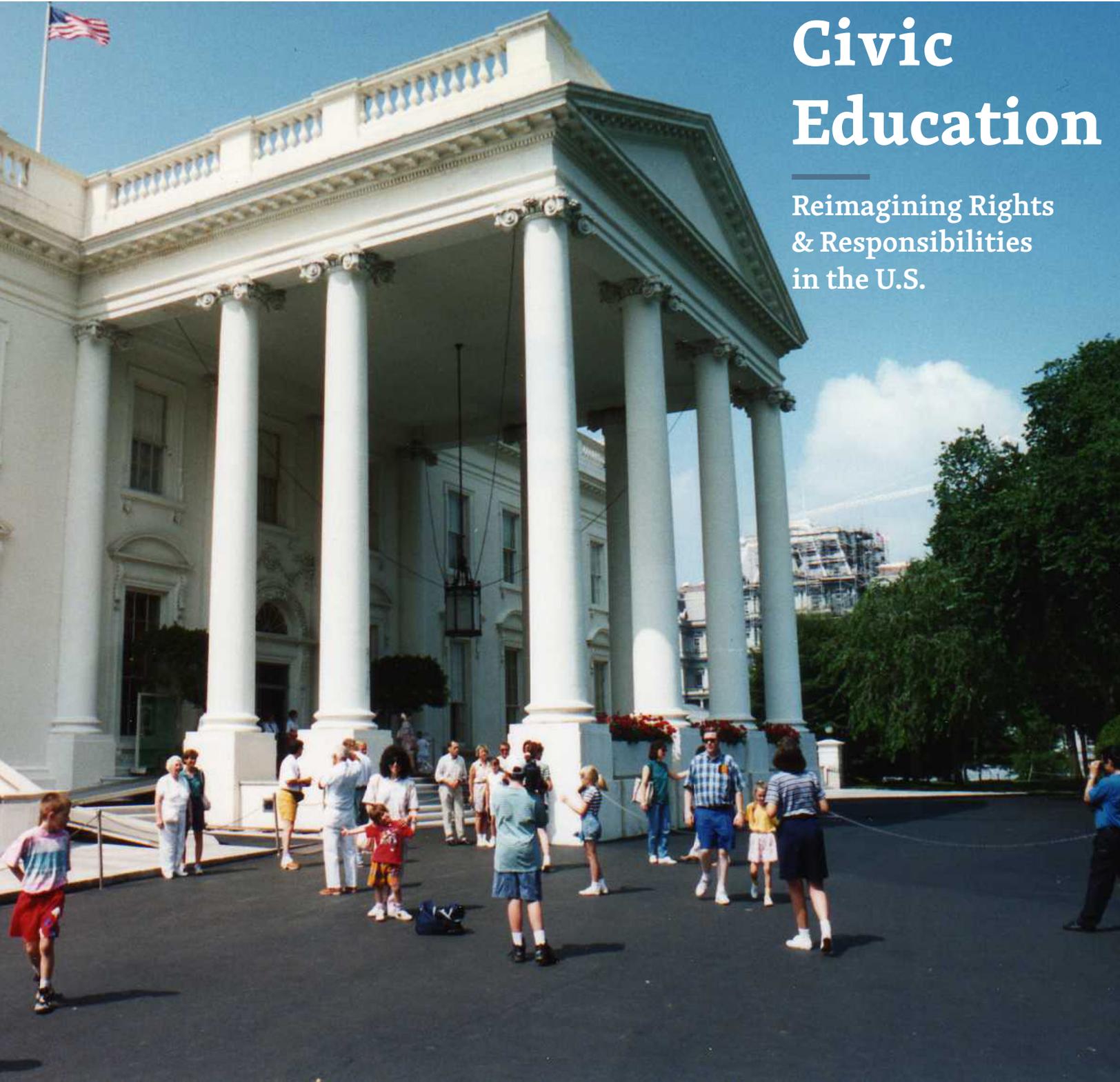


# CARR CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL

## Civic Education

Reimagining Rights  
& Responsibilities  
in the U.S.



## **Reimagining Rights & Responsibilities in the United States: Voting Rights**

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## INTRODUCTION

“Wherever the people are well-informed they can be trusted with their own government,” Thomas Jefferson said in 1789, on the eve of a new American government. This lofty ideal could be said to be the cornerstone of democracy itself. A well-informed citizenry is essential in a democracy to preserve American values and make sound decisions in every area from the school board meeting to the voting booth.

Yet, arguably, in no other way have Americans fallen so short from what the Framers intended than in their understanding of and participation in democratic governance. A 2019 survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania found that only 39 percent of respondents could name all three branches of government, and 22 percent could not name any.<sup>1</sup> Voting rates average only 56 percent in presidential elections, and are as low as 40 percent in mid-terms, ranking the U.S. far below most other democracies in voting participation.<sup>2</sup>

More than knowing facts about the U.S. government and voting, active citizenship involves engaging with civil society organizations or participating in social and political advocacy. But according to a 2018 study by the Public Religion Research Institute,<sup>3</sup> most Americans do not report high levels of civic engagement. Participation rates were low in civic and political engagement activities such as signing an online petition, following a campaign or organization online, contacting an elected official, volunteering for a group or cause, attending a community meeting, or attending a public rally or demonstration in the last 12 months.<sup>4</sup>

In short, the American people are not well-informed about their own government, do not turn out to vote in high numbers, and do not engage significantly in politics and civics. Despite these failings, civic education over the past several decades has been systematically reduced at both the state and federal level. President Barack Obama warned of the harm that lack of attention has caused: “The loss of quality civic education from

so many of our classrooms has left too many young Americans without the most basic knowledge of who our forefathers are, or the significance of the founding documents, [or] the risks and sacrifices made by previous generations to ensure that this country survived war and depression; [or] the great struggles for civil, and social, and worker’s rights. It is up to us, then, to teach them.”<sup>5</sup>

Civic education is the key to democratic governance because it imparts critical American values and encourages civic participation. With voting rights under threat and low voter participation rates, education experts argue that it is important that every American is taught about their government and the value of civic participation.<sup>6</sup> According to a Harvard study, completing a year’s worth of coursework in civics or American government heightens one’s propensity to vote.<sup>7</sup> In the 1960s, robust civic education began to break down, and this coincided with the decreasing rate of young citizens who cast ballots.<sup>8</sup>

But democracy is more than just voting; it depends on a citizenry that is informed, involved, and moral, qualities that can be imparted through civic education. Informed citizens can better hold their elected officials accountable, engage in productive public discourse, and demand accurate information from the media. Civic education can also help promote equality by giving every citizen, no matter their socioeconomic status, the tools to be full participants in their own governance.

Civic education provides students with an understanding of history, contemporary issues, and the processes of American democracy. It also teaches respect for core American values, such as the rights and responsibilities of citizens, as well as an appreciation for a diversity of cultural and political perspectives.

According to a 2011 report by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, competent and responsible citizens have four

1. “Americans’ Civics Knowledge Increases But Still Has a Long Way to Go.” *The Annenberg Public Policy Center*, University of Pennsylvania, 12 Sept. 2019, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-civics-knowledge-increases-2019-survey/>.

2. “Voter Turnout.” *FairVote*, [https://www.fairvote.org/voter\\_turnout#voter\\_turnout\\_101](https://www.fairvote.org/voter_turnout#voter_turnout_101).

3. PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to conducting independent research at the intersection of religion, culture, and public policy.

4. Vandermaas-Peeler, Alex, et al. “American Democracy in Crisis: Civic Engagement, Young Adult Activism, and the 2018 Midterm Elections.” *Public Religion Research Institute*, 11 Oct. 2018, <https://www.prrri.org/research/american-democracy-in-crisis-civic-engagement-young-adult-activism-and-the-2018-midterm-elections/>.

5. Gould, Jonathan, editor. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*. Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011, [https://production-carnegie.s3.amazonaws.com/filer\\_public/ab/dd/abdda62e-6e84-47a4-a043-348d2f2085ae/ccny\\_grantee\\_2011\\_guardian.pdf](https://production-carnegie.s3.amazonaws.com/filer_public/ab/dd/abdda62e-6e84-47a4-a043-348d2f2085ae/ccny_grantee_2011_guardian.pdf).

6. Ibid.

7. Bachner, Jennifer. “From Classroom to Voting Booth: The Effect of High School Civic Education on Turnout.” 23 May 2010, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/From-Classroom-to-Voting-Booth%3A-The-Eect-of-High-on-Bachner/c91611001590e55b68a99fdaf62835528a2b>.

8. File, Thom. *Young-Adult Voting: An Analysis of Presidential Elections, 1964-2012*. Current Population Survey Reports, United States Census Bureau, Apr. 2014, <https://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p20-573.pdf>.

**The American people are not well-informed about their own government, do not turn out to vote in high numbers, and do not engage significantly in politics and civics. Despite these failings, civic education over the past several decades has been systematically reduced at both the state and federal level.**

common traits. They are informed and thoughtful, participate in their communities, are politically active, and have strong civic values.<sup>9</sup> To prepare responsible citizens, civic education must include class instruction and discussion of current events and controversial issues. A well-rounded civic curriculum should also include the development of a community service program for students to apply what they learn. Schools should also offer opportunities for student participation in school governance and facilitate simulations of democratic processes.<sup>10</sup>

Young people who have gained civic education are four times more likely to volunteer and work on community issues, according to the Annenberg Public Policy Center. Additionally, civic education is associated with an increase in young people interpreting political information correctly, discussing political issues with peers and adults, monitoring the news, and feeling confident about their ability to speak in public.<sup>11</sup>

The current state of education in the United States does not fulfill the goal of helping young people become well-informed and civically inclined citizens. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Director of the Annenberg Center, has observed that “at a time when the nation is confronting some of the most difficult decisions it has faced in a long time, a lack of high quality civic education in America’s schools leaves millions of citizens without the wherewithal to make sense of our system of government.”<sup>12</sup>

The Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution categorizes civic education as *civic knowledge* (an understanding of government structure and processes), *civic skills* (abilities that enable participation in democracy), and *civic dispositions* (attitudes that are important to democracy, such as civic duty

and concern for the welfare of others).<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, education today does not adequately develop students’ ability to participate in American democracy. This is a result of both state and federal governments neglecting civic education because of budget constraints and a greater focus on other subjects such as reading and math. A robust restoration of the centrality of civic education in the curriculum could help reverse the decades-long decline in civic understanding and restore the engaged democracy the founders envisioned.

## HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF CIVIC EDUCATION

Jefferson was not the only founder who recognized the importance of education in democracies for ensuring an informed citizenry and creating a shared American identity that would bring together a heterogeneous society. Benjamin Franklin envisioned schooling as a means of “laying such a foundation of knowledge and ability as, properly improved, may qualify [individuals] to pass through and execute the several offices of civil life, with advantage and reputation to themselves and country.”<sup>14</sup>

George Washington stated in his Farewell Address that “the assimilation of the principles, opinions, and manners of our country-men by the common education of a portion of our youth from every quarter well deserves attention. The more homogenous our citizens can be made in these particulars the greater will be our prospect of permanent union; and a primary object of such a national institution should be the education of our youth in the science of government.”<sup>15</sup>

9. Gould, Jonathan, editor. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools. Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools*, 2011, [https://production-carnegie.s3.amazonaws.com/filer\\_public/ab/dd/abdda62e-6e84-47a4-a043-348d2f2085ae/ccny\\_grantee\\_2011\\_guardian.pdf](https://production-carnegie.s3.amazonaws.com/filer_public/ab/dd/abdda62e-6e84-47a4-a043-348d2f2085ae/ccny_grantee_2011_guardian.pdf).

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Hansen, Michael, et al. *The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well are American Students Learning?* Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings, Jun. 2018, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2018-Brown-Center-Report-on-American-Education\\_FINAL1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2018-Brown-Center-Report-on-American-Education_FINAL1.pdf).

14. Franklin, Benjamin. *The Works of the Late Dr. Benjamin Franklin Consisting of His Life Written By Himself: Together With Essays Humorous, Moral, & Literary, Chiefly In The Manner Of The Spectator*, p. 265.

15. “Eighth Annual Address to Congress.” *The American Presidency Project*, UC Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/eighth-annual-address-congress>.

**Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to receive a strong civic education curriculum.**

## To be an effective tool of democracy, education requires all citizens to have equal access.

For generations of immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the common school was the primary teacher of patriotism and civic values. Many came to see the common school as the guarantor of the nation's promise of democracy and freedom. This understanding of the importance of education in a democracy led to the enactment of the 1862 Morrill Act, which gave each state federal land to establish land grant colleges, and the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which gave public schools federal assistance and oversight.<sup>16</sup>

To be an effective tool of democracy, education requires all citizens to have equal access. But the country was more than a half-century old before efforts were made to achieve universal opportunities for education. And “[e]ven after the 1840s . . . most boys could not expect to attend school for more than a few years, and girls could hardly hope to attend at all.” When the Fourteenth Amendment was adopted in 1868, common tax-supported schooling had not yet taken hold in the South, and the education of African Americans was forbidden by law in many states.<sup>17</sup>

By 1890, nearly every American child between the ages of 5 and 13 attended school regularly, with the vast majority in schools funded and administered by newly emergent school districts.<sup>18</sup> Civic education became an important part of curricula nationwide as waves of immigrants from many countries and cultures flooded into the country. Through the 1960s courses in civics and government were common in American high schools, and students were taught about the role of citizens especially at the local and state levels. Studying problems of democracy encouraged students to discuss current issues and events, and

courses in American government focused on the structures and functions of government at the national level.<sup>19</sup>

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, there was widespread concern about whether the school was continuing to fulfill that role. For a variety of reasons—including criticism from the left that civic education was focusing too much on traditional values, and criticism from the right that it was focusing too much on cultural diversity—the public schools seemed to have relinquished their earlier responsibilities to serve as agencies of civic assimilation for immigrants. Policymakers began shifting the focus from social studies toward subjects like math and reading and schools saw their role as creating skilled workers rather than focusing on assimilation.<sup>20</sup> During the 1980s and 90s, public schools concentrated increasingly on math and reading while promoting respect for racial and ethnic diversity, with less attention to the institutions of the American government.<sup>21</sup> Under President Ronald Reagan, the National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended in a celebrated report, “A Nation at Risk,” increased testing in math and science “as these scores would predict future college and workplace performance.”<sup>22</sup>

## INADEQUATE STATE AND FEDERAL CIVIC EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS

In recent years, both federal and state requirements and assessments have deemphasized civic education. Recent studies show that inadequate classroom instruction throughout the country both in civics and in social studies, important to students for learning the historical and cultural context in which the US government is situated. A study by the Albert Shanker Institute found that most state standards in social studies are overwritten, emphasizing a laundry list of historical facts and dates for memorization, and contain far more material to be covered than most states and districts allot for civic learning in the classroom.<sup>23</sup> As of 2018, only nine states and the District of Columbia required

16. Hall Jamieson, Kathleen. “The Challenges Facing Civic Education.” *Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, vol. 142, no. 2, Spring 2013, pp.65-83, <https://www.amacad.org/publication/challenges-facing-civic-education>.

17. Ibid

18. Gould, Jonathan, editor. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools. Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools*, 2011, [https://production-carnegie.s3.amazonaws.com/filer\\_public/ab/dd/abdda62e-6e84-47a4-a043-348d2f2085ae/ccny\\_grantee\\_2011\\_guardian.pdf](https://production-carnegie.s3.amazonaws.com/filer_public/ab/dd/abdda62e-6e84-47a4-a043-348d2f2085ae/ccny_grantee_2011_guardian.pdf)

19. Ibid.

20. Rizga, Kristina. “Why Teaching Civics in America’s Classrooms Must Be a Trump-Era Priority.” *Mother Jones*, Jan.- Feb. 2017, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/02/civics-education-trump-bullying/>.

21. Ravitch, Diane, and Joseph P. Viteritti. *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*, Yale University Press, 2001, p. 5.

22. Klein, David. “A Brief History of American K-12 Mathematics Education in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.” *Mathematical Cognition*, 2003, <https://www.csun.edu/~vcnth00m/AHhistory.html>.

23. Gould, Jonathan, editor. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools. Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools*, 2011, [https://production-carnegie.s3.amazonaws.com/filer\\_public/ab/dd/abdda62e-6e84-47a4-a043-348d2f2085ae/ccny\\_grantee\\_2011\\_guardian.pdf](https://production-carnegie.s3.amazonaws.com/filer_public/ab/dd/abdda62e-6e84-47a4-a043-348d2f2085ae/ccny_grantee_2011_guardian.pdf)

one year of study in U.S. government and civics.<sup>24</sup> Thirty-one states only required a half-year of civics or U.S. government education, and 10 states had no civics requirement at all. Only seventeen states required a civics exam to graduate.<sup>25</sup> The unevenness and lack of assessment of social studies indicate that civic learning is not a priority in education. Moreover, many states teach information, not skills, and no states have experiential learning or local problem-solving components in their civics requirements. Only Maryland and the District of Columbia require both community service and civics courses for graduation.

These varying state civic education requirements affect the quality of test scores and level of youth community engagement. States with the highest rates of youth civic engagement tend to prioritize civics courses and AP U.S. government in their curricula. The 10 states with the highest youth volunteer rates have a civics course requirement for graduation and score higher than average on the AP U.S. government exam. Seven out of ten states with the highest youth voter participation rate score higher than average on the AP U.S. government exam.<sup>26</sup>

However, civic education test score outcomes still lag behind most other subjects nationwide. The national average AP U.S. government exam score is 2.64, lower than the average AP score of all but three of the other 45 AP exams offered by schools.<sup>27</sup>

Civic education has been neglected in the U.S. in part because of competition with other subjects. The 2002 “No Child Left Behind” legislation emphasized math and reading assessments, important in themselves, but this meant schools gave less attention to other subjects, such as social studies.<sup>28</sup> No Child Left Behind emphasized reading, language arts, mathematics, and science because they were considered “core academic subjects.”<sup>29</sup> However, given civic education’s impact on people’s ability to exercise their rights and participate in their communities, it is important that civic

education also be considered a “core subject.” Schools should not have to face a tradeoff between civic education and reading and math.

A comparison of Department of Education Schools and Staffing Surveys from 1987–1988 to those from 2002–2004, the years shortly after No Child Left Behind was implemented, showed a reduction in time spent on social studies instruction in elementary schools. History and social studies instruction time decreased by 21.6 minutes over that period, compared to an increase of 36.6 minutes for reading/English language arts and a 28.8 minutes increase in mathematics.<sup>30</sup>

This narrowing of the curriculum has been occurring since the late 1960s. In the elementary grades, civic learning used to be woven throughout the curriculum, but today only slightly more than a third of teachers report that they cover civic topics on a regular basis.<sup>31</sup> In high school, the situation is worse. Until the 1960s, high school courses in civics and government were common, explored the role of citizens, and encouraged students to discuss current issues. Today, there is generally a single high school course on American government that devotes minimal time to how people can and should participate as citizens. The course is usually offered in the eleventh or twelfth grade, thus not allowing time for students to build knowledge from year to year, and missing the large number of students who drop out before their senior year.<sup>32</sup> This means that students are not learning basic democratic values and the skills necessary to understand and engage with diverse communities and differing perspectives.

The decrease in instructional time and requirements for civic education compared to other subjects has resulted in a deficiency in civic knowledge, as demonstrated by test scores in the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). From 1998 to 2014, the average civic knowledge score for eighth-graders increased

24. Shapiro, Sarah, and Catherine Brown. “The State of Civics Education.” *Center for American Progress*, 21 Feb. 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/02/21/446857/state-civics-education/>

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. Hansen, Michael, et al. *The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well are American Students Learning?* Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings, Jun. 2018, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2018-Brown-Center-Report-on-American-Education\\_FINAL1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2018-Brown-Center-Report-on-American-Education_FINAL1.pdf).

29. United States, Congress. Public Law 107-110. 2002. U.S. Government Publishing Office, <https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ110/PLAW-107publ110.htm>

30. West, Martin. “Testing, Learning, and Teaching: The Effects of Test-Based Accountability on Student Achievement and Instructional Time in Core Academic Subjects.” *Beyond the Basics: Achieving a Liberal Education for All Children*, edited by Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Diane Ravitch, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2007, pp. 45–61, [http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2007/200707\\_beyondthebasics/Beyond\\_The\\_Basics\\_West.pdf](http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2007/200707_beyondthebasics/Beyond_The_Basics_West.pdf).

31. Gould, Jonathan, editor. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*. Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011, [https://production-carnegie.s3.amazonaws.com/filer\\_public/ab/dd/abdda62e-6e84-47a4-a043-348d2f2085ae/ccny\\_grantee\\_2011\\_guardian.pdf](https://production-carnegie.s3.amazonaws.com/filer_public/ab/dd/abdda62e-6e84-47a4-a043-348d2f2085ae/ccny_grantee_2011_guardian.pdf).

32. *Ibid.*



Illustration by Robert Neubecker | Harvard Magazine, 2012

by only 4 points on a 300-point scale. The average score is 24 points below the proficiency threshold set by NAEP.<sup>33</sup>

Not only are civic knowledge scores not increasing, but they are also lagging in proficiency rates compared to math and reading. For civics, only 27% of Grade 4, 23% of Grade 8, and 24% of Grade 12 scored at or above NAEP proficient.<sup>34</sup> This compares to 41% proficiency in math at Grade 4, 34% at Grade 8, and 25% at Grade 12.<sup>35</sup> The comparison is similarly unfavorable in reading: 35% at Grade 4, 34% at Grade 8, and 37% at Grade 12.<sup>36</sup>

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to receive a strong civic education curriculum. The NAEP Civic Test in 2010 measured the frequency of practices for three civic

education practices: discussing current events, debating current issues, and participating in simulations of democratic processes and procedures. The report found that at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and 12<sup>th</sup> grade levels, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were taught more of these practices.<sup>37</sup> Exposure to these practices was associated with higher NAEP scores for all groups.

The lack of attention to civic education in schools is being challenged by students and their parents. For example, Rhode Island does not require schools to offer courses in government or civics, does not require standardized tests in those subjects or history, and does not provide training for teachers in civics.<sup>38</sup> Rhode Island public school students and parents filed a federal lawsuit against the state on November 29, 2018, arguing that

33. "2014 Civics Assessment." *The Nation's Report Card*, National Center for Education Statistics, [https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hgc\\_2014/#civics/scores](https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hgc_2014/#civics/scores).

34. "How Did the U.S. Students Perform on the Most Recent Assessment." *The Nation's Report Card*, National Center for Education Statistics, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Levine, Pete. "Fact Sheet, What the NAEP Civics Assessment Measures and How Students Perform." *The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE)*, Tufts University, Jan. 2013, [https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2020-01/what\\_naep\\_assessment\\_measures\\_2013.pdf](https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2020-01/what_naep_assessment_measures_2013.pdf).

38. Goldstein, Dana. "Are Civics Lessons a Constitutional Right? This Student Is Suing for Them." *The New York Times*, 28 Nov. 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/us/civics-rhode-island-schools.html>.

failing to prepare children for citizenship violates their rights under the U.S. Constitution.<sup>39</sup> As in most states, the Rhode Island state constitution guarantees the right to an adequate education. The plaintiffs argue that “the state has not equipped all of its students with the skills to ‘function productively as civic participants’ capable of voting, serving on a jury and understanding the nation’s political and economic life.”<sup>40</sup> The lawsuit claims that when states do not require schools to offer courses in government or civics, students are left without the knowledge of how to access and practice their constitutional rights. The case is pending in federal court.

## INADEQUATE FEDERAL FUNDING

A major hindrance to the advancement of civic education in the United States is a lack of federal funding. As recently as the early 2000s, the federal government spent approximately \$40 million a year on civics programs.<sup>41</sup> However, the year 2010 was a turning point. Congress changed how some education programs were funded, shifting more dollars toward STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) education and leaving subjects like civics scrambling for what was left over. Now the federal government spends just \$4 million a year on civics—a tenth of what it used to spend— compared to almost \$3 billion a year on STEM.<sup>42</sup> Civic education is no longer considered a priority.

The Obama administration in its fiscal 2011 budget proposed consolidating smaller programs into broader funding streams. For instance, smaller literacy programs would have been combined into a big competitive fund aimed at improving reading and writing. However, under the House bill, these programs were

scrapped entirely, denying \$35 million for civic education. Civic education was considered expendable because officials believe that other subjects were more important.<sup>43</sup>

Congress zeroed out civic education funding in 2011. These drastic spending cuts were justified as a part of the federal government’s bid to cut costs after the 2008 financial crisis and to reduce the federal deficit.<sup>44</sup> In fiscal year (FY) 2012 Congress terminated funding for the “Teaching American History” (TAH) grants program at the Department of Education. Appropriations earmarked for civic education and federal funding for National History Day, a nationally recognized program that increases student participation in historical studies across the country, were also eliminated.<sup>45</sup> As a result, since FY 11 there has been no federal funding provided for history or civic education.<sup>46</sup> The entire civic education portfolio in the Department of Education was eliminated.<sup>47</sup> Learn & Serve America, the program within the Corporation for National and Community Service that funds interactive civic education in K-12 schools, colleges and universities, nonprofits, and Native American communities, was eliminated completely after 21 years. The Center for Civic Education, a national nonprofit whose primary source of funds for decades was the Department of Education, was allocated no money.

This movement in Congress to cut funding in the education budget was aimed at consolidating programs and eliminating “wasteful spending.”<sup>48</sup> Representative Hal Rogers (R-KY), Chair of the House Appropriations Committee, said in a statement: “[we] have weeded out excessive, unnecessary, and wasteful spending, making tough choices to prioritize programs based on their effectiveness and benefit to the American people. My committee has taken a thoughtful look at each and every one of the programs

39. Wong, Alia. “The Students Suing for a Constitutional Right to Education.” *The Atlantic*, 28 Nov. 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/11/lawsuit-constitutional-right-education/576901/>

40. Goldstein, Dana. “Are Civics Lessons a Constitutional Right? This Student Is Suing for Them.” *The New York Times*, 28 Nov. 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/us/civics-rhode-island-schools.html>

41. Adams, Kimberly. “What Federal Funding For Civics Reveals About American Political Discourse.” *Marketplace*, 6 Nov. 2019, <https://www.marketplace.org/2019/11/06/what-federal-funding-for-civics-reveals-about-american-political-discourse/>.

42. Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Summary and Background Information. *Department of Education*, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget19/summary/19summary.pdf>.

43. “State Leaders Quietly Cut Funding For Teaching Civics.” *Fox 13 Tampa Bay*, 13 Feb. 2018, <https://www.fox13news.com/news/state-leaders-quietly-cut-funding-for-teaching-civics>.

44. Petersen, John E. “The Effect of Federal Budget Cuts on States and Localities.” *Governing*, Jan. 2011, <https://www.governing.com/columns/public-finance/effect-federal-budget-cuts-states-localities.html>.

45. White, Lee. “Working Toward The Restoration of Federal Funding For History, Civics, and Social Studies Education.” *Perspectives on History*, The American Historical Association, 1 Mar. 2015, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2015/working-toward-the-restoration-of-federal-funding-for-history-civics-and-social-studies-education>.

46. “House Fails to Fund K-12 History and Civics Educations.” *National Humanities Alliances*, [https://www.nhalliance.org/senate\\_passes\\_k\\_12\\_education\\_bill\\_including\\_history\\_initiatives](https://www.nhalliance.org/senate_passes_k_12_education_bill_including_history_initiatives).

47. Levine, Pete. “Fact Sheet, What the NAEP Civics Assessment Measures and How Students Perform.” *The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE)*, Tufts University, Jan. 2013, [https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2020-01/what\\_naep\\_assessment\\_measures\\_2013.pdf](https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2020-01/what_naep_assessment_measures_2013.pdf).

48. Klein, Alyson. “House GOP Looks to Slash Education Spending.” *Education Week*, 12 Feb. 2011, [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2011/02/house\\_gop\\_slashes\\_education\\_sp.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2011/02/house_gop_slashes_education_sp.html).

we intend to cut and have made determinations based on this careful analysis.”<sup>49</sup>

There was at least some effort to reestablish civics in K-12 education in the “Every Student Succeeds Act” (ESSA), signed into law on December 10, 2015. ESSA included language allowing the Secretary of Education to award grants for “programs that educate students about the history and principles of the Constitution of the United States, including the Bill of Rights.”<sup>50</sup> ESSA replaced the No Child Left Behind Act and emphasized college and career readiness, accountability, scaling back assessments, increasing access to preschool, and the important role of state and local communities in making their schools successful. ESSA was intended to put a greater emphasis on civics in accountability systems and funding.<sup>51</sup>

ESSA supports civic education in three ways: first, by creating the American History and Civic Academies program to support the professional development of teachers in these subjects; second, by funding Student Success and Academic Enrichment Grants which allow local school districts to apply for funding for a well-rounded education; and third, by establishing the American History and Civics-National Activities Grant program which awards funding to innovative teaching and professional development programs. However, ESSA authorizes but does not appropriate funding to support its titles.<sup>52</sup> Funding is based on congressional appropriations for the federal education budget. Full appropriation at the authorized amount for the ESSA programs for civic education would have equaled over \$1.6 billion. However, ESSA programs were appropriated at a combined \$10 million, or less than 1 percent of the authorized amount.<sup>53</sup>

The lack of appropriation of funds for civic education from the federal government sends the message that civic education is not important. And without funds, schools are unable to allocate proper attention to providing adequate curriculum and teaching, particularly when federal and state policy is requiring more focus on STEM.

49. Ibid.

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## CURRENT POLITICAL TENSIONS WITHIN CIVIC EDUCATION

Civic education requires incorporating discussion of diverse perspectives on current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly issues that young people view as important to their lives. Students need to learn how to engage productively with the issues and events relevant to the democratic political system and learn how to engage in discussions about important issues and events with people who disagree. This “cross-cutting” political discussion helps develop a tolerance for others and builds an understanding of a diverse range of views on public policy.

Some states and school districts may feel uncomfortable with discussing current events or controversial issues because the current polarized political climate increases the likelihood that classroom discussion of current events will be cast as advancing a partisan agenda.<sup>54</sup>

Educators have avoided taking up controversial political questions in the classroom for fear that they will offend political sensibilities or trespass into areas of discussion that are private opinions.<sup>55</sup> One out of four teachers surveyed in 2014 by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement thought parents would object if they taught about politics in a government or civics class, and only 38 percent thought their district would give them strong support. More than one-in-ten said they believed parents would object if they encouraged students to vote.<sup>56</sup> In a study of 21 teachers in 35 schools and 1,001 students, 90% of students disagreed with the statement: “My teacher wants students to have the same opinions on issues that he/she has.” Many school districts have strict policies against giving any hint of their own opinion on a political issue.<sup>57</sup>

Engaging in a discussion of controversial political issues, however, helps students develop the ability to weigh fact-based evidence,

consider multiple perspectives, form and articulate their own opinions, and respond to people who disagree.<sup>58</sup> Research shows that when people engage in discussions about important issues and events with people who disagree, they develop a tolerance for others and build an understanding of the range of views about how to best solve public problems.<sup>59</sup> The belief that civic discussion should not take place in a classroom may discourage educators from fulfilling the educational mission of creating informed and participatory citizens.

In addition to teachers fearing repercussions from teaching controversial topics, social studies textbooks may not adequately convey the knowledge or facilitate the development of the skills required of an informed, engaged citizenry.<sup>60</sup> In some textbooks in the 1940s, for example, Dred Scott was the only historical black person featured more than once.<sup>61</sup> While textbooks gradually included more multicultural and feminist content through the 1960s and 1980s, social studies textbooks omitted or downplayed major historical events such as the post-Reconstruction Jim Crow laws. For example, a 2018 report from the Southern Poverty Law Center found that 58 percent of polled teachers were not satisfied with how their textbooks taught about slavery, and almost 40 percent said that their state offered little or no support on the topic.<sup>62</sup>

Civic education reflects the current highly polarized political climate in determining which historical events get taught and what discussions may be had. Strengthening civic education may also provide a means of bridging polarized views and promoting discourse across political perspectives.

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## Engaging in a discussion of controversial political issues, helps students develop the ability to weigh fact-based evidence, consider multiple perspectives, form and articulate their own opinions, and respond to people who disagree.

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## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### How to Reimagine Rights and Responsibilities:

- **REQUIRE AND FUND CIVIC EDUCATION.** Enact legislation requiring US history and civics to be taught in all public and private schools, with federal grant programs to support history and civics teachers. Invest in civic education for all ages in all communities through curricula, professional development for teachers, and a federal award program that recognizes innovative civic education initiatives at local, state, and national levels.
- **BROADEN HISTORY AND CIVIC EDUCATION CURRICULA.** Develop new content and pedagogy for teaching difficult historical subjects relating to the denial of rights—such as slavery, Native American removal, racist restrictions on immigration, antisemitism, and the political and cultural suppression of minorities and women—in order to promote understanding of the value of diversity and the need for rights to define people’s relationship to each other and their government in a democracy.
- **PROMOTE MEDIA LITERACY.** Develop media literacy education to assist media consumers evaluate information and navigate the rapidly changing marketplace of ideas. Media literacy is critical for a democratic information system to function effectively under the principles of free speech and media freedom amid technological change.
- **SUPPORT CIVIL SOCIETY PARTNERS.** Encourage and promote funding for large and small civil society organizations that provide civic education at national, state, and local levels and that can be engaged as partners in school-based civic education programs. These organizations can be especially effective in developing content and pedagogy on rights and responsibilities in the U.S. Constitution and laws and the role of rights and responsibilities in binding together a nation of unprecedented diversity.
- **ESTABLISH NATIONAL TRUST FOR CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE.** Following the recommendation of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in its 2020 report, *Our Common Purpose*, a National Trust for Civic Infrastructure should be established as a public-private initiative to “scale up social, civic and democratic infrastructure. Civic infrastructure supports the activities and interactions through which people gain the motivational and practical capacities needed to develop a sense of common purpose . . . and connect disparate segments of our society.”

## **Reimagining Rights & Responsibilities in the United States**

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