

Govely: an Interactive Smart-phone App Engaging Texas Youth in Democracy

Introduction: *Govely* is a smart-phone app designed to integrate into the Texas high school Political Science curriculum. The app uses gaming technology to help the next generation of voters become engaged, empowered, and assertive. Students will gain the writing skills and confidence required to be politically active as the app encourages them to write their school, city, state, or federal representatives about subjects that affect them personally. By employing current technologies and strategies familiar to them, students earn points and badges for: writing their representatives, “high-fiving”, and commenting on their fellow classmate’s posts. Badges are awarded based on subjects of their posts. For instance, posting about environmental issues awards the “Environmental” badge. Additional, gaming aspects encourage team work as students build a graphical representation of their city based on the number of posts from their team. Here’s what it looks like:



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The Team: Texas State professors, Dr. Dan Tamir (Computer Science), Mr. Grayson Lawrence (Art & Design), and Dr. Jeremy Wells (Political Science), along with Computer Science and Graphic Design students have spent the past year creating initial prototypes and conducting acceptability demos.

The Need: Despite substantial efforts to educate youth on US and local political systems, significant numbers of young US residents remain disengaged from and uninterested in politics. Adolescents' educational environment matters a great deal in terms of future political and civic participation. Youth tend to participate more when debates over political issues happen in the classroom (Kahne, Crow and Lee 2013; Martens and Gainous 2013); and when they have higher levels of civic knowledge and efficacy at school (Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2003). Students are highly active with digital media, including cellular phones, the Internet, social media, and smartphone applications. The effect of social media on youth political participation has not received much attention in the literature; however, in general, greater social media use substantially increases political engagement among adolescents (Xenos et al. 2014). A survey of current smartphone apps for Political Science learning revealed that the majority are designed as examination study guides, and focus on memory recall, rather than fostering active learning and political participation. These applications fail to take advantage of learner-learner and learner-faculty interaction to enhance learning. For learners, these applications do not take advantage of many smartphone activities that are popular among adolescents: check-ins, posting photo/video, and social media sharing.

Initial Data Collected: A recent demo of the application involved three Political Science teachers from San Marcos High School, and consisted of a questionnaire and focus group discussion to judge educator acceptance of the app. Questionnaire results indicated all teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the application aligns with their class goals; would encourage an increased level of student involvement in government; and help teach active civic participation concepts. Additionally, all teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they would assign the app in their classroom. In focus groups, educators praised the app's flexibility and open-ended qualities, allowing them to integrate the app into their class a number of times during the semester and covering a wide range of topics.

Plans for Continued Research: Demos and focus groups with up to 20 high-school students are planned this Fall to collect data on acceptance of the app's gaming aspects, graphical styling, and functionality prior to applying for this grant. Our plan for this stage of the research is to add a professor from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction to validate learning outcomes, as well as add up to two high-school Political Science teachers as consultants on the project.

Future Funding Opportunities: Funding from the Democratic Practice program would serve to expand the project in three ways: Continued development of the smartphone app and teacher's administrator panel, a full pilot of the system in up to three classrooms, authoring of a teacher's guide to help with integrating the app into classrooms, and authoring of a plan for further system improvements and release to schools in a second pilot with an expanded number of school districts. As many of the students in high-school Political Science classes near or achieve voting age, data collected from this pilot would yield valuable information. The app will allow us to collect and publish on areas regarding the types of subjects this potential voting block is interested in; which areas of government (school board, city, state, or federal) they feel most engaged in; as well as features and techniques that make up a successful educational app for classroom use.

Conclusion: It is our hope that with continued funding we will create an app system that encourages active political participation among young people for years to come, and that this app can someday be further developed to reach a nationwide audience of all ages, encouraging democratic transparency for all Americans while improving access to political information by underrepresented communities.

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