

Teaching American Democracy:

Understanding Who We Are As Americans and Why

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INTRODUCTION

America has an extraordinary tale to tell. In a world of kings and queens, the founders created a revolutionary system of self-governance aimed at honoring political equality and human liberty. Legendary fights erupted over how to empower a functioning government without threatening the freedom of individuals and how to address the country's gravest failure to live up to its own professed values — chattel slavery. Learning about the American political tradition ought to be exciting for students, especially since the ideals underpinning the Declaration of Independence still fuel today's battles for social and economic justice.

Yet for as long as schools have been teaching the topic of “civics,” it has evoked yawns from young people. Worse, students perform abysmally on the subject. At a time when liberal democracy in America is under enormous stress, school boards, states, and the federal government must rethink how we pass on America's civic inheritance.

This report lays out the disappointing civics outcomes for students, outlines where civics went wrong, discusses promising practices that localities and states can replicate, and ends with recommendations for a federal role in revitalizing civics education. (A separate PPI report will address the best ways to teach an honest and hopeful account of American history.)

We have two top-line recommendations. First, educators should rename the course now known as “civics” as “American Democracy.” The new nomenclature signals that school children are not learning merely about one type of government among many, but about a thrilling advancement for liberty and equality in the history of the world. The course will explain not only how the American system works but will draw upon the historical drama of how it came into being, and why. Having said that, American Democracy will differ from American history in

important ways. It will focus on that subset of American history that explains the development of our liberal democratic system as opposed to the broader topics covered in American history such as economic, technological, and cultural developments, American foreign policy, frontier expansion, and the like. Conversely, unlike history classes, American Democracy will help students engage in the contemporary practice of self-governance through hands-on learning.

Second, all states should require three years of American Democracy, just as they typically require three years in math and reading. Helping all students understand who we are as Americans and why is of enormous importance in a country where liberal democratic norms are under steady attack — as important as literacy and numeracy.

I. THE CHALLENGE

America's founders knew that education was critical to the success of their fledgling democratic republic. Because the new system provided ultimate sovereignty to the collective views of average citizens through the franchise, they believed it was crucial to educate individuals so they would not fall prey to demagogues who would convince them to give up their liberties. Thomas Jefferson argued that general education was necessary to "enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom."¹ Jefferson noted, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."² The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 proclaimed that because knowledge was necessary for self-governance, "schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."³ Education would help nurture intelligent voters who could discern serious leaders of

high character from con men, but it would do something else as well: instill a love of liberal democracy, a respect for a free press and free religious exercise, and for the rights of political minorities.⁴

Today, a healthy American democracy needs students to graduate high school with three things:

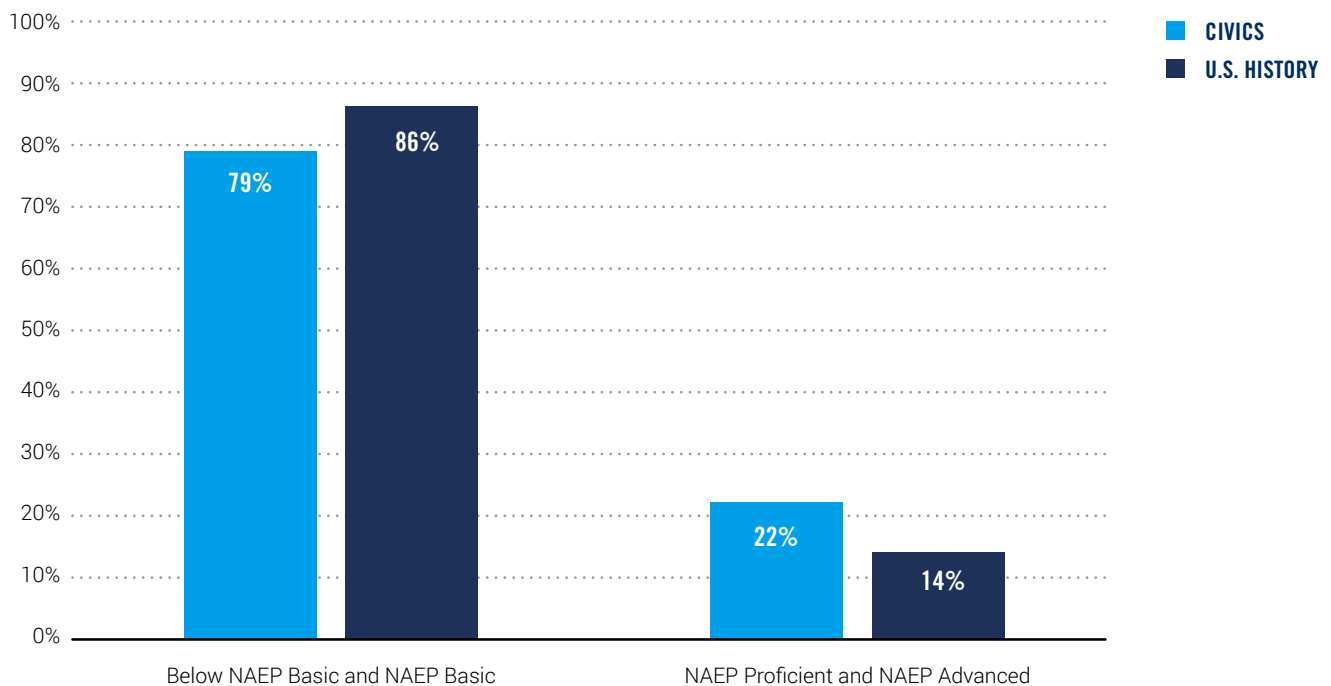
- A. Basic knowledge of how the U.S. government is structured.
- B. An abiding commitment to liberal democratic norms.
- C. An appetite to become active participants in civil society.

Today, we are missing the mark on all three fronts.

A. Knowledge

Most American students lack a firm understanding of American government, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the gold standard for measuring K-12 learning. In 2022, 79% of eighth-grade students scored less than proficient for civics,⁵ while 86% missed proficiency in U.S. history.⁶ These results were the worst of any subjects.⁷ (See Figure 1)

FIGURE 1: SCORE DISTRIBUTION FOR EIGHTH GRADERS IN THE NAEP CIVICS AND U.S. HISTORY EXAMS (2022)



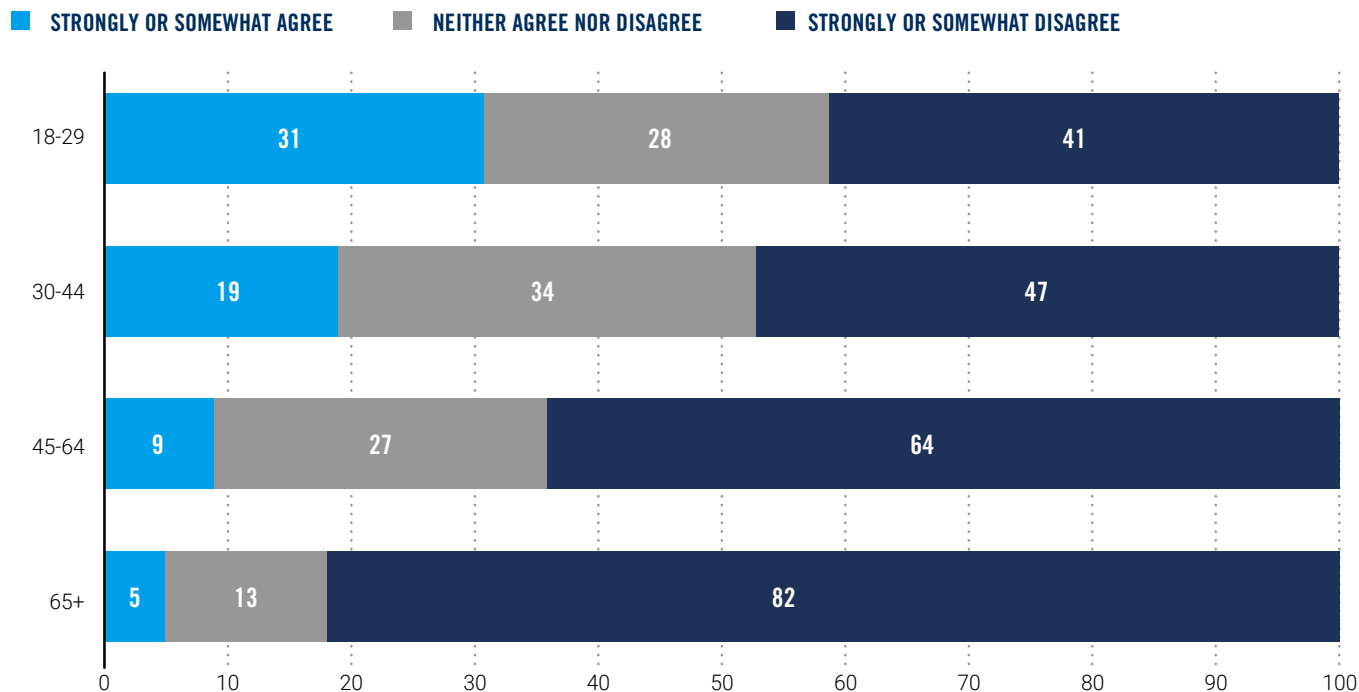
Source: *The Nation's Report Card*

B. Belief

At least as troubling, many young people don't believe in democracy. In a 2023 poll, 31% of young Americans (ages 18-29) agreed that "Democracy is no longer a viable system, and Americans should explore alternative forms of government," compared to only 5% of those over 65.⁸ (See Figure 2). Four in 10 young Americans identify the founders as villains rather than heroes (compared with 1 in 10 Baby Boomers),

suggesting challenges on the political left.⁹ And on the political right, in 2024, 58% of young men without a college degree voted for a political candidate for president, Donald Trump, who consistently flouted liberal democratic norms — resisting the peaceful transfer of power, using the Justice Department to punish his political enemies, and calling members of the press the "enemy of the people."¹⁰

FIGURE 2: DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT: DEMOCRACY IS NO LONGER A VIABLE SYSTEM, AND AMERICA SHOULD EXPLORE ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF GOVERNMENT TO ENSURE STABILITY AND PROGRESS (%) (2023)

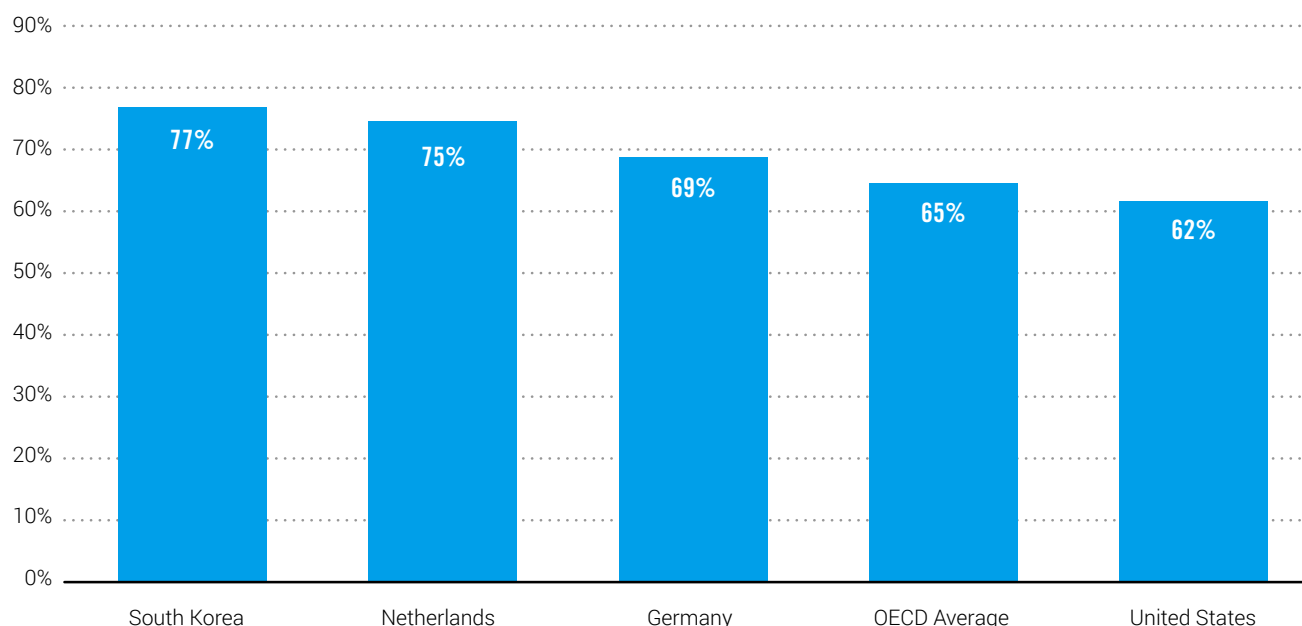


Source: YouGov

C. Civic Participation

Finally, many young Americans graduate from high school without a strong desire to participate in the civic life of the nation. Across the world, young people are less likely to vote than older adults. But the gap is larger in the U.S. compared to many other wealthy, developed countries.¹¹ Our overall voter turnout also lags the OECD average, and is substantially lower than several countries that also lack compulsory voting.¹² In 2020, for instance, 62% of eligible Americans went to the polls. In South Korea 77%

of citizens vote; in the Netherlands, 75%; and in Germany, 69%.^{13, 14} (See Figure 3). At least as worrying, America used to be a nation of joiners, but is no longer. As Will Marshall notes, the “spirit of association” and civic volunteerism that so impressed French writer Alexis de Tocqueville during his travels to Jacksonian America seem to have withered.¹⁵ Only a quarter of Americans say they have a strong sense of belonging to community; we seem, says Marshall, to be entering “a post-Tocquevillian America.”¹⁶

FIGURE 3: VOTING PERCENTAGE OF SELECT COUNTRIES WITHOUT MANDATORY VOTING (IN MOST RECENT NATIONAL ELECTIONS AS OF AUGUST 2022)

Source: Council on Foreign Relations

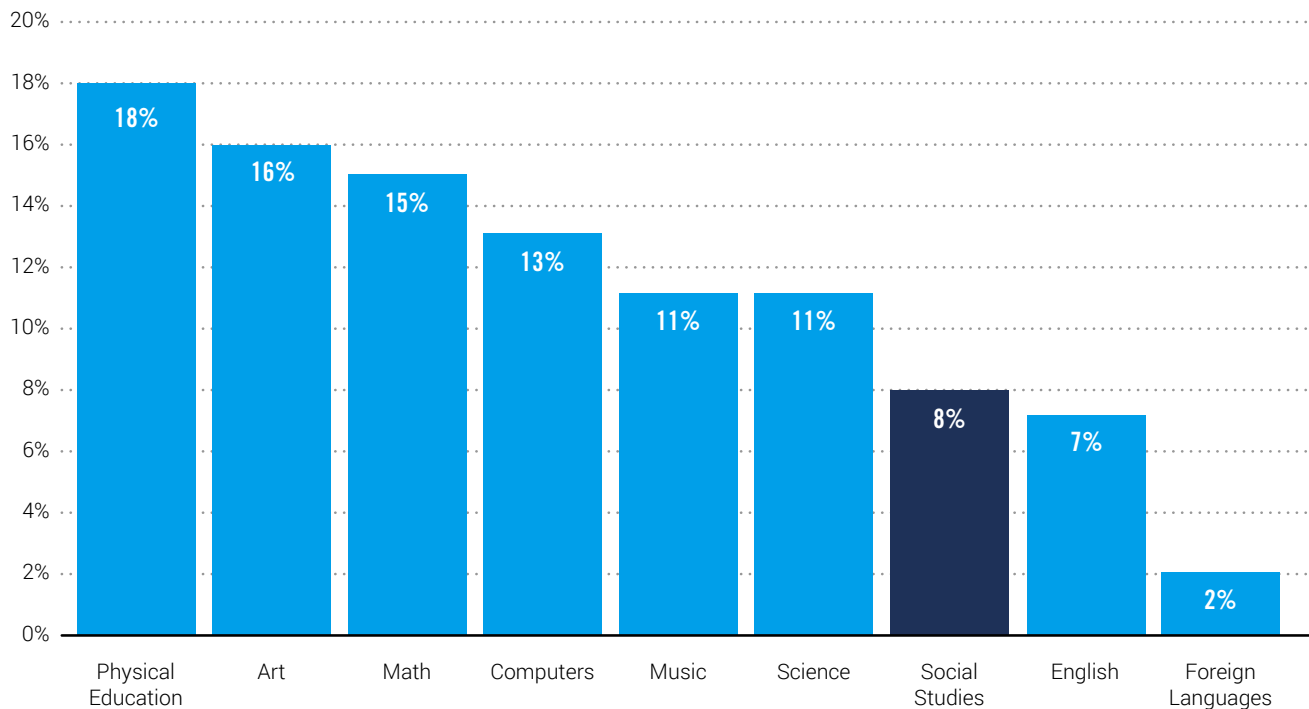
Where has civics education gone wrong? What are some promising practices that offer a better path? And how can those practices be scaled up through local, state, and federal policy?

II. WHERE CIVICS EDUCATION HAS GONE WRONG

American history pulses with drama. Yet civics courses are notoriously boring for students. Going back to 2004, just 7% of teens ages 13-17 named history/social studies their favorite subject, compared to 23% for math and 13% for English.¹⁷ In a 2012 survey, physical education (18%), art (16%), and math (15%) were each about twice as likely to be named favorite subjects as social studies (8%).¹⁸ (See Figure 4)

Several challenges have combined to make civics into a dull slog. Ideological wars deter teachers from addressing controversial topics and have led schools to scrap engaging, hands-on learning activities such as mock trials. Policymakers have also failed to properly fund civics education and to hold students and educators accountable for results. Teachers are inadequately prepared. The curriculum does not help students form a realistic understanding of what life looks like in a non-democracy. And civics-building extracurricular activities, such as the school newspaper and debate clubs, are being cut in many communities.

FIGURE 4: FAVORITE SUBJECTS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOLERS (2012)



Source: Education Week

A. Ideological Wars Over Civics Content Rob It of Its Ability to Engage Students

Political polarization helps make civics less engaging in three ways.

1. Vapid State Standards

To begin with, many states fudge contentious debates over how civics (and American history) should be taught by issuing vapid state standards. Almost 50% of states were rated by the Fordham Institute as inadequate in civics standards, U.S. history standards, or both (i.e., rated a “D” or “F”).¹⁹ (See Figure 5) To avoid controversy, too many state standards have been emptied of content, making what should be a compelling history boring.²⁰

Legend: YES (Blue), NO (Gray)

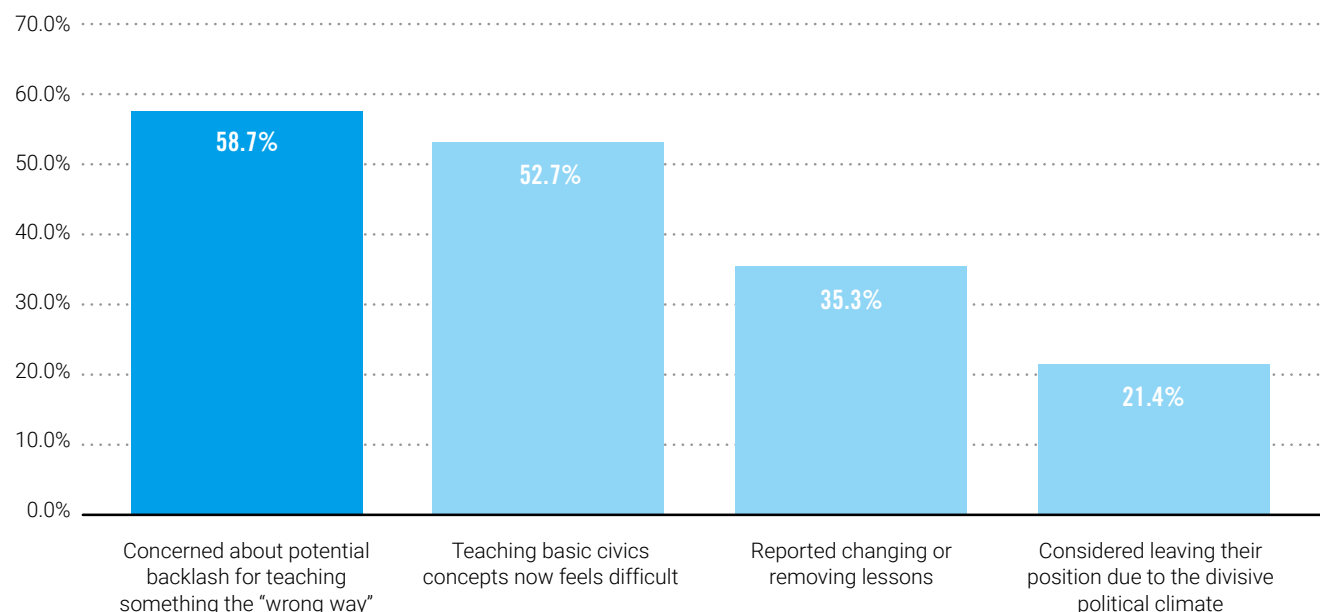
States colored YES (Blue): Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming.

States colored NO (Gray): None.

In some blue states like Illinois, officials did a good job of developing civic mindedness through service learning, according to journalist James Traub, but they also drafted “content-free standards” that lacked specificity about academic knowledge to be acquired.²¹ Some left-leaning states do so in part out of a desire to be “culturally responsive” and avoid history lessons that feature too many white men. And some liberals worry that requiring students to read too much material can induce “stress.”²²

Second, many red states, fearing ideological indoctrination, have issued restrictions on teaching divisive topics. Since 2021, 21 states have limited how teachers can discuss racism, sexism, or other issues perceived to be controversial in the classroom.²³ In a recent iCivics survey, more than half said, “teaching basic civics concepts now feels difficult,” with nearly 6 in 10 worrying about the “potential backlash for teaching something the ‘wrong way.’”²⁴ One-in-five considered “leaving their position due to the divisive political climate.” (See Figure 6.) About 20% said they’ve experienced actual backlash for lessons they’ve taught.²⁵ More than one in three said they’ve changed or removed lessons they typically teach because of the climate in their school or community.²⁶

FIGURE 6: ICIVICS TEACHER SURVEY (2026)



Source: iCivics

A RAND report looking at the 2023 State of the American Teacher Survey found that the chilling of discussion is not restricted to red states and communities that have passed restrictions. RAND found that "55 percent of teachers who were not subject to any state or local restrictions decided to limit instruction about political and social issues."²⁷ It continued: "Teachers said that they limited their instruction because they were afraid of upsetting parents and felt uncertain about whether their school or district leaders would support them if parents expressed concerns."²⁸

Likewise, the report noted: "65 percent of teachers nationally reported deciding to limit discussions about political and social issues in class."²⁹ Furthermore: "This is nearly double the share of teachers in states that have enacted policies that explicitly restrict discussion of certain topics in classrooms."³⁰

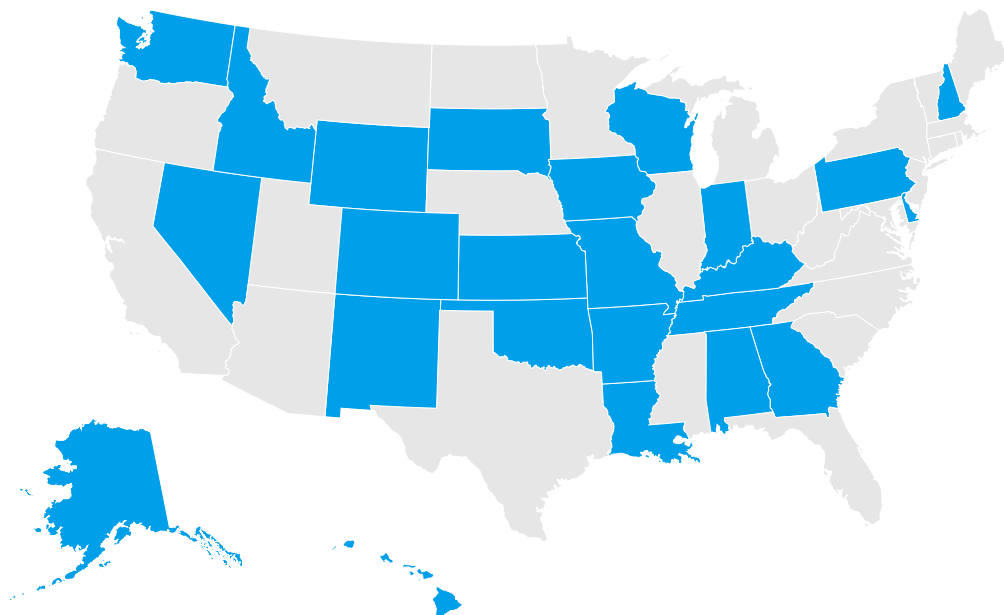
Chilling teachers from discussing highly charged

topics saps civics education of a key element of what can make it engaging to students. As researchers at Stanford University noted, "educators in the civics arena need to stop shying away from the issues that may involve political and ideological controversy."³¹ They argued: "Democracy in practice is emotionally exhilarating and often conflict-ridden. Civic education should reflect this."³²

3. Quashing Experiential Learning

Many students learn best by doing. Teaching students the various theories about why free expression and robust debate lead to better outcomes than allowing one all-powerful ruler to govern is important. But having students engage in a model Congress, where they come together to resolve issues, or contact local officials to seek better funding for a dilapidated public library, takes learning to a deeper level. Research finds that such experiential learning in civics can help young people develop civics muscles that can boost participation as adults.³³

FIGURE 7: STATES THAT DON'T INCORPORATE SIMULATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES OR PROCEDURES INTO THEIR STANDARDS AND CURRICULUM (2018)



Source: Brookings Institution

Many red states have shied away from experiential learning out of a fear that such programs could be used to indoctrinate students with left-leaning ideas. In 2018, 24 states failed to include learning by doing or simulations into their state standards, according to Brookings.³⁴ (See Figure 7)

These concerns from Republican policymakers are not entirely without merit. The truth is that some blue school districts have made poor, politically charged decisions when planning civics education activities. On May 1st, 2026, for example, the Chicago Public School system “used taxpayer funds to transport schoolchildren to participate in May Day demonstrations,” including a protest over President Trump’s policies.³⁵ These types of partisan events should never be a part of school-sponsored civics.

However, safeguards can be put in place to avoid

indoctrination rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Some states go too far in forbidding such approaches. For example, in 2021, Texas passed HB 3979 which prohibits school districts or teachers from requiring, making part of a course, or awarding course grading or credit for “political activism, lobbying, or efforts to persuade members of the legislative or executive branch to take specific actions by direct communication at the local, state or federal level, or any practicum or like activity involving social or public policy advocacy.”³⁶ Why prohibit students from engaging with policymaker over non-ideological issues, such as the physical state of a local park or library? As journalist James Traub says, “replanting a local creek or holding a model congress” does not have to be a “species of neo-Marxist social justice propaganda.” In conservative states and schools where action civics is banned, Traub notes, “students do not experience school as a

proto-democracy in which they practice the skills of active citizenship.”³⁷

B. Underfunded and Unaccountable

Sufficient funding, coupled with strong accountability measures, can make a big difference in student outcomes, yet civics education gets short shrift on both fronts. Research finds that starting early (e.g., introducing civics in elementary schools) and having repeated exposure to civics throughout schooling, such as secondary school, is associated with better outcomes.³⁸

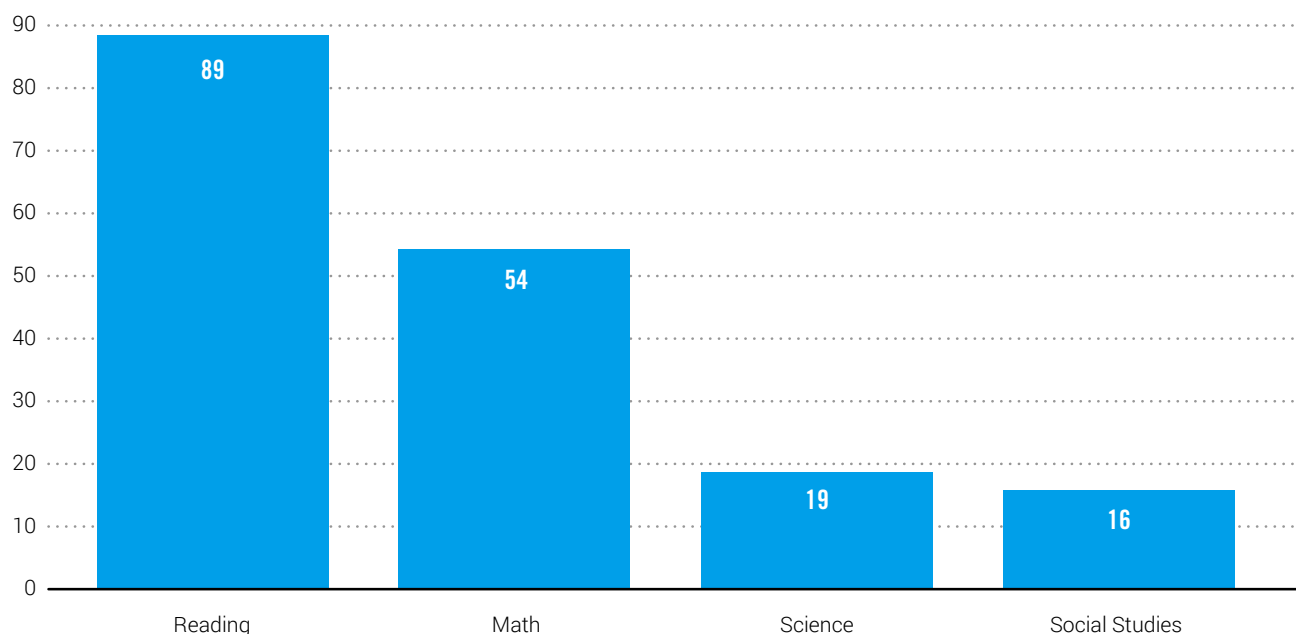
1. Funding

Nevertheless, one analysis found that the federal government spends 100 times less on civics than it does on science, technology, education, and math. The federal government, according to iCivics, invests “less than fifty cents per K-12 student, as opposed to the \$50+ per student investments in STEM subjects.”³⁹ State and local

spending accounts for the vast majority of K-12 spending, but here too, civics education receives fewer resources than many other subjects.

Less money translates into less teacher time — five times less on social studies than on English language arts. At the K-3 level, research finds self-contained classes spent “an average of 89 minutes per day on reading instruction and 54 minutes on mathematics instruction, compared to only 19 minutes on science and 16 minutes on social studies instruction”⁴⁰ (See Figure 8). Furthermore, this pattern continues in grades 4-6, “with 83 minutes per day devoted to reading, 61 minutes to mathematics, 24 minutes to science, and 21 minutes to social studies instruction.”⁴¹ Of course, we want students to be able to read well, but why do schools devote so little time to civics when the creation of good citizens was the fundamental reason public schools were created in the first place?

FIGURE 8: DAILY AVERAGE MINUTES K-3 TEACHERS SPEND ON ACADEMIC SUBJECTS (2012)



Source: Horizon Research, Inc.

2. Accountability

Funding without accountability can be wasteful, and accountability can drive the allocation of resources. That's why it's troubling that educators and students are subject to less accountability for success in civics than some other subjects.

While all 50 states test reading and math, only 21 of the 50 states use statewide exams for social studies.⁴² Of these 21, around half limit their assessments to the secondary level.⁴³ By contrast, under the Every Student Succeeds Act, math and English have mandatory statewide summative assessments "every year in third through eighth grade and once in ninth through 12th grade."⁴⁴

Likewise, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests math and reading skills every two years at grades 4 and 8, and provides national, state, and urban school district-level data.⁴⁵ That drives accountability and helps educators discern what's working and what's not. Without a statewide breakdown of NAEP scores, for example, educators wouldn't know that what's going on in Mississippi has been particularly innovative.⁴⁶ By contrast, civics has been assessed every four years and has only provided national-level data. In a positive step, the federal government recently required that in 2030, the NAEP will, for the first time, structure the civics exam so that there can be state-by-state comparisons of test scores.⁴⁷ However, unlike state participation in math and reading, the NAEP state civics exam will be voluntary, and states can choose not to opt in to participate.⁴⁸

A final failure in accountability comes in the realm of international assessments. We have

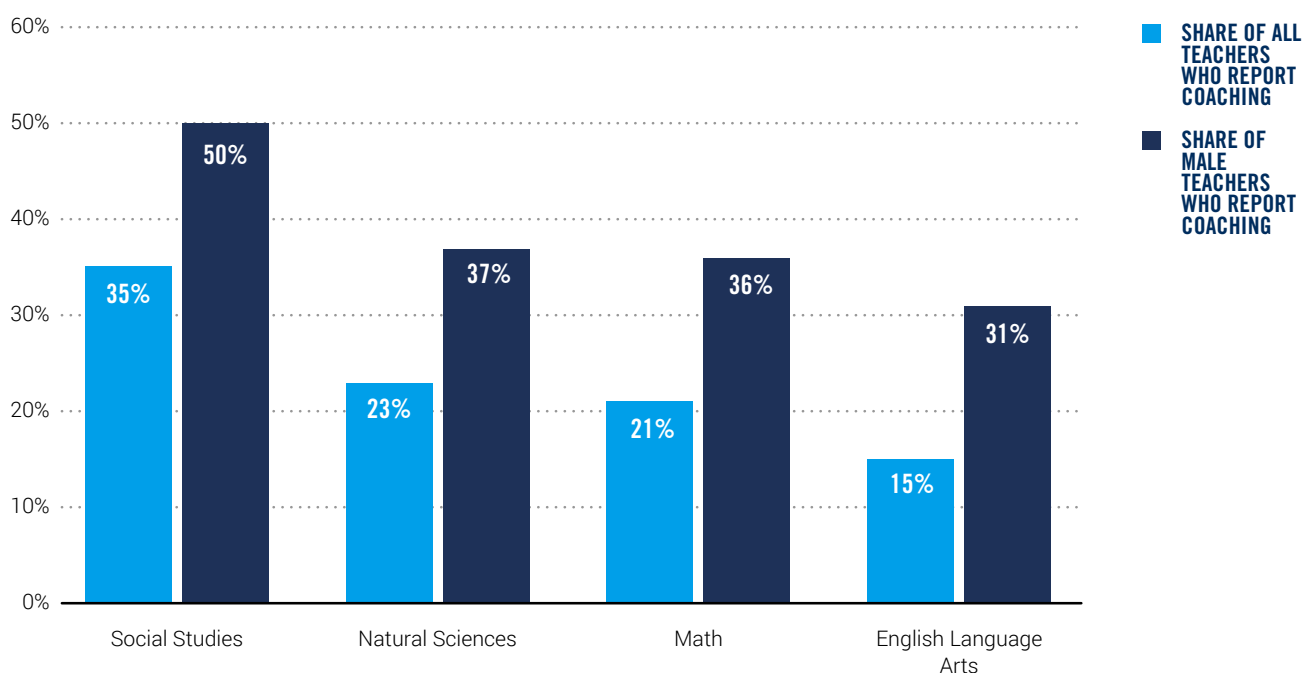
a good sense of how we stack up to other countries on subjects like math because the U.S. participates in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study TIMSS every four years.⁴⁹ By contrast, "the United States has not participated in the international civic assessment (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, undated) since 1999," so country-level comparisons of civic knowledge and skills are not possible.⁵⁰

C. Poor Teacher Preparation in Civics

Teacher preparation in civics (and the broader field of social studies) constitutes a third challenge. There is some truth in the old joke: What do you call a civics teacher? "Coach." Some coaches are excellent teachers, of course, but many others are stretched thin and have a greater allegiance to athletics than to their academic subject matter.

Research finds that more than one third of social studies teachers are athletic coaches, compared with about one in five math and English teachers. A 2018 Brookings report that used survey data from the 2015-2016 school year found that around 35% of social studies teachers served as coaches for sports at school, compared to only 21% of math and 15% of English teachers.⁵¹ (See Figure 9.) Among male teachers, 50% of social studies teachers served as coaches compared to 36% of math teachers and 31% of English teachers. One hypothesis presented is that "teachers in accountability subjects may be compelled to work more intensively in their specialties, leaving teachers in non-accountability subjects like social studies to compensate by extending the reach of their duties beyond their subject specialty."⁵²

FIGURE 9: TEACHER AND COACH OVERLAP (2017)



Source: Brookings Institution

Civics educators also do not receive adequate preparation to teach their subject. According to a 2020 RAND report, around half of elementary social studies teachers reported having received no “preservice or in-service training on how to support students’ civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions” (52%, 45%, and 54%, respectively).⁵³ A 2023 RAND report found that a smaller percentage of principals reported providing support for social studies instruction (professional development workshops or trainings, coaching, teacher evaluation, and collaborative learning with other teachers) than for ELA and math.⁵⁴

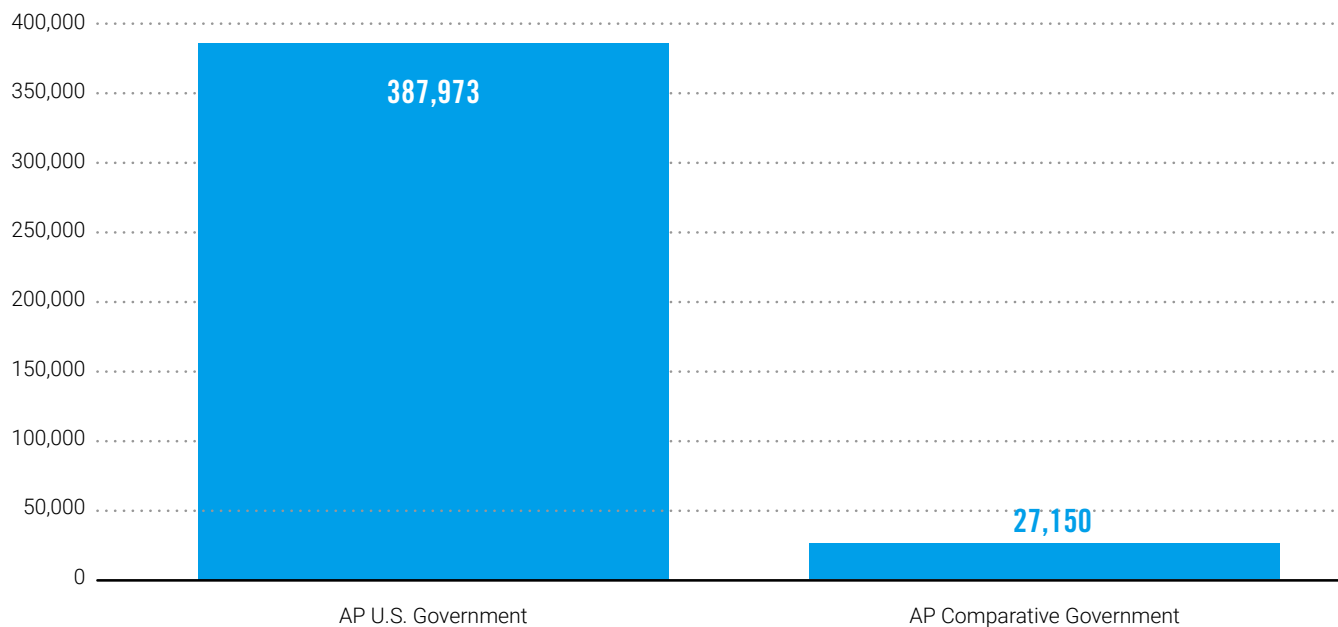
In the same report, RAND found that “38 percent of elementary principals reported that their teachers need a lot more professional learning about social studies standards, content, or pedagogy”.⁵⁵ By comparison, only 30% reported

needing a lot more professional learning regarding math, and 23% for English.

D. A Failure to Teach About Nondemocratic Societies

A fourth problem with today’s civics education is the failure to sufficiently explain to students what it is like to live in nondemocratic societies. When polls show that almost one-third of young Americans believe “Democracy is no longer a viable system, and Americans should explore alternative forms of government,” students need to understand more clearly what living under those alternatives entails.⁵⁶ Excellent courses exist to do that. The College Board’s Advanced Placement (AP) course in Comparative Government allows students to learn about living in autocratic societies lacking freedom.

FIGURE 10: NUMBER OF STUDENTS THAT TOOK EACH AP EXAM (2025)



Source: College Board

The problem, however, is that vanishingly few students take the class. In 2025, AP Comparative Government was the 6th least offered AP exam (based on the number of schools offering the exam).⁵⁷ Fourteen times as many students took the AP U.S. Government exam compared with the number who took the Comparative Government Exam⁵⁸ (See Figure 10).

E. Cuts in Extracurricular Activities that Boost Civic Participation

Extracurricular activities, including debate and/or the school newspaper, can provide training grounds for good citizenship. A 2008 study of over 4,000 students in Chicago, for example, found that “participation in afterschool extracurricular activities other than sports was related to increased commitments to

civic participation.”⁵⁹ A 2018 study based on thousands of questionnaires from Australian students likewise concluded that “participation in student governance and extracurricular activities are quite likely to go in hand with increases in students’ willingness to engage in civic action and to promote important issues in the future.”⁶⁰

Discouragingly, however, research finds that participation in extracurricular activities is declining for low-income students. As Harvard University’s Robert Putnam notes: “Poor students’ participation in extracurricular activities fell from nearly 80% in the early 1980s to about 65% in the mid-2000s. Wealthy students’ participation stayed steady at more than 85% during the same period.”⁶¹ More recent studies come to the same conclusion.⁶²

III. WHAT SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND STATES CAN DO: REPLICATING PROMISING PRACTICES

If the overall picture for civics education is discouraging, there are a number of promising practices that offer hope — for each of the five problems outlined above. Local school districts and states, the prime movers and funders of public education — should take steps to ramp up what works.⁶³

A. Making Civics Exciting and Effective

1. Call Civics American Democracy and Require Three Years of It in High School

Our headline recommendations to make civics as exciting and effective are to rename it “American Democracy” and require three years of it in high school.

It is time to move beyond the uninspiring banner of “civics,” which fails to convey the extraordinary nature of the course’s subject matter. The new name will make clear to students, parents, and teachers alike that the class will explain not just one type of government, but the special place the American system holds among the world’s different types of governance.

We call for all states to require three years of American Democracy in high school because teaching students what it means to be an American is the preeminent purpose of public education in America. Just as we want all students to know how to read and do math, we want every young person to know why their country came to be and what makes our nation exceptional.

Throughout the course of study, we want every American student to understand the great struggles to create the American system and

forge a new American Creed:

- The revolutionary nature of the Declaration of Independence’s principles: the rebellion against the prevailing system of monarchy and inherited privilege; and the unprecedented vision articulated of political equality and liberty.
- The subsequent debates over the writing of the Constitution that sought to create a system of ordered liberty; the need to empower a government while also constraining it from abuses; and to establish a system of majority rule which also protects minority rights.
- The nation’s Second Founding during the Civil War and Reconstruction era, when the Emancipation Proclamation and 14th Amendment provided the nation with what Lincoln called a “new birth of freedom.”
- The movements of the 20th century led by labor, women, and Black people expanded foundational values of liberty and equality to greater numbers of Americans, widening the circle of who is understood to be “created equal,” and who constitutes “we the people.”
- The ongoing battles in contemporary America are to bring the principles articulated in the Declaration and the Constitution to life so that all Americans who work hard can flourish. The course would ask students to exercise their civics muscles through nonpartisan activities.

In addition, other reforms are important. Some teachers and states manage to make civics come to life better than others. Localities and

states should learn from the best. While some blue states offer content-free standards around knowledge, and some red states shy away from applying civics skills in real-world contexts, the best approach involves both. Stand Together's "Civic Virtue, Civic Knowledge, and Civic Skills" (VKS) approach, for example, recognizes that an approach limited to civic action only fails to sufficiently place an "emphasis on virtue and knowledge" that is the foundation of action. Meanwhile, skills without knowledge and virtue are empty. The approach notes: "citizenship requires practice" through "nonpartisan action."⁶⁴

If made interesting and lively, civics education could become more popular with students. Polling finds that young people understand the value of civics education. In a 2024 survey, 84% of young people agreed: "It is important for schools to teach civics so young people know how to take action on issues that are important to them in their communities."⁶⁵

2. Adopt Exemplary State Standards

Some state standards are superb. The Fordham Institute has identified 5 jurisdictions - Alabama, California, Massachusetts, Tennessee, and D.C. — that have exemplary civics and U.S. history standards.⁶⁶ These standards do 5 things:

1. Effectively articulate what every American should know about this country's democratic institutions, traditions, and history.
2. Emphasize skills that are essential to informed citizenship such as critical thinking, problem analysis, and evaluating, interpreting, and arguing from evidence.
3. Champion essential civic dispositions such as respect for other persons and opinions,

an inclination to serve, and a commitment to American institutions and ideals.

4. Make effective use of elementary and middle school and require at least one year of U.S. History and one semester of Civics in high school.
5. Develop user-friendly standards documents that are well organized and clearly written."⁶⁷

Moving forward, states should carefully review highly-rated standards and adapt them for their own circumstances.

3. Foster Engaging Debates and Classrooms

At the classroom level, the best teachers go beyond the fact that America has three branches of government to delve into the philosophical debates about human nature that are the stuff of drama. Teachers can use creative ways to bring to life the fights that the Founders (all dead white males) engaged in while also appealing to today's more diverse set of students. The play "Hamilton," which uses hip-hop and actors of color to replay debates among the Founders, provides a good example of presenting meaty content in an engaging manner. By casting actors of color in the role of American Founders, and discussing serious intellectual debates through rap, the show demonstrates, James Traub says, "that American history belonged to, and could be claimed by, all Americans."⁶⁸

In addition, classes such as AP Language and Composition allow students to read and analyze interesting historical speeches and historical documents.⁶⁹ Teachers can then take steps to ensure that history is relevant to students today. As Traub notes, children can be taught the ennobling ideas of Western-style liberal

democracy in a way that schoolchildren of all backgrounds can see as part of their inheritance as Americans. He is particularly taken by a lesson on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address from Sheryl Hopfer, an eighth-grade history teacher in Texas. She told students, "It's like the Founding Fathers had a baton and they passed it on to the next generation." And then Lincoln "passed it on to us." Traub writes, "That was perhaps as distilled, and inspiring, a civics lesson as I had heard anywhere."⁷⁰

Teachers can also create classroom climates that are known to be particularly engaging and effective. A number of research studies find that positive school ethos, an open classroom climate, and strong teacher-student relationships can engage students and are associated with better outcomes.⁷¹

Teachers can also customize civics and history learning opportunities for students with distinct interests and use a variety of methods for teaching students. For example, for those students who are moved by poetry, teachers can consult Poetry in America, an educational initiative to bring American poetry into the classroom.⁷² Recently, the organization, led by Harvard scholar Elisa New, started releasing a series of essays about American poetry ranging from the Revolutionary-era African American writer Phillis Wheatley to modern forms of poetry found in the lyrics of rapper Nas.⁷³

4. Hands-On Learning with Guardrails

Some states do a strong job of supplementing a knowledge base in American civics and history with exciting forms of hands-on learning. For instance, Utah has implemented a program for the past four years called the Local Innovations Civics Education Pilot Program as a way of

helping increase civic knowledge, enhancing civic skills, and promoting experiential learning.⁷⁴ Likewise, Massachusetts passed an Act to Promote and Enhance Civic Engagement in 2018 that requires all public schools serving eighth-grade students and all public high schools to provide at least one "student-led, non-partisan civics project for each student".⁷⁵ The guardrails embedded in this policy are important to deter teachers from engaging in the sort of inappropriate political activism with students that Chicago public school teachers did.

At its best, hands-on civic learning can promote goals that people of all political persuasions can embrace: advancing buy-in to democratic values among young people and promoting the art of civil dialogue. At West Chicago High School, for example, Traub visited a legislative simulation where students debated issues like raising the minimum wage. One student reflected on the experience, "You realize that everyone has reasons for what they think."⁷⁶

B. Prioritize Funding and Accountability

There are many good models for state leaders wishing to allocate more time and better accountability for civics and history. In the past decade, considerable progress has been made. *Education Week* reports that "since 2021, 24 states have passed legislation that would add civics course requirements, devote additional funding to the subject, or strengthen professional learning for teachers, among other priorities," citing the nonprofit CivxNow.⁷⁷ According to Danielle Allen of Harvard University, 36 states now require civics work in high school in order to graduate.⁷⁸

As outlined above, we call for three full years of teaching American Democracy in high school.

While several states have such requirements for English and Math, none has a three-year requirement in civics. Many states, instead, provide for courses over varying lengths in “social studies,” which can include civics, American history, world history, economics, geography, anthropology, or other disciplines.⁷⁹

C. Support Good Teacher Preparation Programs

Because civics has lacked good teacher preparation for many years, states and localities should make sure that teachers entering the profession have a solid grounding in civics and history and that they are supported through professional development once they become teachers. In particular, states and localities should boost their partnerships with a number of nonprofit organizations that are doing an excellent job at providing teachers with professional support.

iCivics, for example, provides professional development programs for K-12 social studies educators in areas such as: “Enhancing Elementary Civics and Social Studies,” “Fostering an Inquiry-Based Classroom,” and “Supporting Social Studies Best Practices in Classrooms and Schools.”⁸⁰ The program offers both self-guided learning pathways and collaborative learning options in which educators “learn from one another and share challenges and successes.”⁸¹

Likewise, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History offers the highly-regarded Teaching Civics through History (TCTH) professional development that “gives teachers a new set of pedagogical tools while building their content knowledge of the history of key civic issues.”⁸² The Bill of Rights Institute can also help customize professional development that fits state standards for each school and

district.⁸³ The National Constitution Center offers a range of free professional development programs for educators.⁸⁴ And the Jack Miller Center has a Founding Civics Initiative whose goal is to “empower K-12 history and civics teachers with a deep understanding of American Democracy through the study of primary texts.”⁸⁵ Citing these non-profits, journalist James Traub argues, “Collectively, they constitute a vast library from which any teacher grade K to 12 is free to choose material on topics both recondite and grand.”⁸⁶

D. Require Classes About Living in Nondemocratic Societies

States wishing to help more students understand what it is like to live in nondemocratic societies do not have to create something out of whole cloth. In the underutilized AP Comparative Government course, students analyze the political structure and policies of six different countries: “China, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, and the United Kingdom.”⁸⁷ State governments can provide incentives for local districts to offer this class. (The federal government also has a role, as described further below.)

E. Support Stellar Extracurricular Activities

Some school districts show a brighter path forward in providing superb extracurricular opportunities that can build the civic muscle of students. States should provide grants to school districts that provide high-quality offerings, particularly in under-resourced localities.

In the arena of student newspapers, for example, the National Scholastic Press Association provides Pacemaker Awards to the nation’s best student newspapers.⁸⁸ Recently, the Association recognized 13 student newspapers

for excellence in a variety of red and blue states, including California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, and Texas.⁸⁹ States and districts should study what particular high schools are doing right to be successful and attempt to replicate best practices.

So too, some high schools boast exemplary debate and civics competition programs. For example, in 2026, Foothill High School (CA) won the We the People National Finals in Washington, D.C., where “thousands of high school seniors across the country demonstrate their understanding of the federal government and the U.S. Constitution by participating in simulated congressional hearings.”⁹⁰ More school districts should receive the support necessary to succeed in this arena.

IV. THE FEDERAL ROLE

How can exemplary practices be scaled up to benefit millions of students across the country?

A. Federal Efforts to Make Civics Exciting

To make civics more engaging, the federal government should create a Race to the Top competition that rewards states that manage to make civics engaging for students by:

- providing content-rich standards;
- encouraging hands-on learning that is nonpartisan; and
- fostering robust debate.

When state standards make vivid the extraordinary nature of our civic inheritance, allow students to develop their civic muscles, and provide the opportunity for vigorous debates

over contemporary topics, educators can make civics and history instruction both exciting and effective. State winners will be those that make students understand who we are as Americans and why.

Congress could also take a simple step to enliven civics instruction: commission a study of textbooks. Many civics textbooks employed in American public schools are watered down to avoid controversy. As a result, they too often fail to engage the imagination of young people. Congress could authorize funding to commission a panel of experts to assess the major textbooks used in American public schools for whether they are a) accurate, b) balanced, and c) engaging to students.

B. Increased Money, Time, and Accountability

The federal government should prioritize the funding and accountability for civics and U.S. history the way it does STEM instruction.

On the funding front, legislators have over the years proposed substantial federal allocations to begin to match the growing need to strengthen our liberal democracy. In 2022, for example, Senators Chris Coons (D-Del.) and John Cornyn (R-Texas), reintroduced the Civics Secures Democracy Act to authorize \$1 billion annually in federal civics funding. The money was to be used to provide grants to states, nonprofit organizations, and institutions of higher education, among others.⁹¹

The bipartisan legislation was derailed by right-wing critics who were worried that funds would be used to promote divisive teaching, such as the widely debunked 1619 Project, which the Biden administration’s Department of Education

had briefly supported.⁹² Moving forward, a reasonable compromise could allocate substantial funds while placing guardrails against the misuse of funds for curriculum like the dystopian 1619 Project.⁹³ An increase in funding could be used to address the several shortfalls in civics education identified in this report: curriculum development, teacher preparation, democracy-building extracurricular activities such as debate and student newspapers, and nonpartisan hands-on civics.

Funding increases should be matched by accountability measures. The Civics Secures Democracy Act, for example, calls for an assurance that states will participate in the NAEP every two years for civics and U.S. history in grades 4, 8, and 12, which would mean that state-by-state comparisons would be possible.⁹⁴ Mandatory participation in NAEP civics and U.S. history exams will help ensure a representative sample of each state and their scores to make comparisons possible. Doing so will give a firmer empirical basis for identifying the best approaches that governors can replicate.

In addition, to increase accountability for civics learning, reading tests that are already being administered by states could embed civic content into those assessments.⁹⁵ Because reading comprehension is about the content of what is tested as well as decoding words, such a requirement will encourage schools to devote time and resources to civics. This proposal builds on a move the College Board made back in 2014, when it announced that some of the readings from the redesigned SAT exam would include founding texts of the country, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the writings of James Madison and Martin Luther King Jr. Justice Sandra Day

O'Connor applauded the move, because it meant savvy test takers would study those sorts of documents in order to be prepared.⁹⁶

The bipartisan CIVICS Act of 2025 offers another promising approach for accountability. Sponsored by Senators Angus King (I-Maine), Tim Kaine (D-Va.), Roger Wicker (R-Miss.), and James Lankford (R-Okla.), the bill calls for prioritizing instruction about the U.S. Constitution.⁹⁷

C. Scale up Good Teacher Preparation

The Federal Government should earmark more money for high-quality teacher preparation for civics and American history, given the importance of these subjects. Title II-A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is aimed at improving instruction through programs like professional development.⁹⁸ In the 2020-21 school year, school districts chose to allocate a little over \$1 billion dollars of these funds for professional development and were given the discretion over which subjects to focus on.⁹⁹ Unfortunately, at least half (47%) devoted no professional development money to civics or history.¹⁰⁰ In the future, Congress should require that a specific share of professional development dollars be allocated to strengthening students' understanding of the nation's civic inheritance.

In addition, more teacher preparation resources should be allocated to a separate stream of funding in civics and history: the American History and Civics-National Activities Grants, which promote "new and existing evidence-based strategies to encourage innovative American history, civics and government, and geography instruction, learning strategies, and professional development activities and

programs for teachers, principals, or other school leaders.”¹⁰¹ The total amount for these grants, approximately \$19.8 million, is insufficient to the task at hand.¹⁰²

D. Federal Grants to Deepen Learning About Nondemocratic Societies

The Federal Government could also provide federal grants to states which make substantial efforts to boost enrollment in AP Comparative Government and Politics. The grants would cover the cost of outreach to students and parents about the opportunities offered in the class, the cost of teacher professional development, and the cost to students associated with taking the AP examination. (This idea piggybacks on existing federal and state efforts to increase AP participation in low-income high schools.)¹⁰³

E. Support Title I Schools with Grants for Democracy-Strengthening Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities such as the student newspaper and student debate can help young people develop their civics muscles and learn how to weigh evidence, disagree civilly, and appreciate the First Amendment. Given recent findings that extracurricular participation has plummeted for low-income students, the federal government should provide competitive federal grants to low-income (Title I) schools that seek funding to support student newspapers and debate clubs and civic-oriented programs like the We the People competition.

CONCLUSION

The importance of getting civics education right has rarely been more pressing. In the age of Donald Trump, and illiberalism on the left, America’s multiple safeguards to protect against the rise of a strongman exerting authoritarian powers are being tested more strenuously than at any time in modern memory. With Congress and the Supreme Court frequently falling short in checking the executive branch, we must do everything we can to ensure that the public schools serve as a bulwark for liberal democracy.¹⁰⁴

Teaching American Democracy, at its best, provides young, malleable minds with a full understanding of how our democracy works, the dispositions to abide by its norms, and the skills necessary to become active citizens. Because these qualities are not inborn, they must be taught each generation.

Civics education in America is failing on all fronts, in part because ideological wars have sapped the ability of teachers to make the subject matter exciting and interesting to students. The good news is that we have excellent models of how to make civics education engaging and effective.

Policymakers at all levels, from school board members to state legislators and governors, to members of Congress and the federal executive, can each play a role in improving American civics education. Without it, America is unlikely to regain its place as the world’s singular model of how a multiethnic liberal democracy can flourish.

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