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WHEN AND WHY DID AMERICA STOP TEACHING CIVICS?

POLICY
BRIEF

SEPTEMBER 2024

Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.
– John Dewey

Knowledge about the ideas embodied in the Constitution and the ways in which it shapes our lives is not passed down from generation to generation through the gene pool; it must be learned anew by each generation.
– Justice Sandra Day O'Connor

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A Policy Brief from the
Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy

INTRODUCTION

The headlines tell the same story: Americans' civic knowledge is at a woeful level.

A 2024 study from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce found that more than 70% of Americans failed a basic U.S. civic literacy quiz; one in three respondents did not even know that there exist three branches of government, much less what those branches are and what they do.[1] The latest Constitution Day civics survey from the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center found that a mere 5% of the U.S. adults surveyed could name all five First Amendment rights, and 20% could not name any.[2] The 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the "Nation's Report Card," showed that for the first time the civics scores of U.S. eighth graders had declined.[3]

Frustration over such sad results is frequently directed at American public schools. Schools, the popular complaint goes, just don't teach civics like they used to.

This complaint turns out to be true: it is indeed correct that American schools once prioritized civics instruction and no longer do. But to consequent questions—specifically, *when* did American schools stop teaching civics, and *why*?—the answers are perhaps less clear. They deserve inspection. The O'Connor Institute raises a magnifying glass.

KEY FINDINGS

- The time devoted to civic education in American public schools began to significantly decline in the 1960s.
- Civic education has not for many decades been prioritized by federal or state government; time devoted to civics has also declined due to unintended consequences of other educational focuses (see, e.g., STEM and No Child Left Behind).
- The time spent in schools on civics declines when civic education itself is seen as controversial.
- Educators in K-12 schools feel unprepared to teach civics.
- Younger Americans are less knowledgeable about civics than previous American generations.

AMERICAN CIVIC EDUCATION: A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY

The political scientist David Campbell, whose research focuses on civics, emphasizes that in America "civics is not superfluous or even secondary to the primary purpose of public schooling. It is the primary purpose." He goes on to write that the "irony of inattention to civic education is that U.S. public schools were actually created for the express purpose of forming democratic citizens."[4]

Public education was a priority for early Americans; indeed, "it was first religion and next education that engaged the attention of the early settlers," according to the scholars Carl H. Gross and Charles C. Chandler.[5] But let us hear from the source, a certain George Washington:

> . . . the assimilation of the principles, opinions, and manners of our countrymen 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 sciences of government.[6]

This charge—"the assimilation of the principles, opinions, and manners of our countrymen" and "the education of our youth in the sciences of government"—became even more crucial in the late nineteenth century, when waves of immigrants to the United States began arriving daily. For these newcomers, having journeyed from a heterogeneity of places, American public schools were among the chief teachers of their new country's civic values and patriotism. This was true even for immigrant parents, who learned much about American ideals from their school-aged children.[7]

As immigration to America dwindled, relatively, into the mid-twentieth century, civic education in public schools evolved, shifting closer to its initial purpose, which a Detroit superintendent at the time called "the Americanization of the American"—that is, educating each new generation by transmitting knowledge of the broader culture and inculcating the ideals, norms, and values necessary for life in a democratic society.[8]

BETWEEN CIVICS AND A HARD PLACE

Beginning in the 1960s, however, things changed. At the same time that first the Vietnam War and then the Watergate scandal eroded the public's faith in government, the notion of assimilative civic education came under attack. Its initial foes saw American civic education as a form of cultural imperialism that ignored the diversity within American communities and public schools. Civic education based on a common culture was not appropriate, they said, given the variety of experiences and backgrounds that students brought to the classroom. The word "assimilation," once trumpeted as civic education's purpose, became objectionable. One critic, for instance, wrote that "the pressure that schools place on students to assimilate is *itself an example of educational inequality* (italics in original)."[9] As the twentieth century went on these early critics were joined by other groups, including those of religious motivation, that were for one reason or another hostile to American civic education in its more foundational form. Education professor Jeffrey Mirel writes of that time:

> Regardless of whether one opposed Eurocentrism or secular humanism, there appeared to be widespread agreement that the civic mission of public schools was a form of oppression. From that perspective, the old nonpartisan policy of preparing future citizens by educating them in the kinds of knowledge, skills, ideals, and values that had been traditionally taught in public schools had to be either radically redesigned or abandoned.[10]

Here it is worth acknowledging the difficult situation in which American public schools found themselves then and find themselves now. On the one hand they seek to be welcoming, innocuous purveyors of important and commonly accepted knowledge and skills to students from a multiplicity of backgrounds. On the other hand, in teaching civics these schools have, as we have seen, historically attempted to convey not only the undisputed mechanics of American government but also the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, the shared values of a nation. These goals are certainly in tension. Schools face a challenge.

Rather than take up the gauntlet, though, American public schools have historically tended to avoid all gloves tossed in their vicinity. "When in doubt," goes the mantra of the caricature state-education-department or school-district leader, "leave it out."[11] So civics is left out. Especially in times when civics and civic education have themselves become controversial—our current time is surely among these—public schools have tended to teach less civics, thereby transmitting to students neither the hard facts of government nor the skills and values of citizenship.[12]

Thus, whereas until the 1960s American public high-school students were typically required to take three courses in civics—Civics, Problems of Democracy, and U.S. Government—today most get by with a single semester-long class.[13] Even when civics is taught many teachers avoid teaching it robustly. For example, in the 2023 *State of the American Teacher Survey* 65 percent of respondents answered yes to the question, "Have you ever decided on your own, without being directed by school or district leaders, to limit discussions about political and social issues in class?" When this 65 percent was asked why they had made such a decision, the most common first-choice response was, "I am not sure that my school or district leaders would support me if parents expressed concerns."[14]

OTHER PRIORITIES

It is not only controversy that has led to the decline of American civic education. The country's instructional priorities have clearly shifted.

Take, for instance, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, the major legislation that tied school funding to test scores in math and reading. Civics was not an NCLB consideration, yet the law had massive unintended consequences for American civic education. The Center on Education Policy published a report in 2007 which found that school districts had increased their study time of English language arts and math by an average of 43 percent, and they had cut social studies (i.e., the broad subject under which civics is classified) instructional time by an average of 32 percent, with some schools cutting social studies teaching time by more than half.[15]

TABLE 1

CHANGES IN INSTRUCTIONAL TIME IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS SINCE 2001-02

Subject or Period	Percentage of ALL DISTRICTS That Increased Time	Percentage of ALL DISTRICTS That Decreased Time	Average Increase (Minutes per Week)	Average Decrease (Minutes per Week)
English language arts	58%		141	
Mathematics	45%		89	
Social studies		36%		76
Science		28%		75
Art and music		16%		57
Recess		20%		50
Physical education		9%		40

Souce: Center on Education Policy, February 2007, District Survey, item 19

Another study found that from 1993 to 2008, the time allotted to social studies instruction dropped by 56 minutes per week in third- through fifth-grade classes in the U.S. Over the same period, math and English language arts instruction increased.[16]

The United States also recently went through a phase that could safely be called "STEM obsessed." (We refer here to the STEM—that is, science, technology, engineering, and math—focus that began in the aughts, not that which occurred in America after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik into orbit in 1957.) It takes nothing away from the importance of STEM to point out that as federal monies for STEM education skyrocketed, the same funding for civic education plummeted, falling from around $150 million per year in 2010 to less than $5 million in 2020 (in 2024, it was increased to $23 million per year).[17]

States, too, have not recently prioritized civic education, though that is beginning to change. Still, many state requirements for civic education remain low by historical standards. Most states mandate only a one-semester course in high school, as aforementioned, and civics requirements in elementary and middle schools are sparse. Only eight states, for example, currently have any civics requirements for middle-school students.[18]

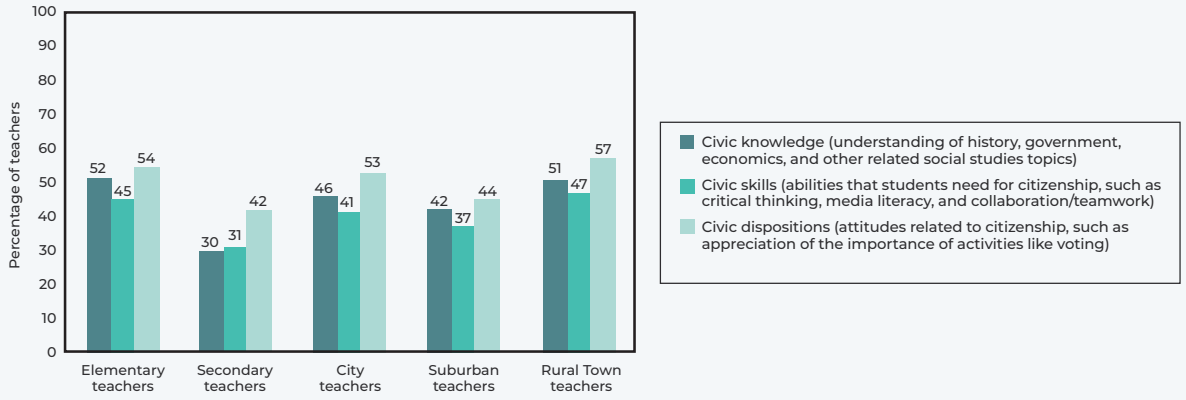
WHAT TO TEACH, AND WHO TO TEACH IT?

Surveys show broad, bipartisan support for the proposition that more time and money should be devoted to American civic education. But on what *kind* of civic education should that time and money be spent? We have yet to reach consensus about what today's American civic education should be.

It is thus unsurprising that teachers feel unready to teach civics courses. A RAND Corporation survey found that 80 percent of American social studies teachers—the teachers most often called upon to teach civics—do not feel well-prepared to support students' civic learning, saying they require "additional aid with instructional materials, professional development, and training."[19]

FIGURE 1

WEIGHTED PERCENTAGES OF SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS WHO HAVE NOT RECEIVED ANY PRESERVICE OR IN-SERVICE TRAINING ON HOW TO SUPPORT STUDENTS' CIVIC KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND DISPOSITIONS



Source: RAND Corporation, *Preparing Children and Youth for Civic Life in the Era of Truth Decay*, 2020

Another survey from RAND found that only 23 percent of teachers agreed that one of the top three aims of civic education is "promoting knowledge of social, political, and civic institutions." And a mere 40 percent of educators said a top-three aim was "promoting knowledge of citizens' rights and responsibilities"; the rights and responsibilities of citizenship is literally the definition of civics.[20]

Writing in *Education Next* about a series of off-the-record, bipartisan symposia conducted at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) think tank, where he is a senior fellow, Frederick Hess concluded "that there is widespread agreement on many—but not all—of the goals of civics education but little agreement on how to get there." Hess continues:

> We all want students to embrace ideals of liberty and equality, to know how American government works, and to be invested in making their nation a better place. We are less decided on whether to cultivate patriotism, how much content students need to learn, whether schools are honest brokers when it comes to sensitive questions of history or ideology, and what it means to *teach* students about liberty and equality. Unfortunately, even for those goals we do agree about, there is sharp disagreement, frequently along ideological lines, on how to achieve them.[21]

Such significant disagreement over the essence of civic education—among, it should be noted, the sort of people who are invited to attend D.C. think tank symposia—is certainly an obstacle to civic education's expansion.

THE KIDS ARE NOT ALRIGHT

Let it be stated clearly: teaching less civics has had real effects on post–baby boomer Americans.

Multiple studies have shown that older Americans are significantly better informed about civics than their relatively younger counterparts. A Pew Research Center survey from 2023 found this to be true,[22] as did a prior study from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, which reported that 74 percent of those over 65 could answer 6 of 10 citizenship test questions correctly while a mere 19 percent of those under 45 could do so. A study from the mid-1990s revealed that the civics knowledge of high-school graduates at that time was comparable to that of high-school dropouts in the late 1940s.[23]

Consider: in June 2024 the American Council of Trustees and Alumni surveyed some 3,000 college and university students on basic knowledge of American history and government. Among the findings: almost one-third of students think senators serve a four-year term; one-third are not sure who is the chief justice of the Supreme Court; and a plurality of respondents thought Joe Biden was president of the Senate.[24]

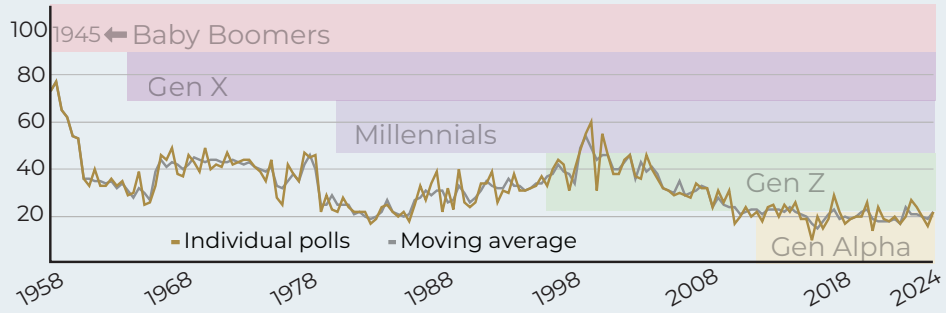
The young Americans surveyed above are, again, attaining university educations.

It is also worth emphasizing that declines in civic literacy have corresponded with a decline in trust in government, a topic that Pew has studied since 1958. At that time, when Pew began examining the subject, about three quarters of Americans "trusted the federal government to do the right thing almost always or most of the time." As of April 2024 that figure had declined to 24 percent.[25]

FIGURE 2

PUBLIC TRUST IN GOVERMENT OVER TIME

% who say they trust the government to do what is right just about always/most of the time



Source: Pew Research Center, Public Trust in Government 1958-2024

Pew's results have been replicated elsewhere. Since the 1970s the Gallup Poll, NORC's General Social Survey, and the Harris Poll have asked a series of questions about the public's confidence in the "people in charge of running institutions" or in those institutions themselves.[26] Analyzing these data in 2022, scholars Henry E. Brady and Thomas B. Kent found that "Between the period of 1972 to 1979 and the period of 2010 to 2021, confidence in Congress declined by 45 percent . . . These changes mirror the drop in trust in 'government' of about 40 percent found over the same period on another set of surveys, the American National Election Studies."[27]

Unfortunately, a lack of civics knowledge goes hand-in-hand with a lack of trust in government institutions—research has shown that these states reinforce each other. A dearth of civics knowledge is also correlated with other undesirable outcomes for individuals and thus societies, including declines in civic engagement and in

what the sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman defined as "social capital"—i.e., the value derived from one's social networks (physical networks, not virtual ones). In the bestselling book *Bowling Alone*, and in subsequent writings, the sociologist Robert Putnam has argued that social capital in the United States has been falling for decades. Young Americans currently report being less happy than older Americans, which is a historical aberration;[28] in fact, the data suggest that levels of anxiety, dissatisfaction, and hopelessness among young Americans are at the highest levels ever.[29]

A WAY FORWARD

In 2011, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor published an essay in which she'd written that "civic education must be understood, at its root, as education for informed participation in government and society." She continued: "The goal is for students to have the knowledge to understand the political history of our nation, appreciate different perspectives, craft their own informed opinions, and gain the skills to persuasively advocate their views in the public sphere."[30]

How do we achieve this multifaceted goal?

First, in order for students to "have the knowledge," as Justice O'Connor wrote, they must be *taught* the knowledge, which means that schools must return to devoting more time to civic education. This is, as we have seen, easier said than done—but we might at least start with the saying. Our nation would do well to reprioritize civic instruction, beginning in the early grades. In not a few states and districts and schools this reprioritization is already underway.

Second, Justice's O'Connor's prescription of learning to "appreciate different perspectives" is sound advice not only for students but also for adults—all adults, certainly, which *ipso facto* includes the policymakers, school leaders, teachers, and parents who are directly involved in civic education in American schools. These adults especially would do well to work to ratchet down rancor where it exists and invite compromise, particularly around the teaching of civics. Doing so entails identifying, appreciating, and enhancing that which was best about earlier flavors of American civic education while also taking seriously the serious present-day critiques. "Our civics and history courses of the past may have been sufficiently extensive," Justice O'Connor wrote in the aforementioned essay, "but they often provided a one-sided view, failing to adequately address the kinds of controversy and conflict that citizens must understand and effectively confront." Corollary to dialing down the animosity is providing educators with effective training in how to teach civics, which includes setting out expectations and limits, and then committing to support teachers in their good-faith classroom efforts.

Can this be done? Is it possible today to reach consensus about the content and skills that should be included, and how they should be taught, in an American public-school civics class?

We submit that it can be done because it is *already being done*. We have seen, for example, state legislatures across the nation pass bills to enhance civic education in one way or another. We have read countless stories about district, school, and classroom leaders who are pushing to revive civics in their jurisdictions. We have watched sprout at colleges from coast to coast programs and entire schools devoted to study of the history and future of civics.

In 2021 the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education think tank, published a review of state standards for U.S. history and civics. The group determined that sixteen jurisdictions—fifteen states and the District of Columbia—deserved recognition for crafting standards documents that avoided both partisanship and vagueness, that settled for neither convenient culture-war narratives nor tepid abstraction.[31]

The College Board's Advanced Placement U.S. Government and Politics (U.S. GoPo) course provides, according to the Board, "a college-level, nonpartisan introduction to key political concepts, ideas, institutions, policies, interactions, roles, and behaviors that characterize the constitutional system and political culture of the United States."[32] Well over 300,000 students enroll each year in this challenging class, the content of which has been backed by manifold conservative and liberal scholars, endorsed by groups including the National Constitution Center, and is taught with relish in both the reddest and bluest of American districts. Students who receive qualifying scores on the AP U.S. GoPo exam can receive college credit at institutions as diverse in perspective as Oberlin College and Conservatory, Wesleyan University, Liberty University, and Hillsdale College.

It can be done because it is being done. And the O'Connor Institute, through our Civics for Life community, Civics 101 Micro-lessons for lifelong learners, and O'Connor Institute Ambassadors club for high-school students, is proud to contribute to this progress.

After denoting the challenges he identified through the AEI symposia, Hess concluded, "Tackling civic education will require educators, advocates, policymakers, and parents to practice the very virtues we want to teach our children. It will be difficult, but the civil and constructive tone of our conversations—even as they grew heated and emotional—leaves us confident that we are more than up to the task."

We agree. Let us adults practice the civics that we preach. "At times," Justice O'Connor said, "we have to give up some of our individual interests so we don't compromise our collective future. The resulting 'common ground' should be treated as 'some kind of sacred ground,' because that's where we're going to find the promised land."[33]

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[5] Carl H. Gross and Charles C. Chandler, "Introduction," *The History of American Education Through Readings*, ed. Carl H. Gross and Charles C. Chandler (Boston: D.C. Heath and Com- pany, 1964).
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[7] It is worth noting that this mode of transmission of civic knowledge, from children to parents, continues even today. See the O'Connor Institute's policy brief *New Evidence on Trickle-Down and Trickle-Up Influences in Civic Education and Engagement*, available at oconnorinstitute.org/research.
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[10] Jeffrey Mirel, "The Decline of Civic Education," *Daedalus 131*, no. 3 (2002): 49-55.
[11] Lawrence Cremin, ed., *The Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Men* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1957), 15.
[12] See, e.g., John Rogers et al., *Educating for a Diverse Democracy* (Los Angeles: UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, 2023).
[13] Molly A. Hunter, *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2011).
[14] See, e.g.,https://www.brookings.edu/articles/partnerships-with-parents-are-key-to-solving-heightened-political-polarization-in-schools/
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[28] *World Happiness Report 2024* (New York: Gallup, the Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre, and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2024).
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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy, a 501(c)(3) organization, continues the distinguished legacy and lifetime work of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor to advance American democracy through multigenerational civics education, civil discourse, and civic engagement. Its vision is to create a nation where important policy decisions affecting our future are made through a process of critical analysis of facts and informed participation of all citizens.

For more information about this policy brief, contact the O'Connor Institute's director of public policy, Liam Julian, at ljulian@oconnorinstitute.org.

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