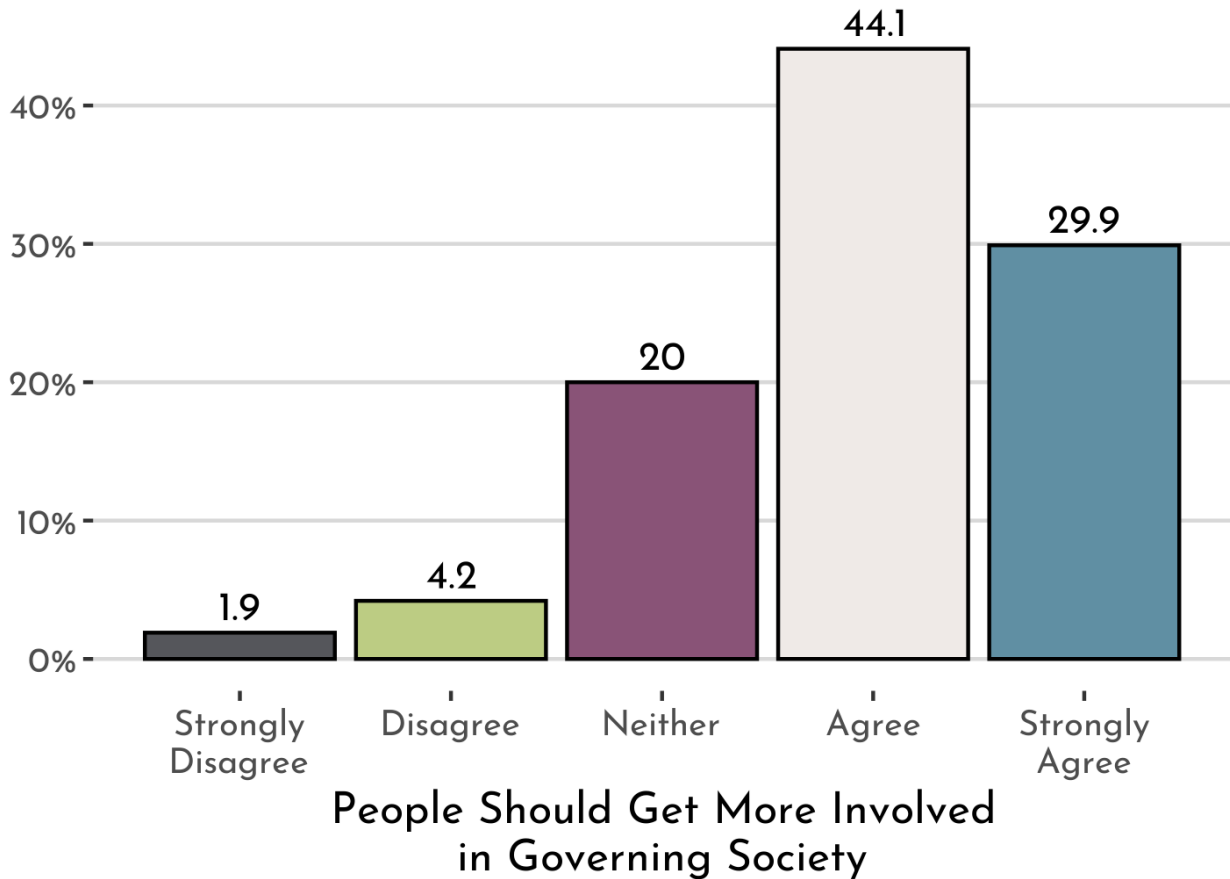
By Paul A. Djupe

With trust in government at an all-time low, congressional failure to negotiate another pandemic bailout package, and the president attacking the integrity of the electoral process, we have multiple indicators that democracy is fading in the United States. What are we going to do about it? How can we revitalize democracy?

There are many things we can do, including registering to vote and voting early in person or by mail. But voting is not enough and we need to dig in and reinforce our support for democratic practices. One way to practice democracy at a deeper level is by participating in shared governance. It is with just this motivation that DCGA created the Student Advisory Board in 2019.[note] The SAB would bring together a group of students representative of the campus to deliberate over a resolution passed by DCGA, issuing a recommendation of support or opposition. From the language from the resolution creating the Board, Denisonians are not currently invested in student governance. So, perhaps here is one place where we plant a flag and convince ourselves that apathy is not ok and democracy is worth fighting for.

Fortunately, Denison students appear ready for this responsibility since they say there is a need for getting more involved in politics. Nearly three-quarters of survey respondents in the February 2020 survey agreed that “people should get more involved in governing society” and only 6 percent disagreed. That’s quite a high level of support for a generation that is often tagged as uninterested in collective action.

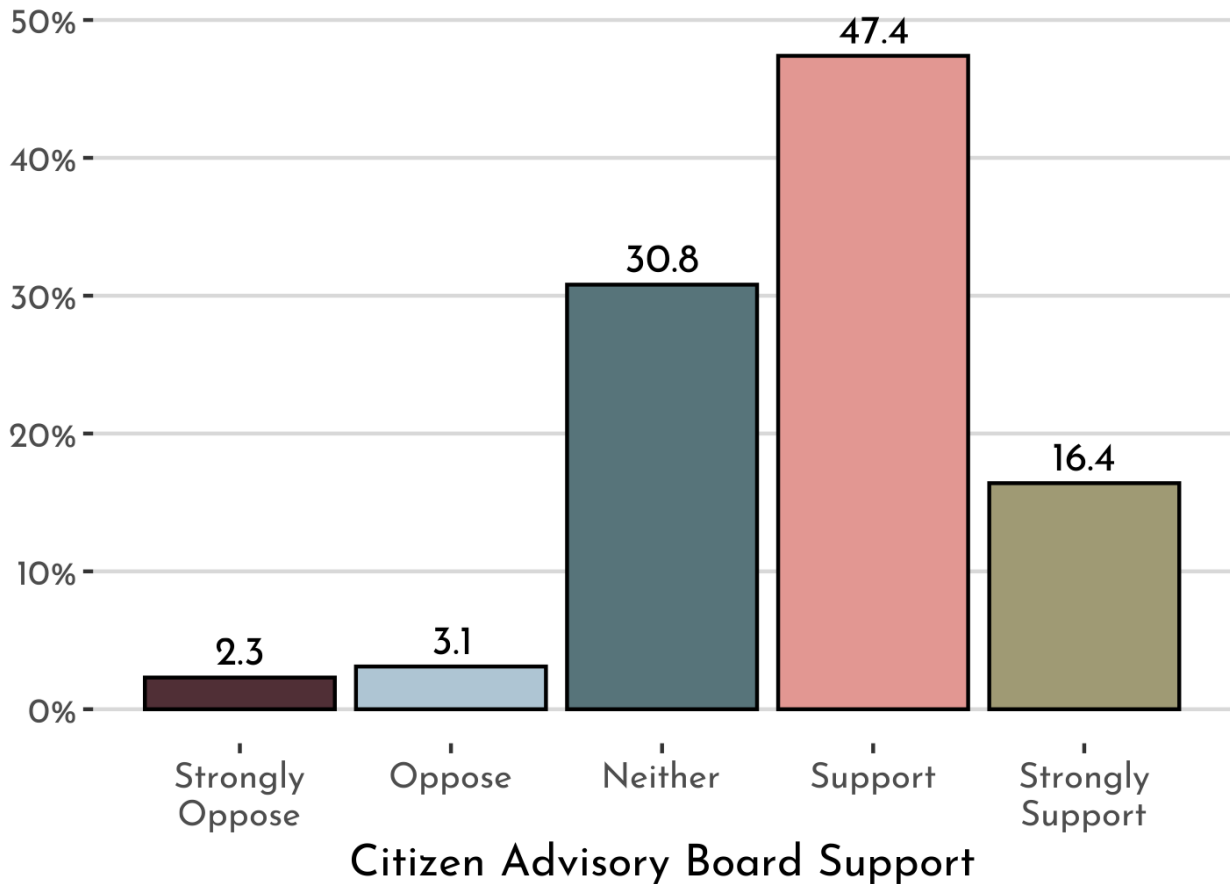
Strong Support for Democratic Involvement



Source: February 2020 Survey.

This is easy to say, but what about getting involved in consequential, time-consuming ways? We have data that shows that the Student Advisory Board has a high level of support on campus. For instance, in the February 2020 survey, we asked “In February 2019, DCGA passed a resolution creating a “Citizen Advisory Board” composed of ~20 students drawn to be representative of campus. The purpose of the CAB is to deliberate on 1-2 proposals from DCGA each semester. Do you support or oppose this effort?” Support is somewhat lower than the generic version of getting involved noted above, but still almost two-thirds of survey respondents support this effort and, again, only 5 percent oppose it.

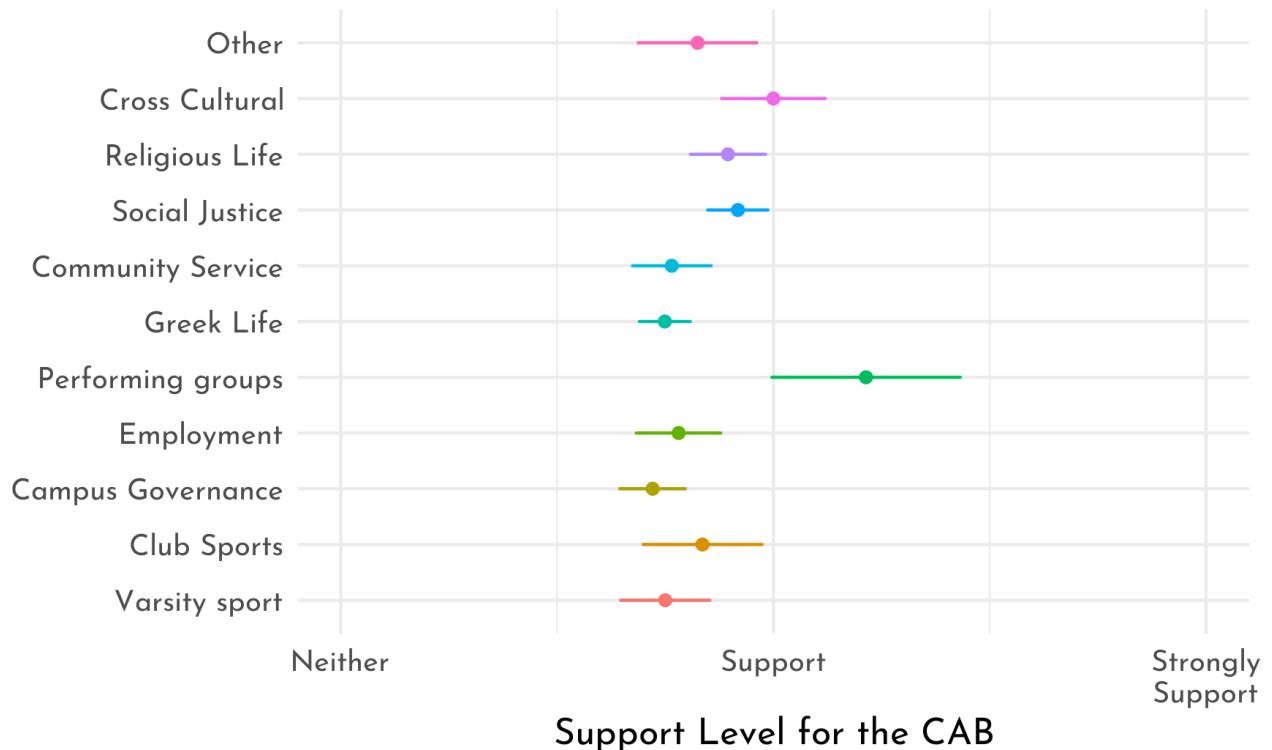
There is Little Opposition to the CAB



Source: February 2020 Survey.

There do not appear to be obvious pockets of resistance either. As seen below, support is widespread and relatively uniform across campus hovering right around “support” on average. Most groups are indistinguishable in their level of support, while participants in social justice, religious life, cross-cultural engagement, and performing art groups indicate greater support than some groups.

CAB Support is Widespread



Source: February 2020 Survey

In a letter to campus after the 2016 election, Adam Weinberg helped reinforce these ideas:

As a college that embraces autonomous thinking, we expect students to use their liberal arts education to understand public issues and to form their own views about them. You have a right (we would argue an obligation) to know the issues of the day, to use your education to understand and formulate views on them, and to work through democratic processes to advocate for what you believe is right, even while remaining open to the possibility that your mind will be changed by those with whom you differ.

While only one way to engage democratic processes, the Student Advisory Board is likely the first in the nation of its kind. To be sure, these sorts of deliberative forums have been used widely for a number of years, helping to bring citizen input directly into the policy process. For instance, Oregon's Citizens Initiative Review has a group of citizens review ballot initiatives and issue recommendations that are then sent to all voters in the state. But we could find no examples of student deliberation attached to student government.

This is the right time to capitalize on the desire for involvement, to sink efforts into meaningful democratic work. There are many ways to do this, but the Student Advisory Board is a worthy one for Denison and DCGA to pursue.

Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who coincidentally has taught social science research methods and political science at Denison for millenia. He started onetwentyseven.blog a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action. He's on Twitter and you should be too, along with your president.

Note

The Student Advisory Board was the brainchild of Nathaniel Beach (class of 2020), who conducted summer research with me in order to build an empirical case for the project from academic and his own work. The resolution was cosponsored by Mayank Kumar (2021) and Taylor Shook (2020).