

With the shifting demands of a competitive world, students are pressed in every direction. Schools are told to emphasize foreign languages, computer science, the arts, STEM, or physical education. In this rush of conflicting influences, one essential area is lost: civic education. The result is an increasingly uninformed and uninvolved electorate, with a limited understanding of the critical political forces that are shaping the nation. Increasing civic education is a crucial step towards generating widespread political engagement and participation in America.

Nationwide, both adults and students consistently demonstrate an inadequate knowledge of American politics, history, and government. This year, only 18% of over 1,100 liberal arts colleges and universities surveyed said that they required students to take at least one U.S. history or government course before graduation.¹ Accordingly, surveys have found that recent American college graduates do not have a working knowledge of basic concepts such as the separation of powers or the origins of the Constitution, and 10% believe that Judge Judy is a member of the Supreme Court.² One study found that when asked to identify the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment, a third of those surveyed could not identify a single right, and 43% could not identify freedom of speech as a right.³ The state of K-12 civics education is even worse. In 2010, nationally administered testing found that, even though nearly all test-takers reported taking at least one civics course, only 24% of eighth graders scored at the proficient level or above.⁴

America's deficit of civic education can be attributed to several core problems: a lack of education funding, the low priority placed on civic education, and inadequate textbooks and resources. Between 2008 and 2014, state education funding decreased in at least 31 states, while total local school funding declined nationally.⁵ With that trend, schools have been forced to choose which programs and subjects to fund and which to cut, and low priorities, like civic education, have fallen into the latter category. In fact, a major education overhaul eliminated all federal funding for civic programs for FY 2011 onwards.⁶ Meanwhile, even when funding and classes do exist, civic textbooks fail to give students a deep enough understanding of politics.

¹ American Council of Trustees and Alumni, *A Crisis in Civic Education*. (Washington, D.C.: American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2016): 1-2.

² *Ibid.*

³ Newseum Institute, *The 2015 State of the First Amendment*. (Washington, DC: Newseum Institute, 2015): 3.

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, *The National Report Card: 2014 U.S. History, Geography, and Civics at Grade 8*. National Center for Education Statistics, April 2015, August 17, 2016. www.nationsreportcard.gov/hgc_2014

⁵ Michael Leachman, Nick Albares, Kathleen Masterson, and Marlana Wallace, "Most States Have Cut School Funding, and Some Continue Cutting," *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, January 25, 2016, August 17, 2016. <http://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/most-states-have-cut-school-funding-and-some-continue-cutting>

⁶ Allie Bidwell, "Report: Federal Education Funding Plummeting," *US News and World Report*, June 24, 2015, August 17, 2016. <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2015/06/24/report-federal-education-funding-cut-by-5-times-more-than-all-spending>

Too often, authors' efforts to avoid controversial topics result in them skipping over many areas, leaving nothing but what one group of researchers called, "lifeless descriptions of the origins, structures, and relationships of government." Left out are the connections between average people and policies, the gridlock and disagreements that dominate the news, and ultimately, the emotions that move people to become involved in politics.⁷ Further, textbooks impart facts and information about government, but often fail to demonstrate the ways that citizens can participate in the political process. Therefore, researchers have emphasized the need for not just traditional classroom learning, but also hands-on civic programs, such as ones that allow students to participate in mock elections or contact elected officials.⁸

Civic education matters because it shows citizens how public policies impact their lives and how their own choices, opinions, and participation can shape those policies. A working knowledge of the political process – the institutions, individuals, and practices that shape policies – is essential to understanding and contextualizing current events reported by the media. Voters will not recognize the importance of Supreme Court nominations if they do not know the role of the Supreme Court, nor will they realize the significance of a government shutdown if they do not understand the scope of government funding. Even further, greater political knowledge increases patriotism and support for democratic values, and decreases mistrust of government.⁹ Overall, civic education generates more interest, and thus, more participation, in politics. Studies have shown that the depth of an individual's political knowledge directly affects his or her probability of voting.¹⁰ In the case of one civic education program, Student Voices, not only were participants found to be more likely to become politically active adults than non-participants, but that probability also increased with every semester students spent in the program.¹¹ When students are provided opportunities for civic education, they begin to partake in political processes, and build a habit that continues for the rest of their lives.

When it comes to civic education, a stark opportunity gap exists between low-income and high-income Americans. Students at more affluent schools are far more likely to benefit from

⁷ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *The Challenges Facing Civic Education in the 21st Century*. Academy of Arts and Sciences 142.2, 2013: 76.

⁸ Stephen Macedo et al., *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2005): 33.

⁹ William A. Galston, "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education." *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, 2001: 223.

¹⁰ Delli Carpini and S. Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996): 397.

¹¹ Josh Pasek, et al, *Building Long-Term Political Efficacy with Civic Education*. (Pittsburgh, PA: Annenberg Public Policy Center at University of Pennsylvania, 2007): 23.

civic classes and programs than students at schools in impoverished neighborhoods.¹² That reality means that low-income students rarely experience adequate political socialization, and become less likely to participate in politics throughout their lives. While 86% of the richest Americans vote, only 52% of Americans in the lowest income brackets vote. Wealthier Americans are also four times as likely to work on campaigns, twice as likely to protest, and twice as likely to contact elected officials.¹³ As a result, the opinions of wealthy Americans are heard more. One study concluded that senators give 50% more weight to the policy opinions of constituents in the upper third of the income distribution than to the opinions of those in the middle third, and give the opinions of the lower third no weight at all.¹⁴ While not the whole cause, fewer opportunities for civic education directly contribute to lower political participation and representation amongst the lower class. When low-income students never learn how to participate in the political process, the voices of their entire demographic become lost.

When students cannot name their constitutional rights, they do not know when those rights are being threatened. When voters do not know the role of congress, they cannot recognize the importance of their representatives' political positions. When Americans do not learn about the ways politics impact their lives, they fail to see the purpose of participating. Without civics education, the next generation of American voters will become the nation's most disinterested, uninformed electorate. That trend must be reversed.

¹² Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, *Democracy for Some: the Civic Opportunity Gap in High School*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2008): 3.

¹³ Kahne, 8.

¹⁴ Sidney Verba and Gary Orren, *Equality in America*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985): 19.

References

- American Council of Trustees and Alumni. *A Crisis in Civic Education*. Washington, D.C.: American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2016.
- Bidwell, Allie. "Report: Federal Education Funding Plummeting." *US News and World Report*. June 24, 2015. August 17, 2016. <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2015/06/24/report-federal-education-funding-cut-by-5-times-more-than-all-spending>
- Carpini, Delli, and S. Keeter. *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Galston, William A. "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education." *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, 2001: 217-234.
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. *The Challenges Facing Civic Education in the 21st Century*. Academy of Arts and Sciences 142.2, 2013: 65-83.
- Kahne, Joseph, and Ellen Middaugh. *Democracy for Some: the Civic Opportunity Gap in High School*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2008.
- Leachman, Michael, Nick Albares, Kathleen Masterson, and Marlana Wallace. "Most States Have Cut School Funding, and Some Continue Cutting." *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. January 25, 2016. August 17, 2016. <http://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/most-states-have-cut-school-funding-and-some-continue-cutting>
- Macedo, Stephen et al. *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2005.
- National Center for Education Statistics. *The National Report Card: 2014 U.S. History, Geography, and Civics at Grade 8*. National Center for Education Statistics. April 2015. August 17, 2016. www.nationsreportcard.gov/hgc_2014
- Newseum Institute. *The 2015 State of the First Amendment*. Washington, DC: Newseum Institute, 2015.
- Pasek, Josh et al. *Building Long-Term Political Efficacy with Civic Education*. Pittsburgh, PA: Annenberg Public Policy Center at University of Pennsylvania, 2007.
- Verba, Sidney, and Gary Orren, *Equality in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.