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Building Civic Engagement through Model United Nations:

A Mixed Methods Case Study

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Abstract

Preparing students for political participation is a central purpose of social studies education. One of the strongest predictors of political participation is political efficacy, the belief that one's own actions can influence political processes. However, researchers understand little about how political efficacy develops. Prior research suggests that certain activities can positively influence political efficacy, including discussing public issues, reading informational news, and participating in democratic decision-making processes. The purpose of this study is to begin to fill the research gap on political efficacy by closely examining students' participation in a program that includes these activities. I administered surveys and conducted interviews and observations with 33 students involved in a Model United Nations program. In my analyses, I explore the ways that these experiences contribute to students' development of political efficacy.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, one of the central aims of social studies education in the United States has been to prepare citizens for active political participation (Hertzberg, 1981). Recently, numerous educational organizations have affirmed this goal, including the National Council for the Social Studies (1993, 1990), the Center for Civic Education (1994), and numerous state education agencies (e.g., Nevada Department of Education, 2008; Michigan Department of Education, 2007; State Education Department of New York, 2002). Despite ongoing educational efforts to prepare youth for political participation, researchers have found that political engagement has remained stubbornly low, especially among youth (McDonald, 2008).

For decades, political scientists have bemoaned Americans' declining levels of political engagement, citing decreasing voter turnout (Gibson & Levine, 2003; Burnham, 1980), less involvement in political organizations (Putnam, 2000), declining political interest (Galston, 2004, 2001), and decreasing confidence in government (Lopez, Levine, Both, Kiesa, Kirby, & Marcelo, 2006; Hetherington, 1998). Even in the election of 2008, which brought a slight increase in political engagement, only about 62 percent of the population voted (McDonald, 2008), with about half of 18- to 29-year-olds taking part (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsburg, 2009). If social studies educators' mission is to prepare citizens for political participation, what can they do to change these trends?

Political scientists have consistently found that one of the strongest predictors of political participation is *political efficacy* – the feeling that an individual's political action can influence the political process (e.g., Becker, 2004; Cohen, Vigoda, & Samorly, 2001; Paulsen, 1991; Guyton, 1988; Almond & Verba, 1963; Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954). Evidence indicates that certain experiences, such as politically-oriented group

work, can have a positive influence on political efficacy (see Figure 1). Participating in a Model United Nations program which gives students opportunities to learn and practice various political skills can be an ideal way for students to develop political efficacy. Due to the complex nature of the program, however, students have extremely varied experiences and may not all develop greater political efficacy. The purpose of this paper is to explore how students in one Model UN program engage in the program's activities and the extent to which they develop political efficacy. By analyzing students' successes, challenges, and developing political attitudes, I offer insights about the potential benefits and difficulties of fostering students' political efficacy through Model United Nations.

## Background

### *Political Efficacy*

Political efficacy was first defined by political scientists who were studying electoral behavior in the mid-1950s. These researchers defined it as follows:

“the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process, i.e., that it is worthwhile to perform one's civic duties. It is the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change” (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954, p. 187).

Since that time, researchers have developed reliable measures of political efficacy and have found it to be an excellent predictor of political participation: When an individual has high levels of political efficacy, she or he is more likely to vote (Cohen, Vigoda, & Samorly, 2001; Pollack, 1983; Guyton, 1982; Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), contact public officials about issues of concern (Hirlinger, 1993; Pollack, 1983; Sharp, 1982), become involved in political activism (Abrams & DeMoura, 2002; Paulsen, 1991; Tygart, 1977), use informational news media (Newhagen, 1994; Tan, 1981), and become

psychologically involved in politics (Cohen et al., 2001; Bell, 1969). Thus, for educators interested in increasing their students' likelihood of political participation, designing instruction that fosters political efficacy is crucial.

In the process, however, educators should consider that there is more than one dimension of political efficacy. Through analyses of thousands of survey responses, political scientists have concluded that political efficacy consists of at least two distinct dimensions: internal political efficacy and external political efficacy (Aish, 1990; Zimmerman, 1989; Coleman & Davis, 1976; Balch, 1974). Whereas external political efficacy is the belief that the public can influence government decisions and actions, internal political efficacy refers to a person's belief that he or she "capable of understanding politics and competent enough to participate in political acts" (Miller, Miller, & Schneider, 1980, p. 253). Although these two dimensions are often correlated (Craig, 1979) and studied as one coherent construct, some researchers have considered them separately. In the previous studies described below, most have considered them in the former manner, but in the original work described herein, I have considered internal and external political efficacy as two distinct dimensions because of their unique properties.

#### *Factors Influencing Political Efficacy*

Both political scientists and educational researchers have explored how to increase individuals' political efficacy, and many of their findings have important implications for educators. One effective method of increasing individuals' political efficacy seems to be political participation itself, especially participation that results in one's preferred political outcomes. For many individuals, simply voting (Ikeda,

Kobayashi, & Hoshimoto, 2008; Finkel, 1985) or participating in other campaign activities, such as attending political meetings or verbally promoting a party or candidate, can boost political efficacy (Stenner-Day & Fischle, 1992; Finkel, 1987). Other studies indicate that voting promotes political efficacy much more definitively when one's preferred candidate wins (Bowler & Donovan, 2002; Clarke & Acock, 1989). On the other hand, research suggests that participating in political action in which participants are marginalized or unheard might reduce their political efficacy (Freie, 1997; Stenner-Day & Fischle, 1992). For educators, this research implies that political action can be a very useful tool in strengthening students' political efficacy but that it is important for students to have opportunities to feel successful in their work.

Another related set of activities that can strengthen political efficacy is participation in small-scale democratic decision-making processes. Researchers have found that when children are involved in making family decisions, they are more likely to become politically efficacious (Langton, 1980; Takei & Kleiman, 1976; Almond & Verba, 1963). In schools, students can develop higher political efficacy when they have opportunities to make classroom rules (Glenn, 1972) and participate in school-wide governance (Siegel, 1977). Even mere simulations of democratic processes can have positive effects. Researchers have documented political efficacy increases resulting from participation in mock elections (Stroupe & Sabato, 2004), legislative role-playing games (Vogel, 1973; Boocock, 1968), and simulations involving negotiations of government energy conservation strategies (Dressner, 1990). However, one study found that if students have disempowering experiences in simulations, their political efficacy can decrease (Livington & Kidder, 1972). Thus, research suggests that teachers aiming to

build students' political efficacy should give students opportunities to be successful in real or simulated democratic decision-making processes.

Recently researchers have also found that when people have opportunities to learn about and discuss political information and perspectives, they are more likely to believe that they can participate effectively in the political system. Numerous studies indicate that political efficacy, especially internal political efficacy, increases when individuals read newspapers or watch television news (Wells & Dudash, 2007; Lee, 2006; Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Discussing political issues with peers also appears to have a positive effect on political efficacy (Morrell, 2005; Hahn, 1999). However, there is also evidence that exposure to confusing or negative political information can actually decrease external political efficacy (Lee, 2006; Miller, 1979). Thus, evidence suggests that if teachers want to strengthen both dimensions of students' political efficacy, it is important for them to give students opportunities to learn and process political information but also to clarify complex political realities and avoid expressing excessive pessimism.

In addition, evidence indicates that identifying strongly with a group, especially a politically-oriented group, can enhance individuals' political efficacy. Researchers have found that people have higher political efficacy if they feel more closely connected to their communities through personal relationships (Steinberger, 1981) or if they identify strongly with a particular demographic group (Koch, 1993). Also, identifying with a political party (Louis, Taylor, & Neil, 2004), especially the party in power (Lambert, Curtis, Brown, & Kay, 1986), tends to strengthen political efficacy. Family politicization also seems to play a role; when children believe that their parents are interested in political issues, they develop higher political efficacy than other children (Ichilov, 1988;

Langton & Karns, 1969). Overall, this evidence suggests that the perception that one belongs to a politically engaged group can strengthen political efficacy. For educators, this research suggests that providing students with opportunities to work with others on civic or political challenges can be an effective way to foster their political efficacy.

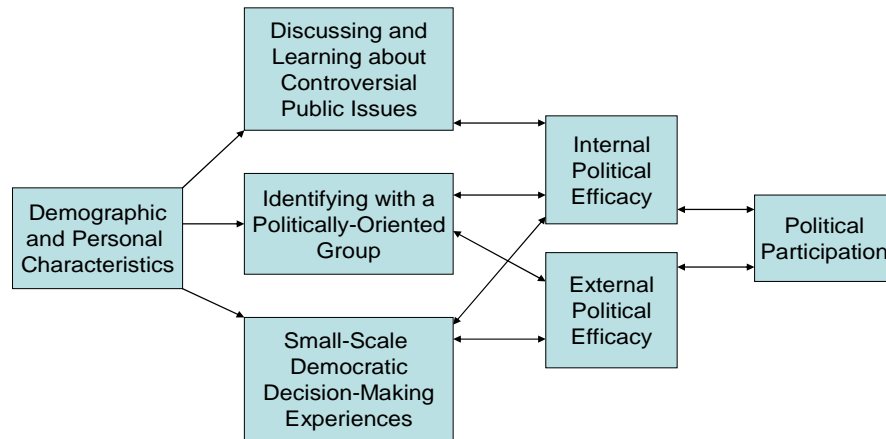


Figure 1. Evidence-based Conceptual Model of Factors Related to Political Efficacy

Finally, researchers have found that certain demographic and personal characteristics are consistently related to political efficacy. People tend to have higher political efficacy if they are older (Wu, 2003; Koch, 1993), more educated (Wolfsfeld, 2006; Ichilov, 1988), from families with higher socioeconomic status (Lambert, Curtis, Brown, & Kay, 1986), or more intelligent (Carmines & Baxter, 1986; Jackman, 1970). Some studies also suggest that one’s ethnicity is related to one’s political efficacy (Kleiman, 1976; Campbell et al., 1954), but other studies indicate that ethnicity’s effect



might be context specific (Wu, 2003; Emig, Hesse, & Fisher, 1996). In most studies examining political efficacy (including the study presented in this paper), most of these variables have been statistically controlled, so despite the relationship between these personal characteristics and political efficacy, individuals' experiences and affinities still have a strong influence political efficacy. In the remainder of this paper, I explore how students' experiences in Model UN can influence their development of political efficacy.

### *Model United Nations*

Model UN is a popular civic education program that provides students with opportunities to represent various countries' interests at interscholastic conferences. About 400,000 students worldwide participate in Model UN activities each year (United Nations Association of the USA, 2009). Model UN conferences, which usually last between one and four days, typically include about a half dozen simulated UN committees, such as the Security Council or the Human Rights Committee. During a conference each committee will address one or two major issues, such as North Korea's nuclear program or water scarcity in the Middle East, and in the process, student delegates follow specific procedural rules to make speeches, propose resolutions, hold caucuses, make procedural motions, and vote. Several weeks before each conference, organizers assign each school club the countries that they will represent, and then within each school club, advisers and students determine which students will represent those countries in the various committees.

Once students are assigned to countries and committees, they prepare to represent their assigned countries' positions on the issues that their committees will address. By the time the conference begins, each student delegate is expected to have written a short

paper clarifying her position on the issues to be discussed in committee. Then during conferences, students have opportunities to debate these issues with students from other schools and develop resolutions to address the challenges in question. Through this process, students have opportunities to engage in many of the activities that researchers have found to strengthen political efficacy (see Figure 1).

Although prior studies have examined Model United Nations programs, no research has closely investigated the ways that various students engage in Model UN and how their political efficacy develops during their participation. In one study, Patterson (1996) interviewed and surveyed students who had participated in an active Model UN program several years earlier. He found that most students believed that the experience had made them feel like they could make a difference in the world, but he assessed this with only one survey question. Another study (Turner, 1997) examined the long history of Model UN programs and the extent to which Model UN activities fulfill the curriculum standards goals of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). After documenting Model UN's impressive history, which pre-dates the actual UN, she concluded that although the programs are typically run by loosely organized local bodies, they almost always support the major goals of the NCSS. While these studies provide valuable evidence of the potential benefits of Model UN, their retrospective nature has not provided strong analysis of what students actually experience while they participate in Model UN. The present study begins to fill that gap.

This is a particularly timely topic not only because of rising concerns about civic disengagement but also because Model UN programs have been spreading rapidly. Since 2000, the United Nations Association's Global Classrooms project has initiated Model

UN programs in 24 urban areas around the world – including Chicago, Johannesburg, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Miami, New York, and New Delhi – with the goal of reaching traditionally underserved communities (United Nations Association of the USA, 2009). Thus, this study makes an important contribution by building our understanding of how students' political efficacy develops during their participation in an increasingly popular civic education program.

### Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. To what extent and in what ways does students' political efficacy develop during their participation in Model United Nations?
2. What kinds of experiences seem to enhance or detract from students' development of political efficacy?
3. To what extent do students' political interest and self-efficacy for political tasks develop during their participation in Model UN?

### Method

#### *Mixed Methods Approach*

In order to address these research questions, I used both quantitative and qualitative methods. There are two major reasons for this mixed methods approach. First, whereas quantitative methods have typically been used for verification of theories and qualitative methods for theory generation, using both allows researchers to simultaneously answer confirmatory and exploratory questions. Given my theoretical framework (Figure 1) and my research questions, both methods are appropriate in this case. Second, having both qualitative and quantitative data can enhance the explanatory

power of a study's conclusions. Even if the different types of data provide divergent findings, this can stimulate an important reexamination of the original theory (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Thus, in this study, by using both qualitative and quantitative methods, I hope not only to examine the validity of the framework in Figure 1 but also to explore the ways in which each element of the framework serves to enhance, diminish, or have no effect on adolescents' political efficacy.

*Context*

This study examines the experiences and political attitudes of the Model United Nations club at Elmwood High School. (All names are pseudonyms.) Elmwood High School is the major secondary school in an affluent semi-urban area bordering a major Midwestern city. The school has approximately 1650 students who are about 90 percent white, two percent African-American, two percent Asian-American, three percent Latino, and three percent other. Elmwood's Model UN team reflects this level of ethnic diversity, attracting mostly white students. The team has a fairly equal mix of males and females, but females pre-dominate in the student-elected officer corps, with eight of nine positions held by female students. Joining the team requires completing an application that includes an essay and short recommendations, but nearly all applicants who complete this process are accepted.

Table 1  
***Characteristics of Elmwood High School***

Number of Students	1650
Graduation Rate	90%
Average ACT Composite Score	21
% Ethnic Minority	10
Per Capita Income (in district)	\$36,800

During the typical school year, club members can choose to participate in a large number of extracurricular club and interscholastic Model UN activities. Club activities

include weekly full membership meetings, weekly officers' meetings (open to all members), country delegation meetings, and fundraisers. Students participate in these activities on a volunteer basis and receive academic credit for them only if they make special arrangements with teachers. Each year, Elmwood's Model UN club participates in at least four interscholastic Model UN conferences – three in the fall semester and one in the spring. I conducted this study during the fall semester of 2009, observing both club and interscholastic programs that occurred during this time and speaking to students about their experiences (see Table 2).

#### *Data Sources*

In order to explore my research questions, I gathered three major types of data during students' Model UN experiences: interview data, survey responses, and fieldnotes on observations. Throughout the semester, I observed students' weekly membership meetings each Monday and officer meetings each Friday, keeping systematic fieldnotes and audio recordings of each observation; I also attended and observed students during the interscholastic conferences. Fieldnotes recorded the amount of time that students spent on various activities, the ways in which students engaged in these activities, and students' opportunities to develop skills and political efficacy.



Figure 2. During a conference, Model UN students vote on an amendment to a resolution.

At the beginning and end of the semester, I administered surveys to 33 Model UN participants from Elmwood High School. These surveys measured students' political efficacy, political interest, and self-efficacy for various skills, in an effort to gauge any changes that occurred during the course of the semester. For the purposes of comparison, I administered the same survey at similar time points to 27 students who were members of the National Honor Society, an exclusive student group of high achievers engaged in community service.

Items measuring internal political efficacy were adapted from the National Election Study (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990), and items measuring external political efficacy were based on a measurement study that I conducted (Levy, 2008). To measure political interest, I adapted questions from studies of the expectancy-value model (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), and items measuring leadership self-efficacy were adapted from a study of managers (Paglis & Green, 2002). (For a list of actual questions, please see Appendix A.)

Table 2  
*Conferences Attended by Elmwood High School Model UN Club*

<b>Conference Location</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Total Days</b>	<b>Elmwood Participants</b>	<b>Elmwood Countries</b>	<b>Conference Committees</b>	<b>Approximate Total Delegates</b>
High School	Oct., 2009	1	30	10	11	190
Large Hotel	Nov., 2009	3.5	21	6	7	250
University	Jan., 2010	3.5	35	7	11	400

In addition to administering surveys and observing Model UN activities, I conducted focused semi-structured interviews (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990) with several students at various points during the term. For this paper, I analyzed interviews with four students – two club officers and two new freshman members. Interviews explored the students’ reasons for joining Model UN, their experiences in the club, and their political efficacy and interest. I spoke with each student at least four times, once at the beginning and end of the semester and also during their conference experiences. Altogether, these data provided a rich corpus with which to explore how students’ political efficacy develops during their Model UN experiences.

*Data Analysis*

Exploring answers to my research questions required detailed analysis of the large amount of data collected. First, I analyzed my qualitative data on an ongoing basis. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I conducted open coding of interview transcripts and fieldnotes beginning in September, and throughout the semester I continually revised these codes. These codes were related to students’ (1) political efficacy development, (2) self-efficacy for various political skills, (3) challenges and learning experiences at interscholastic conferences, (4) political interest, and (5) reasons for participating in the club. While specifying subcategories within these codes, I wrote analytic memos on a weekly basis to explore coding dimensions and relationships among

codes. After I finished collecting data at the end of the semester, I continued to narrow my coding scheme, analyze relationships among codes, and develop theory.

In addition, I analyzed students' survey responses in order to learn about any changes in their political efficacy, political interest, or self-efficacy for political skills. To do this, I first conducted exploratory factor analysis and then created factors out of variables that shared an underlying construct. (For results of factor analysis, please see Appendix A.) After creating factors, I calculated the differences between survey participants' beginning-of-semester and end-of-semester levels of political efficacy, political interest, and self-efficacy for various skills. Then, in order to measure whether or not there were any differences between students who had conducted civic advocacy projects and those who had not, I conducted t-tests and analyzed the variance of students' growth on key variables of interest.

Next, I conducted several ordinary least squares regression analyses in order to more closely examine the relationship between Model UN participation and students' changes in political efficacy, political interest, and self-efficacy for various tasks. Controlling for students' initial levels of political interest, ethnicity, age, grade level, and parents' levels of education, I examined the extent to which Model UN participation was associated with increases on these key factors. Overall, these extensive data analyses provided answers to my research questions and will provide useful insights to researchers and educators interested in strengthening adolescents' political efficacy.

### Findings

Students who participate in Elmwood High School's Model UN program developed significantly stronger political efficacy, political interest, and self-efficacy for



political tasks during their experiences in the program. The Model UN program provided students with opportunities not only to learn about and discuss political issues but also to work closely with their peers to develop solutions to problems, and these experiences contribute to their development of these political attitudes. Although students encountered numerous challenges in their efforts to address problems both in their simulated UN committees and in their school club, spending time collaborating with their peers and putting their knowledge to use motivated many students to develop political skills that strengthened their sense of political efficacy.

*Development of Stronger Political Efficacy*

Results of quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that students' experiences in Model UN positively influence their political attitudes. As Table 3 shows, at the beginning of the semester, students in Model UN and NHS had roughly equivalent internal political efficacy and external political efficacy; but at the end of one semester, Model UN students were significantly higher than NHS students on these dimensions. While NHS students' external and internal political efficacy decreased slightly, Model UN students maintained their levels of external political efficacy and experienced increased internal political efficacy.

Further quantitative analyses indicate that Model UN students developed greater political efficacy than NHS students, even when accounting for the initial differences between them. As Table 4 indicates, results OLS regression indicate that participation in Model UN has a strong and highly significant impact on students' end-of-semester internal political efficacy and external political efficacy, controlling for beginning-of-

semester political efficacy, political interest, self-efficacy for political skills, age, grade level, parental education, and ethnicity.

Table 3  
*Students' Attitudes and Characteristics (N=60)*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Model UN Students</b>	<b>NHS Students</b>
Initial Internal Political Efficacy	5.2	4.8
Final Internal Political Efficacy	5.6***	4.5
Initial External Political Efficacy	4.6	4.3
Final External Political Efficacy	4.6***	3.7
Initial Political Interest	5.4*	4.4
Final Political Interest	5.9***	4.7
Initial Skills Self-Efficacy	5.3	5.1
Final Skills Self-Efficacy	5.5*	5.0
% Ethnic Minority	3.2	7.7
% Mothers with college degrees or more	60.6	65.4
% Fathers with college degrees	63.6	53.8
Age	15.8*	16.4

\*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05, ~p<.1

Interviews with students support these conclusions. At both the beginning and end of the semester, most Model UN students expressed a general belief that their actions could influence the government; but their comments at the end indicate a broader understanding of the means they could use to accomplish their civic goals. For example, early in the semester, when I asked students if they believed they could influence the government, several discussed the importance of voting and writing to representatives.

Erin, a freshman Model UN member, exemplified this sentiment:

“At this moment, all I can do to make a difference would be to write a few letters. Maybe in the future – like ten or 20 years from now – I could make a difference. If I get into a good college and get a good job, maybe I could make a difference. So in the future, yes.”

While participating in interscholastic conferences in which they worked to develop solutions to challenging international problems, students developed a firmer grasp on the potential of working with others to address large-scale issues. Students’

conference experiences demonstrated to them the potential of teamwork. Sarah, a senior Model UN member, who represented Ghana in the Human Rights Committee, built a coalition of delegates to pass a resolution aimed at protecting African women facing the prospect of circumcision. Mark, a freshman who represented Lebanon on the UN Legal Committee, indicated that working with others to develop ways to handle Somali pirates had made him feel increasingly empowered:

“I’m speaking up a little bit more, and people are actually listening to me – which is kind of nice. They’re actually giving me a decent amount of intellectual conversation directly pointed at the arguments that I’ve been making [in my speeches]. This is happening mostly in caucuses....Sometimes things are going against the way that I want, but mostly they’re going in the direction that I want.”

At the beginning of the semester, only the veteran Model UN members discussed the importance of working with others, but by the end of the semester, both freshman and veteran members spoke persuasively about the potential of collaborating with fellow citizens to confront civic challenges. In freshman Erin’s final interview, she mentioned the importance of spreading awareness about issues of concern, describing the potential of digital media to spread one’s message. Since joining Model UN, she had even started a Facebook group for people interested in supporting Elmwood’s music program, which had recently been threatened with severe budget cuts. The group had attracted about 600 members by mid-February.

Although most data indicate that Model UN has a positive influence on political efficacy, participants’ development of political efficacy is not always linear. Randall, a junior officer in the Elmwood club, said that his Model UN experiences had made him more confident in his own abilities but more skeptical about his potential to effect real political change. He thinks that the conferences and club activities have strengthened his ability and willingness to express his views clearly. But whereas his skepticism at the

beginning of the semester was mild, he was increasingly pessimistic after his experience representing Algeria on the UN Security Council:

“If anything, I have less faith in the system by seeing how stubborn people can be and how unwilling they are to cooperate a lot of the time. I’ve always felt like people could make a difference but that it’s hard. But in Model UN, I’ve seen how unwilling people can be to change – and even if it may help out more people, they’re still concerned with themselves the most....Probably my most recent experience colors that opinion. The people in my conference room were pretty selfish.”

Through his frustrating experiences in a simulation of one of the world’s most politically contentious bodies, Randall had begun to feel less politically empowered.

Table 4  
*Effect Sizes of OLS Regression Model Examining Changes in Political Efficacy (N=60)*

<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>End-of-Semester External Political Efficacy</b>	<b>End-of-Semester Internal Political Efficacy</b>
Participation in Model UN	.783**	.669***
Initial External Political Efficacy	.365***	.151*
Initial Internal Political Efficacy	.232	.694***
Initial Political Interest	.141	.070
Initial Self-Efficacy for Political Skills	-.361~	-.105
Parental Education	-.169~	-.017
Ethnicity/Race	.182	-.048
Grade	.337~	.143
Age	-.121	-.200
Constant	4.311	4.219~
R <sup>2</sup>	.528***	.805***

\*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05, ~p<.1

Overall, however, students’ participation in the Elmwood High School Model UN program strengthened their internal and external political efficacy. By working with other student delegates at interscholastic conferences, most students learned that collaborating with peers could be a productive way to develop solutions to meaningful political challenges. Some students’ Model UN experiences with realistic political barriers created frustration and skepticism about an individual’s ability to make a difference, but many of these students experienced other benefits from the program.

*Political Interest*

Model UN participants developed greater political interest during their experience in the program. Results of t-tests indicate that these students had significantly higher political interest than NHS students at the beginning of the semester, but this difference became even larger during one semester in Model UN (see Table 3). As Table 5 indicates, results of regression analyses indicate that participating in Model UN had a substantially positive impact on students' end-of-semester political interest, controlling for beginning-of-semester political interest, political efficacy, self-efficacy for political skills, age, parental education, ethnicity, and grade level. However, several other factors had a significantly positive influence on end-of-semester political interest, including beginning-of-semester political interest and both internal and external political efficacy. This suggests that when students feel more politically empowered, they are more likely to develop greater interest in political issues.

Interview data indicate that students often join Model UN at least partially due to their interest in political issues and that their experiences in the program serve to enhance their interest. Erin, Mark, Sarah, and Randall all said that their interest in political issues was one of their main reasons for participating in Model UN. (For each of them but Mark, a family member had also suggested that they join the Elmwood team.) During Elmwood students' experiences preparing for conferences, they learned about a wide range of issues, including water scarcity, pandemic flu, nuclear proliferation, reconstruction of war zones, and gender inequality, among others. In advance of each conference, Elmwood's team advisors assigned individual students to committees with topics likely to interest those students, and this seemed to enhance students' conference experiences.

Table 5  
*Effect Sizes of OLS Regression Model Examining Changes in Self-Efficacy and Political Interest (N=60)*

<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>End-of-Semester Self-Efficacy for Political Skills</b>	<b>End-of-Semester Political Interest</b>
Participation in Model UN	.411*	.520**
Initial Self-Efficacy for Political Skills	.633***	-.105
Initial Political Interest	.029	.507***
Initial External Political Efficacy	-.028	.226***
Initial Internal Political Efficacy	.153	.306**
Parental Education	-.053	-.074
Ethnicity/Race	-.264	.212
Grade	.285~	-.034
Age	-.177	-.097
Constant	3.795	2.900
R <sup>2</sup>	.604***	.875***

\*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05, ~p<.1

However, even when students were not initially interested in the topics under discussion in their committees, the process of discussing, learning about, and developing solutions to address them seemed to build students’ interest. Sarah, who was in her fourth year in Model UN, reflected on her prior experiences debating solutions to the spread of HIV and AIDS:

“Debating AIDS, I learned how expensive it is to get treatment and how people can’t afford it and that ends up spreading it more.... You end up researching for the purpose of the debate but then you can come out of it realizing that change needs to be made and that it’s not something that should just be debated for four days by high school students.”

Thus, having opportunities to debate, discuss, and address serious world issues can help students to learn about the relevance of political issues and thus enhance their interest.

However, because participation and engagement varies quite widely among students, they do not all develop greater interest in the issues addressed by their committees. While some give speeches promoting their countries’ positions as frequently as they can, others do not give speeches at all, choosing to communicate with other delegates only during caucuses or not at all; most students fall somewhere between these two extremes. Interviews with students during conferences suggest that they are less

likely to participate actively when they have either low interest in the topic or when they are uncertain of what to say. Debates often move vigorously, so for students who have low internal political efficacy, this can be an intimidating environment that discourages both their involvement and interest. Most students in the Elmwood Model UN club, however, prepared adequately for the conferences, became actively involved in their committee debates, and developed greater knowledge about and interest in political issues.

### *Self-Efficacy for Political Skills*

One of the most salient benefits of Model UN is students' opportunities to practice various political skills. During their experiences preparing for and participating in conferences, students typically conduct research on countries' policies, write position papers, construct political arguments, make speeches, and work closely with other students to develop resolutions. My analyses suggest that participating in Model UN strengthens students' self-efficacy for numerous political skills.

As Table 3 shows, results of t-tests indicate that at the beginning of the semester there was no difference between the self-efficacy for political skills (SEPS) of Model UN students and NHS students; however, just a few months later, after the Model UN club had participated in several conferences, there was a significant difference between the two groups of students. Regression results convey a similar trend. As Table 5 shows, participation in Model UN had a substantial impact on students' SEPS, controlling for their beginning-of-semester SEPS, political interest, political efficacy, age, grade level, parental education, and ethnicity.

Analyses of observation fieldnotes and interview transcripts suggest that when students had adequate opportunities to learn and practice certain skills, they experienced increased self-efficacy for those skills. Among these skills were public speaking, working effectively with groups of peers, and making persuasive political arguments. Building confidence in these skills, however, did not come easily for Elmwood students and often required tremendous persistence. Freshmen Erin and Mark, for example, were both very anxious about speaking in front of their committees, but they pushed themselves to overcome their fears. As Erin said,

“It’s hard at conferences. I’ll admit that I get nervous, but I’m glad these conferences are more than one day...Having multiple days helps me to get comfortable in the committee. I’m just gonna debate and say what my country wants to say. I’m probably never gonna see these people again, so there’s really nothing to get embarrassed about.”

Like Erin, other students remarked that developing rapport with members of one’s committee over time can increase one’s comfort level in public speaking. Even Randall, in his third year of Model UN, mentioned that public speaking still made him nervous, but he said that his confidence in front of large groups of people had increased dramatically.

In addition, many students in Model UN learn how to work productively with other students towards meaningful goals. This involves many specific skills, such as listening to other students, considering the relationship between another’s perspective and one’s own, and envisioning a compromise. In addition, it can involve effectively communicating that vision in a way that can bring others on board. As Mark explained,

“I’ve learned a lot about persuasion during caucuses. You need that; you’re not gonna sway them from the country’s policy, but you might be able to sway them a little bit to agree at a moderate level if you have two extremes. And maybe you can get everyone to agree on one thing... I already did have the ability to understand other people’s points of view, but Model UN helps me grow that to a greater level.”



Spending several days working with other students to explore and develop solutions to challenging political problems can be an effective way for students to build their self-efficacy for various useful political skills. Students who do not participate very actively often learn by watching others, and over time, if students have opportunities to attend multiple conferences, they tend to become both more involved and more confident in their own political skills.

### *Challenges*

Participating in Model United Nations can be an active or passive experience, but for members of the Elmwood team – for whom active participation is a norm and expectation – achieving one’s goals at a conference can be quite challenging. For less experienced students, the most prominent challenges are related to students’ becoming involved in the committee. They often struggle to give speeches to their committees or develop resolutions to solve the problems that their committee is addressing. For more experienced delegates, on the other hand, who are often confident and seasoned at public speaking and writing resolutions, the biggest challenges involve passing a resolution that reflects one’s country’s interests.

For example, at her first major high school conference, Erin seldom spoke in her committee and after one session said that she “could have done better.” She had disagreed with the resolution that her committee passed, but she had not forcefully expressed her country’s view. Sarah and Randall, however, fretted not over their own lack of involvement but rather about specific delegates’ arguments. In her debate on addressing problems of a cholera outbreak, for instance, Sarah was frustrated by other delegates’ focus on building infrastructure rather than providing immediately necessary

water supplies. She felt that other delegates were not listening to her points. Thus, whereas some delegates struggle most with becoming actively involved at all, others struggle more with convincing other committee members to accept an alternative viewpoint.

### Discussion

Preparing students for civic participation is a central goal of educational systems in democratic societies, and Model United Nations programs can help to support this goal. With increasingly large numbers of students participating in these programs every year, it is important to understand what students gain from these experiences, what aspects of the program are most beneficial, and how programs might be improved. Although this study examined only one well-organized Model UN program, its findings provide useful information that can help educators and program coordinators to understand both Model UN and effective means of positively influencing students' political attitudes.

#### *Building Civic Engagement through Educational Experiences*

This study's most clear-cut findings are that students who participated in Model UN experienced greater growth in political efficacy. Interviews, observations, and prior research all strongly suggest that when individuals work with others to solve civic problems collaboratively, this positively influences students' belief that their actions can make a difference. However, as also suggested by interviews, observations, and prior research (e.g., Bowler & Donovan, 2002; Freie, 1997; Stenner-Day & Fischle, 1992; Clarke & Acock, 1989), if one's political efforts are not successful, this can reduce political efficacy. Randall's experience on the Model UN Security Council seemed to

temporarily have this effect. For educators interested in strengthening students' political efficacy, it is necessary not only to give students opportunities to develop potential solutions to civic challenges but also to debrief carefully after such activities that without proper discussion could have a negative impact on students' sense of political efficacy.

This study also suggests that participating in Model UN can enhance students' political interest. By researching, discussing, debating, and developing solutions to major world issues over the course of several days or weeks, students learn about the subtleties, effects, and relevance of these issues. Meanwhile, they develop knowledge that enables them to feel more politically efficacious, which in turn positively influences their interest. In short, when students have opportunities to take ownership over their learning, they develop greater interest in those topics. Students would likely develop more political interest in social studies classrooms if teachers provided more opportunities for students to do this.

Despite the potential benefits of Model UN and similar programs, many students do not participate for various reasons – the financial cost to attend conferences, involvement in other extracurricular programs, or a lack of interest in political issues (as suggested in Table 3). Furthermore, even some students who do participate in Model UN do not take full advantage of the program, preparing inadequately or participating only minimally. However, if classroom teachers or educators in other educational programs designed more opportunities for students to take ownership of their civic learning and work with others towards developing potential solutions, these students could experience some of the same benefits that Model UN students do. Through such experiences,

students could develop greater political efficacy and interest that might enhance their civic engagement throughout their lives.

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Appendix A  
Measures and Factor Analysis Results

Table A1  
*Variables in Each Factor*

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Variable Question/Statement</b>	<b>Response Choices (7 levels)</b>
Internal Political Efficacy	<i>I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.</i>	No Understanding – Excellent Understanding
	<i>I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our world.</i>	No Understanding – Excellent Understanding
	<i>I am confident that I can construct arguments about political issues (in writing or speech) that are logical and well-reasoned.</i>	Not at all Confident – Extremely Confident
External Political Efficacy	<i>Do you think that your words and/or actions could persuade a state elected official to consider your policy views?</i>	Definitely Could Not Persuade – Definitely Could Persuade
	<i>Do you think that your words and/or actions could actually affect the outcome of local policy?</i>	Definitely could not affect the outcome – Definitely could affect the outcome
	<i>Do you think that your words and/or actions could actually affect the outcome of state policy?</i>	Definitely could not affect the outcome – Definitely could affect the outcome
Political Interest	<i>Compared to most of your other activities, how useful is learning about political issues?</i>	Not at all useful – Very useful (5 levels)
	<i>For me, being good at understanding political issues is:</i>	Not all important – Extremely important
	<i>How much do you like learning about political issues?</i>	Not at all – Tremendously
Self-Efficacy for Political Tasks	<i>I am confident in my public speaking abilities.</i>	Not confident at all – Extremely confident
	<i>I can persuade my peers of my point of view on political issues.</i>	Never – Always
	<i>When I disagree with a peer, I am comfortable expressing my point of view to him or her.</i>	Never – Always
	<i>When I have to work with other people to achieve a goal, I can motivate others to complete the tasks necessary.</i>	Never – Always
Parental Education	<i>What is your mother's highest level of education?</i>	Less than high school – Graduate degree
	<i>What is your father's highest level of education?</i>	

Table A2  
*Alpha Values for Factor Analyses*

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>
Internal Political Efficacy, Time 1	.895
Internal Political Efficacy, Time 2	.878
External Political Efficacy, Time 1	.860
External Political Efficacy, Time 2	.831
Political Interest, Time 1	.774
Political Interest, Time 2	.914
Self-Efficacy for Political Tasks, Time 1	.464
Self-Efficacy for Political Tasks, Time 2	.755
Parental Education	.643