



## **The Worrisome Impact of Skewed Portrayals of Citizenship and Political Participation in the U.S. Textbooks**

**Angela L. Bos**, Boise State University

How American young people understand politics and their role as citizens is shaped not just by families and peers but also by teachers and classroom instruction. The textbooks students read, in particular, can influence the views they hold about politics and their place in it. Consequently, teachers and professors should pay careful attention to the content of the textbooks and supplement their lesson plans to more fully encourage the development of accurate views and full democratic citizenship for all of their students.

Along with other scholars, I have conducted research on textbooks currently widely used in the United States, and we find clear-cut shortfalls in portrayals of citizenship and social roles in the political process. Our findings highlight the need to improve existing textbooks and also possibilities for supplementing textbook portrayals with additions to high school and college lesson plans.

### **Textbooks Emphasize Rights and Discourage Political Participation**

Analyses of U.S. high school civics textbooks reveal an overwhelming emphasis on citizen rights to the relative exclusion of citizen obligations and participation. This emphasis has psychological and behavioral consequences for students. Surveys of high school students show that they tend to endorse rights more than obligations, in accordance with the curricular emphasis. Such effects are more marked in the United States, which has a highly individualistic political culture.

When students endorse public obligations, they tend to mention intentions to participate in civic and extracurricular activities – but not to engage in politics. Available evidence suggests that rights-focused civics curricula influence how students perceive themselves as citizen actors, undercutting motivations to participate actively in politics.

### **Textbooks Reinforce Social Roles**

Social studies curricula reinforce traditional social roles, for example by portraying politics as a set of activities pursued largely by white males. This finding is confirmed by an analysis of introductory college textbooks in U.S. politics. Because white men have historically dominated American political institutions, they are featured prominently in these texts. In research I conducted with colleagues of widely-used introductory U.S. politics texts, we show that coverage of women is scarce, ignores racial and ethnic diversity among women, reinforces traditional gender roles, and gives little attention to women as political actors. Textbook presentations of women tend to reinforce their status as political outsiders. My collaborators and I hypothesize that this content depresses young women's interest in the academic study of political science and may also discourage their engagement with American political life more generally.

## Textbook Content Can Harm Democracy

Skewed portrayals discourage the engaged citizenship any healthy democracy requires. Textbooks that emphasizes the rights Americans have as citizens while downplaying the obligations and opportunities they have to participate in U.S. democracy can contribute to citizen withdrawal, weakening the democratic political process. Young people may become less likely to run for student government or to state their intention to vote in future elections.

For female students in particular, the dearth of content about women in politics textbooks may be extremely detrimental. U.S. textbooks that include little substantive content focused on women in politics implicitly endorse and thus reproduce gender-based social and political stratification and reinforce women's status as political outsiders. The problem is not confined to the relative absence of female examples in the textbooks; it also resides in the ways women are portrayed – as marginal participants. For example, research on students with marginalized identities indicates they respond to these kinds of implicit messages, incorporating them into their self-image and passively accepting stereotypes about their group. They come to see politics is a “white man's game.”

Female students exposed to such signals about their marginalization may become less likely to pursue academic study of political science or to engage fully with American politics and government. Future research may be able to more fully specify exactly how messages in textbooks contribute to gender gaps scholars observe between female citizens and their more engaged male counterparts.

## How Teaching Can be Improved

Although current textbooks may discourage young peoples' engagement in politics – and especially discourage participation by young women - the good news is that there are ways to make curricular improvements that can have powerful effects. Here are possibilities for teachers and professors to consider:

- As schools and professors select textbooks, they should consider the sex of authors. My research documents that textbooks with one or more female authors have significantly more gender-related content and are more likely to be interesting to female students.
- When a curriculum includes positive examples of women leaders, this shifts young women's perceptions about leadership more generally. Teachers cognizant of these findings can incorporate more examples of female political leaders in their lesson plans.
- When exposed to a curriculum that discusses more female leaders, female college students write say more about females in their answers on exams. Teachers can encourage this by framing appropriate questions.

**Read more in Erin C. Cassese, Angela L. Bos, and Monica C. Schneider, “Whose American Government? A Quantitative Analysis of Author Sex and Textbook Content.” *Journal of Political Science Education* 10, no. 3 (2013): 253-272; Angela L. Bos, Ian Williamson, John L. Sullivan, Marti Hope Gonzales, and Patricia G. Avery, “The Price of Rights: High School Students' Civic Values and Behaviors.” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 37, no. 6 (2007): 1265-1284; and Marti Hope Gonzales, Eric Riedel, Ian Williamson,**

Patricia Avery, John L. Sullivan, and Angela L. Bos, "Variations of Citizenship Education: A Content Analysis of Rights, Obligations, and Participation in High School Civic Textbooks." *Theory and Research in Social Education* 32, no. 3 (2004): 301-325.