



# Teaching Civics in a Time of Partisan Polarization

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At every stage in our nation's history, we must deliberately educate the next generation to be active and responsible citizens. That is always a complex and challenging task. But the challenges differ as the context evolves. Today, students and teachers of civics face special barriers as well as unusual opportunities.

For one thing, national politics is polarized and dysfunctional, and the spectacle of gridlock and bitter struggle in Washington can alienate students entirely from public life. In this polarized climate, the very idea that young people should be active citizens has become controversial. Adults are quick to assume that educating young people about anything related to politics means indoctrinating them in one set of beliefs or mobilizing them to vote for a particular party. Yet the best long-term solution to gridlock and hyper-partisanship may be to teach students to talk to people who disagree with them, form their own reasonable views, and act together constructively. Nowadays, students will need to navigate online information and opinion and learn to communicate responsibly online as well as face-to-face. The need for civic education that includes civil discussion and information literacy is stronger than ever.

Meanwhile, we are living through a time of extraordinary educational inequality, in which, for example, American children in the top quarter of the income distribution have an 80%

chance of attending college while they are young adults, whereas young Americans whose families are in the bottom quarter have just a 17% chance of entering college.<sup>1</sup> Opportunities for civic learning are almost as unbalanced, with the most engaging civics experiences reserved for students in affluent communities or on a college track. As a result, actual knowledge of civics is deeply unequal. White, wealthy students are four to six times as likely as Hispanic or Black students from low-income households to exceed the “proficient” level on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in civics. Only 7% of students whose parents didn't graduate from high school and who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch reached “proficient.”<sup>2</sup>

In these circumstances, the urgent need is for all students to learn to talk and work with people who are different from themselves. They must learn to address current matters of controversy and concern, not just historical or theoretical cases.

To assess the challenges and opportunities facing civic education today, CIRCLE (the Center for Information

& Research on Civic Learning & Engagement) surveyed 4,483 representative Americans (ages 18–24) by cell phone and land-line phones immediately after the 2012 election and asked them about their political knowledge, their engagement in the campaign, and what they recalled experiencing in their high school civics and government classes. Several months later, we surveyed 720 current high school civics and government teachers and asked them about their teaching methods and goals and the context in which they teach.

We collected this information in order to inform a group called the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, which will release its extensive report on Oct 9. In this article, we present some findings from the teacher and youth surveys that are especially relevant to teachers.

We found some good news. For one thing, government and civics teachers are deeply committed to the civic mission of their schools. Almost every respondent said it was either important or essential to teach students to embrace the responsibilities of citizenship, such as voting and jury duty. Some teachers told us that this was the mission that drove them to teach civics in the first place.

They also said that they try to create what researchers call an “open classroom

climate,” in which students feel free to form and express opinions about issues. Virtually all of the teachers said that students should feel free to disagree openly with them about political and social issues, and all of them said that students should make up their own minds about issues. When we asked 18-24-year-olds to recall their high school experiences, 81 percent said they had taken a course called “civics” or “government” or something very similar. Of those, three quarters said they had talked about current events in the course, and over 80 percent remembered that teachers had encouraged students to discuss politi-

cal and social issues on which people disagree.

Another piece of good news is that testing and accountability does not seem to have prevented teachers from discussing current events in class. Even though deliberation skills and current politics are not covered on states’ tests, more than four out of five teachers said that they could meet their course goals if they spent time discussing the 2012 election and that covering the election would help them meet state standards. Just over half said that teaching the election could help them meet the English/Language Arts Common Core standards. That

may be because teachers assign reading and writing assignments related to elections. In open-ended responses, teachers mentioned many inventive lessons that involved research and writing or oral presentations on the 2012 campaign.

The main barrier, therefore, did not seem to be tests or standards. One important obstacle was controversy, or at least the possibility of it. A quarter (24.8%) of the teachers thought that parents or other adults in their community would object if politics were discussed in their course—even though we were asking about a course on government or civics taught during a presidential election year. More than 16% thought that parents and other adults in the community might object to teaching about elections and voting in such a course. Some reported that they had facilitated discussions or debates during the 2008 election but had received complaints from parents and would not repeat that experience. Teachers who have not been directly criticized may fear controversy and may choose to steer away from current politics.

On the whole, teachers said that their principals would support a decision to teach about the election. However, teachers were somewhat unsure of the community’s reaction to “bringing politics” into classrooms. In recent memory, no prominent bipartisan voices have called for politics and controversial issues to be taught in schools; all the public pressure is against that kind of teaching.

To be sure, teaching controversial issues is not easy. Educators must be even-handed, sensitive to the diverse backgrounds of their students, well informed, and prepared. They must hold students accountable for using evidence and making responsible arguments. These are values and techniques that must be learned. They are not acquired automatically, and they are certainly not modeled by our political leaders and pundits. Many teachers did not learn these skills in college; only 10 states require civics teachers to be certified in civics or political science. Also, very

## CIRCLE is...

...the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement ([www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)). CIRCLE focuses on young people in America, especially those who are marginalized or disadvantaged in political life. Our scholarly research informs policy and practice for healthier youth development and a better democracy. CIRCLE is based at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship & Public Service at Tufts University.

In 2012, concerned about low and badly unequal levels of political knowledge and engagement, CIRCLE convened a panel of distinguished scholars to form a Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge. Research for the Commission was funded by the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, the W.T. Grant Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the Youth Engagement Fund.

To inform the Commissioners with timely and rigorous research, CIRCLE surveyed or interviewed 6,913 people, including 720 teachers and more than 6,000 young people (some more than once, to detect changes over time) and scanned the relevant laws of all 50 states plus the District of Columbia.

The Commission’s final report, titled *All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement*, will be released in Washington on Oct. 9. Although the report offers many recommendations for educators, parents, policymakers at all levels of government, and leaders of other organizations, it does not promise simple, one-size-fits-all solutions. Our exhaustive research finds that none of the current policies in states or major school districts comes close to achieving the goals of civic education: to provide *all* young people with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to be active and responsible citizens. There is an urgent need to experiment with new strategies and to build partnerships between schools and other institutions and networks in society.

We tell our students that they should all contribute ideas and energy to address public problems, that they must collaborate, and that they should be persistent—not expecting complex issues to have quick answers. The same advice applies to anyone who cares about youth civic engagement. We hope that the Commission’s report will spur discussions and ongoing work at the local and state levels.

few teachers recalled lasting, valuable professional development in civics after they had entered the profession.

Students can learn to be constructive, deliberating citizens in other venues as well as the civics or government classroom. One important venue is the school as a whole. Students should have a sense that they can express their views constructively on matters of school policy and that they will be heard. Interestingly, 34% of 18–24s recalled that students had a say in how their own high school was run, and almost the same proportion (36%) of teachers felt that the students in their schools had a say. Considering that previous research finds benefits from feeling a voice in school, this proportion should be higher. School administrators may have the most to contribute to that problem.

Students can also learn deliberation and collaboration in service-learning projects. But our analysis of the youth survey data found that service-learning only boosted young people's civic engagement when the students discussed and analyzed the "root causes" of social problems as part of their service-learning. When service was required without a discussion of root causes, it appeared to have a negative effect.

Finally, students can learn to resolve controversies and make decisions together by participating in student-led groups. Whether it is a student government or a drama club, a group may face internal disagreements, competitors, limited resources, and turnover. Learning to deal with those challenges can prepare students for civic life. Young adults who had participated in student groups were more politically knowledgeable today. Civics and government teachers provide an important service in leading those groups. Almost three quarters told us that they advised at least one group or team.

In sum, the survey confirms that civics and government teachers are dedicated to preparing young people to participate responsibly in public life. Standards, testing requirements, and professional

development opportunities do not support deliberation about current issues and controversies, yet many teachers still manage to facilitate some deliberation in their classes. Most parents would not object to even-handed discussion of politics in schools, but a substantial minority would, and they may be causing a "chilling effect" in many schools. Some students are getting good civic educations, but many are not, and the difference is not random: students on a college-track receive much more engaging and challenging experiences than their counterparts who are struggling academically or who attend worse-off schools.

According to our 2012 youth survey, just 10% of Americans between 18 and 24 registered, voted, answered at least one (out of two) campaign knowledge questions correctly, answered four or more general political knowledge questions correctly, voted consistently with their personal opinion on a campaign issue of their choice, and followed the news fairly or very closely during the election season. If that is a measure of being an informed citizen, there is much to be done.

The Commission's report will suggest a range of reforms for policymakers, among them "implement[ing] state standards for civics that focus on developing advanced civic skills, such as deliberation and collaboration, rather than memorizing facts." The Commission says, "Standards should be more challenging, more coherent, and more concerned with politics than the typical state standards in place today." In our view, the upcoming College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards is an important step in that direction; states should adopt the Framework.

For teachers, the main advice is to make sure that all students have opportunities to discuss current, controversial issues that arise in their own classrooms and schools, their communities, their state and nation, and the world. Students should talk responsibly, civilly, and with

good information. At least some of the time, they should put their deliberative ideas into practice by actually managing student groups and conducting projects. Unless their projects address important matters—what our survey called the "root causes" of social issues—their work will not boost their civic engagement. The classroom is one valuable venue for discussion and collaborative work, but so are extracurricular groups and the school as a whole. Many teachers have developed inventive lessons and even whole curricula that involve students in discussion and collaboration on current issues. But these teachers are generally not well supported; they deserve resources and public champions. ●

#### Notes

1. Martha J. Bailey and Susan M. Dynarski, "Inequality in Postsecondary Education." In *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*, eds. Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane (New York: Russell Sage, 2011), pp. 117–131.
2. National Center for Education Statistics, *Nation's Report Card Civics 2010* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Education Science), Appendix Table A-8, p.55; National Center for Education Statistics. Data Explorer. (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Education Science). Calculation conducted by the authors using the Data Explorer.

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