Students in the United States have undertaken some form of formal or informal civic education since the early nineteenth century, but its nature has changed with the political and social climate. We look here at the history of and philosophy behind American civic education, what has been meant by civic education and whether past and present methods have fulfilled the intended objectives. We end with current practice, with more detailed examples to illustrate how social and political changes have affected the teaching of civics within the school system. Lessons for civic education in the UK will be drawn as we go.

The Founding Fathers (1776–1890)

The Revolutionary War provided a foundation for civic education in the new Republic. During the war, ‘military experience operated as a form of civic education in support of the democratic polity’. The ‘citizen soldier’ emerged as an important ideological force. In contrast to the British standing army, made up largely of paid mercenaries, the citizen soldier of the Revolution fought to fulfil his personal obligation to the state, an obligation believed to be held by all. The officer class was open to all (free, white) men, not just the gentry. This created a sense of rights and obligations among those who fought. After the war, most of these men went back to their farms or businesses and to their previous political indifference, but an important segment remained politically active.

The Founding Fathers—George Washington, John Adams, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, Ben Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Paine—shared a common vision for their new country that they believed could only materialise if its people were educated in a certain manner. This involved a commitment, at least in principle, to free public education for all (free, white) boys and girls. All wealthy men and leading intellectuals within their community (only Washington did not attend university), this vision was based around liberal notions of individual rights, civil society and the market, predominantly found within British writers such as Hobbes and Locke, but also Rousseau and Aristotle among others. Locke himself argued that education was necessary for the creation of a responsible citizen. This includes emphasis on the individual, equality and property. As Mary Jane Turner, co-director of the Basic Citizenship Competencies Project,
explains: ‘From the time of the founding of the American republic, it seems that twin orthodoxies—Lockean liberalism and capitalism—have largely determined the content of citizenship education.’ However, she points to two concurrent values that temper this liberalism: an emphasis on public obligations over private interests and the belief that government exists to protect the common man from ‘the malefactors of great wealth’.3

Some norms of behaviour were set out by New England society—home to many of the Founding Fathers and seen as the ‘birthplace’ of the Revolution—but there was no real national identity to convey to young Americans. Agreement had to be reached about the content of civic education. What made a responsible citizen in the new nation? For that matter, what made an American citizen? Which school subjects would be most appropriate in setting out these ideals? The Founding Father’s own beliefs set the agenda. They saw this nation-building exercise as ‘continuing a long-term historical process’ begun in the ancient republics, with God and history on America’s side.4 Thus, early civic education was based around two areas—religion and history.

Despite the constitutional separation of church and state, religion formed an important part of education in this period. This reflected society at the time. The immigrant base was entirely Northern European—white, Protestant, mostly rural and largely devout. The community played a vital role in the successful nature of this early civic education. Schools were very decentralised, with each city or town maintaining control of its own curriculum. The goals of leaders, at the local level as well as national, linked education to religious, moral and material benefits. Being a good American meant being a good Christian, with the full weight of the community to support the young or to censure those who strayed from the path. The National Teachers’ Association (NTA), founded in 1857, strongly advocated the need for religion to be at the centre of American education. Kraig Beyerlein provides examples of its rhetoric at the time:

‘Just as NTA educators insisted that religion was requisite for moral training to be effective in public schools, they also argued that public education needed religious instruction to preserve the nation and its features—such as civilization, liberty, or patriotism—that all citizens, they believed, held dear. Thus James Pyle Wickersham (state superintendent of public schools in Pennsylvania) argued: “Schools in this country should train the young to be religious. All men in all countries should be religious; but religion as an element is more necessary in a republic than under any other form of government; for without it self-government is impossible.” Later in that same address, Wickersham added, “humanity, patriotism, [and] religion all demand” public school educators to inculcate an intense religious sense in their students.’5

Horace Mann was Massachusetts Secretary for Education (1837–49) and a strong advocate of free, quality public education for all. He believed that ‘the first responsibility of the public schools was moral
elevation’ and that moral students made good citizens and good politicians. According to Mann: ‘Never will wisdom preside in the halls of legislation and its profound utterances be recorded on the pages of the statute book, until Common Schools . . . shall create a more far-seeing intelligence and a purer morality than has ever existed among communities of men.’

In all schools, history was the main explicit tool of civic education. Students were taught about the Founding Fathers, famous battles won by the ‘citizen soldiers’, the struggles for survival faced by the first immigrants, the Western expansion and the important documents of the nation—the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence. History as taught was subjective, establishing legends, without getting overly ‘bogged down’ with facts or analysis. Educators and elites believed that a nation must have myths and heroes of which to be proud, and early civic education provided these. There was no intention to teach students how to think as citizens; rather, students were taught what to think as patriots.

Civic education following the Revolution proved extremely successful in creating a national identity, with strong civic participation and patriotism, noted famously by the French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville. First published in 1835, his *Democracy in America*, largely praises the American commitment to democracy. He was particularly impressed by American participation within the political system, predominantly through membership of associations. ‘Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. In democratic countries knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others.’ Decentralised civic education with its focus on the citizen within his or her community was partly responsible for fostering this commitment to civic participation.

Three important lessons can be drawn here for the current debate on civic education in the UK.

1. Myths and symbols can be potent tools to build patriotism and national identity. However, in the US case this often involved a subjective approach to teaching history, which is unlikely to prove popular among teachers and parents today. Also, the population was largely homogenous, in that all citizens were white, Northern European protestants. It would be difficult to find truly national symbols in the UK which appeal to all segments of the population.

2. The success of civic education in this period has been linked to the control of the community over the school and the individual. This is not the case in the modern US or in the UK.

3. The UK is a predominantly secular country, with fewer than one million people regularly attending church for example. Recent
moves by the government to bring in more faith-based schools have been widely criticised. If the UK were to attempt a ‘moral’ approach to civic education, it would have to delink morals from religion to have impact, and this would be difficult without the full cooperation of teachers and parents, at the very least.

A wave of immigration (1881–1940)

In the late nineteenth century, the social composition of the US changed dramatically. Not only did immigration levels greatly increase, the composition of immigration moved south and east, as illustrated in the Table 1.

Cleavages in the system emerged with these new immigrants. Many Catholics shunned existing public schools and established their own parochial ones. The large numbers increased urban populations. Urbanisation, combined with rapid industrialisation, reduced the overall percentage of student attendance, even if absolute numbers increased. This also led to increased bureaucratisation and centralisation of the school system, as the one-room school house went the way of the horse and buggy. The Supreme Court institutionalised the separation of church and state, eliminating the role of religion in civic education, at least in the public school system. This is due in part to the efforts of the National Education Association, the renamed NTA. According to Beyerlein, ‘The new NEA leaders, who were much less friendly to having religion in public education, contested the instruction of “common Christianity” for public schooling’, leading to the secularisation of public education.

The outcome of the American Civil War, and the subsequent rethinking of the importance of equality for all, meant that two segments of the American population needed to be incorporated into the system—blacks and native Americans. Abraham Lincoln and his Gettysburg Address, which famously begins: ‘Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal’—joined the growing list of American legends. This required a changed version of US history that did not focus purely on white Americans.

In order to incorporate these new diverse interest groups, US schools

1. Immigrants Admitted to the United States from the Top Five Countries of Last Residence, 1821–1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1821–1840</td>
<td>3,500,000</td>
<td>Ireland, Germany, United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841–1860</td>
<td>4,200,000</td>
<td>Ireland, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861–1880</td>
<td>5,100,000</td>
<td>Germany, United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, Norway/Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881–1900</td>
<td>9,000,000</td>
<td>Germany, United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, Austria/Hungary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901–1920</td>
<td>14,500,000</td>
<td>Italy, Austria/Hungary, Soviet Union, Canada, United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921–1940</td>
<td>4,800,000</td>
<td>Canada, Germany, Italy, Mexico, United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

focused on a system of ‘acculturation’, rather than ‘assimilation’. Indeed, this continues to be the approach taken today. Morris Janowitz explains the difference: ‘Assimilation implies loss of older identity, while acculturation means the addition of new values while retaining crucial elements of one’s older identity.’ The American leadership did not seek assimilation into the existing culture because the existing culture was one built around the diversity of immigration. It was recognised that each new group brought with it opportunities for enrichment, rather than simply challenges for integration. Speaking in 1913, the US Commissioner of Education exclaimed: ‘For the enrichment of our national life as well as for the happiness and welfare of individuals we must respect immigrant parents’ ideals and preserve and strengthen all of the best of their Old World life they bring with them.’ As the poet Walt Whitman declared: ‘Here is not merely a nation, but a teeming nation of nations.’ The notion of the hyphenated-American developed at this time and is still seen by many as a vital part of ‘acculturation’. An Italian immigrant to the US joins an Italian-American community. It is not just a group of Italians living in the US, nor is it a carbon copy of Italian society. It is a brand new community in its own right.

This is not to say that opposition to the new immigration did not exist. Some groups were already excluded from immigration—the very ill, the insane, the impoverished—but in 1917 the law was changed legally to exclude Asians and to impose a literacy test on new immigrants. In 1921, Congress passed a quota system which affected immigration from Russia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and islands in the Pacific and Atlantic. This dramatically reduced immigration numbers. In addition, during the First World War, there were attacks on the notion of the hyphenated-American from no less than President Roosevelt. He proclaimed:

‘There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism. When I refer to hyphenated Americans, I do not refer to naturalized Americans. Some of the very best Americans I have ever known were naturalized Americans, Americans born abroad. But a hyphenated American is not an American at all. This is just as true of the man who puts “native” before the hyphen as of the man who puts German or Irish or English or French before the hyphen. Americanism is a matter of the spirit and of the soul. Our allegiance must be purely to the United States. We must unsparingly condemn any man who holds any other allegiance. But if he is heartily and singly loyal to this Republic, then no matter where he was born, he is just as good an American as any one else. There is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American. The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else.’

Roosevelt went on to argue that only ‘Americanised’ Americans could truly fight American battles and also that the biggest danger America faced was from infighting between hyphenated groups with more allegiance to citizens in their homelands than to those in their adopted country.
Although Roosevelt found a sympathetic audience, there were critics in positions of influence. The most important in the context of civic education was the philosopher and educator, John Dewey. Dewey believed that it was vital to embrace the concept of the hyphenated-American because it was uniquely American. The diversity of the immigrant experience is seen as one of the things of which Americans should be proud, and if civic education is intended to create national pride, then it must so be acknowledged. He argued that it was the only way to approach a uniquely American civic education: ‘Unless our education is nationalised in a way which recognises that the peculiarity of our nationalism is its internationalism, we shall breed enmity and division in our frantic efforts to secure unity.’

Dewey made a significant contribution to civic education in the US during this period. He saw education as existing solely for the socialisation of the individual. By this he meant that a child was more than a potential voter and subject of the law. He or she was also a future worker and a member of a neighbourhood and community. Because of this, education could be useful in creating a better neighbour, parent, boss and employee, and all of this would create a better citizen. He also introduced the idea of applying the scientific approach to education in general. This was especially important for civic education. ‘Democratic or civic education means commitment to the shared method of observation, hypothesis, and judging by consequences of acting on hypothesis.’ Citizens should not simply be taught what to think but how to think. This would encourage a ‘welcome diversity of opinion’ and deepen one’s commitment to democracy and American institutions. However, Fott points out that this may not necessarily be the case—the scientific method of inquiry encourages critical thinking, which could threaten the status quo and may even yield a preference for non-democratic politics. In addition, it required well-trained teachers with the ability to apply the method to civic education, and these were difficult to find.

Instead, civic education continued to consist of history, ‘civics’ (a term coined at the time to describe teaching a basic understanding of the institutions of government), basic English skills and some newly introduced patriotic symbolism. For example, the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag was institutionalised at this time. In most schools across the US today, American students still raise their right hand over their heart, stare up at the flag and recite, ‘I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.’ Many Americans believe the Pledge originated with the Founding Fathers, but its history is more complex and infinitely more interesting than that, and illustrates the complex nature of invented symbols of national identity. The socialist clergyman Francis Bellamy, cousin of the socialist novelist Edward Bellamy, wrote the pledge, which was
published in the influential family magazine *The Youth’s Companion* in 1892. Prior to this, few schoolrooms had flags; by 1888, over 26,000 did. As chairman of the National Education Association, he prepared the pledge to celebrate the quadricentennial Columbus Day with a flag-raising ceremony and salute. However, his original pledge reads: ‘I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.’ John Baer highlights some interesting changes to the Pledge over the years. The original salute was a stiff, uplifted right-hand salute, but this was (quite sensibly) discontinued during the Second World War. In 1924, under pressure from the American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution, ‘the Flag of the United States of America’ was substituted with ‘my Flag’ to ensure that hyphenated-Americans were pledging the correct flag. President Eisenhower added ‘under God’ in 1954 following pressure from the Knights of Columbus and other anticommunist pressure groups caught up in the McCarthy witch-hunts.

This period of history, involving massive social change, depression and a world war, produced a flexible, ad hoc but largely effective civic education system. It was inclusive, limited in scope and backed by a society that could still exercise effective control and censure over individuals’ behaviour. This is not to say that it was without conflict; however, the process of ‘acculturation’ seemed to work. Americans remained politically and civicly active and patriotism rode high.

Two important lessons can be drawn here for the current debate on civic education in the UK.

1. Much of the debate on the UK has focused around the assimilation of immigrants into the existing culture. This is the opposite of the effective ‘acculturation’ approach taken by the US. A policy of assimilation is likely to foster resentment in minority communities and fuel racism and nationalism in the majority, whereas acculturation allows for diversity with unity. By way of illustration, during the 1994 World Cup in the US, national teams were dispersed around the country depending on where large immigrant groups were. So, for example, Mexico played in California while Italy played in New York and Greece played in Massachusetts. Americans happily cheered on the US side while simultaneously cheering on the team of their ancestors and no one saw a conflict of interest. This of course directly contradicts the implication of Norman Tebbitt’s famous ‘cricket test’ for immigrants.

2. Civic education can mean teaching students what to think if the general remit of civic education is not broad—encouraging voting, for example, or creating patriotism. However, it is not an effective means of producing real participation in the long-term, as we will see below.
A period of turbulent change (1941–1980)

The period following the Second World War is often seen as the golden age of civic participation in the US. However, high levels of patriotism in the postwar period and into the Cold War masked significant social and political change which rocked the very foundations of civic education. Janowitz describes this period as the ‘new communalism’. This communalism, or collectivism, contrasted with the previous emphasis on individualism. Minority groups, and blacks in particular, fought for increased civil liberties and for a new focus on ethnic and racial nationalism in civic education. A new batch of immigrants, especially from Hispanic countries, continued to change the social make-up of the US. These immigrants were particularly unique because of their proximity to their homelands. In fact, the areas of the US into which many settled—Florida, Texas and California—were formerly part of Mexico and the Spanish empire. Janowitz describes this as a ‘recolonisation’ of sorts! Because of this closeness to home, the new group of immigrants proved less willing to acculturate, let alone assimilate.

Responding to these demands, civic education turned its focus on to providing a history and context for minority groups and away from patriotic and nationalistic symbolism. However, it has been argued that this left the majority without the necessary socialisation and, combined with a general loss of confidence in the government following McCarthyism, Vietnam, Watergate and stagflation, created a generation of Americans who are less civic-minded than previous generations. Janowitz points out: ‘The decline in the school as an agency of civic education is not limited to ethnic or racial groupings but involves a wider range of intergenerational relations and tensions.’ This new generation is less religious and less influenced in its behaviour by the censure of the community. They are less likely to be involved in civic affairs or to participate within the community. Several recent books look at the ‘civic malaise’ found in the baby-boom generation (and their children), including Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Democracy, Susan Pharr and Robert Putnam’s Disaffected Democracies: What’s Troubling the Trilateral Countries and E.J. Dione Jr’s Why Americans Hate Politics. Indeed, to buck this trend, Putnam calls for a renewed emphasis on civic education—‘not just “how a bill becomes a law”, but “How can I participate effectively in the public life of my community?”’

Two important lessons can be drawn here for the current debate on civic education in the UK.

1. Acculturation can work but only with the commitment of all groups. If some groups feel excluded from the system, or choose to exclude themselves, then civic education will not work without creating further exclusion.
Politics matters! Civic education can focus on ideals, but if the reality of politics includes sleaze, partisanship and intolerance, or is seen to disregard the will of the majority (as in the case of Vietnam), disillusionment will result.

Rethinking civic education (1980–present)

In the past fifty years a social studies approach has replaced the traditional history-based one. The term ‘social studies’ encompasses a range of disciplines such as history, political science/civics, cultural anthropology, geography, sociology, psychology and economics. Educators believed that civic education was not complete without a more rounded approach. This they made clear at a meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies in 1992 where they adopted a definition for the term ‘social studies’: ‘Social Studies is the integrated study of social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse democratic society in an interdependent world.’

However, it has been argued that it is not enough simply to expand the curriculum and integrate the goals of civic education into social studies subjects. There must be a planned and cohesive approach. Policy-makers and educators have to decide what kind of citizens civic education wants to produce. In other words, do we want ‘political socialisation’ or ‘political education’? Political socialisation teaches what to think. It tells students what values society has chosen and makes these their own. It requires uncritical acceptance of the status quo. It encourages participation in the future, with a heavy emphasis on voting, but does not encourage students to act as citizens now. Political education, on the other hand, teaches students how to think. It emphasises a ‘rational decisioning process’. It allows critical evaluation of the status quo. It emphasises the ‘skills of participation’, with a focus on acting and the consequences of student inaction right now. A social studies approach can fit into either.

Turner argued that the problem with civic education in the US was that it did not teach ‘the skills of participation—how to influence public policy making, how to make decisions that bear on civic matters, how to evaluate the quality of public policy using a set of sensible criteria, how to communicate preference and so on’. Despite its rhetoric, it did not seek to create citizens; it sought to create patriots, and there is a significant difference. The need for change has been hampered by parents and politicians who do not want children to be taught how to question the status quo. It has also been hampered by a lack of teachers qualified in political science, capable of handling value-laden material. In the US, as Turner points out, civic education is taught by history teachers in the best instance, but also by physical education teachers in the worst instance.
Her work set out twelve possible approaches for reforming civic education. Some of these focused on issues. The Social Problems approach teaches students to critically tackle controversial issues, for example poverty, racism, drug abuse, pollution and crime. The Multicultural Education approach provides knowledge of other cultures and promotes diversity. The Global Education approach focuses on students as citizens in a globalised world in order to raise consciousness. The Moral Development approach teaches students to tackle issues by looking for underlying moral arguments through group work with peers. However, these methods have little value on their own and can only be adopted as part of a cohesive strategy. In addition, support is needed from teachers and parents who may be uncomfortable with the material.

Other methods involve teaching students how to think as citizens. The Personal Economics/Consumer Education approach teaches students how to protect themselves in the market economy. Although of little value for civic education if taught on its own, it is an important skill. The Academic Disciplines approach uses concepts, generalisations and methodologies from social science disciplines to organise material and to teach students how to investigate critically. However, teachers often lack these skills and knowledge themselves, and schools would need to attract new teachers with PhDs (the only process currently whereby these skills are obtained). The Critical Thinking approach recognises this as a vital skill for citizenship, but there has been little research done and few, if any, textbooks are available. The Values Clarification approach teaches students how to adopt any position ‘as long as students understand the consequences of their values, are willing to state them to others, and consistently choose the same values across issues’. However, it is unlikely that parents, teachers and administrators would be comfortable with this because it can only work if the course is relativistic and non-judgmental. The Institutional School Reform approach questions the structure of schools themselves. It argues that schools are authoritarian institutions, and encourages students to participate in the administration of the school in a democratic manner. There is little chance for support from teachers, administrators and parents for this approach.

Other approaches build on existing curriculum but with a focus on the student within the ‘real world’. The Law-Related Education approach focuses on laws, constitutions, legal systems, rights and so on. This has traditionally been taught in a historical way in the US, but the new approach looks at the ‘living, dynamic’ nature of these institutions, encouraging students to see opportunities for change and development. The Community Involvement approach puts students in the ‘real world’ to see their own impact (positive or negative) in the community. This must follow a specific model, because it lacks value if it is implemented in an ad hoc manner with little preparation or debriefing. AmeriCorps,
described below, is an example of this scheme. Finally, the Basic Citizenship Competencies approach aims for students to leave school with competencies in areas like processing information about political decisions, developing and using standards such as justice and ethics, communicating ideas and working with bureaucracies to protect their own interests. No one approach has been chosen in the US to reform existing practices in civic education. Instead we find a conglomeration of most (but not all) of Turner’s recommended approaches.

Overview of current practices in civic education
Current practices in the United States have focused on the improvement of civic education curriculum content. However, identified as equally important is the manner in which the curriculum is delivered if it is to have a lasting impact on students. The classroom environment, teacher attitudes and the incorporation of activities based upon the active participation of students will have a tremendous impact on the development of students’ civic attitudes, tolerance and understanding. These are the foundations upon which current developments are shaped.

In the US, civic education has seen the development of national standards for what is still broadly termed ‘social studies’ for students from Kindergarten to 18. The national standards were designed as guidelines or benchmarks of proficiencies, for building a cohesive curriculum that outlines what students should know in the area of social studies at different points throughout their schooling. These standards have then been taken into account in the development of individual state standards, state-wide or district-wide curriculum requirements for students at various school levels. In addition to these standards, the National Campaign to Promote Civic Education and ‘CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education’ have been developed. The former was formed with the purpose of influencing US states to ‘devote sustained and systemic attention to civic education’, while the latter provided a model framework to assist educators in their endeavour to improve the civic education of students. For example, content standards from the National Standards for Civics and Government for Grade 5 (age 10–11) to Grade 8 (age 13–14) include investigation of five areas: What are Civic Life, Politics, and Government? What are the Foundations of the American Political System? How Does the Government Established by the Constitution Embody the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy? What is the Relationship of the United States to Other Nations and to World Affairs? and What are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?

For this purpose, organisations such as The Centre for Civic Education, have proven to be valuable resources for those involved in the development of curriculum, programmes and projects for teaching civics/government across the United States and throughout other parts of the world. Some of the materials devised to assist in curriculum
development include the ‘Foundations of Democracy Series’ and ‘Exercises in Participation Series’. These materials were designed to develop student understanding of basic democratic concepts and principles as well as provide materials to develop their participatory skills through individual and small group projects. The ideas behind the development of these resources can be seen in the Curriculum Frameworks for social studies devised by individual US states and school districts.

This is illustrated in the curriculum frameworks for social studies devised by the Barrington School District, New Hampshire. The curriculum frameworks set an outline of targets of student proficiencies for individual grade levels. For example:

(Kindergarten, age 4–5) the target set is to be able to ‘identify and apply criteria for evaluating the effectiveness and fairness of rules and laws in the classroom, school, and community’.

(Grade 5, age 10–11) student knowledge of major events in local, New Hampshire and United States history from the first arrival of humans to the present.

(Grade 7, age 12–13) discuss the impact of the American concept of democracy on world affairs; discuss ways misunderstandings and conflicts between members of different groups can be prevented, managed or resolved in a fair and peaceful manner that respects individual rights and promotes the common good.

(Grade 8, age 13–14) describe and analyse the ways Americans can effectively participate in civic and political life at the school, community, state, and national levels and discuss how such participation can lead to the attainment of both individual and public goals.

The outline of proficiencies for students as they progress through their schooling increases and builds upon the previous ones to ensure coherence. In the New Hampshire framework this culminates in the sitting of a state exam by tenth grade (age 15–16) public school students. The state exam’s primary purpose is to assess student proficiencies as defined in the state’s curriculum framework. The results from the exam are then utilised to assess the need of further improvement and serves as an impetus for change in particular schools/school districts.22

Other states, such as Hawai’i, have illustrate similar developments in the utilisation of national standards in the development of state-wide standards. The civic education/social studies standards developed there reflect an assessment by the state’s working group23 of which standards were of greatest importance for advancing citizenship education. This choice was based on the aim of creating what Thomas Jefferson called ‘a safe depository of government’. This is the development of a ‘civic minded population able to comprehend the complexity of public policy
issues, relate those issues to their own lives and those of others, and to make decisions with awareness of likely consequences'. With these standards in mind, frameworks are then developed to provide not a checklist of subjects to be taught but a checklist of possible topics for implementing the standards. The framework outlines the progression of development of the standards identified, ensuring that each stage builds upon the previous one. This ensures not only the dissemination of information but also provides valuable opportunities in and out of the classroom for students to experience and examine democracy and acquire the skills relevant to engage in civic participation.

With the development of standards and frameworks, civic education reformers have also emphasised the need for active participation of students in projects or programmes revolving around the development of analytical and critical thinking skills. They are designed to promote competence and responsible participation in state and local government through innovative activities which enhance the curriculum material imparted to students. For instance, one programme piloted during the 1995–96 school year in twelve states, ‘We the People . . . Project Citizen’, focuses on the role of state and local governments in the American federal system. It involved a class project to identify and study a public policy issue and development of an action plan for implementing this policy. What students gained was an understanding of state and local government processes, the development of policies, learning to interact with their government through the process of researching, examining and evaluating a public policy concern in their community. The project culminated in simulated legislative hearings where the student groups answered questions on their policy proposals from community representatives and judges acting as a legislative committee.

Another programme, ‘We the People . . . The Citizen and the Constitution’, has been designed to complement the normal school curriculum by including critical-thinking exercises, problem-solving activities and cooperative learning techniques to help develop intellectual and participatory skills while increasing students’ understanding of the institutions of American constitutional democracy. Its effectiveness was validated by the Program Effectiveness Panel of the US Department of Education’s National Diffusion Network, confirming evaluation studies. One such, by Richard Brody of Stanford University, concluded that the programme was ‘effective in promoting political tolerance because participating students feel more politically effective and perceive fewer limits on their own political freedom.’ Another, in Clark County, Nevada, found that 80% of the students who had participated in the programme had registered to vote on turning eighteen, as compared with the national average of 37%. It concluded what teachers have observed, that the programme had an effect on participating students and that they became more interested in participating in civic affairs.
Other programmes which have been emphasised to different extents across the US have been like those organised by the non-profit organisation The Close Up Foundation which organises programmes that host high school students, educators, retired-elderly persons and others for week-long government studies programmes or internships in the nation’s capital. There are also state and local programmes modelled on the Washington DC programme that range in length but promote hands-on, interactive experiences that help students understand the democratic process and what makes it work. It strengthens their knowledge of the political process and motivates their interest in it.

What such programmes have set out to accomplish has been the involvement of students in realistic learning activities—group discussions, problem-solving, simulated government meetings—which have engaged them in debate and open discussions, in questioning problems that affect them on a daily basis; in a search for solutions. However, despite efforts to increase and improve civic education, there are still other factors that need to be addressed if results are to be seen in real terms. Other factors have been identified as hampering implementation of civic education programmes: resistance from the older generation; slowness of institutional change in schools—not only content, but new pedagogical methods introduced; design and implementation of curricular programmes with inadequate resources to carry out the necessary tasks; resistance to democratic teaching styles and empowerment of students—as interactive programmes are inevitably noisier and potentially more disruptive than traditional instructional methods; low status of civic education compared with other disciplines taught; lack of adequate requirements for civic education; common approach of limiting civic education to a single course rather than make it a part of entire curriculum taught; inadequate preparation of civic education teachers; and dealing with diversity and the gap between ideas and reality.

These factors illustrate what some educators and researchers are finding. Despite recent trends in civic education, results have not yet achieved the overall aims sought. If the assessment conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress in Civics on the United States is an indication (it showed that only 25% of US students were proficient in the subject of civics), then there is still much work that needs to be done and much to be considered, not only in the United States, but globally.

However, in addition to curriculum content and delivery, the US has also encouraged the development of civic skills through community service. This ranges from projects organised locally or from within school groups to national organisations such as AmeriCorps—the domestic Peace Corps in the US that provides more than 40,000 Americans each year with the opportunity to participate in community or national service. One particular AmeriCorp programme, founded originally in Boston in 1988 is City Year. This has now expanded to
several cities—an ‘innovative service organisation that seeks to address pressing community needs by engaging young people, ages 17–24’. Fundamental to its mission is ‘to build democracy through national service’, ‘the concept of bringing together a diverse collection of young people from different ethnic, economic and educational backgrounds to draw upon their diverse talents and experiences in order to provide the best service’ for communities.30

Some important lessons can be drawn here for the current debate on civic education in the UK.

(1) Civic education implementation needs coordination between all levels and the setting of standards is one way of ensuring this coordination.

(2) In order to develop the civic skills of students, civic education needs to become more broad-based and inclusive, incorporating a wider scope of disciplines to develop a better-rounded, knowledgeable and active citizenry.

(3) Civic education content is an important focus; but to reinforce content the delivery of curriculum content and the addition of outside projects are also necessary for engaging students and developing their interest and skills.

(4) Civic education is not only about participating in the elections, it needs to be reinforced and passed on to the next generation as a means for developing participation, understanding and tolerance throughout societies.

**Conclusion**

Through recent work undertaken by researchers examining the changes that underline the current political malaise, continual assessment of where we are with regard to political attitudes and behaviour provides us with the knowledge needed for improving civic education and strengthening democracy. Many have concluded that one of the main purposes of civic education is to develop students into knowledgeable, active citizens who are able to meet the challenges and cope with changes to their civic and political lives. Civic education in the US has been developed ‘to teach citizens the timeless truth that their rights are at risk if their government is either too weak or too strong’.31 Further, it is seen as the building blocks for engagement in political and civic life—the understanding that with rights come obligations as well. Civic education has also been emphasised as a means not only to increase political participation and understanding but to also increase political tolerance. It has been found that ‘civic education which includes a systematic examination of the role of dissent in a democratic society, a better understanding of diversity and the more active engagement of students in their own learning’32 fosters more awareness and tolerance within society.
Current practices in the United States suggest that the development of a civic-minded citizenry which actively participates in politics begins with a critical examination of civic education as a part of an overall educational strategy. For many educators in the United States, this seems naturally to begin with development of a curriculum that enhances understanding of the political system from an early age. However, the mere dissemination of information is only a start; what is needed is further attention, with activities both in and out of classroom that engage students, thereby providing them a fuller understanding of their place in the entire process. What the current US strategy towards civic education seems to be promoting is the development of well-informed, critical, experienced individuals who are able and willing to take their place within the governing system of the country—at the national, state and local levels. These lessons illustrate some of the possible methods and strategies that may be of use to the UK in its current debate on civic education. Not all US experience will necessarily be transferable to the UK but it should provide ideas.

4 M. Janowitz, op. cit., p. 55.
7 M. Janowitz, op. cit., p. 89.
11 D. Fott, ibid, pp. 43–4.
14 C. Fischer, *Just how is it that Americans are Individualistic?*, paper for the American Sociological Association, 2000.
18 M.J. Turner, op. cit., p. 56.
21 Centre for Civic Education at http://www civ ed org/programs html.
23 The State of Hawai‘i’s working group for developing state standards for social studies in public schools was made up of educators from different disciplines of the social sciences and from different civic groups who had an interest in developing civic education. there was input from teachers.
24 State of Hawai‘i’s, op. cit.
25 Centre for Civic Education, *We the People ... The Citizen and the Constitution*, http://www.civiced.org/programs.html.
26 Other details about the Close Up Foundation and its programmes can be found on their website: http://www.closeup.org.
29 For further details about AmeriCorps, see http://www.americorps.org and http://www.nationalservice.org.
30 Further details about City Year, can be found at http://www.cityyear.org.