

HATCH CENTER

POLICY REVIEW

COMMONSENSE SOLUTIONS TO OUR CIVICS CRISIS

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Preface

What a decade this year has been.

A once-in-a-century pandemic has tested the resilience of our citizens and the ability of government to respond. Meanwhile, our economy is on the ropes with a recovery slow coming and millions of Americans still out of work due to COVID-19 restrictions. Set all of this against the backdrop of the most significant social unrest the nation has seen since 1968 and a highly contentious election.

2020, if nothing else, has been a stress test for our democracy. The events of one of the most tumultuous years in American history have pushed our fragile experiment in representative government right up to the breaking point—but importantly, it has not broken. While our democracy remains intact, we see with new eyes its weaknesses and vulnerabilities and the need to fortify it against future challenges.

The question, then, becomes: How can we restore our democracy to its former health? How can we ensure that it doesn't break in the future? And how can we reverse the trends of growing polarization, civil unrest, and distrust of institutions that threaten to tear us apart?

Here, in the inaugural *Hatch Center Policy Review*, we present a common-sense, bipartisan solution. By restoring civic education to its proper place in our schools, we can revitalize our democracy and preserve the American experiment for future generations.

The current state of American democracy is—in a word—anemic. Trust in our institutions, especially among younger generations, sits at near record lows. Civic participation as measured by voter turnout lags far behind that of other developed countries, and when it comes to understanding how our economic and constitutional systems work, there is an epidemic of ignorance that has been around much longer than the coronavirus. Consider that, according to an Annenberg Public Policy Center survey, only 39 percent of Americans can name all three branches of government while 37 percent cannot name a single right guaranteed by the First Amendment of the Constitution.

We are living in an era the Founders feared. After leaving the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a bystander asked Benjamin Franklin what system of government would define our newborn nation. Franklin answered, “A republic, if you can keep it.” Implicit in his response is the idea that a republic such as ours requires constant nurturing, attention, and care and that its strength depends almost entirely on the wisdom and prudence of the governed. It's no wonder, then, that our republic is in trouble.

In this report, we make the case that the seeds of division and dysfunction now undermining our democracy were sown—at least in part—by decades of neglect in the area of civic education. We attempt to outline the full extent of our civics crisis, including the precipitous drop in funding for civic education over the years,

the unintended consequences of placing higher priority on STEM, and growing evidence of civic illiteracy. We then examine the ways that a more robust civic education can address the very problems that ail our society by boosting civic engagement and voter turnout, increasing trust in government, and promoting better policy outcomes through an improved understanding of economics and history.

Many policymakers are waking up to the fact that civic education is in urgent need of reform, but just how to reform it is another question. We seek to answer that question in full by laying out concrete policy proposals to recenter civics at the heart of America's public education system.

This includes, first and foremost, a 100-fold increase in federal funding for civic education. The US government currently allocates a paltry \$5 million a year for classrooms and teacher development in civic education. But we call for a commitment of more than \$500 million, coupled with grants of \$1 million a year or more from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

We likewise advocate for a complete overhaul of federal testing for civic education to ensure that the subject takes priority in the classroom. We propose mandating testing in US history and government for grades 4, 8, and 12, and reporting these results both nationally and by state. And we wholeheartedly endorse the creation of a civics exam as a requirement for graduating high school.

Schools express the value they place on civics through the amount of time they spend teaching it in the classroom. To that end, we call for a significant increase in the amount of classroom time devoted to civics instruction, especially in high school, where the subject often takes a backseat to STEM. The gold standard is a strong presence of civics in the elementary and middle school curriculum culminating in a year-long course in civics in high school.

And of course, we bring attention to the need for greater teacher development in civic education. In addition to the 100-fold increase in federal funding for civic education, we call on states to devote more resources to assist teachers charged with educating the next generation of public leaders in civics and history. We also propose reshaping our civics curriculum to focus on civic knowledge before civic action and to encourage the teaching of history through primary documents.

At stake is nothing less than the life and well-being of our democracy, so failing to address the civics crisis is not an option. The challenge before us is a monumental one. But as with every challenge that our country has faced in the past, we are more than up to the task. This report serves as a roadmap to reform. May it also serve as a powerful call to action to restore the primacy of civic education and thus secure the future of our republic.

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Part One

The Civic
Education Crisis

Introduction

Evidence of a growing civics crisis surrounds us—a pandemic of civic disengagement and a deepening recession in civic education. In what has become a vicious cycle, young people are not learning about their country—its history and how it works—and they grow up disengaged and distrustful. Although voter turnout in the most recent 2018 election was up from a 20-year low in 2016, overall turnout totaled only 53 percent, with a mere 36 percent of the youngest voting group (ages 18–29) casting their ballots. A 2019 poll by the Pew Research Center showed that a mere 17 percent of Americans trust their government to do what is right most of the time, a number that has been plummeting since the 1960s.¹

Recent national test results of student knowledge of US history and government show that the cycle begins with the sad state of civic education in our schools. The recent 2020 report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that only 24 percent of 8th graders tested were “proficient” in their knowledge of government and proficiency in US history dropped to an anemic 15 percent. For US history, scores fell in all measured categories with statistically significant declines for both male, female, white, black, and Hispanic students. While US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos called these scores “stark and inexcusable,” test scores have been low for years, and little has been done. Further, of 47 Advanced Placement tests administered in 2019, scores in both government and US history were among the seven lowest subjects tested.²

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Studies and surveys of all kinds attest to the deep and persistent problem of civic education. The Annenberg Public Policy Center has been publishing an annual report on civic knowledge since 2006. Its most recent 2019 survey reported that only 39 percent of Americans could name the three branches of government while its 2017 study showed that 37 percent of Americans could not name a single right guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution.³ A 2018 study by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation found that only one in three Americans could pass the civics portion of the national citizenship test, a test that immigrants pass at more than a 90 percent rate.⁴ The anecdotal evidence is both sad and humorous: No, Judge Judy is not on the Supreme Court, and climate change was not started by the Cold War.

As if the overall problem was not sufficiently troubling, the evidence suggests that it is getting worse. Surveys of civic education have shown that younger people are not as well informed about our history and government as older Americans, suggesting a growing failure of civic education. When the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation released its study in 2018, for example, it found a stark difference in civic knowledge between older and younger Americans: 74 percent of those over age 65 could answer 6 of the 10 citizenship test questions correctly, but only 19 percent of those under age 45 could do so. A 2018 Pew Research Center study presented comparable results, noting that 19 percent of those over age 65 had “low” civic knowledge, but for those ages 18–29 that number jumped to 41 percent.⁵ It comes as no surprise, then, that high school students in Rhode Island have brought a federal lawsuit against school officials for failing to provide a proper civics education.

It is surprising that, with all this discouraging data about civic education, there is so little action to remedy the problem. Is it because we do not think it is important or we simply cannot figure out or agree on what to do? Whatever the root cause, we must combat these trends and improve our nation’s civic education. This article issues a rallying cry, illuminating the nature of our growing civics crisis, how deficient civic education affects civic engagement, and solutions to restore civic education.

I. What Problems Contribute to the Crisis?

A. Low Priority by Federal and State Governments

Although many factors contribute to America’s weak civic education, many of the variables could be summarized by saying it is no longer a priority, either in the schools or in the larger society. The federal government itself has given a number of signals in recent years that civic education is not a priority. Federal funding for civic education dropped from approximately \$150 million annually in 2010 to a mere \$5 million in 2019.⁶ Although the federal NAEP tests in core subjects (reading and math) are administered in multiple grades every two years, government and history tests are now offered only every four years to eighth grade students alone, again sending a strong signal of what is and is not important. The lack of testing is also a warning that we may not even know how poor civic education is across the grades.

In America’s system of federalism, states are primary players in many aspects of K–12 education, including curriculum, and they have sent their own mixed messages about the importance of civics in schools. Forty-two states and the District of Columbia require high school courses in US history.⁷ But the requirements for civics and government across all states are less impressive. A 2018 survey by *Education Week* found that 15 states do not require a course in civics or government and only 19 states require an exam in these subjects

to graduate.⁸ Significantly, only nine states require a full year of civics and government study. Teachers themselves believe the emphasis on civics should be greater, with a 2019 poll showing 81 percent of teachers (and 70 percent of Americans) feel the subject should be required.⁹ A few states are doing more, but state legislatures generally need to step up to the challenge and incorporate civic education more fully into the required curriculum.

B. Low Priority in the Schools

A deeper look at curriculum underscores the low priority given to civic education in schools. Thanks to testing regimes fostered by the No Child Left Behind legislation and the heavy emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) in our schools, civics and the social sciences generally have been crowded out in favor of these newer priorities. When teachers in the 2018 *Education Week* study were asked about the major challenges to teaching civics, the number one challenge (identified by 79 percent of teachers) was “pressure to focus on subjects other than civics because they are tested or emphasized.”¹⁰ Preparing for standardized tests now takes as much as one-fourth of classroom time,¹¹ leaving little opportunity to teach civics, history, or the arts. The problem is especially acute in elementary school where, in 2012, teachers reported that they spent an average of only 16 minutes a day on all social studies.¹²

The reduced emphasis on teaching social studies, including civics and history, was especially notable following the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law in 2002. The law intended to increase fundamental skills like math and reading, putting in place an extensive regimen of testing in grades 3–8 to measure progress. Often referred to as high-stakes testing, the results can impact both teachers and schools, including sanctions for schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress toward 100 percent proficiency. Most experts agreed that the law revolutionized the school curriculum, especially in the elementary years, though with mixed results.

Insofar as NCLB intended to increase focus on reading and math, perhaps the corresponding large reductions in teaching of social studies and related subjects was an unintended consequence. Whether unintended or not, as schools ramped up the time for teaching reading and math, classroom time devoted to social studies such as civics and history suffered. A 2007 study by the Center on Education Policy found that 62 percent of school districts increased their study time of English language arts (ELA) and math by an astonishing 43 percent.¹³ To accommodate this increase, 44 percent of districts reported cutting time for social studies and other subjects by an average of 32 percent, with some schools cutting teaching time by more than 50 percent.¹⁴ These reductions in teaching time for social studies such as civics and US history are especially pronounced in the elementary grades, where they were already a rela-

tively low priority. Teachers in those grades now spend as little as 5 percent of instruction time on history and social studies.¹⁵ As developmental psychologist William Damon has written, “Civics is one of the ‘peripheral’ subjects deemphasized by the single-minded focus on basic skills during the recent heyday of the narrow curriculum.”¹⁶

As if these blows to teaching time for civics were not enough, along came an ambitious effort to push the teaching of STEM. Again, even assuming good intentions, these programs have further diminished social studies in the school curriculum. Rather than continue to pursue a balanced curriculum emphasizing critical thinking and the broad liberal arts, STEM seeks to steer schools toward a more technical, career-based education.¹⁷ The STEM commitment is

huge, with federal spending around \$3 billion per year. President Barack Obama and now President Donald Trump have looked for ways to stimulate more programs. Even though relatively few students will major or work in these fields, the goals are nevertheless ambitious. One such goal, for example, is to add 100,000 new qualified STEM teachers to the workforce and to increase the number of students having STEM experiences by 50 percent.¹⁸ One could only dream of such a commitment for civics. If math, reading, and science now dominate classroom time, as they do, civics must make do with the leftovers.

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C. The Civic Knowledge Gap

A testing culture in favor of teaching skills—rather than teaching knowledge—also contributes to the problem. Two recent books make a compelling case that not only has civic education been harmed by schools’ move away from teaching knowledge, but so has the education system as a whole. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., who is well known in the field, explained in his 2019 book *Why Knowledge Matters* that schools have mistakenly moved toward teaching reading by means of skills such as identifying the main idea or making inferences. As a consequence, there is almost no emphasis on reading great literature or historic texts and building up a storehouse of knowledge as part of a coherent curriculum.¹⁹ Similarly, Natalie Wexler’s *The Knowledge Gap* bemoans the teaching of reading comprehension as “completely disconnected from content.”²⁰ She refers to the unfortunate reality of a “content-free curriculum.”²¹ As Wexler notes, civic education depends on an understanding of history, since it is “hard to grasp how the system operates if you have no idea where it came from and no context in which to place it.”²²

Indeed, by the time students actually take a civics course in high school, they often have no basic knowledge of American history and government on which to build. Knowledge in core subjects, including civics and history, best proceeds like constructing a layer cake, beginning with a base in elementary school and adding new layers throughout their school years.²³ But with almost no teaching of civics in the elementary grades and very little in middle school, beginning civics in high school is “too little, too late.”²⁴ As E.D. Hirsch Jr. explained, if teachers are charged primarily with teaching reading skills and not subject matter, they can do so with *Tyler Makes Pancakes!* rather than a biography of Abraham Lincoln. Then by high school, when civics finally enters the curriculum, students “lack the knowledge and vocabulary to understand the mature language of newspapers, textbooks, and political speeches.”²⁵ Our failure to introduce, much less emphasize, civics in the early grades and continue to teach them across the school years is a large part of the civic education problem.

In addition to the major curricular changes brought about by STEM and high-stakes testing, civic education has also lost ground in our schools to its shiny new cousin: civic engagement or “action civics.” The notion is that if we cannot get our students to study harder and learn more facts, perhaps we can get them out of the classroom and more engaged in civics projects. Instead of learning in class, they can learn by doing, or so the theory goes. As such, we send students out to do community service projects or engage in a local political or civic issue they care about. The purpose of this, of course, is to interest and engage students, but it also turns the learning process on its head. It improperly puts the cart of civic engagement before the horse of civic education. We should not be prioritizing hands-on democracy before brains-in democracy. As one expert in the field said of such civic engagement programs: “[I]t must lie on top of a solid foundation of understanding and respect for what we have.”²⁶ Indeed, civic education is the only base on which action and engagement can properly be built.

Losing this emphasis on civic education is a major departure from the purpose of schooling as the founders of our country envisioned it. Indeed, the founders saw education as a cornerstone for building and sustaining a free republic. As Samuel Adams wrote, “If virtue and knowledge are suffused among the people, they will never be enslav’d. This will be their great security.”²⁷ George Washington, in his Eighth Annual Message (1796), asked Congress “what duty [can be] more pressing on the legislature than to patronize a plan for communicating it to those who are to be the future guardians of

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the liberty of the country?” Thomas Jefferson, Noah Webster, and Benjamin Franklin, among others, all underscored the priority of schooling in civics for the health and well-being of a democracy. Today, however, schools have largely abandoned any pretense of engendering civic purpose or patriotism in students.

D. Inadequate Tools and Teacher Preparation

There are at least two additional problems: Inadequate teacher preparation to teach civics and ineffective teaching methods, including boring and biased textbooks. To some degree, these internal educational issues are beyond the scope of a policy article, but the civic education problem will not be solved without addressing them. Thankfully, there are some policy measures that, if deployed, could ameliorate them.

Although further study of this issue is needed, there is evidence that civics is too often taught by teachers who are not themselves well prepared in the field. This is especially problematic since, as most of us learned in school about education generally, civic education is teacher driven. As Diana Hess and John Zola put it in their study of teacher development, “The quality of teaching is the most powerful determinant of students’ access to a meaningful civic education.”²⁸ Here, there are dual problems: Many teachers are ill prepared by their college major and teacher-training programs to teach civics, and federal funding for teacher development after being hired has been drastically reduced.

A study published by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2015 showed that 78 percent of high school civics and government courses are taught by teachers who neither majored in those fields in college nor are certified to teach in those specialties.²⁹ Only 6.8 percent of civics and government teachers surveyed had majored in those fields, with only 7.1 percent of these classes taught by majors³⁰—numbers much lower than those found for most other high school courses. Another survey in 2014 showed somewhat higher numbers, with 35 percent of civics teachers having majored in government or political science.³¹ Teacher content preparation is already a challenge in K–12 education more broadly, as a degree in education is more about *how* to teach than *what* to teach. But being unfamiliar with a subject area only makes preparation that much harder. It is difficult to convey enthusiasm about a subject when the teachers themselves are learning from school textbooks, perhaps only a few pages ahead of their students.

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Teacher preparation can be a special challenge in civic education since there is generally no college major in civics per se, leaving aspiring teachers to pursue broader social sciences such as history or political science. A civics course itself is most often a combination of US history, political science, government, and even geography—a broad range of subjects that would be difficult to cover in college or a school of education. Further, given that most states only require a one-semester course in civics, instructors will often need to offer courses on other social science topics as well. With this deficit of teacher training during their own education, helping teachers develop an understanding of this area once they are in the field and assigned to teach civics is all the more critical. Yet funding for teacher development is precisely what the federal government chose to cut when Congress eliminated the US Department of Education's Teaching American History grant program that invested approximately \$100 million per year in teacher development.

Then there are the textbooks—mostly dreary and boring, with others being downright sinister. Within the educational community, there are spirited debates over what constitutes civics and how to teach it. At its worst, civics instruction entails dry and boring memorization. But at the other extreme, it sometimes skips over knowledge in favor of civic action and engagement. No doubt teachers will agree that boring textbooks which reduce important turning points in our nation's history and development to a few dry summary paragraphs have not gotten us where we need to be. Students who are not engaged by their studies in any field are not likely to learn much and, as will be demonstrated in Part II, are not destined to engage much in their own civic responsibilities later.

Even more troublesome, however, are textbooks that seek to indoctrinate students with the author's own political beliefs. The classic example is Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, one of the most widely adopted history textbooks in both colleges and high schools. Zinn's book is a radical critique of American history, calling out Christopher Columbus as a greedy murderer and the American founders for devising a government to protect their property interests. This continues right on through World War II, which was about "advancing the imperial interests of the United States," and beyond. It should be no surprise that students who read Zinn's text would not develop a patriotic love of country or seek to become engaged citizens. Originally an alternative and supplemental history text, Zinn's book has sold over two million copies and, in many quarters, is now a dominant text.

As Professor Gordon Lloyd of Pepperdine University, an expert on the Founding era of American history, has said, "It's hard to love an ugly founding." The *New York Times* recently doubled down on this cynical approach to American history with its 1619 Project. This project aimed to recast US history

as an ongoing racial struggle by moving the Founding from 1776 to 1619, the year settlers brought the first slave to America.

At last, a more balanced and vibrant American history textbook has become available: Wilfred M. McClay's *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* (2019). Without whitewashing or skipping over difficult periods in history, McClay nevertheless presents the case for America in more interesting narratives and on more favorable terms. Perhaps one way of measuring progress in American history teaching will be to see whether McClay's textbook gains traction in comparison with Zinn's withering critique.

Biased and single-issue approaches to American history warn us of yet another problem in teaching civics: the possibility of becoming so politically divisive so as to prevent real learning, instead fanning flames of ignorance and prejudice. All over the country, people are fighting political battles about the proper understanding of the American republic and its history. Statues are toppled and names are removed from buildings in an effort to rewrite history. In California, efforts have been undertaken to require ethnic history courses in school that "critique empire and its relationship to white supremacy, racism, patriarchy, cisheteropatriarchy, capitalism, ableism, anthropocentrism and other forms of power and oppression at the intersections of society." If the teaching of history and civics is allowed to become simply politics by other means or an older generation working out its political and social angst on children, it will be nearly impossible to improve civic education and raise up a new generation of engaged citizens. History is something we learn from, not rewrite.

We have traveled a long way from the original purpose of American education, which included developing civic purpose and even patriotism among young people. As the influential educator and philosopher John Dewey said, "Democracy has to be born anew every generation and education is its midwife."³² This is why many state constitutions and educational policies explicitly mention the democratic purpose of public schools.³³ As Notre Dame scholar David Campbell has written, "[C]ivics is not superfluous or even secondary to the



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primary purpose of public schooling. It is the primary purpose. The irony of inattention to civic education is that US public schools were actually created for the express purpose of forming democratic citizens.”³⁴ This will not be accomplished if students are primarily taught a politicized and cynical perspective on our history and government. They will need to care about their country in order to want to learn about it and participate in it.³⁵

These are the central problems we must address in order to restore vibrant civic education in our schools. Civics must become a priority, every bit as much as reading or STEM. It needs to be properly funded and tested, required and taught, and its value sung from the halls of government to the classrooms of America. We need a national movement, a rallying cry, to prioritize civic education. Only when that base has been laid will the other things we can do—including better preparation of teachers and teaching approaches—begin to make a difference. Tipping a cap to the highly effective campaign for STEM education, civic education needs to be the next STEM in our schools if we are to secure the republic and see our democracy flourish. We need wide support to restore civic education as a fundamental cornerstone of our republic. As Chief Justice John Roberts described it: “Civic education . . . is a continuing enterprise and conversation. Each generation has an obligation to pass on to the next, not only a fully functioning government responsive to the needs of the people, but the tools to understand and improve it.”

Part Two

Downstream Effects of the Crisis

We turn now to the question of whether America's poor civic education has had a ripple effect through several dimensions of civic engagement. Beginning with Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* in 2000, there has been considerable debate over whether America is experiencing huge losses in community and civic engagement of all kinds, including political engagement. To the extent this is true, it seems important to establish whether poor civic education is part of the problem or, at least, whether better civic education might be part of the solution.

We must also acknowledge another macro-event: the rise of Millennials and Gen Zers. When we speak of young people, young adults, and young voters, we are generally speaking of Millennials (born in the early 1980s to the late 1990s) and Gen Zers (born in the late 1990s to around 2015). Millennials are especially important because, as of the 2020 election, they will be the largest generation.³⁶ Gen Zers, who tend in many ways to follow the views of Millennials, are important to our study because many of them are near the end of their schooling, including their civic education, and ready to move into adulthood.

Millennials stand in marked contrast to their Baby Boomer parents. As Stella M. Rouse and Ashley D. Ross explain in their book, *The Politics of Millennials*, Millennials exceed one quarter of the population and are the most demographically diverse group in the nation's history.³⁷ Importantly, they reached adulthood during the worst economic recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and, though they are the best educated, they are likely to be the first generation not to earn more or be better off economically than their parents. Their attributes, according to the Rouse and Ross study, are "diversity and minority group identity, liberal political ideology, economic hardship, cosmopolitanism, and collectivist worldview."³⁸ They choose different kinds of political engagement—more individual direct action such as volunteering—than earlier generations who are more comfortable with authority and have more trust in institutions.

While we explore the role of civic education in improving civic engagement, we should recognize that we are also pushing against some of these generational forces. Indeed, Professor Martin T. Wattenberg, in his book *Is Voting for Young People?*, argues that young people do not engage in politics, civics and, specifically, voting because they are not *interested* in politics per se.³⁹ Instead, he cites a broad range of statistics, including loss of interest in reading daily newspapers, concluding that "the problem of getting young people to vote stems mostly from a lack of *exposure* to politics."⁴⁰ This does not suggest that improving civic engagement is hopeless but rather underscores the importance of exposure and further education, especially civic education.

Of several civic engagement and political problems we could study, I offer these three: voting, trust, and a rising interest in socialism. I submit that these case studies reinforce the view that civic education is very much part of the solution in addressing critical areas of civic disengagement and misunderstanding.

A. Low Voter Turnout

Voting is a fundamental right, perhaps *the* fundamental right and responsibility in a democracy. It is the people's opportunity to be heard, and it is the means by which a representative government of, by, and for the people is chosen. As Thomas Paine said in his *Dissertation on First Principles of Government*, "The right of voting for representatives is the primary right by which other rights are protected."

One important measure of the health of a democracy is the level of citizen participation in voting. It is of real concern, then, that US voting rates are low and falling. As one report summarized it, "The voter turnout rate in US presidential elections has fallen from a high of 69.3% in 1964 to a low of 54.7% in 2000," hovering now around 60 percent.⁴¹ The voting rates in midterm elections, when no presidential candidates are on the ballot, are even lower, in the 40 and 50 percent range. In data published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, US voting rates are

surprisingly low compared to other highly developed democratic states, placing 26th out of 32 nations.⁴² When barely half the people are turning out to vote, we must wonder about the health of our democracy and worry about the disengagement of our citizenry.

If low turnout rates overall were not a sufficient concern, a closer look tells us that voting participation by young people is even worse. As Alia Wong pointed out in *The Atlantic*, "Only half of eligible adults between the ages of 18 and 29 voted in the 2016 presidential election. . . . During the 2014 midterm elections two years earlier, the youth-voter-turnout rate was just 20 percent, the lowest ever recorded in history[.]"⁴³ The percentage of young people who voted in the 2018 midterm elections was better than 2014, but still only 36 percent.⁴⁴ Comparing generations, about half the eligible young voters turned out in 2016 compared to two-thirds of older voters.⁴⁵

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Although many causes for low voter turnout are cited, there is a good case that poor civic education is part of the problem. As a starting point, evidence shows that education itself—not just civic education—is a predictor of higher rates of voting. Several studies and experts indicate that more education, including college education, results in an increase in voter turnout.⁴⁶ Young people who do not go to college develop a higher likelihood of “civic alienation” without the opportunities and connections college offers.⁴⁷ Still, with a relatively higher number of college graduates, American voting rates among the young are low.

Studies also indicate that robust civic education in particular should result in higher rates of political participation, including voter turnout. A study on the Civic Mission of Schools concluded, “Research shows that Americans who are not properly educated about their roles as citizens are less likely to be civically engaged by nearly any metric. They are less likely to vote, less likely to engage in political discourse, and less likely to participate in community improvement projects than their counterparts who receive civic education.”⁴⁸ Courses in civics, history, economics, law, and geography “increase a student’s confidence in and propensity towards active civic participation.”⁴⁹ This kind of education is especially helpful to students whose parents do not engage in much political conversation at home.⁵⁰

Civic education also has a direct impact on voter turnout specifically. A study by scholar Jennifer Bachner concluded, “Students who complete a year of American government or civics are 3–6 percentage points more likely to vote than peers without such a course and 7–11 percentage points more likely to vote than peers who do not discuss politics at home.”⁵¹ Another report on this question concluded, “The only course category that consistently exerts a positive, statistically significant effect on voting behavior is American Government/Civics.”⁵² It is worth noting that these results were found among those taking a full year of civics and government, whereas most states only require a single semester. As noted in the final section regarding solutions, there are studies suggesting that *how* educators teach civics and government also affects political participation outcomes such as voting.

Further, evidence indicates that testing students’ civic knowledge, beyond offering or requiring classes, increases voter turnout. A recent 2018 study found that a state-mandated civics test actually improved voter turnout in younger voters.⁵³ After acknowledging that certain extracurricular activities such as sports and debate teams as well as civics class “tended to increase public voice,” the study acknowledged state exams “likely intensify the ... intention to vote.”⁵⁴ As the authors note, state testing may not have this effect directly but may, instead, alter the way civics is actually taught, in turn increasing po-

litical participation and voter turnout. This question would benefit from closer study. It certainly raises again the question whether, in a high-stakes testing environment in schools generally, it is a mistake to leave civic education out of the testing regime.

One unfortunate development is that voting has come to be recognized as merely a right and not a civic responsibility. The classic 1960 book *The American Voter* expressed voting in just those terms, as a civic duty or responsibility.⁵⁵ Indeed, a number of countries impose mandatory voting upon their citizenry, including fines and enforcement for not voting. Unfortunately, in the US, especially among young voters, the view is now that voting is merely a right, not a duty or responsibility. According to a 2002 CIRCLE survey of young people ages 15–25, only 9 percent said that they felt voting was a duty, and 20 percent a responsibility. Most referred to voting as a choice or a right.⁵⁶ It would seem that one important step, then, would be to teach the rising generation the importance of voting with an accompanying responsibility to participate.

Some have suggested the voting age should be lowered to 16 to generate greater youth participation. To carry this out on a national level would require a constitutional amendment, as was implemented in 1971 during the Vietnam War to permit 18-year-olds to vote. Given the difficulty of enacting a federal constitutional amendment, proposals to permit 16-year-olds to vote are primarily focused on local elections where municipalities and counties set the rules. A small handful of localities have permitted this, and it is under consideration in others, as well as in some states.⁵⁷ On one hand, given the low voting rates of 18- to 29-year-old voters, it is difficult to understand how adding one more likely low-voting cohort to the mix would solve the low voter turnout problem. On the other hand, advocates argue that young people, while still at home and under the influence of their parents and schools, might form a voting habit. This remains to be seen, and perhaps the cities where it is being tried will provide a test case.

Perhaps allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to pre-register as voters in schools before they turn 18 is a better answer. As part of their civics or government courses, students would not only study voting but would begin the process of registering to vote as well. As classroom instruction about voting increases young people's intention to vote when eligible,⁵⁸ so completing the registration process would build on that strength. This idea is gaining steam across the country with 23 states having implemented policies to establish voter pre-registration for students younger than 18 or voter support programs in their schools.⁵⁹ Making voter registration a part of the civics curricula⁶⁰ would likely boost civic participation overall since research shows that pre-registration is an effective way to increase youth turnout.

B. Low Trust in Government

An alarming development, especially among young people, is a broad and growing loss of trust in our society. This decline in trust is evident across the board: trust in other people, in institutions generally, and in government specifically. Although a variety of factors may have caused this loss of trust, evidence suggests that failures in American civic education are part of the problem or, at the very least, should be part of the solution. Indeed, loss of trust stands out as one of the worrisome byproducts of the decline in American civic education.

The Pew Research Center issued the results of a “wide-ranging” survey on questions of trust in 2019.⁶¹ Regarding personal trust, 73 percent of young adults (below age 30) believe people “just look out for themselves” most of the time, with 60 percent saying people cannot be trusted. Compared to older adults (over 65) where only 19 percent were found to be “low trusters,” nearly half of young adults (46 percent) fell into that category. Younger adults were also far more likely to believe that people will not help those in need or treat others with respect.

Unfortunately, these low levels of trust extend to all kinds of institutions and their leaders. The same Pew Research Center study found that young adults held low levels of trust in a range of leaders, including business executives (33 percent), elected officials (27 percent), and journalists (47 percent). High levels of trust were expressed for only two categories of leaders: scientists and the military. In many cases, the difference in trust levels between older and younger adults was as much as 15–20 percent. The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer concluded, “Despite [America’s] strong global economy and near full employment, none of the four societal institutions that the study measures—government, business, NGOs and media—is trusted.”⁶² Yuval Levin’s new book, *A Time To Build*, is a useful guide to the growing lack of trust in institutions, beginning with this straightforward premise: “Everybody knows that Americans have long been losing faith in institutions.”⁶³

Institutional trust in government, which should tie most directly to civic education, is especially low. Of the various leaders and occupations identified in the Pew Research Center study, elected officials are trusted the least: 27 percent among young people, topping out at 46 percent for older Americans. Experts have defined political trust as a belief that government officials consider the views of their constituents in formulating public policy and are “generally committed to serving the public interest.”⁶⁴ The opposite of trust is best understood as alienation which, in turn, discourages participation in the political process.⁶⁵ The Pew Research Center has studied this topic since 1958 and, in its most recent survey, found that only 17 percent of Americans trust government to “do what is right” most of the time.⁶⁶ In 1975, a year after Richard Nixon’s resignation in the wake of Watergate, 52 percent of Americans

expressed trust in the presidency, but by 2018, only a third of Americans did. Public confidence in Congress dropped from 42 percent in the 1970s to a shocking 11 percent in 2018.⁶⁷

Interestingly, mistrust seems highest when young people fail to understand government systems and come to view them as just politics—an issue that civic education can remedy. As one study has pointed out, distrust may lead to disengagement and cynicism, seeing politics as just a “series of elections and scandals.”⁶⁸ The study provides a compelling example: “Those who are bewildered by such basics as the branches of government and the concept of judicial review are less likely to trust in the courts. . . . Importantly, those who have taken a high school civics class are more likely to command key constitutional concepts.”⁶⁹ Those who do not understand the constitutional system of checks and balances or separations of power are more likely to conclude that the policy process is not democratic or is unfair.

In fact, evidence suggests that education broadly—not only civic education specifically—is important in building trust among the citizenry. As education professors and researchers Katy Swalwell and Katherine A. Payne point out, even in the lower grades, young children are taught through patriotism, obedience, and trust to be future citizens—although the authors note that education neglects teaching children about their current civic life.⁷⁰ Though this explicit curriculum is key, how teachers go about their lessons—their implicit curriculum—displays important principles such as respect for authority, how to get along with and respect others, how to listen to the opinions of others, and how to model leadership. From the elementary school years, then, a base of informed trust for authority and institutions can and should be laid.

Accordingly, further trust should be built through civic education itself. Surprisingly, there are few studies on the specific question of whether civic education builds greater trust in citizens. Some even argue that as students learn about how government should work, and then see how it fails in comparison, education might actually decrease their trust in government. Two scholars wrestled with this question, summarizing that the small number of available studies reach conclusions on nearly all sides of this question.⁷¹

Having acknowledged the need for additional study, I argue that civic education should increase trust. At the most basic level, it would be difficult for people generally to trust something they do not understand. As Katherine Barrett and Richard Greene wrote, “How, indeed, can anyone trust a powerful entity they don’t understand? It’s a basic element of human nature that ignorance leads inexorably to mistrust.”⁷² Even at a psychological level, we understand that ignorance easily produces fear and frustration whereas knowledge can form a basis for trust. One study found that even a perception of hav-

ing greater knowledge and understanding of a matter can increase trust in the institution charged with addressing that matter.⁷³ If, as Quinton Mayne and Armen Hakhverdian argue in their book, “[c]itizens grant or withhold political trust based on their evaluation of the performance of political actors and institutions,”⁷⁴ then specific study of those topics should be helpful in developing greater trust.

Even though many factors may be causing our rising mistrust, better civic education can help remedy this issue. There are plenty of reasons for lack of trust: political polarization and gridlock, hyperpartisanship, and the perceived bias of journalists and news producers. Yet in every case, a more solid base of civic knowledge could help students work through those issues more effectively. As the report on the Civic Mission of Schools underscored, factors contributing to our mistrust such as the media, the role of money, and politicians serving narrow interests “would be ameliorated by a more knowledgeable and engaged citizenry.”⁷⁵

Here, too, teachers’ leadership and implicit curriculum will not only build trust generally, but should also be powerful tools when deployed in specific classes on US history, government, and civics. A good teacher will, for example, help students understand that there are principled debates and disagreements to be had in government and that the back-and-forth that onlookers sometimes find frustrating actually has a deeper basis. A teacher’s own framing for discussion and analysis in civic education will also help develop a sense of civic respect so needed in our country today. As The Civic Mission of Schools study noted, “Students feel a greater sense of general trust in humanity, support for the political system, and trust in leaders when they report that their teachers have promoted tolerance and respect for all students.”⁷⁶ Taken together, civic knowledge along with teachers modeling and managing civic respect and understanding would be highly likely to increase civic trust and, in turn, raise participation and engagement.

C. Distorted Policy Understanding and Debate: The Case of Socialism

Unfortunately, the low quality of American civic education has implications that go well beyond the classroom. When Americans do not understand the purpose of many aspects of government and civics, they take political and policy positions that would erode the very foundation of the republic. Unfamiliar with the purpose of checks and balances or separations of power in the Constitution, for example, they become persuaded that the Constitution itself is antiquated and should be overhauled or replaced. Failing to understand the origin of the Electoral College, many are convinced to support the National Popular Vote bill that would carry out an end-run around the electoral process and essentially close the College without a proper constitutional amendment. Few understand First Amendment rights, executive power, or the process of impeachment when those issues arise.



A 2019 Harris Poll found that 49.6 percent of Millennials and Gen Zers would prefer to live in a socialist country. And a YouGov poll in 2019 showed that 36 percent of Millennials and Gen Zers had a favorable view of communism.

The growing interest in socialism, especially among the young is a current and classic case of how civic ignorance impacts politics and policy. Previously anathema to most Americans, so-called democratic socialism has now become popular, even trendy among younger generations. A number of polls and surveys in recent years attest to the rising acceptance of socialism. As early as 2014, the Reason-Rupe study showed that 58 percent of young people ages 18–24 held a favorable view of socialism.⁷⁷ During the 2016 election cycle, several polls confirmed this, including a YouGov survey showing that 42 percent of Democrats and 43 percent of young people had a favorable view of so-

cialism.⁷⁸ A more recent 2018 Gallup poll revealed that 51 percent of respondents between the ages of 18 and 29 saw socialism favorably,⁷⁹ and a 2019 study by the Pew Research Center found that 65 percent of Democrats held a favorable view of socialism.⁸⁰

Even more alarming, a 2019 Harris Poll found that 49.6 percent of Millennials and Gen Zers would prefer to live in a socialist country.⁸¹ And a YouGov poll in 2019 showed that 36 percent of Millennials and Gen Zers had a favorable view of *communism*, while 70 percent said they would be very likely or somewhat likely to vote for a socialist candidate.⁸² Marion Smith, Executive Director of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation and cosponsor of the YouGov poll, said, “The historical amnesia about the dangers of communism and socialism is on full display in this year’s report.”⁸³

The newfound attraction to socialism is largely generational, with young people reflecting an interest not shared by older generations. In all the polls referenced, Baby Boomers and older voters reflected greater confidence in capitalism than the young and far less interest in socialism. In addition, the Gallup polls show comparisons between such questions today and in the 1940s, again showing significant gains in the acceptance of socialism. During the Cold War era, from the end of World War II to the fall of the Berlin Wall, communism and even socialism were the enemy, so negative views polled more strongly.

If the more favorable view of socialism is generational, it is also educational, or rather reflects a lack of education. The evidence is clear that young people have a muddled understanding of what socialism is. The classic definition of socialism is an economic system in which the people, usually through the government, own the means of production and distribution. A broader and perhaps more modern definition from the noted economist Joseph Schumpeter is a system in which “as a matter of principle, the economic affairs of society belong to the public and not to the private sphere.”⁸⁴ It is obviously in direct contrast to capitalism in which the economic sphere is owned privately and managed by markets with some (albeit increasing) government regulation.

This, however, is not the meaning of the term socialism when young people tell pollsters they think of it in favorable terms. The Gallup organization published a poll specifically on the meaning of socialism in October 2018 and found that the following were the top three understandings of the term: equality (23 percent of respondents), government ownership and control of business (17 percent), and free services from the government (10 percent).⁸⁵ For every respondent who understood the classic definition of government control of business, two respondents thought socialism meant equality and free stuff. Not far down the list of definitions at 6 percent came “talking to people, being social, social media, getting along with people.” In a 2010 New York Times/CBS poll, only 16 percent of young people could accurately define socialism (though admittedly only 30 percent of older folks could do so).

Digging a little deeper, one finds a direct contradiction between young people’s stated preference for socialism, on one hand, and their opinion about who should run business on the other hand. In the Reason-Rupe 2014 survey, 58 percent of young people held a favorable view of socialism. Later in that same survey, however, when asked whether they wanted governments or businesses leading the economy, they preferred markets by a two-to-one margin (64 percent to 32 percent). Likewise, the May 2019 Gallup poll found that after 43 percent said socialism would be a good thing for the country, respondents then said they would choose market control over government control of everything from the economy to wealth distribution and even healthcare. Clearly, then, people are saying “socialism” when they do not mean anything like the classic economic understanding of the term.

Using Denmark and other Scandinavian countries as examples of desirable socialist economies is yet further evidence of how a lack of education yields an increased interest in socialism. No mere youngster, Senator Bernie Sanders (D-Vermont) has made this claim, stating in his 2016 presidential campaign that we should look to countries like Denmark, Norway, and Sweden to understand his notion of democratic socialism. The problem is that when you look more closely, those are not actually socialist economies. In fact, with all the

attention brought on his country in the 2016 election, Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen felt the need to clarify that Denmark was not socialist but rather “a market economy” with “an expanded welfare state.” Like other Scandinavian states, Denmark has high taxes and provides many government services, but it is not a socialist economy in the traditional sense of the word.

Even though Bernie Sanders, the avowed socialist, did not win the Democratic presidential nomination in either 2016 or 2020, young people’s idea of socialism—free stuff—has nevertheless remained on the agenda. Free undergraduate tuition, student loan cancellation, healthcare as a right, and aspects of the Green New Deal are all very much on the table. And so is the “socialist” label—if not by the major presidential candidates, it is certainly in the vocabulary of young people. Clearly, this is an example of how both the public policy debate, and actual policy itself, is skewed by a failure to understand what economic systems are and how they work—matters that should be addressed by a solid civic education.

Part Three

Solutions
Going Forward

A. Prioritization

Before building a structure, we must lay a solid foundation. Federal and state governments and leading public figures must lay this foundation by proclaiming the priority of civic education. Sadly, we have allowed civic education to become a low priority compared to reading and STEM in our schools' curricula. In some places, civic education, especially as it pertains to the teaching of American history, has devolved into a political football. If we are to maintain a vibrant democracy, we must begin with a full commitment to civic education, communicated throughout the country.

We have seen precedents for this kind of emphasis. The Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957, for example, issued a wakeup call for the US to catch up in science and technology education. The 1983 report, "A Nation at Risk," highlighted profound weaknesses in American education and issued a broad call for reform. That call was most fully answered in the federal No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001, which created a major emphasis on high-stakes testing and federal oversight. In the early 2000s, emphasis shifted to STEM education, a call that the government and private sector have heeded in tandem by investing in scientific and technical education to make Americans more competitive job applicants.

Surprisingly, there has been no similar response to the shocking test results, surveys, and studies that reveal the poor state of American civic education. Perhaps this is because poor civic education does not create the same sort of international, competitive crisis of previous calls to action in education. We need leaders from both sides of the political aisle who will make this a top priority and stand up for a major boost to civic education. We could benefit from a Bill Gates or a Warren Buffet making major investments to improve civic education. But even a drumbeat of strengthened course requirements and teacher development in the states would move things in the right direction. STEM helps prepare students for certain jobs, but civic education enables our democracy to survive and to prepare leaders to understand and lead the republic. What could be a higher priority?

B. Funding

Like most policy priorities, improving civic education will require more money. It is most unfortunate that at the same time our civics crisis has grown and become more visible, the federal government has moved away from its em-

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phasis and spending on it. Of course, the federal role in K–12 education is not preeminent. Education policy belongs primarily to states and, through property tax funding and school boards, local governments. Indeed, a key part of the message of replacing the federal No Child Left Behind law with the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 was to dial back the growing federal influence in K–12 education and put states back in the driver’s seat.

Still, the federal government can and should play a vital role in civic education. Federal leaders need to prioritize civic education by restoring and increasing funding for it. This falls well within the US Department of Education’s mission statement, which includes “focusing national attention on key educational issues” as well as “collecting data on America’s schools and disseminating research.”⁸⁶ Even though the federal government does not control the nation’s 100,000 public schools, as Brendan Pelsue of the Harvard Graduate School of Education pointed out, “the federal government [still] uses a complex system of funding mechanisms, policy directives, and the soft but considerable power of the presidential bully pulpit to shape what, how, and where students learn.”⁸⁷ This is precisely what is needed from the federal government for the critical field of civic education.

As noted previously, federal funding for civic education peaked around \$150 million in fiscal year 2010, after which Congress cut the funding, shifting money toward STEM education instead. As one report pointed out, the federal government now spends around \$5 million per year on civics, compared to almost \$3 billion a year on STEM.⁸⁸ This sorts out to “\$54 per schoolchild in this country [for STEM] as opposed to the very paltry amount of five cents per student on civics.”⁸⁹ By contrast, merely compounding the \$150 million invested in 2010 by 5 percent annually, the federal government would be spending around \$250 million in civic education. Instead, a federal commitment closer to \$500 million or more would demonstrate a needed shift towards improving civic education. Can we say that preparing our young people to save and govern the republic is less important than preparing them for careers in technology?

Additional federal support should come from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) as well. As one of the largest funders of humanities programs in the country, its mission “strengthens our republic” by “conveying the lessons of history to all Americans.”⁹⁰ Rather than supporting schools directly, NEH awards grants to universities and



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colleges, as well as individual scholars, to “strengthen teaching and learning in schools and colleges.”⁹¹ Happily, the current chair of NEH, Jon Parrish Peede, recognizes the importance of investing in civic education and has awarded a \$650,000 grant to study best practices in teaching history, civics, and government to develop a “roadmap” by which civics should be taught in each grade.⁹² As Peede said in a recent speech, “I can’t escape the inherent contradiction in the fact that we expect the young adults of our nation to defend our three-branch representative democracy, yet we no longer deign to teach them its core principles, nor its core attributes.”⁹³

Given NEH’s mission and current budget of \$155 million, this should be the first of many large grants to improve the understanding and teaching of civics. It seems very realistic for NEH to make a series of major grants to study additional issues in civics, including teacher preparation and certification and the role of testing. As the recent study *From Civic Education to a Civic Learning Ecosystem* observed, “Currently no distinct research field of civic learning exists. . . . Given the inchoate state of the research field, it is not surprising that a coherent research agenda has yet to emerge.”⁹⁴ Both NEH and the Department of Education should be able to provide funding and leadership for deeper and more coherent research in the field.

Before leaving the case for federal funding, it should be noted that three bills were introduced in Congress in 2019 to strengthen civics, but they all seem to be collecting dust in their assigned committees. The Civics Learning Act (H.R. 849) introduced January 29, 2019, would appropriate \$30 million toward improvements in civic education in fiscal year 2020. The USA Civics Act (S. 2024) was introduced on June 27, 2019, and would provide grants for teacher development and materials on civic education, political thought, and American history. The CIVICS Act (S. 313) also introduced in 2019, would provide support for education pertaining to the Constitution. These bills demonstrate interest by members of Congress in civic education and providing federal leadership. Yet the bills have sat in their respective committees for well over a year.

As a small sign of progress, a bipartisan bill—the Educating for Democracy Act of 2020 (H.R. 8295)—was introduced in September 2020, proposing to expend \$1 billion on history and civic education, mostly in the states. This legislation would also increase NAEP testing.⁹⁵ Such a bill, if enacted, would be a great start toward several of the recommendations we make in this article. Still, its future in this contentious political environment with many competing legislative priorities is uncertain.

State and local governments should also increase funding for civic education to provide another avenue of support. But the federal government could help states in this effort. The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 defines

“well-rounded education” to include civics, government, history, economics, and geography. This definition empowers the federal government to encourage states, municipalities, and schools to give greater attention to civic education. Moreover, the Trump administration’s recent proposal to move \$19.4 billion of federal funding to states by way of block grants could, at least theoretically, provide states flexibility to place higher priority on civic education. The money states now have is being used for other purposes in programs that do not go away, and it would take tremendous willpower for states to, in effect, cut existing programs to spend more on civic education. If adopted, the proposed federal block grants would provide some federal flexibility for states to spend more on civic education, but no new funding.

In short, the federal government should move toward spending upwards of \$500 million annually to improve civic education, coupled with grants of \$1 million a year or more from NEH to study and improve civic education. If new funding is not possible, current appropriations might need to be reallocated from funds now committed to STEM, which after a number of years allocated to that purpose, seems like a tradeoff worth making.

C. Testing

In the last two decades, K–12 schooling in the United States has moved toward a culture of testing. In addition to the traditional testing conducted by individual teachers in courses, there is now a variety of other tests. Some of these tests are for graduation, and others are required by federal and state governments. Estimates indicate that students spend as many as 20 days per school year taking standardized tests and another 26 days preparing for them.⁹⁶ If a subject, such as civic education is not tested, it sends a message that it is not a high priority, and whatever benefit is gained by preparing for such tests on this topic is lost.

There are two kinds of tests that ought to be required and expanded in the field of civic education, beginning with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing. NAEP, also known as the nation’s report card, is a standardized federal test administered by the National Center for Education Statistics in several subject areas. The problem here is that while certain subjects, such as math and reading, are tested annually (in grades 3–8) and reported in grades 4, 8, and 12, the US history and government tests are only given and reported once in eighth grade. Since the NAEP test is really the only national assessment of student knowledge and understanding of civics, we should mandate NAEP testing nationwide in those fields, at least in grades 4, 8, and 12, if not every two years, with the results reported both nationally and by state.

Such an expansion of NAEP testing would benefit civic education in several important ways. First, regular testing conveys a message that these subjects are a priority, right along with math, reading, and science. Second, it would en-

courage the teaching of civic education—now often limited to a single course in high school—in elementary and middle school as well. Third, if it is true that teachers teach to the test, it will increase the focus on civic knowledge, not only enhancing student test scores but also their understanding of the American system. Finally, careful study of NAEP results by state education officials will reveal valuable demographic gaps (such as race or income) that should be addressed.⁹⁷

The second test that should be considered is one near the end of high school, perhaps as a graduation requirement, on civic knowledge. A report by the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service in March 2020 disclosed that “only 22 states require high school students to be tested on civics or US government before they graduate.”⁹⁸ As noted earlier, such tests correlate with greater civic participation, including voter turnout.⁹⁹ Some schools have begun requiring students to pass the US citizenship test. Nineteen states use some version of the test in this way, with others considering it.¹⁰⁰ This may set a low bar for students taking a year-long course in civics, but it may be a useful place to start and a valuable component of a larger civic education strategy.

D. Time

Time committed to teaching and learning civic education is the most important variable in expressing the priority of the subject and creates the greatest likelihood for improvement. As a report from the Education Commission of the States noted in 2017, the single course requirement in most states for civics “contrasts with course requirements in the 1960s, when three required courses in civics and government were common and civics was woven throughout the K–12 curriculum.”¹⁰¹ The gold standard, which states should be encouraged to adopt, is a strong presence of civics in the elementary and middle school curriculum, a year-long course in civics in high school, and some kind of comprehensive test required for completion of the course and/or high school graduation. By that measurement, states have a long way to go.

Since requirements change regularly, it is difficult to be timely and precise about what is currently required in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Nevertheless, a reminder of these data points

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will serve as an indication of how far we need to travel. A study published in December 2019 reported that only nine states plus DC require year-long courses in civics, with another 30 states mandating a one-semester course.¹⁰² Hawaii requires much more, with a one-year course in civics plus an additional semester class on participatory democracy. The same recent report shows 20 states require a demonstration of competency in civics through testing. A few states require civic competencies across the grades, with Maryland's structure being especially robust and worthy of consideration by other states.

If state legislators or governors wondered what could be done to improve civic education in their state, this step is straightforward: Give more time to the subject in schools. A certain number of hours per school year of civics should be required in each elementary grade, with modules, units, and courses required in middle and high school. In high school, there should be a full-year course in civics and a comprehensive test.

E. Teachers

At the heart of virtually every educational priority lie the teachers and their training, effectiveness, and tools. I learned this the hard way as a university president decades ago. In the early days of computers, my university announced a computer literacy initiative, requiring various levels of student development in the new information age. But we had skipped a step: the faculty were not, themselves, computer literate. If the faculty are not prepared and on board, the students will not learn—it's as simple as that. As Diana Hess and John Zola put it in their chapter on teacher profes-

sional development in civic education, "The quality of teaching is the most powerful determinant of students' access to a meaningful civic education."¹⁰³ Since there is so little high-stakes testing being done in civics, teachers are freer than in many subjects to make decisions about the content. Consequently, we cannot expect big improvements in civic education unless our teachers are well trained, capable, enthusiastic, and have the proper tools to do the job.

Teachers must be properly trained to teach civics. Such training may occur in two ways at two different times: first, training aspiring teachers at college, and second, continuing to train teachers on the job. In general, the first has not been effective, and the second has not been sufficiently robust.



Teachers must be properly trained to teach civics, first as aspiring teachers in college and second on the job. In general, the first has not been effective, and the second has not been sufficiently robust.

As noted previously, there are several limitations in teacher education that make it difficult for new teachers to be well-prepared and enthusiastic about teaching civics. One is the age-old dilemma that teacher education is more about skills and pedagogy than it is content. In general, nothing requires a teacher of history or mathematics to major in those fields during their undergraduate years, and majoring in or doing a master's degree in education is largely about pedagogy, not content. As a result, a teacher may enter the classroom with very little knowledge of the subject to be taught. This is precisely what is happening in civic education. A teacher who lacks confidence in the subject matter will not be able to convey any enthusiasm or generate engagement among the students.

A further problem with teacher training lies in the nature of the subject itself. Civics involves a combination of history, government, political science, economics, and even geography. Yet there is generally no "civics" major at the undergraduate level. Further, most states offer only a general certification in "social studies," not in single subjects. A 2015 article noted that only "10 states have a pre-service requirement for high school civics or government teachers."¹⁰⁴ One would hope that a teacher of civics had majored in one of the social science fields listed, with significant coursework in the others. We would do better if state certification and school hiring required some reasonable mix of courses in these subjects. If we were to add requirements for civic education in elementary schools, we would also need to provide additional teacher training. Clearly, this is a topic ripe for further research and recommendations for best practices which, at the present time, are either nonexistent or are literally all over the map.

Once a teacher is in the field and assigned to teach civics, teacher development becomes absolutely critical to teacher success in this hybrid field, even more than in some other subjects. Frankly, teacher development in civics has been poor and underfunded. When civic education funding was cut from the US Department of Education budget in 2011, that eliminated around \$100 million per year in Teaching American History grants that largely funded professional development programs for teachers. With limited funding and very little systematic teacher development opportunities in civic education, teacher training has largely been served by several small and medium-sized nonprofits. Rebecca Burgess, in her 2015 study of professional development for civics teachers, reported several problems with this approach: There are too many civic education subtopics and too few professional development providers, their offerings are generally a menu of unconnected events, and they end up emphasizing current events or civic engagement more than civic knowledge.¹⁰⁵ Teachers especially will need additional training as newer and more engaging approaches to teaching civics are emphasized.

Still, were it not for a few nonprofits aiding teacher development, teacher training would be hopelessly thin.¹⁰⁶ The Ashbrook Center in Ohio, for example, offers effective programs to retrain teachers to teach civics and history using primary documents, a method shown to increase not only student knowledge and performance on standardized tests, but also one that excites interest and engagement in the classroom. The Gilder Lehrman Institute in American History is also known for its excellent offerings for teacher development, especially in US history. Generation Citizen trains teachers in the field of action civics. The McCormick Foundation in Illinois has funded coaches to help develop teachers who are carrying out new civics curriculum requirements.

With support from government and school districts so limited, these valuable teacher development partners are left to find their own donor support which, in turn, greatly reduces their potential outreach. The federal government needs to restore and even increase the highly leveraged Teaching American History grants that enable these nonprofits to reach more teachers. And we will need other donors and foundations to step up since these nonprofit offerings on teaching civics are likely to have to carry the professional development load for the foreseeable future.

Another promising model for civics teacher development comes from a unique partnership in the state of Florida. Florida created a Joint Center on Citizenship as a partnership between two universities and the state, endowing it with \$7 million and annual appropriations of \$400,000.¹⁰⁷ This was tied to a new requirement of a middle school course in civics, requiring teacher development and funding. Some colleges and universities—including Purdue University, the University of Central Florida, and the University of California, Riverside—have begun offering non-credentialing certificates in the teaching of civic education.

There is much to do in order to prepare and empower teachers to teach civics. If, as recommended here, states move toward incorporating civics in elementary and middle schools where it has essentially been absent altogether, those teachers will require additional training. Colleges should also examine the sort of course content that will best prepare teachers of civics, and state certification should require an appropriate mix of social studies courses to teach it. These are long, slow processes, but professional development for teachers of civics will be crucial. Further, additional civics testing in grades 4, 8, and 12 should provide additional backbone for the curriculum teachers would follow.

F. Shaping Curriculum

There is considerable debate today about how civics and history should be taught. For civics, the debate centers on the best methodology: teaching civic knowledge in a more traditional way or employing what has come to be called “action civics.” With regard to American history, the debate is highly politi-

cal, pitting traditional narratives against a victim's-point-of-view approach. As mentioned above, the *New York Times'* 1619 Project endeavored to understand American history through the lens of slavery, while a traditional approach focuses on America's founding, starting with the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the US Constitution adopted in 1787. Both of these approaches, their pedagogy and content, present challenges to improving civic education.

1. Civic Knowledge vs. Action Civics

Beginning with the easier question, how should civics be taught? The traditional emphasis in civics has revolved around learning things like dates and events and their ongoing significance. There is generally a strong emphasis on the Founding and the Constitution, including a thorough understanding of our constitutional system of government and how it operates. Students come to understand the functions and purposes of federal, state, and local governments as part of our republic. This approach has come under criticism as pedantic and boring, insufficiently engaging students during the learning process. The National Action Civics Collaborative calls "traditional civic education . . . boring and ineffective" because it focuses on the "basics of our political system without developing students' abilities to participate in and improve the system."¹⁰⁸

In response, an alternative approach has sprung up in recent years often called action civics. Here the emphasis is getting students out of the classroom and engaged in project-oriented community or government work that will give them a direct experience with civics in practice. Sometimes this involves supporting larger political causes such as protests about guns on campus or voting. Field trips to the state capital, with the opportunity to visit with legislators about current bills, is another form of action civics. Generation Citizen's Action Civics program, adopted in many states and schools, challenges students to choose an issue they care about, develop a plan for making change, and begin to implement it. They call this "hands-on democracy." As another example, former US Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor initiated iCivics, developing games that would bring students into more direct contact with the issues at stake in civic education.

Unfortunately, the debate on civic knowledge versus action civics has created a false dichotomy. Civic education, like all education, needs to engage students to be effective. There are, however, lots of ways to engage students—but engagement is not limited to civic action. Civic education need not be thought of as *either* knowledge *or* experience; instead, there is room for the two to work together. As in science, for example, an individual first studies something in the classroom and then experiments with it in the lab. Civic knowledge comes ahead of civic action or experience, with one reinforcing the other. To make it "either/or" is to create a false—and politically divisive—choice.



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That said, civic knowledge should come before civic action. Seth Andrew, the leader of Democracy Prep in Harlem, acknowledges that prior to practicing the skills of civic engagement, students need knowledge in history and government. He is quick to say that his teachers “want kids to know stuff before they attempt to do stuff,” logically calling for a “floor of civics knowledge before other aspects of civics education can be integrated.”¹⁰⁹

Moreover, we know there are ways to teach civic knowledge that engage students more actively and deeply than merely reading textbooks or listening to lectures. Notre Dame scholar David Campbell has reported that teachers who simply employ discussion in class found students achieving higher NAEP test scores.¹¹⁰ He also notes that “open classrooms” where students are free to express ideas and encouraged to disagree about issues are environments that produce better test scores.¹¹¹ Extracurricular activities such as debate or service learning have also been shown to increase later civic engagement.¹¹² There are plenty of ways to increase student engagement while learning civic knowledge short of leaving the schoolhouse for action civics, and these suggestions are a good place to start. As noted earlier, incorporating voter preregistration in school to take effect at age 18 could certainly improve later civic engagement.

Action civics should not be attacked, however, unless it is being used as a substitute for developing civic knowledge. Knowing and observing, or knowing and doing, work well together. But we must be careful not to let the cart of civic engagement come before the horse of civic knowledge. At the very least, buying into the false dichotomy and replacing civic knowledge wholesale with civic engagement is not the right choice.

2. Teaching History and Civics Through Primary Documents

For teaching American history, one of the best innovations is the use of primary documents. Students are asked to read primary documents from different periods in history, either as a complement to their textbooks, or sometimes even as a replacement. This approach addresses at least two problems with the use of history and civics textbooks: many of them are quite simply boring and simplistic in their presentation, while others are politically biased. Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* is a classic example of the latter, showing how leading figures and movements in US history were actually pursuing aims that were racist, selfish, and imperialist. It is no surprise that young people emerge from being “Zinnified” without much respect or affection for the American story.

By contrast, reading primary documents brings students into direct contact with important turning points in American history by reading speeches, debates, and other documents of the time. Students are invited into the historic period and are challenged to understand the time on its own terms, not as it might be judged through today's political lens. Students may take sides and debate the issues or even engage in roleplaying. All kinds of possibilities are available for creating excitement and engagement in the history and civics classroom. Plus, students may be invited to reach their own conclusions about historic events rather than the digested views of textbook authors or teachers.

The Ashbrook Center in Ohio has taken the lead in training and retraining teachers of history and civics to use primary documents. Teachers who implement such programs report much more engagement in the classroom, and studies on the effectiveness of the program have also shown improved test results from students who learned this way. Some teachers have even set their textbooks aside and relied exclusively on primary documents, as Ashbrook has published volumes of primary documents to be used in the classroom. Although thousands of teachers have been trained in this way, there are many more who would benefit from learning to teach with primary documents. Ashbrook is the kind of nonprofit that should be supported by teacher development grants from the federal government and by private donations.

3. Building Layer Cakes and Competencies

One challenge to developing a robust civic education is that we are doing little or nothing in the elementary and middle school years and then putting all our chips on a single course in high school. Far better would be building a foundation of civic education in the early grades that culminates with a year-long course in high school. The Founder and Head of Nashville Classical School, Charlie Friedman, described how this is done: "Core Knowledge curriculum is sequenced in a cycle and built like a layer cake, so events of history get returned to again and again, each time layering more context and age-appropriate understanding."¹¹³



**Charlie Friedman, Founder
and Head of Nashville
Classical School: 'Core
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Fortunately, several states have awakened to the importance of requiring civics in elementary and middle school. Florida has been an early trendsetter in improving civic education, and it requires coverage of key civics topics in elementary school and a one-semester civic education course in middle school. Florida has seen a significant increase in student test scores on the state exam that accompanies the middle school course.¹¹⁴ As noted earlier, increased testing on this topic has caused a major increase in teacher preparation and the availability of course materials and tools.¹¹⁵ Illinois has also assigned civic education themes to be covered during the elementary school years and, in 2019, adopted a new law (H.B. 2265) requiring a one-semester civics course in middle school.

A good alternative to adding new civics courses in the lower grades is to identify civics competencies students should develop in each grade. Here, Maryland has been a leader, providing a civics competency to be taught and mastered in each grade from kindergarten through high school. Maryland teachers are provided with comprehensive standards as well as resources for teaching these competencies. Thirty hours of civics per school year are required in grades K–2, 40 hours in grades 3–5, and then units and semesters of courses for the remaining grades, culminating in a one-year civics or government class, community service, and a passing score on the Maryland High School Assessment in American Government. Vermont has developed a similar system but, instead of an exit exam, student proficiency in civics is tested regularly through the child’s education. Again, as in Maryland, milestones and competencies are carefully laid out. Massachusetts has also laid out civics standards by grade, and it also requires the completion of civics projects.

Another approach to building the layer cake over time is to integrate civics with reading or with other social science topics. Since reading is a high priority in K–12 education, why not have a list of outstanding biographies of civic and political leaders that students should complete as part of their reading program? Stories about the founders of the country and Abraham Lincoln, for example, could easily serve the dual purpose of teaching reading and civics at the same time.

With careful attention to building a layer cake of civic knowledge, or establishing competencies, the high school civics course becomes a culmination of study, not a one-shot effort. It will be awhile before we know which of these approaches might be best. But for now, any of them is better than doing nothing until high school civics class.

Conclusion

Today, we have allowed civic education to become an educational afterthought. There is little sense of national priority or urgency about it. Typically, a student will take a single one-semester course on civics in high school and call it a day. Teachers receive little or no training in how to teach it effectively. The tools of the trade are boring textbooks or texts with a strong political bias. The federal government has largely stopped funding civics, and in the new testing culture of K–12 education, it is barely tested at all.

In fact, to the extent that today’s headlines express concerns about civic education, it is usually an attempt to make a political football out of it, to make certain it covers this or that issue of the day, or provides an appropriate critique of our founding and our history, rather than studying the foundations of our system. As Professor Gordon Lloyd of Pepperdine University has said, “It’s hard to love an ugly founding,” and so students are driven away from developing the ideal that President Ronald Reagan called “an informed patriotism.”¹¹⁶

Unfortunately, we now see the adverse impact declining civic education has on our institutional and political life. Many young people have lost trust in leaders and institutions, especially those of a political nature. They are barely turning out to vote. They are often confused about the nature of economic and political systems such that some prefer socialism or even communism, not understanding what those terms mean.

This is a Sputnik moment. Our nation is truly, as the 1983 education report put it, “at risk.” Unless we reclaim the priority of civic education and make it a central part of our young people’s education, we will continue to see erosion in our political and institutional life. Can we trust the future of the republic to people who do not even know what a republic is?

Although it could be helpful if the federal government launched an emphasis on civic education to parallel the robust STEM movement—and I do recommend and call for that—we do not have to wait for that moment. Of course, a billionaire such as Bill Gates or Warren Buffet deciding to pour everything he had into improving civic education would certainly help, but that is not essential to recovering viable civic education.

Instead, we must undertake an across-the-board ratcheting up of our commitment to civic education. We should demand that the federal government restore and increase its funding of civic education to \$500 million a year, mostly to be used for teacher development and for states to increase their efforts. If some of this must come from the STEM budget, so be it. We must also insist that the federal government increase NAEP testing of government and US history to three times in a student’s career—grades 4, 8, and 11 or 12—not just once, and that those results be made available by state. A major bipartisan statement should accompany all this, calling for a renewed priority for civic education in these times.

The real action must come at the state level where, happily, things are already stirring. We need states to develop civic education requirements, beginning in elementary school and continuing through middle school. This commitment should culminate in high school with a year-long course in civics, accompanied by some kind of test. States will need to prioritize teacher development, especially as new courses and commitments at different grade levels are added. States must also examine certification requirements for teaching civics.

To augment this effort, we will also need colleges and nonprofits to gear up and help. We would also benefit from additional studies about the best practices in civic education—which state models might be best to follow—and the long-term effects of better civic education. This is all part of developing what one major effort has called “a civic education ecosystem,” not just a series of new courses.

Of all the major problems facing our country, lackluster civic education can and must be addressed now. We need not wait for a miracle cure. The moment for a strong emphasis and dramatic improvement in America’s civic education is now, and we dare not miss it.

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Davenport earned a BA with distinction in international relations from Stanford University and a JD from the University of Kansas’s School of Law, where he was elected to Order of the Coif and earned national and international awards in moot court competitions.

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