

The Challenges Facing Civic Education in the 21st Century

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Abstract: This essay explores the value and state of civics education in the United States and identifies five challenges facing those seeking to improve its quality and accessibility: 1) ensuring that the quality of civics education is high is not a state or federal priority; 2) social studies textbooks do not facilitate the development of needed civic skills; 3) upper-income students are better served by our schools than are lower-income individuals; 4) cutbacks in funds available to schools make implementing changes in civics education difficult; and 5) reform efforts are complicated by the fact that civics education has become a pawn in a polarized debate among partisans.

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Because, as John Dewey contended, “[d]emocracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife,”¹ the quality of civic education has been a concern of those interested in the health of our system of government and the well-being of the citizenry. For much of the nation’s history, our leaders have viewed civics education as a means of realizing the country’s democratic ideals. In the past decade, low levels of youth voting and non-proficient student performance on a widely respected civics assessment test have elicited efforts to increase the amount and quality of time spent teaching civic education and have ignited a movement to create common standards in the social studies. Complicating these efforts is ideological disagreement about the content that should be taught and the values that ought to be inculcated. Validating the belief in the worth of civics education and underscoring the importance of reform efforts, data reveal that schooling in civics and other, related cocurricular activities are associated with increased knowledge of the U.S. system of government and heightened participation in democratic activities such as voting.

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Reformers seeking to increase the quality and accessibility of civic education in schools confront five challenges. First, neither the federal government nor the states have made high-quality civics education a priority, a conclusion justified by evidence showing that the systematic study of civics in high school is not universal; that fewer high school civics courses are offered now than were offered in the past; that the time devoted to teaching the subject in lower grades has been reduced; and that most states do not require meaningful civics assessment. Second, social studies textbooks may not adequately convey the knowledge or facilitate development of the skills required of an informed, engaged citizenry. Third, consequential differences in access and outcomes between upper- and lower-class students persist. Fourth, cutbacks in funding for schools make implementation of changes in any area of the curriculum difficult. Fifth, the polarized political climate increases the likelihood that curricular changes will be cast as advancing a partisan agenda.

Throughout much of its history, the United States has “relied upon government schools as a principal purveyor of deeply cherished democratic values.”² So interconnected are education and citizenship that some historians contend that “the most basic purpose of America’s schools is to teach children the moral and intellectual responsibilities of living and working in a democracy.”³ Consistent with this view, Americans “have expected schools to prepare future citizens, nurturing in children loyalty and common values and forging from them a strong national character.”⁴ Among the implications of these arguments is the notion that the classroom is both the training ground for democracy and the incubator of its leaders.

Scholars of U.S. history argue that “it was first religion and next education that engaged the attention of the early settlers.”⁵ Whereas the Puritans justified the teaching of reading primarily as a means of accessing Scripture, Benjamin Franklin envisioned schooling as a means of “laying such a foundation of knowledge and ability as, properly improved, may qualify [individuals] to pass through and execute the several offices of civil life, with advantage and reputation to themselves and country.”⁶

Unsurprisingly, then, those governing under the Articles of Confederation signaled education’s centrality to national well-being as early as the Land Ordinance of 1785, which “set aside the sixteenth section of government land in each township for school support.” Two years later, Article Three of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 proclaimed, “Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”⁷

Recognizing the importance of education in developing the capacities of citizenship, early U.S. presidents championed government-supported schooling for at least some citizens. As a result, the Military Academy at West Point was established in 1802. In the years that followed, the Founders continued to associate an educated populace with a secure union. Motivating George Washington’s argument for a national university, for example, was his belief that

the assimilation of the principles, opinions, and manners of our country-men by the common education of a portion of our youth from every quarter well deserves attention. The more homogenous our citizens can be made in these particulars the greater will be our prospect of permanent union; and a primary object of such a

national institution should be the education of our youth in the science of government.

“In a republic,” the father of the nation asked, “what species of knowledge can be equally important and what duty more pressing on its legislature than to patronize a plan for communicating it to those who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country?”⁸

In a like vein, Thomas Jefferson included public education, along with roads, rivers, and canals, in a list of “objects of public improvement as it may be thought proper to add to the constitutional enumeration of Federal powers.”⁹ Drawing a similar connection between education and the productive exercise of citizenship, President James Madison argued in his second annual message:

I . . . invite your attention to the advantages of superadding [*sic*] to the means of education provided by the several States a seminary of learning instituted by the National Legislature within the limits of their exclusive jurisdiction. . . . Such an institution, though local in its legal character, would be universal in its beneficial effects. By enlightening the opinions, by expanding the patriotism, and by assimilating the principles, the sentiments, and the manners of those who might resort to this temple of science, to be redistributed in due time through every part of the community, sources of jealousy and prejudice would be diminished, the features of national character would be multiplied, and greater extent given to social harmony. But, above all, a well-constituted seminary in the center of the nation is recommended by the consideration that the additional instruction emanating from it would contribute not less to strengthen the foundations than to adorn the structure of our free and happy system of government.¹⁰

These presidential encomia to the indispensable role of education in a democracy

prefigure the enactment of such landmark legislation as the 1862 Morrill Act, which gave each state federal land to establish land grant colleges, and the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which gave public schools federal assistance and oversight.

The importance of schooling was magnified by the young country’s impulse to turn away from primogeniture and entail. “The English laws concerning the transmission of property were abolished in almost all the States at the time of the Revolution,” noted Alexis de Tocqueville. “The law of entail was so modified as not materially to interrupt the free circulation of property. . . . [T]he families of the great landed proprietors are almost all commingled with the general mass. . . . The last trace of hereditary ranks and distinctions is destroyed.”¹¹

Unsurprisingly, the educational system that ultimately developed in the United States bore the imprint of the country’s founding philosophy. If taken seriously, principles such as freedom of speech and of assembly and consent of the governed should be construed as inviting education of the many. The need for public schools was also driven by the extension of voting rights, first beyond the propertied class and, eventually, to African Americans and women. “Education must be universal,” argued Horace Mann. “It is well, when the wise and the learned discover new truths; but how much better to diffuse the truth already discovered, amongst the multitude. . . . With us, the qualification of voters is as important as the qualification of governors, and even comes first, in the natural order.”¹² And as the country faced the challenge of absorbing waves of immigrants during the turbulent Gilded Age and Progressive Era, educators came to see public schools “as helping different groups assimilate into American culture and society.”¹³ “For many generations of

Kathleen
Hall
Jamieson

immigrants,” write historian of education Diane Ravitch and public policy expert Joseph Viteritti, “the common school was the primary teacher of patriotism and civic values.”¹⁴

Unlike its European counterpart, the U.S. educational system “reflected the ideal of equality,” an aspiration expressed in the notion of “educational opportunity for all regardless of wealth and ability.”¹⁵ Still, the country was more than a half-century old before “real efforts to achieve universal opportunities for education” were undertaken. And “[e]ven after the 1840s . . . most boys could not expect to attend school for more than a few years, and girls could hardly hope to attend at all.”¹⁶ The extent to which the country failed to realize its ideals was evident in the fact that, when the Fourteenth Amendment was adopted in 1868, common tax-supported schooling had not yet taken hold in the South, and the education of those identified as “Negroes” was still forbidden by law in some states.¹⁷

Those who feared an empowered rabble challenged the notion that universal education would benefit both the individual and the country. On the other side of the argument, Jeffersonians echoed the sentiments of the author of the Declaration of Independence, who noted that “[i]f a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”¹⁸ Whereas Jefferson envisioned an “aristocracy of worth and genius,”¹⁹ the worriers forecast that the combination of widespread schooling and its corollary, expanded suffrage, would vest elected power in those least – rather than best – suited to govern.

In the contest over these competing worldviews, Jefferson’s prevailed. “In New England,” Tocqueville noted in 1838, “every citizen receives the elementary notions of human knowledge; he is taught, moreover, the doctrines and the

evidences of his religion, the history of his country, and the leading features of its Constitution.”²⁰ The state of affairs we assume today had its roots in arguments made by such champions of education as Pennsylvania’s Thaddeus Stevens, who told that state’s House of Representatives:

If then, education be of admitted importance to the people under all forms of governments; and of unquestioned necessity when they govern themselves, it follows, of course, that its cultivation and diffusion is a matter of public concern; and a duty which every government owes to its people.²¹

Because views such as Jefferson’s and Stevens’s won the day, “[o]ver 49 million students” headed “to approximately 99,000 public elementary and secondary schools for the fall 2011 term” at an estimated one-year cost of \$525 billion.²²

On the role of schooling in inculcating the values of citizenship, contemporary presidents share the Founders’ views. Thus, for example, President Ronald Reagan noted, “Since the founding of this Nation, education and democracy have gone hand in hand.”²³ Similarly, President George W. Bush observed, “A love of democratic principles must be taught.”²⁴ And President Bill Clinton challenged “all our schools to teach character education, to teach good values and good citizenship.”²⁵

In the past decade, a number of major initiatives have concentrated on enhancing educational quality at the elementary and secondary levels. Signed into law in January 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) focused on increased student proficiency in language arts and mathematics. In 2007, NCLB added student proficiency in science to its goals. In light of the long-lived perception that education should increase civic knowledge and enhance the capacities of citizenship, it is

surprising that Title I of NCLB did not list civic education as a priority.

That omission is seen by some as a sign that other priorities have displaced civic education on the public agenda. Reformers have been motivated by concerns that civic education is not as central to public schooling as it once was. They worry that the standards movement may have inadvertently made the delivery of high-quality civic education more difficult. The largest group responding to both of these concerns is the Civic Mission of the Schools (CMS) Coalition.²⁶

In response to low levels of voting and civics knowledge among the young, in 2003 Carnegie Corporation of New York released *The Civic Mission of Schools* report²⁷ and created the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, “a coalition of 40 organizations committed to improving the quality and quantity of civic learning in American schools.” Both the 2003 report and its 2011 follow-up, *Guardian of Democracy: Civic Mission of Schools*,²⁸ proposed agendas for action. Among the Campaign’s goals, along with college and career preparation, is reestablishing civic learning as one of the three principal purposes of American education. The CMS Coalition now includes more than sixty participating organizations and individuals representing groups concerned with civic learning, general education, civic engagement, policy-making, civil rights, and business.

The 2003 *Civic Mission of Schools* report argued that schools should not only “help young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives” but also work to ensure that students:

- *Are informed and thoughtful.* They have a grasp and an appreciation of history and the fundamental processes of

American democracy; an understanding and awareness of public and community issues; an ability to obtain information when needed; a capacity to think critically; and a willingness to enter into dialogue with others about different points of view and to understand diverse perspectives. They are tolerant of ambiguity and resist simplistic answers to complex questions.

Kathleen
Hall
Jamieson

- *Participate in their communities.* They belong to and contribute to groups in civil society that offer venues for Americans to participate in public service, work together to overcome problems, and pursue an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs.
- *Act politically.* They have the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes – for instance, by organizing people to address social issues, solving problems in groups, speaking in public, petitioning and protesting to influence public policy, and voting.
- *Have moral and civic virtues.* They are concerned for the rights and welfare of others, and are socially responsible, willing to listen to alternative perspectives, and confident in their capacity to make a difference.²⁹

Since its inception in 2003, CMS has:

- Developed state-level campaign coalitions in each state.
- Developed an online database of more than two hundred civic-learning practice examples. The Civic Learning On-Line database contains best-practice examples of each of the six promising civic-learning practices of the *Civic Mission of Schools* report.
- Helped the CMS state affiliates pass nearly seventy pieces of supportive state

- legislation in thirty-five states during the 2004 to 2010 legislative sessions.
- Conducted a study of schools and school districts around the nation that are meeting their civic mission through employment of the six promising practices of the *Civic Mission of Schools* report.
 - Participated in efforts to create common standards for social studies education.

Elements of this reform agenda are controversial. As education scholars Wayne Ross and Perry Marker argue, “[R]eform efforts have brought to the fore the primary tensions in the field of social studies: 1) the relative emphasis on the cultural heritage of the dominant society versus the development of critical thought; and 2) conflicting conceptions of citizenship, that is, citizenship for social reproduction or social reconstruction.”³⁰ It is not difficult to imagine political progressives favoring the development of “critical thought” and “social reconstruction” and conservatives championing the cultural heritage of the dominant society and citizenship for social reproduction. Political scientist Amy Gutmann provides a fair summary of the key points of disagreement when she writes:

The first issue is whether civic education that is publicly mandated must be minimal so that parental choice can be maximal. The second issue concerns the way in which publicly subsidized schools should respond to the increasingly multicultural character of societies. The third issue is whether democratic education should try to cultivate cosmopolitan or patriotic sentiments among students.³¹

The heat generated by the controversy over content is evident in the Thomas B. Fordham Institute’s 2003 publication *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?*³² In the foreword to that work, Fordham Founda-

tion President Chester E. Finn, Jr., laid the failures of social studies at the feet of the social studies establishment:

Evidence also accumulated that, in the field of social studies itself, the lunatics had taken over the asylum. Its leaders were people who had plenty of grand degrees and impressive titles but who possessed no respect for Western civilization; who were inclined to view America’s evolution as a problem for humanity rather than mankind’s last, best hope; who pooh-poohed history’s chronological and factual skeleton as somehow “privileging” elites and white males over the poor and oppressed; who saw the study of geography in terms of despoiling the rain forest rather than locating London or the Mississippi River on a map; who interpreted “civics” as consisting largely of political activism and “service learning” rather than understanding how laws are made and why it is important to live in a society governed by laws.³³

Evidence from a 2010 survey of social studies teachers calls Finn’s assessment into question. In a national random sample of 866 public high school teachers and an oversample of 245 Catholic and private high school instructors, 83 percent viewed the United States “as a unique country that stands for something special in the world”; 82 percent thought pupils should be taught to “respect and appreciate their country but know its shortcomings”; and only 1 percent wanted students to learn “that the U.S. is a fundamentally flawed country.”³⁴

The ideological tensions at play here were also on display in the early 1990s, when those attempting to develop national guidelines for the teaching of American history faced off against critics, including National Endowment for the Humanities Chair Lynne Cheney, over the balance between focusing on past injustices and on narratives centered on traditional historical figures.

In the broad sweep of things, efforts to expand the focus of textbooks have succeeded. As a result of challenges to traditional accounts that excluded the struggles of blacks and women, for example, the content of social studies texts has changed remarkably over the past half-century. In the 1940s, for example, Dred Scott was the only black individual featured more than once; by the 1960s, and even more so by the 1980s, texts contained a notable amount of multicultural and feminist content.³⁵ Increasingly, textbook publishers have incorporated the aspiration that “students can learn about multiple viewpoints and competing narratives.”³⁶

Still, clashes among competing views of social studies are so intense that education scholar Ronald Evans has labeled them the “social studies wars.”³⁷

Even though social studies was ignored in NCLB, states have standardized their civics curricula “as part of the sweeping trend toward greater teacher accountability and systemized decision making.”³⁸ Since 1989, when a national education summit convened by President George H.W. Bush made the case for common standards, every state has developed standards of learning in curricular areas including social studies, which is defined as the core academic area consisting of civics, history, economics, and geography. Influencing these deliberations were the two voluntary sets of social studies standards developed by the National Council for the Social Studies³⁹ and the Center for Civic Education.⁴⁰

However, as the states have revised their standards over the years, benchmarks have proliferated to the point that even the most skilled teacher would have difficulty meeting them within the available class time. In short, rather than improving the state of civic education, the standards movement may in some ways have under-

cut it. As the *Guardian of Democracy* report notes, “In social studies standards revisions . . . most states have added to the amount of material to be covered, rather than developing fewer and clearer standards that encourage an understanding of the vital importance of citizen engagement in our democracy.”⁴¹

Recognizing the problem, in June 2010 the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers released a set of state-led education standards designed to reduce the number and increase the quality of the standards set in math and science. Since then, forty-seven states have agreed to implement the Common Core State Standards in those two subjects. Although acceptance by the states was voluntary, President Barack Obama’s Department of Education accelerated adoption by making it a criterion for entry into the federal Race to the Top education grant competition.

Push back against the standards took two very different forms. Some argued that the math standards were problematic because they were lower than those in place in high-achieving states such as Massachusetts.⁴² Others contended that national standards would stifle innovation in the states and constituted an unconstitutional expansion of federal authority.⁴³

Motivated in part by the Albert Shanker Institute’s influential 2003 study *Educating Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core*,⁴⁴ reformers are now focused on clarifying the standards in social studies. The Shanker study found that standards in many states consisted simply of a laundry list of people, events, and dates to be memorized and therefore failed to develop civic competence and critical thinking.

In early 2010, the CMS coalition and the National Council for the Social Studies agreed to develop common state standards in the social studies designed to

Kathleen
Hall
Jamieson

prepare students for informed and engaged citizenship, and so they established a task force to pursue that goal. Working with the states, the task force is charged with:

- 1) Drafting, and agreeing on, the actual standards;
- 2) Identifying assessment instruments for use with the standards; and
- 3) Developing resources to help teachers use the standards and assessments effectively.

To date, twenty-one states have joined the effort to develop common state standards.

Decades of scholarship suggest that civics classes and certain cocurricular activities help develop the civic skills, transmit the knowledge, and inculcate the civic dispositions valorized by *The Civic Mission of Schools*. Specifically, schooling in civics increases knowledge of our system of government and its history and laws; builds students' confidence in their ability to exercise the prerogatives of citizenship; and increases participation in the community and in governments, including voting. In the presence of controls for other factors that could affect civics knowledge, having taken classes in that subject predicts a command of central concepts,⁴⁵ an increase reflected in improved performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test.⁴⁶ Civics education also heightens students' confidence in their ability to perform such participatory functions as writing a letter to Congress.⁴⁷

By increasing the representativeness and perceived legitimacy of our system of government as well as the accountability of its leaders, widespread citizen voting protects democratic governance as surely as lackluster civic participation jeopardizes it. With balloting in U.S. presidential contests hovering around 50 percent of

those eligible, U.S. voter participation falls far from the democratic ideal. Overall, the percentage that chooses to cast a ballot in U.S. elections compares unfavorably to that of many other developed countries. In general, for example, turnout in U.S. elections is lower than in comparable ones in much of Europe and Canada. Although balloting among eighteen to twenty-nine year olds increased in 2008, it remained proportionately below that of other age groups.

These data signal the importance of the link between civics education and an inclination to act on the notion that voting is a citizen's right and duty. In particular, completing a year's worth of coursework in civics or American government heightens one's propensity to vote by 3 to 6 percent.⁴⁸ Involvement in some forms of extracurricular activities and voluntary associations predicts increased balloting as well.⁴⁹ Programs that engage students in gathering and using information in political contexts both increase basic knowledge about our governmental system and stimulate voting behavior.⁵⁰ So, too, do course exercises that involve newspaper reading.⁵¹ Importantly, evidence drawn from the National Education Longitudinal Study correlates participation in student government with increased civic and political participation.⁵² These findings are consistent with those drawn from the National Education Longitudinal Study and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health that revealed that high school students active in "youth voluntary associations" are more politically engaged in adulthood.⁵³

Specific curricula have also yielded robust effects. A randomized field experiment concluded that involvement "in Student Voices significantly boosted students' confidence in their ability to make informed political decisions, their knowledge about how to register to vote, and

their belief that their vote matters.”⁵⁴ Moreover, in a randomized controlled experiment, “participation in Facing History and Ourselves programs result[ed] in: greater engagement in learning; increased skills for understanding and analyzing history; greater empathy and ethical awareness; increased civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions; an improved ability to recognize racism, anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry in themselves and in others; and reduced racist attitudes and self-reported fighting.”⁵⁵ Some civics programs, such as Kids Voting USA, have been shown to create a trickle-up effect, not only increasing the knowledge level and civic dispositions of the young but enhancing their parents’ political knowledge as well.⁵⁶ Evidence also suggests that inclusion of civics education in a curriculum may correlate with a decreased dropout rate.⁵⁷

In a similar vein, student involvement in service learning has produced civic benefits. As the Corporation for National and Community Service notes, “[T]he state of youth volunteering is robust – with 55% of youth participating in volunteer activities each year – and . . . the level of their volunteer commitment is directly related to the nature of the social institutions with which they interact.”⁵⁸ The *Guardian of Democracy* report adds, “Service learning is far more than community service alone; high-quality service learning experiences incorporate intentional opportunities for students to analyze and solve community problems through the application of knowledge and skills.”⁵⁹ When well executed, service learning can have positive effects on civic knowledge and engagement.⁶⁰

Despite the fact that civic education produces an array of positive outcomes, the citizenry’s current level of civic knowledge is far from ideal, and the role of civic education in schools is far from secure.

Over the last half of the twentieth century, political scientists Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter observe, levels of political knowledge changed little, a conclusion made more remarkable by the fact that education levels in the citizenry increased markedly over that period.⁶¹ In practice, this finding means that in the mid-1990s, high school graduates’ knowledge was about the same as that of high school dropouts in the late 1940s; college graduates of the mid-1990s were more or less comparable to high school graduates at the end of World War II.⁶²

Leaders of both political parties have joined prominent scholars in lamenting the fact that, according to the rigorous standards set by the NAEP, a majority of our elementary and secondary students are not proficient in civics. As President Obama has noted, “The loss of quality civic education from so many of our classrooms has left too many young Americans without the most basic knowledge of who our forefathers are, or the significance of the founding documents.” They were unaware of “the risks and sacrifices made by previous generations, to ensure that this country survived war and depression; through the great struggles for civil, and social, and worker’s rights. It is up to us, then, to teach them.”⁶³

Consistent with this view, the 2006 NAEP concluded that 27 percent of twelfth graders were at a proficient level and 66 percent at or above the basic level. Although the 2010 NAEP⁶⁴ found that the average score for fourth graders was higher than it had been in either 1998 or 2006, there was no year-over-year improvement in grades eight or twelve. And, overall, the performance levels of all three grades were unimpressive. “Twenty-seven percent of fourth-graders, 22 percent of eighth-graders, and 24 percent of twelfth-graders performed at or above the Proficient level in civics in 2010.”⁶⁵

Kathleen
Hall
Jamieson

Not all of the news about students' performance in civics is negative. By international standards, U.S. students hold their own. In contrast to their subpar command of math and science relative to other countries, on civic knowledge and skills U.S. students fair reasonably well. When compared to students in other industrialized nations in an international study of twenty-eight democracies, American fourteen year olds performed at a higher level than their counterparts in other democracies.⁶⁶ U.S. students also outperformed their international peers at the task of interpreting media content such as political cartoons. These data suggest that in satisfying its obligation to impart civics knowledge and critical thinking skills, the overall U.S. educational system may be performing somewhat better than the systems in place in other democracies.

The NAEP conclusion that many students are not proficient in civics is consistent with the finding that the adult population is ignorant of some basic concepts underlying our system of government. For example, in the past decade, surveys conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center have found that:

- Only one-third of Americans could name all three branches of government; one-third could not name any.
- Just over a third thought that the Founding Fathers intended for each branch to hold a lot of power but for the president to have the final say.
- Just under half of Americans (47 percent) knew that a 5-4 decision by the Supreme Court carries the same legal weight as a 9-0 ruling.
- Almost a third mistakenly believed that a U.S. Supreme Court ruling could be appealed.

- Roughly one in four (23 percent) believed that when the Supreme Court divides 5-4, the decision is referred to Congress for resolution; 16 percent thought it needed to be sent back to the lower courts.⁶⁷

One can debate the importance of knowing the name of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court or the details of Paul Revere's ride, but there is little doubt that understanding such foundational concepts as checks and balances and the importance of an independent judiciary affects one's other attitudes. Those bewildered by such basics as the branches of government and the concept of judicial review are less likely to express trust in the courts and, as trust declines, more likely to say that courts are too powerful, that judges should be impeached or court jurisdiction stripped when unpopular rulings are issued, and that under some circumstances, it might simply be best to abolish the Supreme Court.

Not only does civics knowledge predict normatively desirable beliefs about the value of our existing structures of government,⁶⁸ but heightened knowledge is tied to increased politically relevant activity such as discussing politics and engaging in the community.⁶⁹ Overall, "[i]nformed citizens are demonstrably better citizens ... more likely to participate in politics, more likely to have meaningful, stable attitudes on issues, better able to link their interests with their attitudes, more likely to choose candidates who are consistent with their own attitudes, and more likely to support democratic norms, such as extending basic civil liberties to members of unpopular groups."⁷⁰

As mentioned earlier, five hurdles confront those working to improve the quality and accessibility of civic education in the schools: 1) neither the federal government

nor the states have made high-quality civics education a priority; 2) social studies textbooks may not adequately convey the knowledge or facilitate the development of the skills required of an informed, engaged citizenry; 3) consequential differences in access and outcomes between upper- and lower-class students persist; 4) cutbacks in funding for schools make implementation of changes in any area of the curriculum difficult; and 5) the polarized political climate increases the likelihood that curricular changes will be cast as advancing a partisan agenda.

There is a widespread belief among social studies educators that “civic knowledge and inquiry” are “not validated” within the accountability system established by NCLB.⁷¹ Other evidence underscores the conclusion that neither the federal government nor the states have made high-quality civics education a priority. Specifically, the systematic study of civics in high school is not universal; fewer high school civics courses are now offered than in the past; the time devoted to teaching the subject in lower grades has been reduced; and most states do not require meaningful civics assessment. The 2010 NAEP found that “88% of fourth-graders had teachers who reported emphasizing politics and government to a small extent or more in social studies classes.”⁷² Just over three-quarters of students said that they had learned about Congress in 2010. And slightly fewer than seven in ten twelfth graders reported that they had studied the U.S. Constitution in that year.⁷³

Significantly, those who have taken a high school civics class are more likely to have a command of key constitutional concepts.⁷⁴ However, proportionately fewer students are now exposed to multiple civic education courses than in the past. Since the generation now in power left high school, the number of civics and government courses completed by stu-

dents has declined. As the *Guardian of Democracy* report concludes:

Kathleen
Hall
Jamieson

Until the 1960s, three courses in civics and government were common in American high schools, and two of them (“civics” and “problems of democracy”) explored the role of citizens and encouraged students to discuss current issues. Today those courses are very rare. What remains is a course on “American government” that usually spends little time on how people can – and why they should – participate as citizens.⁷⁵

Furthermore, class time devoted to civic education appears to have declined in the lower grades. Public policy scholar Martin West’s comparison of Department of Education Schools and Staffing Surveys from 1987–1988 to those from the years shortly after NCLB was implemented (2002–2004) showed a reduction in time spent on social studies instruction in elementary schools.⁷⁶ This finding has been amply corroborated.⁷⁷ A re-analysis by CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) not only confirmed West’s results but went on to show that the reduction began even before NCLB was passed and continued after.⁷⁸ On a more encouraging note, studies of instructional time spent and credits earned in middle schools and high schools show either the same or increased attention to social studies compared to past decades.⁷⁹

However, in a climate in which we signal what matters by testing it, comparatively few states require meaningful civics assessment. As of 2011, the *Guardian of Democracy* report noted that “only sixteen states require meaningful assessment in the social studies – a number that has declined in the past five years as states have eliminated civics assessments.”⁸⁰

In addition, social studies textbooks may not adequately convey the knowledge or facilitate development of the skills

required of an informed, engaged citizenry. The public as well as parents, teachers, and administrators agree about the sorts of knowledge that one should gain in public schools. A 2003 Annenberg Public Policy Center survey of these groups found that more than half agreed that it is absolutely essential or very important that fourth graders are able to:

- Understand that the rules of the American government are established in a document called the Constitution;
- Give an example of a right protected by the Constitution;
- Understand the meaning of American holidays such as the Fourth of July and Presidents' Day; and
- Identify important figures in American history such as George Washington.

More than six in ten respondents concurred that eighth graders should be able to:

- Understand the idea of separation of powers in American government;
- Identify all fifty states on a map of the United States;
- Understand the effects of European settlement of the United States on Native Americans; and
- Understand the role of slavery in the history of the United States.

The same proportions held that twelfth graders should:

- Understand how immigration has shaped America at different points in history;
- Be able to compare and contrast the U.S. economic system with those of other countries; and
- Know what differentiates a "liberal" from a "conservative" and understand current American political debates.⁸¹

Nonetheless, a survey of eighteen U.S. government and civics textbooks concluded in 1987 that their tendency to avoid controversial topics "made them lifeless descriptions of the origins, structures, and relationships of government,"⁸² a finding consistent with the one political scientists Richard Niemi and Jane Junn reached a decade later. "When we say that students have a 'textbook' knowledge of how government operates," they noted,

what we mean is that they have a naïve view of it that glosses over the fact that democratic politics is all about disagreement and the attempt to settle quarrels peacefully, satisfactorily, and in an orderly manner. We believe that it is a disservice to students to let them think that government ideally operates without conflict, as if it were possible to enact and administer laws that benefit everyone and harm no one.⁸³

In addition to arguing that "controversial issues should be discussed fairly and explicitly," the reviewers in that 1987 study recommended that texts change their focus "from imparting information to preparing students to become concerned citizens." Students need to learn the value of public participation by becoming involved, they concluded.⁸⁴ Nearly two decades later, political theorist Stephen Macedo and colleagues agreed that schools too often "teach *about* citizenship and government without teaching students the skills that are necessary to become active citizens themselves."⁸⁵ Importantly, human development scholars Judy Torney-Purta and Britt Wilkenfeld's 2009 analysis of data from the IEA Civic Education Study found that "[s]tudents who experience interactive discussion-based civic education (either by itself or in combination with lecture-based civic education) score the highest on the '21st Century Competencies,' including working with others (especially in diverse

groups) and knowledge of economic and political processes.”⁸⁶

Consequential differences in access and outcomes between upper- and lower-class students persist. More worrisome than low levels of aggregate NAEP scores are indications that students from families of lower socioeconomic status (SES) have fewer opportunities to engage in activities that stimulate voting and civic engagement, and they substantially underperform those from upper SES families. Those high school students who attend “higher SES schools, those who are college-bound, and white students get more of these opportunities than low-income students, those not heading to college, and students of color.”⁸⁷

The twinned side of that reality is represented in the 2010 NAEP Civics Assessment’s report of significant disparities in scores by family income and parents’ level of education. Whereas at the fourth-grade level only 10 percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch scored at the proficient level and just 40 percent were at a basic or higher level, that figure rose to 60 percent and 90 percent, respectively, for those fourth graders not eligible for the lunch program. At the twelfth-grade level, students whose parents failed to graduate from high school were significantly less likely to be proficient (8 percent proficient/33 percent at least basic) than those whose parents graduated from college (40 percent proficient/75 percent basic).⁸⁸

In practice these disparities translate into a political penalty for the already disadvantaged.⁸⁹ As political theorist William Galston notes, “[C]itizens with low levels of information cannot follow public discussion of issues, are less accepting of the give and take of democratic policy debates, make judgments on the basis of character rather than issues, and are significantly less inclined to participate

in politics at all.”⁹⁰ When a segment of the population does not comprehend the political debate and lacks the wherewithal to affect collective decision-making, it forfeits its access to political power, a result that makes the political system both less representative of the will of the whole and less democratic.⁹¹

Underlying these findings are two realities. Given that, in general, non-Anglo students live in economically disadvantaged school districts, they have access to a lower quality education overall.⁹² And children in higher income families are more likely to live in educationally enriched homes. Thus, for example, “[i]n the period from 1972 to 1973, high income families spent about \$2,700 more per year on child enrichment than did low-income families. By 2005 to 2006, this gap had nearly tripled, to \$7,500.”⁹³

As states face the need to balance their budgets in a time of higher-than-average unemployment and lower-than-expected revenues, school budgets in K-12 education are experiencing new pressures. It is unlikely that there will be increased funding for underperforming schools or that extra attention will be paid to any content not evaluated by high-stakes tests. In particular, as the Center on Budget Policy and Priorities reports, a majority of U.S. states funded their public elementary and secondary schools at a lower level in 2012 than they had in 2011.⁹⁴

All these challenges are of course compounded by the fact that the polarized political climate all but ensures that curricular changes will be cast as advancing a partisan agenda.

Although it is uncontroversial to suggest that civic education is a means of advancing the well-being of the nation and realizing its democratic ideals, in recent decades concern has been elicited by low levels of voting and inadequate

*Kathleen
Hall
Jamieson*

student performance on civics assessment tests. Reformers have responded with efforts both to increase the amount and quality of time spent teaching civic education and to create focused common standards in the social studies.⁹⁵ Under-scoring the importance of these efforts are data associating civics education writ large with increased knowledge of the U.S. system of government and increased

participation in democratic activities such as voting. However, the challenges confronting these reform efforts are substantial – ranging from reestablishing the centrality of civics education to attempting to institute changes at a time when school budgets are being cut and our political culture is increasingly polarized. As a result, any discussion of ways to inculcate civic identity will be controversial.

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Kathleen
Hall
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