



# Cultivating Youth Engagement: Race & the Behavioral Effects of Critical Pedagogy

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## Abstract

Political scientists attribute gaps in participation between whites and people of color to unequal access to political resources, political efficacy, and weak affiliations to political parties. I argue that the content of civic education courses also matters. I theorize that if courses were to incorporate critical pedagogy—an educational approach that centers the agency and grassroots political action of marginalized groups—that young people of color would be more likely to participate in politics. I test this theory using an experiment distributed to nearly 700 14–18-year high schoolers in the Chicago area. I find that content informed by this pedagogical approach bolsters the willingness of Latinx and black youth to pursue multiple forms of political participation. Such an educational intervention, coupled with other teaching tools, may provide a way to prepare an increasingly diverse generation of young people for active participation within American democracy. It also reveals how civic education in schools can play a crucial role in processes of political socialization and engagement.

**Keywords** Civic education · Critical pedagogy · Political participation · Young people · Race and ethnicity · Experiments

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The data and code utilized to conduct the analyses featured below can be accessed using the following link: <https://matthewdnelsen.com/research/>.

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## Introduction

Equal political voice is a fundamental democratic ideal (Dahl 2005). Yet, across multiple forms of participation, white Americans tend to be more politically active than people of color, calling the vitality of participatory democracy into question (Verba et al. 2012; APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy 2004). A number of studies attribute gaps in political participation to unequal resources such as money (Verba et al. 1995, 2012), political efficacy (Verba et al. 1995, 2012), or weak affiliations to political parties (Hajnal and Lee 2011). These factors undoubtedly play an important role. However, another critical factor concerns socialization experiences, including those in school (Berelson et al. 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Niemi and Jennings 1991; Niemi and Junn 1998; Sapiro 2004; Campbell 2006; Bruch and Soss 2018; Campbell 2019). Civic education courses in particular are shown to close racial gaps in political knowledge (Campbell and Niemi 2016), political interest (Neundorf et al. 2016) and in traditional forms of political participation (Callahan and Muller 2013). However, less is known about whether the precise content of these courses contribute to these outcomes. This paper takes on this task by asking the following question: can critical pedagogy better mobilize young people of color to participate in politics?

I build a theory that examines how content informed by critical pedagogy (Freire 2005) affects intended political participation across racial groups. While traditional civics curricula emphasize white political actors and traditional forms of participation (e.g., voting), critical content disrupts traditional narratives, emphasizing the agency and grassroots political action of marginalized groups. I theorize that young people of color are more likely to participate in politics when presented with narratives that address the ways in which marginalized groups resisted systemic inequality, closing racial gaps in intended political participation.

I test my predictions with an experiment distributed to nearly 700 high school students across nine communities in Chicago. The experiment tests the effect of a critical pedagogy intervention on four types of political participation. Overall, I find that content informed by critical pedagogy leads young Latinxs and African Americans to report greater willingness to participate in multiple forms of politics relative to those who are exposed to traditional content. Most importantly, exposure to *content informed by critical pedagogy appears to close gaps in participation between white youth and young people of color across multiple participatory domains*. This suggests that the content of civic education courses can play a formative role in processes of political socialization. I conclude by emphasizing the importance of exploring new ways to teach civics in the United States. If one hopes to close the racial participation gap, critical pedagogy may provide a new way forward. This intervention, coupled with other teaching practices, may better equip schools to prepare an increasingly diverse generation of young people for active participation in American democracy.

## Political Participation and Civic Education

Political participation encompasses a variety of activities. The most studied are acts of *political engagement*—activities that intend to influence “government action by either directly affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Zukin et al. 2006, p. 7). Common acts of political engagement include voting, campaigning, and contributing to political candidates. This is distinct from *civic engagement* activities such as volunteering, joining a community organization, or attending community meetings, which aim to enhance the “public good” through “hands-on cooperation with others” (Zukin et al. 2006, p. 51). While distinctions between political and civic engagement are frequently invoked (Tocqueville 1835; Verba et al. 1995, p. 38; Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003), no consensus exists regarding how to best categorize these activities (see Verba and Nie 1972; Barnes and Kaase 1979; Junn 1999).<sup>1</sup> When it comes to studying youth participation, however, one must also account for alternative activities that are more readily available for those who may be too young to vote or lack the financial resources to make contributions (Zukin et al. 2006; Cohen 2010; Sloam 2014). Alternatively, many young people may appear disengaged but are actually prepared for political action when an issue emerges that is relevant to their daily lives (Amna and Ekman 2014, p. 2; Han 2009).<sup>2</sup> I utilize the Zukin et al. (2006) approach because it categorizes a wider variety of political activities, including more passive ones, that are often overlooked as meaningful forms of participation. Furthermore Zukin et al.’s (2006) study suggests that the activities categorized into their four participatory domains are particularly useful when examining the political participation of younger generations specifically. These other forms, summarized in Table 1, include public voice and cognitive engagement (Zukin et al. 2006). *Public voice*—defined as “the ways citizens give expression to their views on public issues”—includes activities such as protests and boycotts (Zukin et al. 2006, p. 54). Finally, *cognitive engagement*—defined as paying attention to public affairs and politics—refers to activities that enable individuals to pay attention to politics and public affairs, including watching the news or talking to family and friends about politics (Zukin et al. 2006, p. 54).

Existing scholarship suggests that white Americans participate more frequently across most of these categories. For example, Verba et al. (1993) find that white respondents vote at higher rates, are more active within political organizations, and contribute more to campaigns than other racial and ethnic groups (political engagement; 1993, pp. 462–465; Verba et al. 2012). These trends have historically held true for young people as well, with white 18–24-year-olds consistently voting at higher rates than young people of color (Cohen 2010, p. 164; CIRCLE). The notable

<sup>1</sup> For example, Verba and Nie (1972) suggest that contacting a public official is its own participatory dimension while Junn (1999) defines it as “systems-directed,” attempting to sway government officials (1432). See Barnes and Kaase (1979), Brady (1999), and Junn (1999) for alternative approaches to categorization.

<sup>2</sup> See also Cohen (2010, pp. 190–200) on “politics of invisibility”.

exceptions to this trend are 2008 and 2012 when black 18–24-year-olds, mobilized by the historic candidacy of Barack Obama, voted at higher rates than white youth—55% versus 49% in 2008 and 55% versus 48% in 2012 (Cohen 2010, p. 164; CIRCLE). However, by 2016 this trend reversed again, with voter turnout among white youth reaching 54% and voter turnout among black youth falling to 51% (CIRCLE).

These trends tend to persist across other participatory domains as well. White Americans attend more community meetings (civic engagement; 1993, p. 465; Verba et al. 2012) and discuss politics with family and friends more often (cognitive engagement; Verba et al. 1995, 2012). Among young people specifically, 77% of white 18–30-year-olds reported talking to family and friends about a political issue or candidate as compared to 69% of black youth and 65% of Latinx youth (Cohen 2010, p. 180). Finally, people of color tend to comprise higher percentages of informal community activists and political protestors (public voice; Verba et al. 1993, pp. 463–465; Junn 1999, p. 1423; Verba et al. 2012). This trend holds true among young people as well, with 15% of African Americans and 14% of Latinxs having reported participating in a protest since the 2016 presidential election as compared to 12% of white youth (Cohen et al. 2017, p. 39).

A common explanation for these gaps in participation is that white Americans have greater access to resources such as money and report higher rates of political efficacy—that is, the belief that government is responsive to the concerns and actions of citizens (Verba et al. 1995, p. 272, 2012). However, socialization experiences, including those in school, also contribute to these trends.

### Traditional Civic Education Courses

Civic education refers to the teaching of both the political and practical aspects of citizenship, the rights of individuals, and the duties citizens have towards one another as members of a shared political community. For the purposes of this paper, civic education refers to any course that aims to equip young people with attitudes, skills, and behaviors that prepare them for democratic citizenship. While many states have distinct civic education courses, citizenship standards are frequently embedded into other social studies courses, especially American history and American government (see CIRCLE). Therefore, I follow others who view social studies courses more broadly as important spaces for civic education (e.g. Merriam 1934; Niemi and Junn 1999; Levinson 2012).

I argue that traditional civic education courses are oriented towards training citizens that reinforce America's existing political culture (Almond and Verba 1963). While the National Council for the Social Studies' C3 Social Studies Framework represents one attempt to make civic education more engaging and meaningful, especially for young people of color, the framework continues to discuss "civic life" in terms of systems-justifying activities. According to the framework, "active and responsible citizens... vote, serve on juries when called, follow the news and current events, and participate in voluntary groups and efforts" (C3 Framework). Though the framework introduces laudable readiness dimensions that aim to foster greater social, cultural, and historical awareness (see C3 Framework, p. 47), it is difficult to

**Table 1** Four Categories of Participation Adapted from Zukin et al. (2006) and Cohen (2010)

Political engagement	Civic engagement
<p><b>Definition</b>                      Activities with “the intent or effect of influencing government action either directly affecting the making of implementation of public policy or indirectly influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Zukin et al. 2006, p. 7)</p> <p><b>Activities</b>                      Voting, joining a political group, giving money to a candidate, party, or issue, working or volunteering on a political campaign</p>	<p><b>Definition</b>                      “Organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others” (Zukin et al. 2006, p. 7)</p> <p><b>Activities</b>                      Volunteering or community service work, neighborhood problem solving</p>
Public voice	Cognitive engagement
<p><b>Definition</b>                      “The ways citizens give expression to their views on public issues” (Zukin et al. 2006, p. 7)</p> <p><b>Activities</b>                      Boycotting and Buycotting, participating in a protest, march, demonstration, or sit-in, contacting public officials, signing a paper or e-mail petition, sending an email/writing a blog about a political issue, writing a letter to the editor about a political issue or problem, political posts on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter</p>	<p><b>Definition</b>                      “Paying attention to public affairs and politics” (Zukin et al. 2006, p. 7)</p> <p><b>Activities</b>                      Talking to family or friends about a political issue, party, or candidate, watching television news or reading a newspaper</p>

see how the intended civic outcomes of these learning objectives are substantively different than the best practices already discussed within existing civic education research. Furthermore, these practices do not incorporate defining characteristics of critical pedagogy, which I discuss in greater detail below.

A number of studies explore how traditional pedagogical tools frequently used in social studies classrooms such as discussions, simulations, exams, and traditional content shape political behavior. Many of these studies focus on how features of open classroom environments such as conversations about current events and political issues shape the political attitudes and behaviors of students (Niemi and Junn 1998; Torney-Purta 2002; Campbell 2008; Hess 2009; Gainous and Martens 2012; Dassonneville et al. 2012; Martens and Gainous 2013; Hess and McAvooy 2014; Persson 2015). Research addressing this topic in both education and political science suggests that open classrooms are associated with favorable democratic outcomes, including increased likelihood of voting and increased political knowledge, especially among socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Campbell 2008, 2019). Other active learning activities frequently present in civic education courses such as mock trials (Torney-Purta 2002; Feldman et al. 2007; Pasek et al. 2008; Finlay et al. 2010; Martens and Gainous 2013) are also shown to shape participation, political knowledge, trust, and efficacy.

Some studies even find standardized tests to be associated with favorable democratic outcomes. For example, Campbell and Niemi (2016) find that young Latinxs

residing in states with high stakes standardized testing in civics results in higher rates of political knowledge. This trend is especially pronounced among Latinx immigrants (see also Niemi and Junn 1998).

Finally, traditional civic education courses typically address content centered around two major themes: political institutions and American heroes (Levinson 2012; Nelsen 2019). Young people are cognizant of these themes as well. One study finds that 45% of young people associate their civics course with the “three branches of government, the constitution, and how bills become law” while an additional 30% associated these courses with “great American heroes” such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln (Levine and Lopez 2004, p. 2). While much of the research on civic education concludes that the precise content of the course has little to no effect on student outcomes (Langton and Jennings 1968, Campbell 2006), others challenge this notion. For example, Torney-Purta (2002) finds that young people enrolled in civic education classes that stress the importance of elections vote with higher frequency during adulthood (209). Similarly, Green et al. (2011) find that a curriculum that focuses on civil liberties and constitutional rights significantly increases student knowledge in this domain (see also Litt 1963; Feldman et al. 2007; Pasek et al. 2008; Owen 2015). These studies offer some confirmation for an intuitive relationship: the ways in which young people are taught to think about politics shape their knowledge and intent to participate later in life.

However, extant work pays very little attention to how *content* might affect the aforementioned racial participation gap. Even if the pedagogical approaches highlighted above are well-intentioned, Apple (2011) suggests that traditional curricula frequently justify and reproduce inequality in society and must be analyzed through a critical lens. With this in mind, I next turn to a discussion of critical pedagogy, an educational approach that may be key to reducing the racial participation gap.

## Critical Pedagogy

The concept of critical pedagogy is frequently attributed to Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005). Freire suggests that this approach can allow people to develop critical consciousness—the ability to reflect and act upon the world in order to transform it (Seider et al. 2017). Contrary to traditional pedagogy, which aims to reproduce America’s political culture (Almond and Verba 1963), I argue that critical pedagogy may hold the key to closing racial participation gaps, effectively transforming it (Apple 2011).

Though this educational philosophy originated in adult literacy programs in Brazil (Freire 2005), it has come to inform a number of pedagogical techniques including critical reflection (Giroux 2001)—how individuals come to understand structures that limit access to social, economic, and political opportunities and perpetuate injustice—and culturally relevant teaching—ensuring that marginalized students

progress academically and develop critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings 1995, p. 483).<sup>3</sup>

Critical pedagogy's emphasis on empowerment and social justice has captured the attention of those interested in civic education as well (see Edwards 2009; Hope and Jagers 2014). In fact, a number of educational programs in the United States are already informed by critical pedagogy and seek to empower marginalized students through curricula that fill "historical voids" in social studies textbooks (Depenbrock 2017). For example, youth participatory action research (YPAR) initiatives allow young people to study the social problems affecting their lives by (1) taking their local knowledge seriously, (2) providing the critical literacy and reflection skills needed to understand the historical roots of their oppression, and (3) allowing them to develop tactics to surmount this oppression (Levinson 2012, pp. 224–232; Duncan-Andrade 2006, p. 167; Fine and Weiss 2000; Cammarota and Fine 2008, p. 2; Kirschner et al. 2003; Fine 2009).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, ethnic studies programs such as Arizona's controversial Mexican–American Studies curriculum utilize Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* alongside Chicano history textbooks such as Rodolfo Acuna's *Occupied America* (Depenbrock 2017).<sup>5</sup> Extant work suggests that ethnic studies courses of this kind are associated with increased school attendance (Dee and Penner 2017), higher GPAs (Dee and Penner 2017), more empathetic racial attitudes (Novais and Spencer 2018), and the development of positive group associations that allow for higher rates of political participation (García-Bedolla 2005).<sup>6</sup> Yet, to the best of knowledge, no work explicitly explores the effects of critical pedagogy on political participation experimentally.<sup>7</sup>

In the experimental design presented below, I examine whether course content informed by critical pedagogy can shape the willingness of young people to participate in politics. This approach is akin to the ethnic studies programs highlighted above, which are designed around the study of critical texts such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and works that highlight the agency of marginalized groups (Depenbrock 2017). While this approach does not test all aspects of critical pedagogy, it does allow me to gauge whether an important facet of this approach—the content—has a positive effect on the willingness of young people of color to participate in politics. Beginning with just the content is important because it allows me to isolate

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<sup>3</sup> See also see Darder (1991), Shor (1992), Hooks (1994), McLaren (1994).

<sup>4</sup> This approach shares similarities with pedagogical interventions such as "spatial stories" in geography (see Elwood and Mitchell 2012) and "critical bifocalities" in education (Weis and Fine 2012). Specifically, both approaches allow young people to make sense of their lived experiences while simultaneously building their political identities.

<sup>5</sup> This course was banned for 7 years after law makers claimed that the course portrayed whites as oppressors and Latinxs as the oppressed. However, in 2017 this decision was overturned after a judge determined that the ban was motivated by racial animus (Depenbrock 2017).

<sup>6</sup> See also Shor (1992), Chilcoat and Ligon (2002), and Fischman and Luis (2007).

<sup>7</sup> A number of exceptional qualitative studies find a more critical approach to civic education to be associated with favorable democratic outcomes among marginalized students (see Levinson 2012; García-Bedolla 2005). Others examine whether schools contribute to the development of critical consciousness but are unable to demonstrate a causal connection between course content and political participation (see Seider et al. 2017; Diemer and Li 2011).

the effect of one aspect of critical pedagogy before introducing confounding factors such as teaching style.

In terms of outcomes, though critical pedagogy ultimately aims to dismantle oppressive social and political hierarchies, both Freire and those who draw from his work note that political participation is a necessary precursor to achieving these ends (see Seider et al. 2017; Diemer and Li 2011). With this in mind, it is essential to explore how the various components of critical pedagogy, including critical texts, might push an individual to become more willing to participate in both formal and informal political acts.

### Theorizing a Link Between Critical Content and Political Participation

Critical pedagogy focuses on “people engaged in the fight for their own liberation” (Freire 2005, p. 53; see also Hope and Jagers 2014, p. 451). This approach envelops three components. First, critical pedagogy allows individuals to understand the causes of their marginalization in order to surmount it (Freire 2005, p. 47). This suggests that critical pedagogy must adopt a historical approach, pushing students to recognize marginalization as a systemic and historical process. While critical pedagogy can theoretically be implemented across content areas, the focus on locating the historic foundations of marginalization lends itself especially well to social studies, especially courses that focus on the development of American political institutions such as civics, American government, and American history.

Second, critical pedagogy aspires to “explain to the masses their own action” (Lukács quoted in Freire 2005, p. 53). In other words, rather than focusing exclusively on the actions of exceptional historical figures that are difficult for students to relate to (Levinson 2012; Peabody and Jenkins 2017), critical pedagogy also highlights the grassroots collective action taken by marginalized groups. This feature clearly separates the content of critical pedagogy from traditional curricula that may highlight prominent heroes of color such as Martin Luther King Jr. or Harriet Tubman while overlooking the political action taken by less vaunted historical figures (Levinson 2012). In other words, while policymakers have made attempts to incorporate more women and people of color into curricula since early 90 s (see Moreau 2003, Nelsen 2019), highlighting prominent “American heroes” is substantively different than emphasizing the collective action tactics employed by marginalized groups of people (Levinson 2012; Peabody and Jenkins 2017).

Third, by focusing on these grassroots political activities, critical pedagogy focuses on extra-systemic political action in addition to formal institutional processes such as legal battles and elections. In other words, this pedagogical approach allows for a clear public voice component (e.g. emphasizing protests and boycotts) that is frequently missing from more traditional curricula. According to Freire, highlighting this type of political action allows the oppressed to reject the image and tactics of the oppressor (e.g. systems-justifying forms of political participation) and “replace it with autonomy and responsibility” (2005, p. 47). Freire suggests that these three components allow individuals to “unveil” the deeply-rooted nature of

their oppression, allowing for critical dialogue that precedes political action (2005, pp. 54–55).

This approach harkens back to W. E. B. Du Bois' argument regarding the importance of centering black points of view in history textbooks:

Negroes must know the history of the negro race in America, and this they seldom get from white institutions. Their children ought to study textbooks like Brawley's "Short History," the first edition of Woodson's "Negro in Our History," and Cromwell, Turner, and Dyke's "Readings from Negro Authors." They ought to study intelligently and from their own point of view, the slave trade, slavery emancipation, Reconstruction, and present economic development...*It does not consist simply in trying to parallel the history of white folk with similar boasting about black and brown folk, but rather an honest evaluation of human effort and accomplishment, without color blindness, and without transforming history into a record of dynasties and prodigies* (Du Bois 1935, pp. 333–334; italics added).

Thus, it follows straightforwardly that critical pedagogy should stimulate marginalized youth to reflect upon narratives about people "like them" and, in particular, on figures who have taken grassroots political action to confront long-standing, systemic inequality. Given that existing narratives in civic education courses (or social studies more generally) focus on positive political actions of white people and isolated references to prominent people of color (Moreau 2003; Levinson 2012; Nelsen 2019), such opportunities for reflection and motivation are lacking from traditional curricula. Thus, I expect that shifting towards critical content will bolster rates of traditional forms of political participation (i.e. voting) through an empowerment mechanism and acts of public voice through role-modeling.

Empowerment refers to one's sense that their own racial group has gained "significant representation and influence in political decision making" (Bobo and Gilliam 1990, p. 378). This allows the perceived benefits of political participation to outweigh the costs, allowing individuals who lack important political resources such as time and money to participate anyway (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Bobo and Gilliam 1990). This is particularly important to consider when examining marginalized communities that lack of access to political resources and face discriminatory policies that depress political engagement (e.g. Sobel and Smith 2009; Brady and McNulty 2011; Burch 2013; Bruch and Soss 2018). It is also important to note that empowerment differs from external efficacy—the belief that one is capable of influencing government (Verba et al. 1995, p. 272). While both refer to how individuals interact with formal institutions, empowerment is substantively different in its emphasis on the importance of seeing marginalized group members gaining significant decision-making power within these institutions.<sup>8</sup>

Extant work suggests that empowerment serves as an important predictor of political participation among people of color. For example, scholars have found that

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<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, I measured both internal and external efficacy as outcome variables. However, the treatment had no significant effect on either measure.

black Americans living in cities with black mayors are more politically active than white people with similar socioeconomic statuses, at least during the initial rise of black mayors (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Spence and McClerking 2010; see also Leath and Chavous 2017). Similarly, García-Bedolla (2005) finds that holding positive views of one's own group to be associated with higher rates of political participation among Latinxs in Los Angeles. I argue that critical pedagogy can stimulate a similar empowerment mechanism as well by explicitly teaching students about the ways in which marginalized groups have influenced political decision making even in the face of limited resources and discriminatory policies. If young people feel that that they have the power to influence government officials, they should also be more willing to vote in elections and participate in other political engagement activities. Since empowerment theory has typically been invoked to explain political participation among marginalized groups, curricula that stimulate this mechanism should bolster rates of participation among young people of color without negatively effecting rates of participation among white youth. Thus:

**H1** Young people of color exposed to critical pedagogy will report greater willingness to participate in acts of political engagement relative to those exposed to traditional content.<sup>9</sup>

Since other forms of political action take place outside of formal political institutions, I suspect that a different mechanism is at play with regard to public voice. I expect the effects of critical pedagogy to be especially pronounced on the respondents' willingness to participate in acts of public voice (e.g., protests, boycotts). I theorize that this is largely the result of a role-model effect. As mentioned, critical pedagogy highlights the political agency of "everyday" people of color by providing examples of extra-systemic action and acts of public voice—actions taken by individuals and groups who have historically been excluded from formal political institutions. Given that role models provide young people with tangible examples of how to pursue civic and political action (Levinson 2012) and convey important ideals about government and citizenship (Wrone 1979; Sanchez 1998, p. 3, Allison and Goethals 2011; Peabody and Jenkins 2017), I expect narratives rooted in critical pedagogy to resonate among young people of color specifically. Even if young people feel disempowered due to a lack of political resources or a lack of representation within political institutions, resistance narratives that highlight the collective action of marginalized groups can provide impactful examples of how to pursue meaningful political action outside of political institutions. Thus:

**H2** Young people of color exposed to critical pedagogy will report greater willingness to participate in acts of public voice relative to those exposed to traditional content.

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<sup>9</sup> Hypotheses for this study were pre-registered at [aspredicted.org](https://aspredicted.org/#11310) (#11310).

## Latinx Youth and Cognitive Engagement

Youth from immigrant families with lower educational attainment and English language skills should experience a greater increase in cognitive engagement even when enrolled in a traditional civic education course. Since Latinx youth are more likely to exhibit this combination of factors than other racial groups, we should expect the effect of critical pedagogy to be most pronounced among these respondents.<sup>10</sup> Extant work suggests that effect of traditional civics courses is most pronounced among young Latinxs, increasing their ability to engage in political discussions at home (Callahan and Muller 2013; Campbell and Niemi 2016). Contrary to traditional top-down processes of political socialization, Latinx youth play an important role in delivering information regarding political processes in the United States to their family members (Callahan and Muller 2013; Anguiano 2018; Weiskirch 2005; Burial et al. 1998).

I theorize that curricula that better reflect the experiences of Latinx youth will spur greater interest in the content than traditional approaches, and consequently help facilitate these conversations. Additionally, since content highlighting the history of Latinx-Americans is even less common than content highlighting Black History, it is possible that Latinx youth may be more impacted by the intervention since they are less likely to have been exposed to Latinx resistance narratives previously (Novais and Spencer 2018, p. 19). Existing scholarship suggests that even traditional civic education courses have a compensation effect on rates of political knowledge and willingness to engage in political conversations among young Latinxs (Callahan and Muller 2013; Campbell and Niemi 2016). I expect this compensation effect to be even more pronounced when young Latinxs are exposed to critical content that center individuals sharing their own racial and ethnic identity. Thus:

**H3** Latinx youth exposed to critical pedagogy will report greater willingness to participate in acts of cognitive engagement relative to those exposed to more traditional content.

In what follows, I also will explore the effect of critical pedagogy on civic engagement; yet, I do not offer formal hypotheses. Acts of civic engagement such as volunteering represent non-partisan, “everyday” acts that aim to improve one’s local community (Zukin et al. 2006). These actions are certainly important to the function of a healthy democracy, but they typically do not comprise significant moments canonized within the historical narratives presented in content informed by critical pedagogy.

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<sup>10</sup> According to Pew, 55% of U.S.-born Latinxs are second generation immigrants and nearly 60 percent are age 33 or younger (2016). Sixty-six percent of my Latinx sample reports that both of their parents were born in Mexico.

## Data and Methods

Experiments have frequently been employed to test the effectiveness of educational interventions (Cook 2002). However, I am unaware of any work that tests the impact of critical pedagogy on the willingness of young people to participate in politics experimentally. This study utilizes such an approach as it allows for clear causal inference regarding the impact of critical content—one important component of critical pedagogy. I conducted the study in 24 high school classrooms across three public charter schools, four Chicago Public Schools, and two public high schools in northern Chicago suburbs between August 2017 and April 2018.

I recruited schools using both convenience and snowball sampling (Mosley 2013). Teachers, parents, and students connected me with educators in four communities: South Chicago, Roscoe Village, Evanston, and Lincolnshire. Schools within all four of these communities agreed to participate in the study. Snowball sampling was employed to ask participating teachers to connect me to American history teachers at other schools, yielding connections to educators in two additional neighborhoods: Englewood and West Town. Members of the Chicago Public Schools Office of Social Science and Civic Engagement connected me to educators in two additional neighborhoods, one of which agreed to participate: East Side. Finally, I used contact information made available on school websites to contact 50 additional American history teachers at 20 Chicago area schools. While this “cold calling” technique proved less effective, I was able to recruit educators from two additional neighborhoods: Lincoln Park and Downtown Chicago. In all, twelve teachers spanning nine schools agreed to participate in the study. The location and school demographics of each of the nine sampling sites are summarized below in Fig. 1.

The sample sites highlighted in Fig. 1 span nearly 50 miles and are reflective of Chicago’s racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. Lincolnshire, a suburb 30 miles north of downtown Chicago, was the northernmost sampling site and serves predominantly affluent white students (60.3% white; 5.4% low-income). Contrastingly, schools in neighborhoods on Chicago’s south and west sides (West Town, Englewood, South Chicago, and East Side) tend to serve young people of color from low-income households. Schools located on Chicago’s northside (Loop, Lincoln Park, and Roscoe Village) and the immediate suburbs (Evanston and Lincolnshire) tend to serve student populations that are more diverse in regard to race and socioeconomic status. All things considered, Chicago serves as an exceptional case for studying the effects of a pedagogical intervention such as critical pedagogy on diverse student populations.

While convenience and snowball methods may be vulnerable to sampling bias, a review of the geographic and demographic distribution of schools as well as school-level data assuage such concerns. It is important to note that the goal of sampling was to obtain enough white, Latinx, and black respondents to test my hypotheses separately for each group. Even so, Table 2 demonstrates that the sample accurately reflects the racial and ethnic breakdown of the city of Chicago:

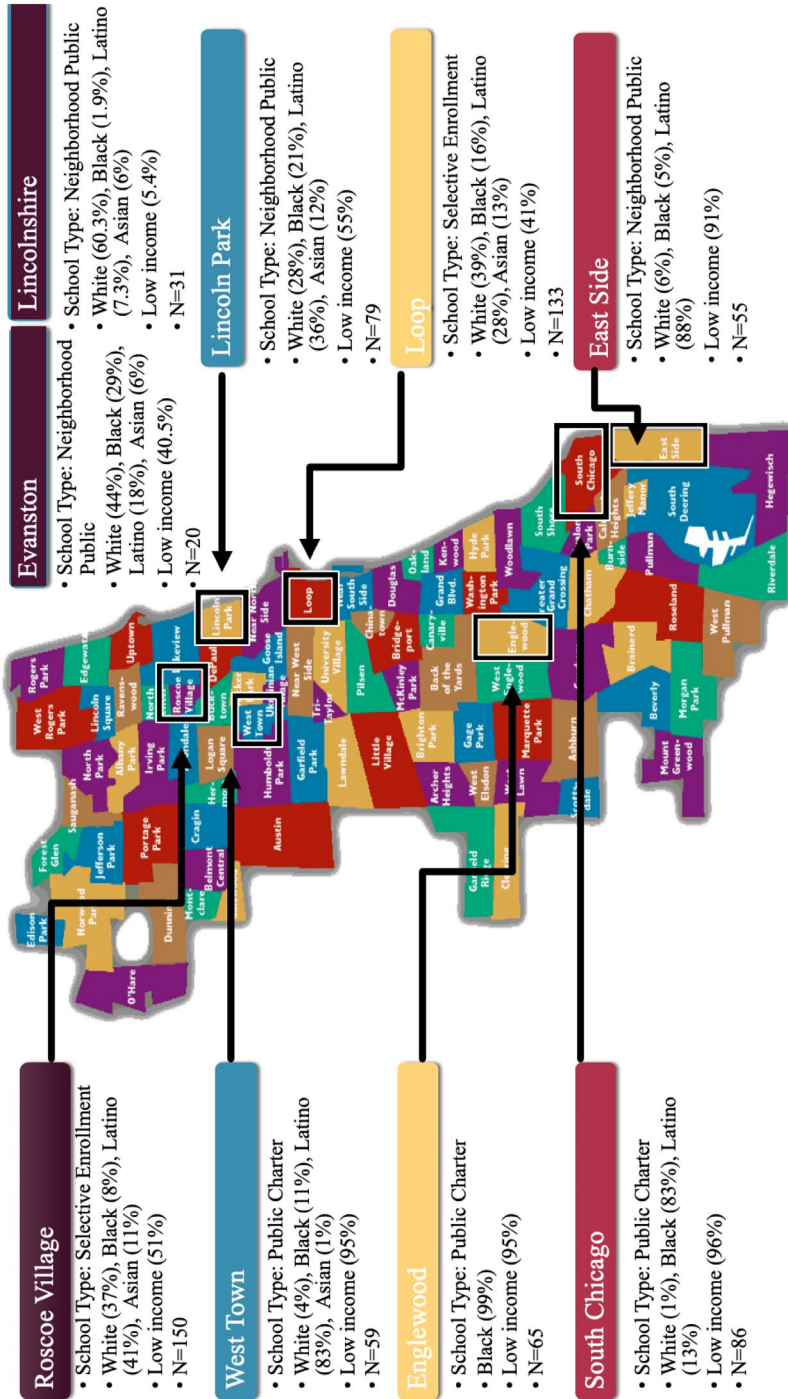


Fig. 1 Demographic data and school type by sampling neighborhood

**Table 2** Racial and ethnic breakdown of sample *Source* Chicago Public Schools (2018), U.S. Census Bureau (2018)

Race/ethnicity	Sample size	Percentage of sample (%)	Percentage of Chicago (%)
White	212	31	31
Latinx	182	27	28
Black/African American	181	27	32
Asian	75	11	5
Biracial	22	3	3
Pacific Islander	2	< 1	< 1
Native American	1	< 1	< 1
Refused	2	< 1	< 1
Total	N=678	–	–

31% of participants are white, 27% are black, and 27% are Latinx. Thus, my oversampling of schools within the specified neighborhoods was effective. Furthermore, Fig. 1 of the Online Appendix A reveals a robust geographic distribution of respondents beyond the borders of the nine neighborhoods of study. In other words, the map demonstrates that the sample captured respondents living throughout the city and not just those residing in the nine neighborhoods of focus.

I was only allowed one class period to conduct the study. Thus, I crafted succinct textbook segments for students to read to test my hypotheses. Specifically, I selected historical cases that are conducive for discussing institutionalized discrimination and the corresponding agency of people of color: Abolitionism and the Underground Railroad, a case frequently mentioned in state history standards, and Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers (UFW).<sup>11</sup> I selected the case of Cesar Chavez/UFW to highlight the historical experiences of Latinxs, given the large size of the Mexican–American community in Chicago. In fact, 91% of the study’s Latinx participants identify as Mexican. In order to account for the great deal of internal variation among Latinxs in regard to language, culture, and immigration experiences (Beltrán 2010) and to satisfy critical pedagogy’s emphasis on identity, addressing national origin is essential. Apart from national origin, participants were between 14 and 18 years of age ( $\mu=16.5$ ) and a little over half (55%) of the 678 participants were women. A full breakdown of demographic characteristics is included in Table 1 of the Online Appendix A.

<sup>11</sup> The study also included a third passage about Chinese Exclusion in order to test the effect of critical pedagogy on Asian Americans students. While I was able to obtain a small oversample of Asian American students, I do not include these findings in the body of the text because I was unable to get a large enough sample to find moderate effect sizes. Furthermore, the Asian American sample featured a greater degree of heterogeneity in terms of nation of origin than the Latinx sample. Even so, results for Asian Americans are included in Figs. 4 to 7 of Online Appendix A. Future work addressing the effect of critical pedagogy on Asian Americans specifically should aspire to obtain oversamples of multiple national origin groups to ensure accurate results (Wong et al. 2011).

## Procedures

I travelled to each participating school between August 2017 and April 2018 to conduct this study. I arrived an hour early to each school in order to meet with teachers to discuss their teaching practices, course syllabi, and to observe their classroom environments and their interactions with students. Each participating teacher also participated in a 60-min, in-depth interview regarding their teaching practices. This qualitative data allowed me to gauge whether each educator already used critical pedagogy within their classroom. Due to the existing use of critical pedagogy at the classroom level in some schools, randomization within classrooms ensures that such pre-treatment effects will lead to under-estimates of the individual-level treatment effects. However, a brief discussion of these effects is included after the presentation of primary results.

Prior to beginning the study, I asked students to participate in a survey about an American history textbook that might be used in a Chicago area high school in the future. However, I did not tell students that they were being randomly assigned to read different versions of the text. At this time, I walked students through a written consent form that provided information about the study and its optional nature and gave every student the opportunity to opt out of participation.<sup>12</sup> I also stressed that there were no negative consequences for choosing not to participate. As an incentive, I entered participating students into a raffle to win a \$25 gift card.

Participants then filled out a pretest questionnaire that asked for demographic information and a range of questions about political interest, ideology, and party identification. Since this questionnaire was fairly long and asked a number of demographic questions, it is unlikely that participants had their social identities primed prior to completing the study (see Online Appendix B). Additionally, there was nothing in the instructions that would have suggested a focus on identity. Even so, the majority of the sample (regardless of race and gender) identified as Democrat (see Table 1 of Online Appendix A). Thus, both the treatment and control conditions were distributed to individuals who shared fairly similar political views.

Following this questionnaire, each student read three textbook segments highlighting the historical events mentioned above. These texts served as the experimental treatment—the details of which I will discuss below. After reading the texts, students reported their willingness to participate in several political activities that constitute the forms of participation listed above: political engagement, public voice, cognitive engagement, and civic engagement. Each of these variables was measured using a 1–5 scale ranging from “very unlikely to participate” to “certain to participate.” Though these questions measure intended participation rather than actual behavior, “intention to perform a behavior... is the closest cognitive antecedent of actual behavioral performance” (Ajzen and Fishbein 2005, p. 188; see also O’Keefe

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<sup>12</sup> Only three students opted-out of participation (one in Englewood, one in East Side, and one in the Loop). Parents were also given the opportunity to opt their children out of participation prior to conducting the study.

2015, p. 128).<sup>13</sup> While the questionnaire only included one measure for both cognitive<sup>14</sup> and civic engagement,<sup>15</sup> four activities were combined into a single political engagement index ( $\alpha=0.70$ )<sup>16</sup> and seven activities were combined into a single public voice index ( $\alpha=0.82$ ).<sup>17</sup> I test my hypotheses by seeing if the critical pedagogy treatment—detailed below—altered these metrics.<sup>18</sup> Once every student completed the survey, I facilitated a 10–15-min discussion regarding the true nature of the study and provided space for students to share their thoughts about the passages.

## Experimental Conditions

My hypotheses require a control group that reads a traditional American history text and a treatment group that is exposed to text that meets the criteria of critical pedagogy. In creating the experimental conditions, I wanted to ensure that the texts were as real as possible. Thus, I adapted excerpts from existing, widely-circulated American history texts that are at a high-school reading level (see Table 4). *The American Pageant* (Kennedy 2006) is commonly used in Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. History courses in the United States (College Board 2018; American Textbook Council 2018) and presents a standard account of American history (Loewen 1996). I found at least one copy of this text in more than half of the American history classrooms I visited. As I discuss shortly, I used this text to create the control baseline—the traditional historical information to which students are commonly exposed.

To create the critical content treatment, I turned to a more critical account of American history: *A People's History of the United States* (Zinn 2003). This text meets the criteria of critical pedagogy by centering the agency marginalized groups, systemic injustice, and grassroots political action (Loewen 1996). While *A People's History of the United States* is not a textbook per se, it is a widely circulated, critical, and accessible take on American history. Interestingly, unlike the *American Pageant*, I only observed two copies of *A People's History of the United States* while visiting classrooms.

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<sup>13</sup> I requested to follow up with participants weeks and months following the intervention. However, Chicago Public Schools does not allow researchers to maintain contact information that can be used to follow-up with students.

<sup>14</sup> Cognitive engagement was measured using one question: “How likely are you to talk to family and friends about a political issue, party, or candidate within the next 12 months?” Responses were measured using a 1–5 scale ranging from “very unlikely to participate” to “certain to participate”.

<sup>15</sup> Civic engagement was measured using one question: “How likely are you to work with people in your community to solve a problem within the next 12 months?” Responses were measured using a 1–5 scale ranging from “very unlikely to participate” to “certain to participate”.

<sup>16</sup> The political engagement index includes four activities: intent to vote, political campaigning, giving money to a political issue/cause/candidate, and joining a political group. Responses were measured using a 1–5 scale ranging from “very unlikely to participate” to “certain to participate”.

<sup>17</sup> The public voice index includes seven activities: protesting, boycotting, contacting a public official, posting about politics on social media, signing a petition, sending a political email, or writing a blog or letter to the editor about a political issue. Responses were measured using a 1–5 scale ranging from “very unlikely to participate” to “certain to participate”.

<sup>18</sup> While I am unable to test the empowerment mechanism explicitly using this data, I discuss this possibility here for theoretical clarity.

I created my own textbook template that allowed both the treatment and control conditions to appear identical in design in order to test the causal effect of the text. Participants in both the control and treatment conditions read all segments addressing the historical events previously discussed. Each segment includes a body text and an additional “Did You Know?” box. A prime for pan-ethnicity is included in the instructions since the Cesar Chavez/UFW passage focuses on a single ethnic group.<sup>19</sup>

For the control condition, both the body text and a “Did You Know” box across each of the three segments include text taken exclusively from *The American Pageant*. Pictures corresponding to the primary figures referenced in the text are included to make each segment look like a real textbook, as displayed in Fig. 2. The combination of this text and the corresponding images accurately model a traditional American history textbook that would be used in a typical high school classroom.

For the treatment condition, the body text for each segment is also taken from *The American Pageant*. This allows students in each condition to receive the same historical background information for each segment. However, unlike the control, the “Did You Know?” box in the treatment condition includes text from *A People’s History of the United States* and an additional heading that explicitly references how black and Latinx actors took political action to fight injustice. Like the control group, pictures corresponding to the figures and events mentioned in the text are included to make it look more like a textbook. However, given that this text discusses the grassroots political action of people of color in greater detail, the treatment includes more images of black and Latinx actors. This treatment text and the corresponding images more accurately reflects critical pedagogy by centering the agency of marginalized racial and ethnic groups. This is summarized above in Fig. 2. A summary of the content covered within each text is included below in Table 3. Full copies of both the control and treatment texts are included in Online Appendix B (control) and Appendix B (treatment).

While the control and treatment conditions address similar historical events, are of equal length and reading level, and are nearly identical, the behaviors and historical figures they mention are different (see Table 3). Students were randomly assigned to either the control or treatment group. OLS regression analyses suggest that experimental conditions were well-randomized across a number of demographic characteristics (see Table 2 of Online Appendix A).

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<sup>19</sup> Language for the pan-ethnicity prime is as follows: “While this passage is about Mexican Americans, it speaks to Latino/a Americans as a whole. While Latino/a American groups have a range of differences in their demographic characteristics, beliefs, and perceptions of life in the United States, they also share much in common”.

## Statistical Models

My analyses focus on the effect of the treatment condition (critical content) on each of the four participatory domains discussed above. The bulk of these analyses is a simple comparison of means across treatment and control groups. If my theory is correct, I should observe two things. First, black and Latinx participants in the treatment condition should report greater willingness to participate in each of the four participatory domains. Second, the gap between intended participation among white youth and young people of color should decrease and become less significant.

I conducted an additional series of robustness checks in order to account for possible variations that may emerge across schools and study dates. Since the experiment was never conducted at multiple schools on the same day, school fixed-effects were included in OLS analyses to account for possible school and time effects. Including this additional variable did not significantly alter the results (see Tables 3 to 6 of Online Appendix A). This suggests that I am in a strong position to compare control and treatment condition means and any difference reflects the content rather than other factors.

Finally, I used content analyses of course syllabi, classroom observations, and in-depth interviews with each participating teacher to determine if critical pedagogy was already being used within each classroom. Using these qualitative data, I am able to conduct a final set of analyses that allow me to test for pre-treatment effects (Druckman and Leeper 2012). If a teacher already uses critical pedagogy in their classroom, the effect of the experimental intervention should be less pronounced since those in the control group will have already been exposed to material that may resemble the treatment. Contrastingly, if a teacher utilizes traditional pedagogy, even the brief intervention of a critical text should show a discernable effect. This final series of analyses allows me to theorize about the ways in which the critical content presented in the experimental treatment may interact with other teaching tools in order to gain a more comprehensive view of the possible effects of critical pedagogy in the classroom.

## Results

I first test H1: Latinx and black youth exposed to critical pedagogy will report greater willingness to participate in acts of political engagement relative to those exposed to the traditional curriculum. I find partial support for this hypothesis. As shown by the comparison of means presented in Fig. 3, Latinx and black youth exposed to the treatment condition (critical content) report greater willingness to participate in acts political engagement relative to those in the control group (traditional content).<sup>20</sup> While the difference in means does not reach levels of statistical

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<sup>20</sup> Due to the directional nature of each hypothesis, one-tailed tests are used. Sample sizes for each condition are included in Table 7 of Appendix A along with means and standard errors for each dependent variable.

Traditional Curriculum (Control)


**INSTRUCTIONS:** Read through the passage in this section. Use the map to help you understand the text. The Underground Railroad was a network of secret routes and hiding places for enslaved African Americans to escape to the north and west. It was a system of secret routes and hiding places for enslaved African Americans to escape to the north and west. It was a system of secret routes and hiding places for enslaved African Americans to escape to the north and west.

**The Underground Railroad**

The trade of 1825 was relatively small. It was estimated, however, that the trade in slaves from the southern states to the northern states was worth about \$10 million. The trade in slaves from the southern states to the northern states was worth about \$10 million. The trade in slaves from the southern states to the northern states was worth about \$10 million.

Trade moved an additional 60,000 slaves in 1825. It continued to grow, and by 1850, it was worth about \$100 million. The trade in slaves from the southern states to the northern states was worth about \$100 million. The trade in slaves from the southern states to the northern states was worth about \$100 million.



Many Southerners were also opposed by the rising abolitionist movement in the North. The abolitionist movement in the North was growing, and many Southerners were also opposed by the rising abolitionist movement in the North. The abolitionist movement in the North was growing, and many Southerners were also opposed by the rising abolitionist movement in the North.



**Did you know?**

By the late 1800s, the Underground Railroad had become a well-known network of secret routes and hiding places for enslaved African Americans to escape to the north and west. It was a system of secret routes and hiding places for enslaved African Americans to escape to the north and west. It was a system of secret routes and hiding places for enslaved African Americans to escape to the north and west.

Other national abolitionists joined to support the effort. In 1833 they founded the American Anti-Slavery Society. The American Anti-Slavery Society was a national abolitionist organization that worked to end slavery in the United States. The American Anti-Slavery Society was a national abolitionist organization that worked to end slavery in the United States.

The abolition of the black slave in the United States was a long and difficult process. It was a process that required the efforts of many people, including William Lloyd Garrison and Amos A. Phelps. The abolition of the black slave in the United States was a long and difficult process. It was a process that required the efforts of many people, including William Lloyd Garrison and Amos A. Phelps.

High-minded and courageous, the abolitionists were men and women of good will who were determined to end slavery in the United States. They were men and women of good will who were determined to end slavery in the United States. They were men and women of good will who were determined to end slavery in the United States.

**After reading both selections, answer the questions included below:**

- According to the passage, how many slave states existed in the United States in 1850?
  - a. 15
  - b. 16
  - c. 17
  - d. 18
- According to the passage, who was the most amazing of the conductors on the Underground Railroad?
  - a. Harriet Tubman
  - b. Sojourner Truth
  - c. William Lloyd Garrison
  - d. Amos A. Phelps
- Based on the information in the passage, it is reasonable to conclude that most enslaved black people:
  - a. Escaped to large groups of 1,000 or more
  - b. Were helped by Harriet and Sojourner
  - c. Had a difficult time escaping
  - d. Came from America to escape their enslavement

In the control, both the body text and the “Did You know?” box features text from a traditional textbook-*The American Pageant*.

Critical Pedagogy (Treatment)


**INSTRUCTIONS:** Read through the passage in this section. Use the map to help you understand the text. The Underground Railroad was a network of secret routes and hiding places for enslaved African Americans to escape to the north and west. It was a system of secret routes and hiding places for enslaved African Americans to escape to the north and west. It was a system of secret routes and hiding places for enslaved African Americans to escape to the north and west.

**The Underground Railroad**

The trade of 1825 was relatively small. It was estimated, however, that the trade in slaves from the southern states to the northern states was worth about \$10 million. The trade in slaves from the southern states to the northern states was worth about \$10 million. The trade in slaves from the southern states to the northern states was worth about \$10 million.

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**Did You Know?**

**Abolition and the Power of Black Resistance**

By the late 1800s, the Underground Railroad had become a well-known network of secret routes and hiding places for enslaved African Americans to escape to the north and west. It was a system of secret routes and hiding places for enslaved African Americans to escape to the north and west. It was a system of secret routes and hiding places for enslaved African Americans to escape to the north and west.

Other national abolitionists joined to support the effort. In 1833 they founded the American Anti-Slavery Society. The American Anti-Slavery Society was a national abolitionist organization that worked to end slavery in the United States. The American Anti-Slavery Society was a national abolitionist organization that worked to end slavery in the United States.

The abolition of the black slave in the United States was a long and difficult process. It was a process that required the efforts of many people, including William Lloyd Garrison and Amos A. Phelps. The abolition of the black slave in the United States was a long and difficult process. It was a process that required the efforts of many people, including William Lloyd Garrison and Amos A. Phelps.

High-minded and courageous, the abolitionists were men and women of good will who were determined to end slavery in the United States. They were men and women of good will who were determined to end slavery in the United States. They were men and women of good will who were determined to end slavery in the United States.

**After reading both selections, answer the questions included below:**

- According to the passage, how many slave states existed in the United States in 1850?
  - a. 15
  - b. 16
  - c. 17
  - d. 18
- According to the passage, who was the most amazing of the conductors on the Underground Railroad?
  - a. Harriet Tubman
  - b. Sojourner Truth
  - c. William Lloyd Garrison
  - d. Amos A. Phelps
- Based on the information in the passage, it is reasonable to conclude that most enslaved black people:
  - a. Escaped to large groups of 1,000 or more
  - b. Were helped by Harriet and Sojourner
  - c. Had a difficult time escaping
  - d. Came from America to escape their enslavement

In the treatment, the body text features text from the traditional textbook as well-*The American Pageant*. However, the “Did You know?” box features text from a more critical text-*A People’s History of the United States*.

Fig. 2 Example of control versus treatment conditions

significance for black youth (p=0.17), it is highly significant for Latinxs (p=0.001; Cohen’s d=0.37). In fact, Figs. 2 and 3 of Online Appendix A demonstrate that young Latinxs exposed to the treatment condition showed greater intent to vote and campaign for political candidates relative to those who were in the control group. A comparison of means for each individual political engagement activity can be seen in Table 9 of Online Appendix A. Despite lacking an explicit reference to voting, the treatment segment addressing the Chavez and the UFW potentially activated an

**Table 3** Content summary for each textbook excerpt

	Abolitionism and underground railroad	Cesar Chavez and the UFW	Chinese exclusion
<p><b>Control</b>                      Source: <i>The American Pageant</i> (Kennedy 2006)                      Reading Level: 11th–12th Grade</p>	<p>Word Count: 1130                      Key Figures                      Harriet Tubman                      John Brown                      Wendell Phillips                      Zachary Taylor                      William Lloyd Garrison                      Frederick Douglass                      Abolitionists                      Behaviors:                      Escape                      Legal Action</p>	<p>Word Count: 868                      Key Figures                      Cesar Chavez                      Behaviors                      Created civic organizations and the UFWOC                      Elected mayors                      Latinos are inconsistent voters</p>	<p>Word Count: 921                      Key Figures                      Wong Kim Ark                      Behaviors                      Pooled money                      Created Chinatowns and immigrant clubs                      Legal action                      Entrepreneurial ventures</p>
<p><b>Treatment</b>                      Sources: <i>A People's History of the United States</i> (Zinn 2003); <i>Claiming America</i> (Wong 1998); "Lo Mein Loophole: How U.S. Immigration Law Fueled a Chinese Restaurant Boom" (Godoy 2016); "How Racism Created America's Chinatowns" (Goyette 2014)                      Reading Level: 1240 Lexile (12th Grade+)</p>	<p>Word Count: 1153                      Key Figures                      Nat Turner                      Harriet Tubman                      Sojourner Truth                      Frederick Douglass                      Abolitionists                      Behaviors                      Rebellion                      Theft                      Damaging machinery                      Avoid work/feign sickness                      Escape                      "Ballot box"</p>	<p>Word Count: 895                      Key Figures                      Cesar Chavez                      Behaviors:                      Rebellion                      Boycotts                      Organizing farm workers                      Strikes                      Hunger strikes                      Campaigns                      Media use                      Legal actions                      UFWOC</p>	<p>Word Count: 910                      Key Figures                      Wong Kim Ark                      Behaviors                      Created community organizations that provided services                      Legal representation and action                      Created the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association                      Offered health services                      Created private watchman patrol                      Evaded immigration laws                      Used media and petitions to protest</p>

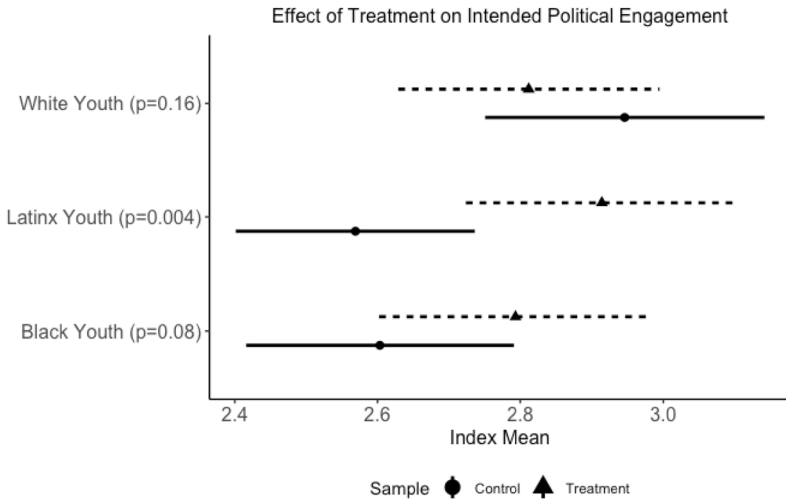


Fig. 3 Political engagement

empowerment mechanism that bolstered willingness to participate more broadly.<sup>21</sup> Thus, as García-Bedolla suggests, positive group images embedded within school curricula appear to be important drivers in shaping one’s willingness to act politically (2005, p. 9; pp. 183–185). More importantly, a comparison between white youth in the control group and black and Latinx youth in the treatment group provides strong support for my primary claim: exposure to critical pedagogy *decreases* gaps in political engagement between white youth and young people of color. As demonstrated by Table 4, the large gaps in political participation present between white youth and young Latinxs exposed to the traditional content ( $p=0.005$ ) are no longer significant among those exposed to critical content ( $p=0.449$ ). Similarly, the gaps in political engagement that emerge between white youth and black youth exposed to the traditional content ( $p=0.014$ ) are decreased substantially in the critical content group ( $p=0.89$ ). Taken together, these findings suggest that critical pedagogy can play an important role in decreasing racial gaps in political engagement between white youth and young people of color.

Next, I test H2: Latinx and black youth exposed to critical content will report greater willingness to participate in acts of public voice relative to those exposed to more traditional historical accounts. Overall, I find strong support for this hypothesis. As shown in Fig. 4, Latinx and black youth exposed to the treatment condition report greater willingness to pursue acts of public voice. Difference in means are statistically significant for both Latinx ( $p=0.002$ ) and black respondents ( $p=0.02$ ; Cohen’s  $d=0.36$ ). These results are largely driven by increased intent to protest, boycott, and sign petitions by both black and Latinx youth. A comparison of means

<sup>21</sup> While I was unable to test the empowerment mechanism explicitly due to time constraints, I discuss this possibility here for theoretical clarity.

**Table 4** Participation gap between white youth and young people of color by condition

	Political engagement	Public voice	Cognitive engagement	Civic engagement
<b>White/latinx participation gap</b>				
Control → Treatment (p value)	+0.38 → +0.10 (p=0.005) → (p=0.449)	+0.24 → -0.33 (p=0.06) → (p=0.017)	+0.77 → +0.18 (p < 0.001) → (p=0.183)	+0.03 → -0.40 (p=0.877) → (p=0.01834)
<b>White/black participation gap</b>				
Control → Treatment (p value)	+0.34 → +0.019 (p=0.014) → (p=0.89)	+0.25 → +0.15 (p=0.062) → (p=0.295)	+0.62 → +0.39 (p < 0.001) → (p=0.015)	-0.005 → -0.22 (p=0.979) → (p=0.227)

Table 4 summarizes the effect of the treatment on the White/Latinx participation gap and the White/Black participation for each participatory domain. According to my theory, the treatment (critical pedagogy) should cause the participation gap between white youth and young people of color to decrease and become less statistically significant. The results presented above demonstrate that this is almost always the case

Bold text indicates instances in which young Latinxs express *significantly greater* willingness to participate than young whites

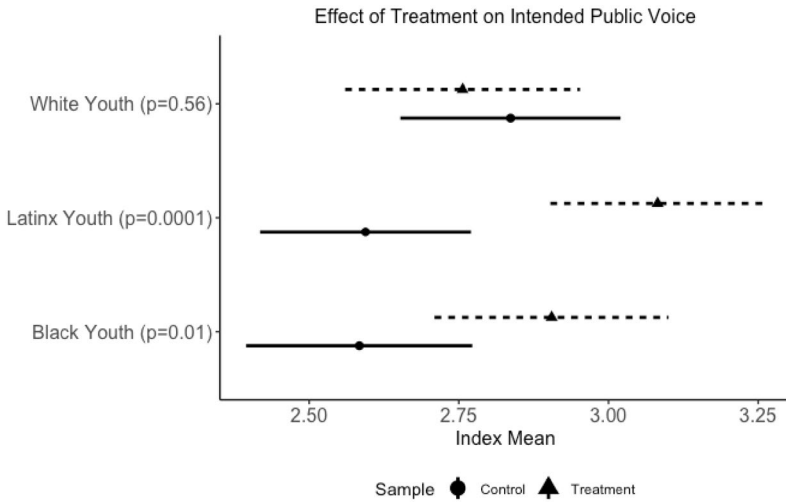


Fig. 4 Public voice

for each individual public voice activity can be seen in Table 9 of Online Appendix A. It is likely that the large effect size among Latinxs (Cohen’s  $d=0.53$ ) exposed to the treatment is also function of both ethnicity and political context. Though the treatment passage mentions multiple national origin groups, Cesar Chavez is the primary focus.<sup>22</sup> Given that 91% of Latinx respondents within the sample identify as Mexican, the passage potentially bolstered feelings of empowerment by centering a role-model representing this national origin group. Second, this survey was distributed within a political context that is particularly threatening for Latinxs. Over half of the Latinx respondents included in this study participated within 2 months of the Trump Administration’s decision to rescind DACA, suggesting that policy threat may have interacted with the treatment condition’s focus on the political activism of Latinxs to yield particularly robust results (see Zepeda-Millan 2017).<sup>23</sup> Thus, while the treatment condition clearly has an effect on the reported behavior of Latinx respondents, a number of other contextual factors specific to this group are likely contributors to the large effect size. Most importantly, Fig. 4 demonstrates that critical content effectively eliminates gaps in participation between white youth and black and Latinx youth. Gaps in public voice between white youth and young Latinxs border on statistical significance among those exposed to the traditional curriculum ( $p=0.06$ ). However, Table 4 demonstrates that critical content not only

<sup>22</sup> While I was unable to test for a role-model effect explicitly due to time constraints, I discuss this possibility here for theoretical clarity.

<sup>23</sup> School administrators and teachers in West Town emphasized that I could not ask students for their geographical or contact information beyond Zip Code due to heightened immigration concerns. Prior to beginning the survey, one student asked their teacher whether they could use their initials to give consent rather than identifying themselves by name due to concerns regarding immigration status (West Town, October 6, 2017).

closes the participation gap across racial groups in the realm of public voice, but actually pushes Latinx youth to be *more willing* to participate in this domain than their white peers ( $p=0.017$ ). Similarly, gaps in public voice between white youth and black youth approach statistical significance among those exposed to the traditional content ( $p=0.062$ ). However, this gap is decreased significantly among those in the critical pedagogy group ( $p=0.295$ ).

I also find strong support for H3: Latinx youth exposed to critical content will report greater willingness to participate in acts of cognitive engagement relative to those exposed to more traditional accounts that center white political actors. As shown in Fig. 5, Latinxs express greater willingness to participate in cognitive engagement activities when exposed to critical content than those in the control group ( $p=0.001$ ; Cohen's  $d=0.35$ ). As hypothesized, it is likely that critical content helps young Latinxs feel greater capacity to engage in robust conversations about politics. More importantly, Fig. 5 also suggests that critical content shrinks the cognitive engagement gap between white and Latinx respondents. As demonstrated by Table 4, while gaps in cognitive engagement are significant between white youth and young Latinxs in the control condition ( $p<0.001$ ), this gap is no longer significant in the critical content group ( $p=0.183$ ). However, white youth continue to outpace every other group in willingness to participate in cognitive engagement activities.

Though no formal hypotheses are presented for civic engagement, results for civic engagement are shown in Fig. 6. Latinx and black respondents exposed to critical content expressed greater willingness to pursue civic engagement activities relative to those in the control group. Though difference in means only reach levels of statistical significance for Latinx youth ( $p=0.001$ ), the effect size is fairly large (Cohen's  $d=0.36$ ). More importantly, Fig. 6 demonstrates that exposure to critical content closes the participation gap between young people of color exposed to critical content and white youth in the control group. Most impressively, Table 4 demonstrates that young Latinxs exposed to the treatment are actually *significantly more* likely to say they are willing to participate in cognitive engagement activities than their white peers ( $p=0.018$ ). This suggests that critical content may not have to emphasize a particular type of participation in order to see an effect. Rather, centering role models of color and grassroots action within historical narratives may contribute to a sense of empowerment that bolster one's willingness to participate in more localized and non-partisan domains as well.

### Pre-treatment Effects

In order to theorize how the experimental intervention discussed above may interact with other pedagogical tools, I conducted a final series of analyses that test for pre-treatment effects. Drawing from content analyses of course syllabi, classroom observations, and in-depth interviews with each of the participating teachers, I categorized schools into one of two groups: students enrolled in classes where the teacher uses traditional pedagogy and students enrolled in classes where the teacher uses critical pedagogy. A simple comparison of means across the treatment and control

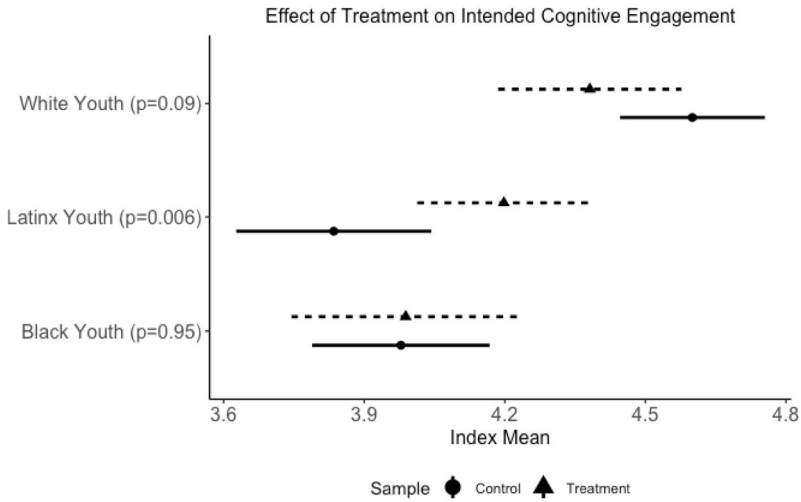


Fig. 5 Cognitive engagement

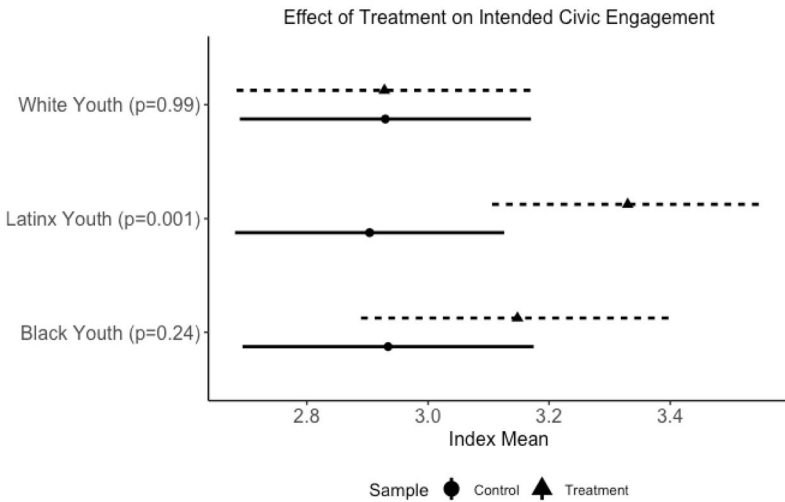


Fig. 6 Civic engagement

groups in each of these categories reveals a pre-treatment effect such that those in classes with extant critical pedagogy already exhibit increased participation.<sup>24</sup>

Figures 7, 8, 9 and 10 compare means for intended participation between students who are already exposed to critical pedagogy and those who are not. These

<sup>24</sup> Sample sizes for each condition are included in Table 8 of Appendix A along with means and standard errors for each dependent variable.

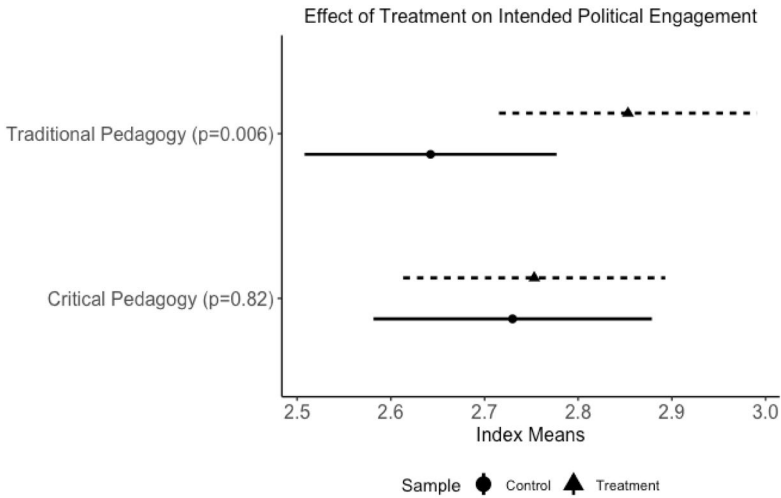


Fig. 7 Political engagement

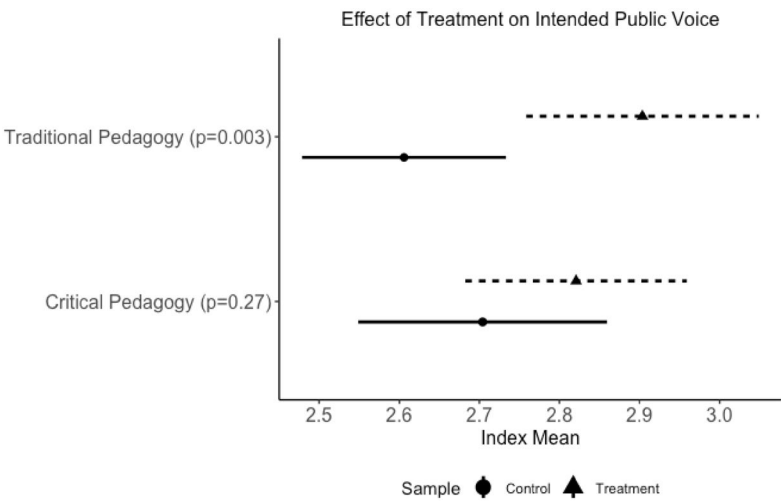


Fig. 8 Public voice

figures reveal two important findings. First, the effect of the treatment condition on each of the four participatory domains is only significant among students who are enrolled in courses where the teacher uses traditional content and traditional teaching strategies (e.g. lecturing rather than student-led discussions or youth participatory action research). Since these students were not yet exposed to the critical content presented within the treatment condition, it makes sense that the effect is most pronounced among these students. Contrastingly, there is no significant treatment effect on intended participation among students who are already exposed to critical

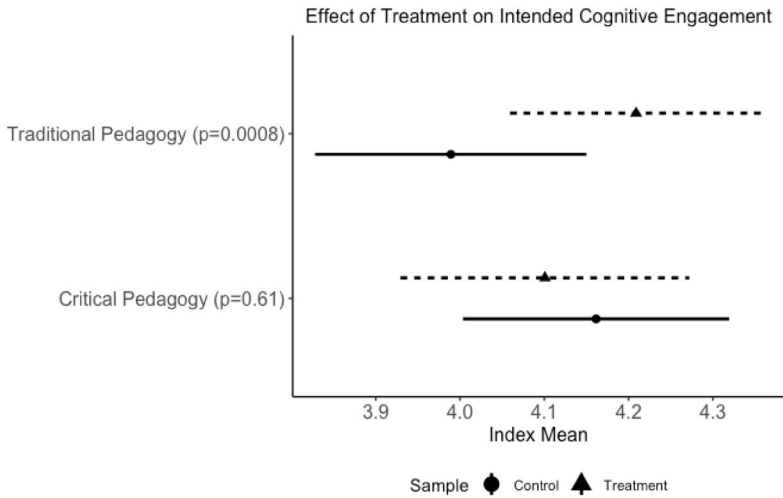


Fig. 9 Cognitive engagement

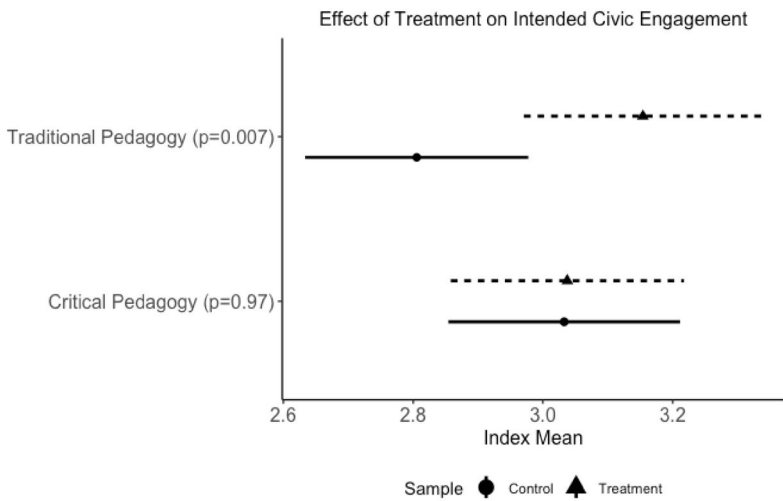


Fig. 10 Civic engagement

pedagogy in their classrooms. In other words, the novelty of the critical content presented within the treatment condition is less pronounced when students are already exposed to this type of content.

Second, Figs. 7, 8, 9 and 10 reveal that intended participation is higher among young people who are already exposed to critical pedagogy. This is consistent with my theory. However, differences in control group means do not reach levels of statistical significance for any of the four participatory domains. While this may cause some to question the long-term benefits of critical pedagogy, there are three things

to consider before drawing this conclusion. First, the traditional content presented within the control condition is not a true control for young people already exposed to critical pedagogy. In fact, it is possible that exposure to the traditional content actually had a negative effect on intended participation among young people who expect to read more critical content. Second, the aim of critical pedagogy is to develop the critical consciousness of students, providing them with the tools needed to reflect upon and transform the world (Freire 2005). Students who are taught to think about the world in more critical ways are likely more aware of the challenges that arise from taking political action. Thus, it is also possible that consistent exposure to critical pedagogy alters how young people think about their own intent to participate. As Amna and Ekman (2014) suggest, while these young people may be prepared to

take political action, it is likely that their intent to participate is more affected by their awareness of real-life challenges rather than an abstract commitment to future political participation. Finally, the results here suggest that teachers can cultivate youth engagement by introducing critical texts that highlight the agency of people of color. However, this does not mean that texts are the only intervention that should be used to shape behavior. Rather, in the tradition of critical pedagogy, these texts can be combined with other teaching tools such as youth participatory action research in order to foster more lasting participatory outcomes. The main takeaway here is that course *content* should not be overlooked as one of *many* tools that can be used by those interested in closing the civic empowerment gap.

## Conclusion

My results accentuate a missed source of inequality in participation. Socialization matters and the content of civic education courses can impact how young people of color intend to participate in politics. Though unequal access to political resources such as money and political efficacy clearly account for gaps in participation rates between whites and people of color, the content of civic education courses, coupled with other teaching tools, may help close these gaps. I find that exposure to content informed by critical pedagogy causes young Latinxs and African Americans to be more willing to pursue multiple forms of political participation. However, future research can add nuance to these findings.

Future work should aim to address four specific concerns. First, the study presented here is limited to a particular place and time. Future work should test the effect of critical pedagogy across temporal and geographical contexts to assess whether the effects of this intervention persist. In doing this, researchers should also aspire to oversample other racial and ethnic groups (e.g. Asian Americans and Indigenous Americans) as well as high schoolers in rural areas to address how content can be used to bolster participation among diverse cohorts of young people. Second, this work cannot assess whether the effects of critical content persist overtime. While the robust results of this intervention suggest that course content can have a powerful effect on the willingness of young people of color to participate in politics, it is important to gauge whether such an intervention continues to shape political behavior beyond high school using longitudinal data.

Third, an independent reading exercise is admittedly a weak test of Freire's conception of critical pedagogy. While the pre-treatment effects highlighted in this study suggest that the pre-existing practices of teachers dramatically shaped the effect of my experimental intervention, future work should examine whether more robust interventions, combining both critical content and critical teaching practices, result in significant and long-lasting effects on the political behavior of young people. Finally, this work should also aspire to isolate more precise causal mechanisms. While I theorize that the effect of critical pedagogy operates through an empowerment mechanism and a role-model effect, I was not able to test this theory explicitly. Still, the results presented here suggest that critical pedagogy may provide a promising way forward for those interested in closing the civic empowerment gap.

As the United States becomes more racially diverse, it is important to explore ways to better prepare young people of color for active participation in American democracy. One possible way forward involves civic education practices that incorporate a more inclusive account of our history that directly addresses racial oppression and the grassroots political action taken by people of color in struggles against it. Schools have long been viewed as cradles for democracy. However, a more critical approach to education may be necessary in order to encourage political participation that actually serves to benefit those who have been most marginalized by the political process (Junn 1999, 2004). As advocates of critical pedagogy suggest, we must "understand deeply the nature of mechanisms that work to establish and maintain asymmetric social relations ... in order to redress systemic inequalities" (Hope and Jagers 2014, p. 451). Schools represent an important space to do just that.

Such an effort will require collaboration among multiple actors. First, constituents must be willing to lobby their elected officials for curricular changes that better reflect the diverse experiences of American youth. Given that many political elites have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and will inevitably push back against efforts that aim to empower young people of color, individuals will have to support political candidates committed to meaningful educational reform. Second, teachers will have to be properly trained to utilize critical pedagogy in their classrooms. For many, this will require learning about new events, new historical figures, and developing a nuanced understanding of how to utilize curricula to foster positive group associations among students. However, if institutional barriers arise that aim to stifle this pedagogical approach, some educators may have to explore ways to circumvent these roadblocks within their own classrooms. Finally, such deep changes in civic education policy and practice will require a great deal of self-reflection among white students and white parents. The goal of critical pedagogy is *not* to decrease participation among white people. In fact, the results presented here suggest that critical content has no significant effect on white respondents. Rather, content informed by critical pedagogy provides a more comprehensive and truthful interpretation of our political history that explores the role of *multiple* narratives, figures, and modes of political action. To encourage political participation among young people of color, we must acknowledge the political agency of people of color throughout history. These transformations are vital if we are to prepare new and increasingly diverse generations of Americans to be full participants in democracy.

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