

Learning About Politics in Low-Income Communities

Poverty and Political Knowledge

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Many take for granted that children living in impoverished communities are disadvantaged on several social outcomes, including civic knowledge, because of their poverty and the circumstances that go along with this condition. However, most analyses of poor communities are conducted only in urban neighborhoods. In this article, the author examines the paradox of small-town life: On one hand, many rural areas and small towns are just as or even more impoverished than many urban neighborhoods; on the other hand, these same communities are praised as the most civically minded and politically knowledgeable places within the United States. How can two similarly poor community types produce such different outcomes? The author shows that the best explanation for these differences is the social interaction that characterizes small towns and rural areas. Political discussion within smaller towns is beneficial for adolescents' levels of political knowledge, whereas this discussion in urban areas is associated with lower levels of knowledge.

Keywords: *political knowledge; political engagement; civic engagement; political socialization; neighborhood effects; contextual effects; poverty*

Rural poverty has been and continues to be a way of life for many Americans. In 2000, the metropolitan poverty rate stood at 10.8%, whereas the rural poverty rate was 13.4%. In spite of the higher rate in small towns, most social science research focuses on impoverished urban areas. Growing up in poor, urban neighborhoods is detrimental for school achievement, health and

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well-being, socioemotional functioning, and civic engagement and political knowledge. In contrast, and in spite of their poverty, small towns and rural areas are often described as bastions of American civic life. Why would these two impoverished environments have such different patterns of civic engagement and different levels of political knowledge?

I argue that these divergent patterns are due at least in part to the influence of social networks and positive social interactions in smaller towns. Informal networks that facilitate social development are often lacking in modern urban neighborhoods (Sampson, 1992; Wilson, 1987, 1996), but these types of relationships are more common in smaller towns and rural areas. Individuals are more knowledgeable and participatory in communities where they know and trust one another (Putnam, 2000). Here, I explore the differences in political knowledge among adolescents in smaller compared with more urban communities.

Impoverished Communities and Social Outcomes

The scholarship on the negative effects of poverty on many social outcomes is almost entirely based on urban neighborhoods, stimulated in part by Wilson's (1987, 1996) work on the "urban underclass." The urban focus is also largely practical; indeed, one look at a sampling of indicators of social and economic status confirms that life in certain parts of cities is abysmal. Even so, children in urban America are not alone in their deprivation. The nonmetropolitan poverty rate has exceeded the metropolitan poverty rate since these rates were officially measured in the 1960s (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2004). In 2000, the average urban resident made over \$12,000 more per year than the average rural resident. These differences are due in part to the wider income distributions in urban than rural areas. Poverty is more common and widespread in rural areas. And although the average cost of living is lower in rural than urban areas (Nord, 2000), rural residents often have higher costs for transportation and medical care (Rogers, 1988). Rural areas and smaller towns suffer from many of the same problems that poor, urban neighborhoods face: high levels of unemployment, low levels of educational attainment, geographic isolation, and the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Given these similarities between small towns and urban communities, one might expect similar social outcomes. In some cases, this would be right. Rural schoolchildren score much lower on standardized tests and are more likely to drop out of school than those in the suburbs or urban areas

(Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Single parenthood is on the rise in smaller communities (Lichter & Eggebeen, 1992), especially among those in poverty. In fact, in 1995, the proportion of single-parent families below the poverty rate within rural America was essentially the same as that in urban areas (32.8% compared with 32.2%; see "Poverty and Well-Being," 1999). Furthermore, with the losses in the agricultural and industrial sectors that once typified the rural labor force, jobs in the low-paying service sector have been unable to replace the wages and benefits to which many were accustomed. Even so, many scholars extol the virtues of small-town civic life, while they bemoan the lack of civic mindedness in poor urban neighborhoods. Why would similarly impoverished environments produce such different patterns of engagement?

Although many smaller towns and rural areas have the same problems that poor, urban neighborhoods face, one of the major differences is the types of interactions that take place and the relationships that form within these communities. Social interaction is the mechanism that translates community characteristics into particular behavioral outcomes (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Two theories describe, generally, how the level of poverty influences social interaction within a community.

Theories of collective socialization and contagion describe how the affluence of a community can affect a variety of social outcomes. Collective socialization theories suggest that because adults in more well-off communities are more highly educated, steadily employed, and more participatory in civic life than adults in poor communities, they bestow benefits on all young people within the communities (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Wilson, 1987). Contagion theories describe how behaviors, both good and bad, spread through peer interaction. They assume that if children grow up in communities where their peers drop out of school, for example, they will be more likely to drop out; and likewise, if all their peers go to college, they are more likely to go to college (Crane, 1991; Granovetter, 1978; Schelling, 1978).

Even though these theories were mostly developed with poor, urban communities in mind, they still indicate that the types of adult-child and child-child interactions within a community have important influences on the socialization of young people. This interaction is mediated in part by the level of affluence or poverty within the community. Individuals, including young people, are a part of particular local contexts; these contexts structure interaction patterns through which people receive information about a wide range of activities. This community context creates a particular culture, or bias, that is transmitted from generation to generation through interaction in the community.

Although the economic standing of a community is undoubtedly a component of this culture, we should not expect the experience of poverty or affluence to be uniform across different environments with varying biases and contexts. Impoverished urban communities are often characterized as environments of social disorganization (Sampson, 1992; Wilson, 1987) and places where the “community structure is unable to realize the common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls” (Sampson, 2001, p. 8). The characteristics of many poor, urban neighborhoods, and thus the social interactions within them, often do not facilitate the kind of environment in which individuals can come together to achieve common goals. The networks and interactions within smaller communities, however, are characterized quite differently.

Social Interaction in Rural America

Poverty within small towns is “geographically concentrated in the same way that urban poverty is confined by neighborhoods; and rural children in poverty face the same challenges as poor urban children—substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and educational failure” (Nadel & Sagawa, 2002, p. 12). It is often assumed that urban communities are the only places that suffer from a lack of adequate institutions, such as good schools, community centers, and health clinics. However, these facilities are often just as lacking in rural communities, which also lack the money to hire and maintain the best teachers, to pay for new textbooks and equipment for school activities, and to attract medical practitioners and community leaders.

In spite of their poverty and hardship, individuals in rural areas are more likely to vote and to engage in other civic activities than those in poor urban areas (Putnam, 2000, chaps. 7, 12; Oliver, 2001; Verba & Nie, 1972). Monroe (1977, p. 75) finds a negative association between urbanism and turnout that is stronger in magnitude than education, income, and race. Looking at particular counties in Illinois, he shows that turnout is highest in the most rural areas, declines a bit in small towns, even more in suburbs, and is lowest in urban areas. Much of decline in voter turnout in the past 30 years can be explained by looking at the declining levels within the nation’s largest 32 metropolitan areas (Nardulli, Dalager, & Greco, 1996). Outside of these cities, turnout has remained steady.

An illustrative example can be found in Perry, Alabama. This community is small (only 11,800 residents) and is one of the poorest places in America (with an average income of \$20,000 in 2000). But in the 2000 election, nearly 70% of adults in Perry County voted, and in 1996, 67% turned out. Accord-

ing to a Perry County commissioner, "Voting is part of our culture, and we continue to preach it" (Scripps Howard News Service, 2004).

The commissioner points to an underlying rationale for higher civic knowledge and involvement in rural areas: a network of strong, positive social bonds that create a particular "culture" or "context" that promotes the importance of and fosters participation in politics. In smaller communities, "human relationships are intimate, enduring and based on a clear understanding of where each person stands in society" (Bell & Newby, 1972, p. 23). Often, an individual's identity is tied to the smaller community because families tend to "stay put" and are less mobile than those living in large, urban neighborhoods (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Martinez-Brawley, 1990). Older sociological scholarship contends that people feel alienated from one another because of the high population density and heterogeneity in large (urban) areas (Toennies, 1887; Wirth, 1938).

The portrayal of the close ties and participatory nature in small towns contrasts with Wilson's (1987, 1996) descriptions of informal social networks that are lacking in urban America. The difference between these networks and those in small towns, and thus why outcomes are often more positive in small towns, can be accounted for by what Sampson (2001) refers to as "the believed capacity for collective action" (p. 13). People can come together for any number of reasons. If they do not believe that they can effect change, or somehow obtain some of what they need, however, the relationships are less likely to support the values and behaviors that would allow a community to overcome its impoverished status and participate in the political system. The theory does not assume that social bonds and networks are absent in urban areas but rather that they are often not of the type that facilitate political knowledge and participation. Neighbors in poor inner cities, as well as small towns, often rely on one another for child care, financial support, and emotional support (Danziger & Chih Lin, 2000), but these relationships in small towns also incorporate civic or community activities.

Because poverty is more evenly distributed in rural areas, poor residents are not isolated from the rest of the community. Rather, all residents, whether they are poor or middle class, attend the same schools and places of worship, and they live in close proximity to one another. In cities, however, poor residents are often isolated from mainstream society, which "deprives inner-city residents not only of conventional role models . . . but also of the social resources (including social contacts) provided by mainstream social networks" (Wilson, 1996, p. 66). Social networks provide young people with additional caregivers, who provide social control and cohesion (Aschenbrenner, 1975; Jarrett, 1995). These networks also facilitate opportunities for young people to discuss current events and local affairs. It is the presence of

these networks in many small towns that helps foster civic engagement as well as political knowledge. On the basis of this scholarship, I posit then that social interaction is the key to understanding why two types of impoverished communities yield different outcomes related to political knowledge.

Data and Methods

The data for this research are from the Metro Civic Values Study, a study of students at 29 public high schools (Grades 9 to 12) across the state of Maryland and northern Virginia (Gimpel, 1999-2000). These data are unique because unlike national random samples in which 1 to 2 students per community are selected, these data were designed with the aim of analyzing the roles that communities play in political socialization, and as such, 70 to 150 students were surveyed at each location. The sample was selected using multi-stage cluster-sampling techniques. In the first stage, 14 clusters, in the form of school districts, were selected within the entire state of Maryland, along with 4 in Virginia. These clusters were designed to represent urban, suburban, and rural contexts of varying levels of homogeneity on relevant population characteristics, such as race, socioeconomic status, political partisanship, and participation.

At the next stage, researchers selected 29 schools out of the 14 clusters by random draw. Each district had a minimum of 1 school selected. They selected a few more schools in the districts with larger populations because of their greater heterogeneity across the relevant dimensions. The resulting sample is representative of the overall population of the area (Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003).¹

The categorization of communities into rural, suburban, and urban is highly problematic. The typical methods used to place communities into these categories use either population or census codes for metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs). Yet almost all communities within the United States fall into an MSA, and thus there is little variation, resulting in inadequately differentiating between an “urban” community and a “suburban” one. Similarly, the use of population poses problems, because it cannot adequately differentiate between the middle categories of communities. Few would quarrel that a community of 3,000 would not be considered urban; likewise, one of 2 million is not a small town. Population certainly differentiates between the poles, but it does not sufficiently distinguish between the middle categories. For example, two towns with similar populations can have very different levels of density and are thus very different places in which to grow up. Such

places are not likely to impart the same sets of norms or have the same sets of interaction patterns.

Because almost any scheme to demarcate clear lines between these different types of communities would be somewhat arbitrary, I use a continuous measure, population density, to measure community type. This continuous measure provides greater variation than a categorical scheme. Thus, when I describe the results, I use terms such as *more rural* or *more urban*. Even so, it is worth noting that the small communities in these data are not among the most rural communities in the United States. This may actually make my case more difficult; if it is true that social interaction can mediate the negative effects of poverty in these slightly larger small towns, it is likely the effects will be even stronger in the most rural communities in the United States.

Finally, once the school sites were chosen, a representative sample of students was selected on the basis of grade level, achievement level, race and ethnicity, and parental socioeconomic status. At each school, students were surveyed in their social studies classes in the springs of 1999 and 2000, for a total sample size of 3,062. The resulting sample represents a broad cross-section of economic, political, and demographic contexts.² The appendix compares the racial breakdown of the subsamples to the populations within each community and also shows the sample sizes within each school. Other data on the representativeness of the sample to its population can be found in Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht's (2003) *Cultivating Democracy*.

The community-level variables were constructed using U.S. census data matched to the schools' ZIP codes. Although admittedly, the use of ZIP codes as proxies for communities presents some problems, this is an acceptable approximation to obtain socioeconomic, racial, and political data on communities (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993). These respondents attend public schools, making it less likely than if they were enrolled in private schools that they would live in markedly different communities from the ones in which they attend school.

The dependent variable is political knowledge. Political knowledge is an essential feature for most other forms of civic engagement. It fosters citizens' abilities to connect their personal interest with specific public policies (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996); those with higher levels of knowledge are more consistent in their views across issues and across time (Galston, 2001); knowledge is a key element in helping people understand political institutions and events (Popkin & Dimock, 1999); and, perhaps most important, political knowledge promotes democratic values, including tolerance and most forms of political participation. Young people with higher levels of knowledge are more active in their schools and communities (Niemi & Junn, 1998). By political knowledge, my concern is with the fundamental under-

Table 1
Description of Variables Used in
Hierarchical Linear Modeling Analysis

Student-Level Dependent Variable
<p>Political knowledge: number of questions out of seven answered correctly, then rescaled from 0 to 100</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How many Senators does each state have in the U.S. Senate? 2. In the U.S. House of Representatives, the member who is elected to preside is called? 3. Where can you find the Bill of Rights? 4. Presidential elections are held every _____ years? 5. The system of government in which power is divided between two levels of government is? 6. Who is the current Vice President of the U.S.? 7. The current Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court is _____.
Student-Level Independent Variables
<p>Civics courses taken: semesters of civics-related coursework taken (0 to 5) Dislike civics courses: dummy variable (1 = dislikes civics, 0 = likes civics) No college plans: dummy variable (1 = not planning to attend college, 0 = planning for college) Female: dummy variable (1 = female, 0 = male) Black: dummy variable (1 = African American, 0 = not African American) Inverse income: inverse of parental income scale (0 to 41, where 41 = lowest income) Political discussion: number of days a week students discuss politics with others (0 to 7)</p>
Community-Level Independent Variables
<p>Density: measures urbanization with community in persons per square mile (72 to 19,921) Percentage less than \$15,000: measures poverty within community (1.8% to 34.7%)</p>

standing of political structures, historically significant events, and the identities and roles of officeholders in the political system. The measure was created as an index of the number of correct answers out of the seven knowledge-related questions on the survey and then rescaled from 0 to 100 to make the interpretation of results easier (see Table 1 for the specific wordings of questions).³

There are two sets of independent variables: individual traits from the survey and community characteristics based on census data (see Table 1). The individual variables are controls for several traditional civic education indicators that are known to influence political knowledge. First is the number of civics courses a student has taken; civics courses tend to have a positive influence on political knowledge (Niemi & Junn, 1998). Because the respondents

were predominantly from one state, civics requirements are fairly uniform across the population studied. A student's affinity for civics courses is also important; students who like their civics courses are more knowledgeable than those who dislike them. I include a dummy variable on whether a student dislikes civics courses. I also use a dummy variable to measure respondents' educational aspirations, because students who plan to go to college are more politically knowledgeable and engaged than those who plan to complete their education with high school. Finally, the other control is for gender effects, because girls still generally have lower levels of knowledge than boys.

In addition to these individual-level controls, the focus of this article is on the interactions of parental income with the size and economic composition of the communities. The estimations include the individual measure of parental income and cross-level interactions with three community-level variables.⁴ Population density measures the urbanization, or size, of the community and is calculated as the number of people per square mile. The proportion of the community's residents who make less than \$15,000 per year measures the degree of poverty within the community.⁵ Because some might argue that any differences in outcomes between rural and urban areas may be due to racial differences in poverty, I control for whether a respondent is Black and examine cross-level interactions with race, density, and the percentage of the community's residents who make less than \$15,000. Finally, a second model examines the influence of social interaction (students' political discussions with family members and friends) on political knowledge and includes cross-level interactions with discussion, density, and community poverty.

To conduct these multivariate analyses, I use hierarchical linear modeling (HLM). It is possible to create a series of interaction terms in a regular ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model to account for cross-level interactions, but OLS regression does not provide accurate estimates for data at multiple levels of analysis. HLM maintains the assumptions of linearity and normality that are in OLS regression but deals with the special statistical challenges of data analysis when individual observations are clustered within schools, geographic jurisdictions, or distinct temporal periods rather than independently distributed. HLM provides a means to estimate the variability of the regression coefficients (slopes and intercepts) across communities (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Steenbergen & Jones, 2002). The main difference between HLM and OLS is in the error terms; the HLM model provides a more conservative estimate of the standard errors of coefficients than OLS models.

Table 2
Estimation of Fixed Effects for
Political Knowledge, Excluding Social Interaction

	γ Coefficient (<i>SE</i>)	
<i>Intercept</i>	79.979***	(3.058)
<i>Inverse income</i> (higher value = lower income)		
<i>Intercept</i>	-0.423***	(0.089)
<i>Density</i>	-0.00002**	(0.000009)
% less than \$15,000	0.007*	(0.004)
<i>Race</i> (1 = Black)		
<i>Intercept</i>	-9.333***	(2.210)
<i>Density</i>	-0.0004	(0.0002)
% less than \$15,000	0.144*	(0.083)
<i>Controls</i>		
<i>Civics courses taken</i>	1.199***	(0.234)
<i>Female</i>	-5.210**	(1.379)
<i>No plans to attend college</i>	-7.745**	(1.970)
<i>Dislikes civics courses</i>	-6.111***	(1.231)

Note: Percentage reduction in error from fully unconditional model: 9.95%. Regression coefficients were derived using hierarchical linear modeling. Italicized variables are individual variables. The Level 2 variables are indented and placed underneath the Level 1 variables for which they were controlled.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Results

Table 2 shows the results from the hierarchical linear regression model for political knowledge, excluding social interaction effects.⁶ The direct effects, or individual-level effects, are not surprising. Individuals from low-income families score lower than those with higher incomes, African American students score significantly lower than other students (by 9 points), female students score lower than male students, college-bound adolescents are more knowledgeable, and those who dislike their civics courses are less knowledgeable than those who enjoy these classes. It is important to note that civics courses also improve knowledge; with each additional semester of civics, students score 1.2 points higher on the knowledge test.

The most interesting results are with the cross-level interactions. The results should be read as follows: lower income students score lower than higher income students; lower income students in more urban areas have lower scores than poor students in smaller towns; and poor students living in impoverished communities score slightly higher on the knowledge test, controlling for urbanization. The low-income students living in poor, smaller

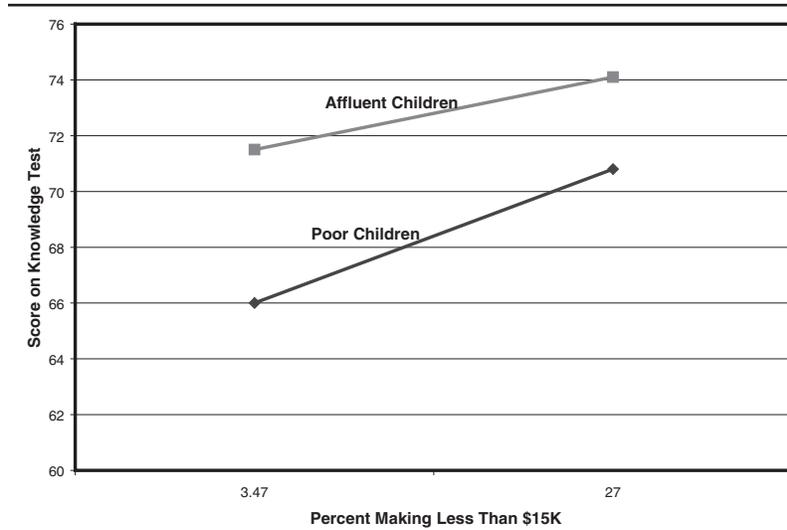
towns are more knowledgeable than similarly situated students in urban areas. Thus, growing up in a poor community does not necessarily consign one to low levels of political knowledge, provided the impoverished community is a smaller town.

These results hold even controlling for the respondent's race. The benefits of growing up in a smaller town are not merely because the communities in population area are generally all White. The cross-level interactions for race underscore this fact. Although Black students in more urban areas have lower knowledge scores, political knowledge actually rises among Black students in poor communities, controlling for urbanization. Although there are few Black students in these smaller towns ($n = 20$), a difference-of-means test shows that they score 7 points higher than Blacks in the more urban areas (65% correct compared with 58%, respectively; $p < .10$).

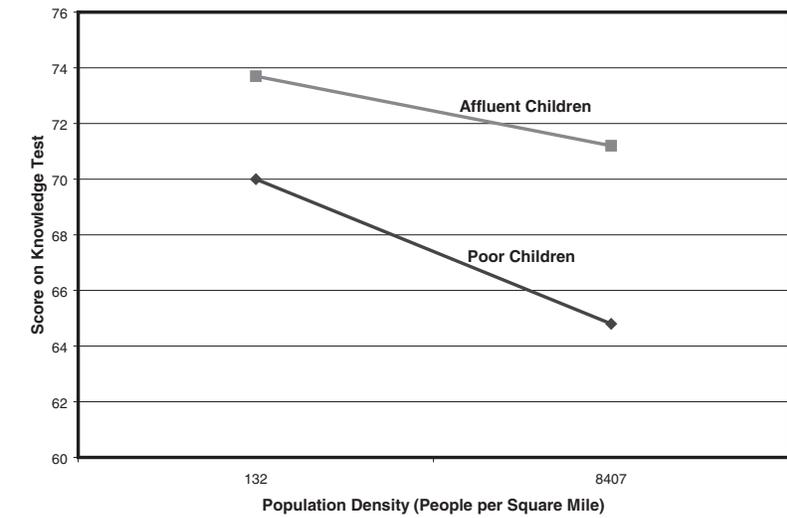
Figure 1 shows graphical representations of the relationships between political knowledge, urbanization (density), and poverty (income less than \$15,000). The graphs are drawn from the HLM regression model, and thus each variable in the model has been controlled. The darker line represents students who are poor, and the lighter line represents more affluent students. The graphs illustrate the influence of communities. Regardless of family background, knowledge increases in poor communities and decreases in urban communities. Affluent students, in any community, score higher on knowledge tests than lower income students. One would probably assume that knowledge would be highest among affluent children in affluent towns, but knowledge is higher in poorer communities (controlling for urbanization) among both higher and lower income children. Smaller towns, despite their poverty, are better able to foster political knowledge than wealthy suburbs. Additionally, the knowledge gaps between the rich and the poor are less significant in smaller towns than the more urban areas (3.7 compared with 6.2, respectively) as well as in poorer communities compared with affluent ones (4.1 compared with 5.5, respectively). Thus, even though it is better to come from a family that is well off, these benefits are less of an advantage in poor, rural communities.

The final set of results examines the effects of social interaction, in the form of political discussions students have with family and friends (Table 3). Political discussions are just one type of social interaction that may affect political socialization but the only such concept available in this survey. Political discussions have a positive direct impact on political knowledge. For every additional day a week that a respondent discusses politics with others, his or her score increases by 1.2 points. Students learn not only by reading books and sitting in the classroom but by engaging one another on political issues.

Figure 1
(a) Interaction of Parental Income and Poverty on Political Knowledge;
(b) Interaction of Parental Income and Urbanization on Political Knowledge



(a)



(b)

Table 3
Estimation of Fixed Effects for
Political Knowledge, Including Social Interaction

	γ Coefficient (SE)	
<i>Intercept</i>	78.890***	(2.947)
<i>Political Discussion</i>		
Intercept	1.168***	(0.261)
Density	-0.0002***	(0.00005)
% less than \$15,000	0.085**	(0.028)
<i>Inverse income</i> (higher value = lower income)		
Intercept	-0.444***	(0.093)
Density	-0.000008	(0.00001)
% less than \$15,000	-0.00001	(0.004)
<i>Race</i> (1 = Black)		
Intercept	-10.480***	(2.562)
Density	0.0001	(0.0002)
% less than \$15,000	-0.104	(0.087)
<i>Controls</i>		
<i>Civics courses taken</i>	1.124***	(0.234)
<i>Female</i>	-4.671**	(1.272)
<i>No plans to attend college</i>	-8.903**	(2.290)
<i>Dislikes civics courses</i>	-6.821***	(1.513)

Note: Percentage reduction in error from fully unconditional model: 20.83%. Regression coefficients were derived using hierarchical linear modeling. Italicized variables are individual variables. The Level 2 variables are indented and placed underneath the Level 1 variables for which they were controlled.

** $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

There are two important findings with regard to the interactions. First, discussions have a negative impact on knowledge in the neighborhoods with higher densities but have a positive influence in poor communities, controlling for urbanization. The discussions that take place in impoverished smaller towns promote political knowledge, whereas those in urban areas are negatively associated with political knowledge. These data do not speak to the content of the discussions, and thus I could only speculate about why political discussions in urban areas actually seem to undermine political knowledge.

The overall level of inequality within the community likely has significant effects on socialization, including political discussion. There is greater income equality in rural areas and small towns than in urban areas, and as such, adolescents coming of age in urban areas witness the extent of their poverty by comparing their status with that of extremely affluent neighbors

just blocks away. This not only makes their poverty seem greater than it might in a rural community in which the distribution of income is much narrower, but it also erodes trust in both government and the members of the community to be able to change the situation (Uslaner, 2002). This relative deprivation creates the attitudes Sampson (2001) describes in which residents of impoverished urban areas lack the sense that their networks can positively effect change within the community. Thus, the content and tone of the political discussions that take place in these neighborhoods is likely to be very different from those in smaller communities. In ethnographic work, Cynthia Duncan (1999) points out that social capital is much higher in smaller towns that have low socioeconomic inequality than in those small towns with high inequality. Inequality impedes the emergence of strong social networks by stratifying society.

Finally, once I look at social interaction, the effects of the cross-level interactions for individual income and race are no longer significant. The direct effects of parental income and race are still important, but when social interaction is controlled, differences between rural and urban communities vanish, indicating that the primary difference between these communities is the interactions and networks within them.

Conclusions

The concept of the urban underclass has typically included one or more of the following characteristics: (a) the persistence and/or intergenerational transmission of poverty, (b) geographic concentration, (c) social isolation from mainstream society, (d) unemployment and underemployment, (e) low skills and education, and (f) membership in a (racial) minority group (Gephart & Brooks-Gunn, 1997, p. xiv).

Although most scholars interested in the effects of these characteristics on social outcomes are concerned with urban areas, the above list adequately describes much of rural America as well. The main differences between impoverished small towns and urban neighborhoods are their racial composition and the social interactions within the communities. The results of my analysis show that even among African Americans, poor small towns are the best environments for political learning. This is especially true for lower income students, because the gaps between the rich and the poor are narrower in smaller towns. The negative effects of living in poor urban neighborhoods must not be due solely to their concentrated poverty, high unemployment, and racial composition.

Instead, the main difference between these environments is in the social interactions that take place there. The patterns of social interaction are different in content and character in many poor, urban neighborhoods compared to poor, smaller towns. Once again, I am not suggesting that networks and relationships are absent in urban areas but rather that they are less likely to be of the type that foster or facilitate political knowledge. In smaller communities, for a variety of reasons, adults may exercise greater social control and accountability over young people, because most residents know one another, and often, relationships have formed through kinship and friendship ties that have developed over long periods of time.

The size of smaller towns and the fact that many families have resided in these locales for many generations enable residents to engage those around them. Children can discuss issues with their parents, as well as their grandparents and other adults whom they know very well. These relationships not only afford young people opportunities for jobs, as Wilson (1996) suggests, but also indirectly influence academic achievement through activities available within the community (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001). Social interaction within smaller towns, in the form of political discussions, is also an important mechanism helping young people learn about politics and government. Informal ties can flourish in small towns, where residents often meet one another on regular bases through various local community gatherings. It is worth noting that many parts of urban America were once described in this same way. Throughout much of the early 20th century, immigrants found their way to America's cities and lived in neighborhood enclaves in which social interaction patterns looked much like those we see in smaller towns today. There is a history of these patterns in urban America, and the potential for the future may lie in this past.

I do not mean to suggest that the focus on urban poverty is misguided. In fact, from a policy perspective, this work rightly emphasizes the worst environments for political socialization. However, by comparing impoverished urban neighborhoods only with affluent communities, one may miss some of the nuances of urban life. Negative social outcomes, whether they are teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, or low civic knowledge, cannot be explained only by examining poverty, geographic isolation, or racial composition. This is best illustrated only when poor smaller towns are included in the analysis.

Even though smaller towns seem to be good environments for socializing young people, it is still very much the case that children from higher income homes are better off than those with low-income parents. This is not surprising and indicates that there is more to learning about politics than interactions within the community. From objective resources such as books and

computers to more subjective factors, such as parental education, the resources available to children in affluent homes are vast compared with those available to children of lesser means. Yet the advantages of affluence are less important in small towns than in wealthy suburbs or urban neighborhoods.

Knowledge is only one aspect of political socialization but is seen by many as a fundamental prerequisite to democratic citizenship. Without adequate levels of knowledge about politics and government, political participation is less likely. To the extent that participation depends on knowledge, the future in many American smaller towns looks bright, especially compared with impoverished urban America.

Appendix
Student and Sample Populations by Race and Ethnicity at Public High Schools Surveyed in the
Metro Civic Values Survey, 1999 to 2000

School	Category	White					Asian	Other/Biracial ^a	Total Within Subsamples
		Non-Hispanic	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other/Biracial ^a			
A ^b	Sample	94	1	0	0	0	5	109	
	Population	94	4	0	0	2	0		
B	Sample	28	60	2	2	2	8	67	
	Population	22	78	1	1	1	0		
M	Sample	55	21	5	6	6	13	90	
	Population	32	28	25	15	0	0		
C	Sample	79	20	0	0	1	1	106	
	Population	59	38	2	1	1	0		
T	Sample	77	8	2	9	4	4	114	
	Population	74	20	1	4	1	1		
H	Sample	64	5	7	21	3	3	117	
	Population	67	6	4	22	1	1		
D	Sample	1	95	0	0	4	0	68	
	Population	1	98	0	1	1	0		
E	Sample	84	6	4	1	1	5	187	
	Population	92	5	1	2	0	0		
F	Sample	1	89	2	2	2	6	180	
	Population	1	92	2	2	2	3		
R	Sample	67	22	4	2	2	5	157	
	Population	71	20	4	4	4	1		

(continued)

Appendix (continued)

School	Category	White				Asian	Other/Biracial ^a	Total Within Subsample
		Non-Hispanic	Black	Hispanic	Asian			
G	Sample	95	0	2	2	1	111	
	Population	99	0	0	1	0		
I	Sample	65	22	1	2	10	178	
	Population	63	31	2	4	0		
V	Sample	76	5	3	3	13	122	
	Population	75	21	3	1	0		
K	Sample	27	35	18	10	10	95	
	Population	40	22	26	12	0		
L	Sample	28	17	31	7	17	79	
	Population	17	30	50	3	0		
U	Sample	19	50	5	11	16	93	
	Population	20	60	10	10	0		
Z	Sample	98	1	0	1	0	77	
	Population	98	1	1	1	0		
X	Sample	93	3	2	2	0	123	
	Population	87	11	1	1	0		
W	Sample	5	74	11	5	5	60	
	Population	10	70	12	8	0		
XH	Sample	4	73	4	7	12	85	
	Population	6	80	5	9	0		
J	Sample	45	21	4	25	5	95	
	Population	36	35	7	22	0		
PP	Sample	92	1	0	0	7	98	
	Population	89	8	1	1	1		

RO	Sample	40	37	3	11	9	82
	Population	34	50	6	10	0	
S	Sample	76	9	2	6	8	86
	Population	92	4	1	3	0	
GB	Sample	33	31	9	18	9	79
	Population	24	37	18	21	0	
KE	Sample	13	36	28	13	10	138
	Population	16	26	46	12	0	
QW	Sample	33	13	34	10	10	104
	Population	39	15	32	14	0	
TW	Sample	56	4	4	28	8	30
	Population	61	4	5	30	0	
Y	Sample	54	13	21	5	7	132
	Population	66	7	19	9	0	

Note: Values represent the percentages of each category within the sample and population.

a. The "Other/Biracial" category for the sample population includes mainly those students who classified themselves as biracial. This category is listed as 0 for most school population statistics because these school districts do not classify their students as biracial or multiracial. The vast majority of biracial students were of African American-Caucasian ancestry, and school officials usually classify these students as "Black."

b. Figures may not total 100% because of rounding. Names of schools have been replaced by arbitrary letters because three of the schools asked not to be identified by name. More information about the school sites can be obtained on request from the author

Notes

1. To correct for the unequal sizes of sample subclasses, I use sample weights (see Kish, 1987). The weights are defined by the inverse probability of selection and corrected for the slight oversampling or undersampling of populations in some districts within the study area. The weights are defined by $Weight_i = 1 / \{N \text{ of Districts} \times [(School\ n / District\ N) \times (School\ n / School\ N)]\}$, where $Weight_i$ is the sample weight for individual i , N of Districts is equal to the number of school district clusters (14), $School\ n$ is equal to the number of students sampled at the particular school at which i is a student, $District\ N$ is equal to the number of students in the entire district in which i is a student, and $School\ N$ is equal to the total number of students in the school at which i is a student. The need to use these weights is debatable. Their use typically makes little difference to the magnitude of coefficients in the regression analyses, but the variances are typically increased by their use, and consequently the standard errors (and significance tests) are often changed.

2. A completely random sample design was not feasible because most principals and teachers will not allow researchers to randomly select and pull children out of classes for a survey because it is too disruptive to their classes. Researchers were instructed to incorporate a lesson plan along with the collection of surveys so that students could gain something from the experience. Because social studies is a sufficiently ubiquitous part of the high school curriculum, the resulting sample from each school closely mirrors the overall school population, as shown in Table 1.

3. The scale is $(\text{Number of Correct Answers} / 7) \times 100$.

4. Parental income was obtained by asking students to name their parents' occupations, and then researchers used the mean income of each occupational category listed.

5. I selected \$15,000 because according to the Office of Management and Budget, the poverty line for a three-person family is \$14,494.

6. Although there are three levels of analysis (the original 14 clusters, 29 schools, and the individual respondents), I use a two-level hierarchical linear modeling model because there are not enough Level 3 groups to justify a three-level model.

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