



Research Summary KNOWLEDGE AND COGNITIVE SKILLS

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Definitions

Civic knowledge starts with an understanding of the structure of government and the processes of lawmaking and policy-making, but a broader, deeper knowledge of history, politics, economics, and other disciplines is necessary to comprehend the wide range of issues that citizens face.² The National Assessment Governing Board has delineated five major areas of civic knowledge focused on America’s political institutions, political values, and role in international politics. Research has shown that students with more years of education tend to vote more often and take a more active role in civic affairs, although a clear causal link between taking civics or other specific courses and greater civic involvement has not been clearly established.³

Scholars note that the development of civic knowledge and subsequent participation in civic life depends heavily on the instructional practices used and the skills developed to support this learning. They emphasize that effective political participation requires well-developed verbal and cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, effective communication, and self-directed learning beyond basic content.⁴ Beginning in 1996, Niemi, Junn

¹ With edits from Dr. Peter Levine, Tufts University

² Jonathan Gould, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Peter Levine, Ted McConnell, and David B. Smith, eds., “Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools,” Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011, p. 16; Michael A. Rebell, *Flunking Democracy, Schools, Courts, and Civic Participation*, University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. 75-76; Danielle Allen, *Education and Equality*, University of Chicago Press, 2016; Michael X Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*, Yale University Press, 1996; Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, 2010; Anne Newman, *Realizing Educational Rights: Advancing School Reform Through Courts and Communities*, University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 37.

³ Norman H. Niemi, Jane Junn & Kenneth Stehlik-Barry, *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America*, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

⁴ Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, “Civic Education and Deeper Learning,” Jobs for the Future, 2015,

and Stehlik-Barry argued that verbal cognitive skills were perhaps the most relevant to democratic citizenship, noting that politics relies heavily on language utilization and debate.⁵ In 2011, a group of 33 scholars, civic leaders, and federal officials developed and endorsed the following list of skills, which are critical to preparing students to be capable citizens:⁶

- Speaking and listening
- Collaborating, organizing fellow citizens
- Understanding formal politics
- Advocacy
- Information gathering and processing
- Technology
- Verbal empowerment⁷

Civic Knowledge and Skills: Research Summary

1998	Niemi and Junn examined NAEP civic exam scores and found that civics coursework only had a modest effect on political knowledge. ⁸
2004	Mierick and Wackman showed that some program evaluations have provided more evidence of the effectiveness of curriculum-specific civic programs on political knowledge than standard civics or social studies courses. ⁹
2006	McDevitt and Kiouis found positive effects from the Kids Voting USA curriculum on political knowledge, discussion, and propensity to vote. ¹⁰
2007	Hart et al. concluded that the number of high school civics courses taken by students had only a weak, positive relationship with adolescent civic knowledge, and the number of social studies courses had a weak, positive association with civic engagement in early adulthood. ¹¹

available at <https://www.jff.org/resources/civic-education-and-deeper-learning/>.

⁵ Niemi, Junn & Stehlik-Barry, note 2, *supra*, pp. 41–42.

⁶ “Special Report: Civic Skills and Federal Policy,” *Around the CIRCLE: Research and Practice*, vol. 8, 1, January 2011.

⁷ Danielle Allen emphasizes that participatory readiness demands verbal empowerment—reading, writing, and interpreting the world around us. Allen, *Education and Equality*, p. 40.

⁸ Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn, *What Makes Students Learn*, Yale University Press, 1998.

⁹ Patrick Meirick and Daniel Wackman, “Kids Voting and Political Knowledge,” *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 85, no. 5, 2004.

¹⁰ Michael McDevitt and Spiro Kiouis. “Experiments in Political Socialization: Kids Voting USA as a Model for Civic Education Reform. CIRCLE Working Paper 49.” Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), University of Maryland (2006).

¹¹ D. Hart, T. M. Donnelly, J. Youniss, J., and R. Atkins, “High School Community Service as a Predictor of Adult Voting and Volunteering,” *American Educational Research Journal*, 44(1), 2007, pp. 197-219.

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2008	Campbell found that classrooms that encourage open discussion of political issues promote civic learning and engagement. ¹²
2010	Through randomized experiments, Sondheimer and Green concluded that education attainment had a positive relationship with voter turnout. ¹³
2011	Green et al. collaborated with the Bill of Rights Institute to create a civics curriculum that they randomly assigned to 1,000 high school students. They found that: 1) In classrooms that made use of the curriculum, knowledge of civil liberties was significantly higher, but the knowledge dissipated one year and two years; 2) The curriculum had no effect, positive or negative on general knowledge about politics; 3) The curriculum had no effect on support for civil liberties, as measured in three post-treatment surveys. ¹⁴
2016	Campbell and Niemi found that civics testing requirements lead to more civic knowledge, with particularly strong effects for Latinos and recent immigrants. ¹⁵
2017	Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg found that pedagogical practices mattered in the teaching of civics: “Students who take [courses on civics, government, law, and related topics] are better informed and more likely to vote, so long as the courses use recommended pedagogies.” ¹⁶

Assessment of Civic Knowledge and Skills

- **NAEP Civics Test**

Educational testing in the last few decades has emphasized scores from standardized testing in English Language Arts and mathematics, while assessment in social studies, civics and other disciplines have received substantially less attention.¹⁷

¹²David E. Campbell, "Voice in the classroom: How an open classroom climate fosters political engagement among adolescents." *Political Behavior* 30.4 (2008): 437-454.

¹³ R. M. Sondheimer and D. P. Green, "Using Experiments to Estimate the Effects of Education on Voter Turnout," *American Journal of Political Science*, 54, 2010, pp. 174-189.

¹⁴ D. P. Green, P. M. Aronow, D. E. Bergan, P. Greene, C. Paris, and B. I. Weinberger, B. I. "Does Knowledge of Constitutional Principles Increase Support for Civil Liberties? Results from a Randomized Field Experiment," *The Journal of Politics*, 73(2), 2001, pp. 463-476.

¹⁵ David E. Campbell and Richard G. Niemi, "Testing Civics: State-Level Civic Education Requirements and Political Knowledge," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 110(3) August 2016, pp. 495-511

¹⁶ Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, "The Republic is (Still) at Risk—and Civics is Part of the Solution," Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University, 2017, available at: <https://www.civxnow.org/documents/v1/SummitWhitePaper.pdf>.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics test assesses understanding of a narrow set of civic knowledge, and it has not been consistently implemented—in 2013, the NAEP Civics Assessment was canceled because of budget cuts, while other NAEP assessments were maintained.¹⁸

Despite the limitations of the NAEP test, results have provided some data for researchers who study the impact of state policies and classroom practices on learning. Using results from the 2006 and 2010 NAEP civics test and a large national survey of 18-24 year-olds, Campbell and Niemi found that simply adding a statewide high-stakes civics requirement had a relatively low impact on NAEP civic exam scores, but that it most improved the scores of Latinos and immigrants.¹⁹

Kawashima-Ginsberg examined the use of promising practices such as discussion, debate and simulation in classrooms and their effects on NAEP test scores, and found that as an overall trend, 12th graders were likely to benefit from these practices, while findings were mixed, in some cases negative, for 4th graders.²⁰

- **State Standards**

State standards vary widely across the country. Many only include a one-course requirement for civics, and others include civics themes in their general social studies standards. Those states that provide assessments in this area tend to test a very narrow understanding of civic knowledge, often just a multiple choice test of basic facts.²¹ In order to encourage states to emphasize higher-order thinking skills and critical analytic approaches to civics and social studies, 15 national professional organizations collaborated on the College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for

¹⁷ Michael A. Rebell, *Flunking Democracy*, p. 77.

¹⁸ “All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement: The Report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge,” CIRCLE, 2013, p. 16.

¹⁹ D. Campbell and R. Niemi, “Testing Civics: State-Level Civic Education Requirements and Political Knowledge,” *American Political Science Review*, 110(3), 2016, pp. 495-511.

²⁰ Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg “Do Discussion, Debate, and Simulations Boost NAEP Civics Performance?” CIRCLE fact sheet, 2013, available at: https://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/CIRCLE_NAEPBechtelFactSheetApril30.final_.pdf.

²¹ Michael A. Rebell, *Flunking Democracy*, p. 100. The Education Commission of the States reports that “37 states “require students to demonstrate proficiency through assessment in civics or social studies,” but the data includes very minimal short answer quizzes. Education Commission of the States, “50-State Comparison: Civic Education,” 2016, available at <http://www.ecs.org/citizenship-education-policies/>.

Social Studies State Standards.²² Most states, however, have not adopted these standards. Many state social studies standards still largely reflect an approach to civic knowledge that emphasizes the structure and functions of government rather than critical analysis and active civic participation. Research on specific areas of civic knowledge has shown that state standards very rarely go into enough depth in areas such as the study of political parties and ideology.²³

Twenty-seven states now require high school students to pass some version of the hundred-question multiple-choice test administered to individuals applying to become naturalized citizens, a policy that has been promoted by the Joe Foss Institute.²⁴ Some leaders in the field have questioned whether this test is sufficient for the task, noting the limitations of such a standardized test in providing a full measure of preparation for participation in civic life.²⁵

- **Recommendations for Assessing Civic Knowledge and Skills**

Assessment measures should reflect a broader understanding of knowledge and skills and incorporate the importance of civic experiences. In 2013, CIRACLE published the following recommendations for assessment in civics:

- “Experiment with assessments of civic skills that use portfolios of students’ work instead of standardized tests;”
- “Implement high school course requirements with valid assessments that measure higher-order skills and the application of knowledge. Courses should specifically instruct students in registration and voting processes and engage students in following the news and deliberating about issues.”²⁶

²² “College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History,” National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, available at: <https://media.nationalgeographic.org/assets/file/C3-Framework-for-Social-Studies.pdf>.

²³ Paula McAvoy, Rebecca Fine and Ann Herrera Ward, “State Standards Scratch the Surface of Learning about Political Parties and Ideology,” CIRACLE Working Paper #81, 2016, available at: <https://civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/State-Standards-and-Political-Ideology.pdf>.

²⁴ See Joe Foss Institute, Civic Education Initiative, available at <http://joeffossinstitute.org/civics-education-initiative/>.

²⁵ For a summary of criticism towards the test, see Alia Wong, “Why Civics Is About More Than Citizenship,” *The Atlantic*, September 17, 2015.

²⁶ “All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement: The Report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge,” CIRACLE, 2013, p. 8.

- **Recommendations for Research**

The literature on the impact of civic education on civic engagement is mixed, but some scholars have argued that these findings may reflect methodological limitations rather than the reality of the results that stem from students gaining knowledge in this area.²⁷ Supporting research that uses long-range longitudinal studies and randomized experiments can provide more accurate results.

²⁷ David E. Campbell, “What is Education’s Impact on Civic and Social Engagement?” in *Measuring the Effects of Education on Health and Civic Engagement: Proceedings of the Copenhagen Symposium*, OECD, 2006, available at <http://www.oecd.org/edu/innovation-education/measuringtheeffectsofeducationonhealthandcivicengagement.htm>; R. M. Sondheimer and D. P. Green, “Using Experiments to Estimate the Effects of Education on Voter Turnout,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 54, 2010, pp. 174-189.

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