

Why Civics Is About More Than Citizenship

Amid stagnant performance on civics exams and abysmal youth voter turnout, one group has endeavored to make the U.S. citizenship exam a high-school graduation requirement in every state.



Kids recite the Pledge of Allegiance during a Halloween-themed naturalization ceremony.

Patrick Semansky / AP

ALIA WONG | SEP 17, 2015

Only one in five Americans aged 18 through 29 cast a ballot in last year's elections, marking 2014 as having the lowest youth voter-turnout in 40 years.

Some reason that young Americans are [apathetic about public affairs](#). Others argue that [cynicism about the electoral process](#) is what's keeping young adults from the polls: They're so disillusioned with politics they've simply given up on it.

Given Millennials' lifestyle habits and the general public's ever-growing skepticism of people in power, perennially low voter turnout may seem inevitable. But perhaps schools are largely to blame for the rather pathetic participation numbers; perhaps young adults' ignorance of civic affairs helps explain why so few of them cast their votes. Perhaps that means change is possible.

“The more educated you are, the more likely you are to be civically engaged,” the Fordham Foundation's Robert Pondiscio said in a recent seminar with education reporters. It seems that the country's public schools are failing to fulfill one of their core founding missions: [to foster and maintain a thriving democracy](#).

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This is the stated mission of the [Joe Foss Institute](#), a nonprofit that has been [making headlines](#) for its particular civic-ed strategy. The non-partisan institute is on a mission to make passing the [U.S. citizenship exam](#)—the one that immigrants have to take to become naturalized citizens—a high-school graduation requirement in all 50 states by 2017. Officially, the exam is designed to comprehensively assess one's familiarity with American fundamentals,

drawing 10 questions or prompts at random from a total pool of 100: “What is the supreme law of the land?” for example, or “Name a state that borders Canada.”

Even though all 50 states and the District of Columbia technically require some civic education, advocates say many districts don’t take those policies very seriously, and few states actually hold schools accountable for students’ civics’ outcomes. [Just about a fourth](#) of high-school seniors in 2014 scored “proficient” on the federal-government’s civics exam. Proficiency levels were [equally lousy for eighth-graders](#). “U.S. performance has stayed the same. Or should I say: Scores have stayed every bit as bad as the last time the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) took the pulse of history, civics, and geography in public and private schools,” [wrote](#) the *Washington Post Writers Group* columnist Esther Cepeda, who hosted the aforementioned seminar with reporters, earlier this year. As with standardized tests in general, the NAEP exam certainly isn’t the ideal way to gauge proficiency but [it’s the only source of nationwide data](#). And ultimately, surveys of American youth suggest that these test scores paint a pretty accurate picture of their civic literacy: [A 2010 Pew Research study](#) found that the vast majority of young adults struggle with basic questions about politics—who the next House speaker would be, for example. On a day like today—national [Constitution and Citizenship Day](#)—that makes for an especially discouraging reality.

Tufts University’s Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, or CIRCLE, suggests that these low proficiency levels correlate with turnout stats. According to [a 2013 CIRCLE survey](#) of young adults, about 60 percent of the respondents who said they’d studied voting in high school cast ballots in the 2012 election, compared to only 43 percent of those who said they hadn’t; just 21 percent of the respondents said they knew their state’s voter-registration deadline.

Given those circumstances, the institute's initiative may seem like a large undertaking—especially in a country whose politicians are nearly a decade overdue in rewriting the omnibus federal education law. Yet the citizenship-exam law has already passed in eight states, among them Arizona—where the nonprofit and much of its leaders are based—Louisiana, and Wisconsin.

Moreover, another 11 state legislatures considered the proposal this year, and the group intends to get 20 additional states on board in 2016. Advocates are confident all will go according to plan.

The question is whether that goal will actually achieve the institute's pledged mission of civic know-how among America's future adults. The initiative has also raised concerns about what it represents. "It's an empty symbolic effort," said Joseph Kahne, a professor of education at Mills College who oversees the [Civic Engagement Research Group](#) and is a vocal critic of the Foss Institute's plan, in the seminar. "There's not any evidence base to show that this will be effective ... It's something state legislators can pass and feel good about." In a [recent piece of commentary](#) for *Education Week*, he argued that testing approach to civic ed is the equivalent of "teaching democracy like a game show."

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Aside from Kahne, critics have been scrutinizing the initiative for a range of reasons, both educational and political. For one, it comes with even more standardized testing for kids who are already overwhelmed by the stuff. For another, it sends the message that a multiple-choice exam is the key to being a successful citizen. In other words, it uses an arguably one-dimensional tool as a proxy for an idea of nationhood that, to many critics, is precisely the opposite—what should be a “continuum,” as Louise Dubé, the executive director of iCivics,

explained, that emphasizes “quality and not just facts.”

Indeed, civics is an abstract concept that means different things to different people, as does civic education. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines civic education as “all the processes that affect people's beliefs, commitments, capabilities, and actions as members or prospective members of communities.” The Center for Civic Education's Margaret Stimmann Branson offers something a little more concise: “education in self-government,” which, she specified, requires that citizens are proactive. “They do not just passively accept the dictums of others or acquiesce to the demands of others,” she continued. And then there's the *Joe Foss Institute's interpretation*: the teaching of “how our government works and who we are as a nation, preparing them to exercise their vote, solve problems in their communities, and engage in active citizenship.”

Civic education is “education in self-government.”

What makes the subject challenging to apply in schools, though, is that things can get complicated once the basic facts and figures are peeled away. Teaching how a bill becomes law? Fine. Using a current piece of pending legislation to illustrate that lesson? Tricky. Asking students to think critically about that legislation and opine on its merits as if they're the lawmakers determining its fate? Risky. Indeed, civics inherently intersects with polemical topics that some teachers are uncomfortable discussing in the classroom—often because *they're worried, perhaps for good reason, about losing their jobs*. As Cepeda noted in the seminar, efforts to ramp up civic education in schools may have floundered because the subject is “a very politically touchy issue,” something with which

politicians are wary of dealing.

In a way, that's one reason why the Joe Foss approach makes sense: As a multiple-choice test about facts, it is by definition as objective as these things get. And the exam itself is, arguably, so easy that debating the merits of it as a required exit high-school exam almost seems silly. Pondiscio even went as far as to say that the exam is too easy to make sense as a high-school requirement; "it should be an exit exam" for elementary-school students, he contended. (To be sure, not every elementary-school student is going to be able to ace the test. No. 67, for example, asks applicants to name one of the writers of the Federalist Papers.)

Acknowledging the exam's limitations, Lucian Spataro, a former president of the [Joe Foss Institute](#) who continues to serve on its board, reasoned that it simply serves as a first step toward getting kids' civic literacy to an acceptable level. It's part of what will inevitably be a long-drawn-out and challenging process. Spataro used similar logic in justifying the testing approach: It incentivizes teachers, he suggested, to give the subject more attention. "If it's tested, it's taught," he said. (Ironically, this teaching-to-the-test reasoning is one of the main reasons No Child Left Behind is so unpopular.)

Sparato, a former educator and an engineer by training, lamented what he said is a disproportionate emphasis on STEM in America's classrooms. "You're going to have to have all the disciplines on the frontburner—not just the STEM disciplines" in order to retain "the United States' competitive edge," he said. "You need to be a well-rounded student to be a well-rounded citizen ... This can no longer be the quiet crisis in education."

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Few would doubt Sparato’s characterization of the civic-ed problem as a “quiet crisis”—a term coined by the former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor (who, coincidentally, founded iCivics) and **regularly included** in the Foss Institute’s promotional materials. But the citizenship-test strategy “is the exact opposite of what we want,” says iCivics’ Dubé, who got involved with the organization after her own son participated in its educational activities as a fourth-grader. In contrast with the Foss Institute, iCivics—which O’Connor founded in 2009—sees itself as a technology-focused endeavor, giving teachers free access to interactive, role-playing games and activities to use in the classrooms. The program, according to Dubé, reaches an estimated 3 million children annually and is used by roughly half of the nation’s public middle-school teachers. iCivics, Dubé stressed, based on a four-pronged definition of civic ed: “skills,” like teaching kids how to write effective argumentative essays using primary sources; “knowledge,” which has to do with facts and understanding how the system works; “dispositions,” such as being able to engage in dialogue about difficult issues while managing their socioemotional behaviors; and “actions,”—putting these tools into effect by going to the polls, for example. In other words, the Joe Foss emphasis—what iCivics would probably define as “knowledge”—seems to highlight a small, though important, fraction of that endeavor. “Some of the things happening politically are a result of people not knowing,” how to make a difference, Dubé said. “It’s important that we show [students] that that big machine that seems like it has nothing to do with you matters more than you think.”

“Any movement for civic education,” she continued, “is a good thing.”

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The two biggest challenges to civic literacy among today’s young adults, according to Dubé, are quality and equity. To improve the outcomes, educators need to show students that the information is relevant and easy to digest, she said. They need to know it will make a difference in their lives. And, she argued, iCivics’ effectiveness has to do with its focus on gaming; it’s about employing the element of mystery and playfulness, encouraging kids to compete and discover. That, she said, is “what might overcome that disaffection.”

In general, disaffection seems to be a major obstacle in Arizona. Home to one of the [highest rates of undocumented immigrants](#), the state is notorious for its [harsh treatment](#) of those believed to be in the country illegally. It’s also one of the few states [where high-school dropout rates have actually increased](#), a trend that’s been largely attributed to specific districts, such as Tucson and Mesa, and the high percentage of Latino students.

Arizona also happens to be the epicenter of the country’s civic-ed efforts. O’Connor was an elected official and judge in Arizona before being appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court by President Reagan; she started iCivics in response to students’ poor outcomes and what she described as widespread misperceptions of the judiciary’s role. The Foss Institute, too, has Arizona roots: The Grand Canyon state spearheaded the move toward making the test a graduation requirement.

And, in an interesting juxtaposition to the Joe Foss initiative, Arizona’s Tucson school district is currently immersed in a high-profile battle over Mexican American Studies course—one that integrates topics ranging from social justice to multiculturalism. The course was banned after the state’s attorney general

called the curriculum “very racially oriented and designed to create negative feelings about the United States.” A challenge to the ban’s constitutionality recently went to a U.S. appeals court, which largely rejected the plaintiffs’ complaint but said that [they had enough evidence to merit](#) to take the case back to trial in Arizona’s district court in Tucson. “Once that law goes away I think things are just gonna bloom because really people have to acknowledge the facts, the demographics—and at the end of the day, we have to prepare the youth for a multicultural era,” Tony Diaz, a Texas professor and activist who in response to the ban has [spearheaded a nationwide effort to get ethnic studies into schools](#) by “trafficking” books into classrooms, told me earlier this year. “If this law stays on the books I do not even know what to think for America. I cannot even imagine that [policymakers] would ultimately condone this law—it would not be America. Everything I have ever believed in this county would be a farce.”

TED STORY



[Should Decide How Students About America’s Past?](#)

Almost all of the states that have already adopted the Foss graduation requirement, as [The New Yorker’s Vauhini Vara points out](#), lean toward the right. Even the institute’s CEO, Frank Riggs, a former Republican U.S. representative, acknowledged in an interview with Vara that the institute has “the image of a more conservative organization.” But, Riggs added, the institute has “been very, very careful to promote our citizen-education initiative as a bipartisan, good-government initiative.” In its advocacy of the citizenship-test requirement, the nonprofit—which is named after a World War II Marines fighter and former North Dakota governor whose wife remains on the organization’s board—is certainly careful to avoid political (and, presumably, Anglocentric) rhetoric. Still, for what it’s worth, an analysis of the institute’s [leadership page](#) suggests that all the institute’s

executives and board members are white, and many of them have right-leaning political affiliations and are powerful and likely wealthy. They include Sandra Froman, a former National Rifle Association president; John Elway, a former Denver Broncos quarterback who's now one of its vice presidents; and Dan Quayle, who served as vice president under George H.W. Bush.

The Joe Foss Institute describes its mission as simply “promoting an emphasis on civic education in schools,” though tax filings indicate a mission that's a little more specific than that. Its IRS 990 form for 2013, the most recent year for which federal tax filings are publicly available, lists two grants to outside organizations. One was a \$26,000 donation to the Dreyfuss Initiative, a nonprofit it described as having a similar mission: “to promote patriotism and education in schools.” (The other hefty donation went toward an educational program whose curriculum, according to its website, “is designed to teach character, life skills, and leadership to urban students,” largely thanks to a “team of full-time primarily ethnic staff.) The Foss Institute on its website also refers to its eponymous founder as “A True American Patriot.”

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Today, it seems that the increasingly popular conception of good citizenship is proving you're “American.” Proving not just that you're knowledgeable about civic life and how to play a part in it, but also assimilated and patriotic and good at memorizing facts. Maybe it in part explains the [controversy that exploded in](#)

Oklahoma over the AP U.S. History exam, which provoked criticism from right-leaning policymakers for its supposedly inadequate emphasis on “American exceptionalism.” (The College Board later [made a sentence-by-sentence revision](#) to the [curriculum](#) to appease critics’ concerns.)

There’s also the question of how deep such lessons ultimately go. Educators often cite limited social-studies instructional time as a key reason why so many students underperform on assessments in the subject. Yet, as Cepeda noted in her column, researchers tend to question that rationale, suggesting that there’s little correlation between the amount of time dedicated to a subject and students’ performance. “To me, this points directly to the quality, rather than the quantity, of instruction,” Cepeda wrote in her column. Is preparing students for the citizenship exam—which would likely entail rote memorization and out-of-class practice tests—really the highest-quality option?

Peter Levine, the director of CIRCLE, echoed Cepeda’s logic in a February op-ed in *Education Week*. It doesn’t make sense to ask educators to engage kids in civics through the test used by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, he [wrote](#), noting that the NAEP scores aren’t as dire as some make them out to be. “The priority should be to give students frequent opportunities to read and talk with one another about pressing social and political issues, identify civic problems that interest them, deliberate about possible solutions, and when their deliberations suggest a promising course of action, pursue it.”

CIRCLE describes this approach as “[deeper learning](#).” It’s the kind of stuff that can’t be taught in a textbook—that can’t be contained in a lecture nor tested in a multiple-choice exam.

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government works in order to make change.”

Similarly, some advocates—such as the Webby Awards creator Tiffany Shlain who last year founded “Character Day”—emphasize that “citizenship” is simply one component of a much broader goal: character development. The annual Character Day even, which this year takes place Friday, brings films and discussion guides to thousands of teachers and schools around the world, including all of San Francisco’s public schools in an effort to foster dialogue about and act on diverse philosophies about [the best way to lead a “happy, fulfilling, and purposeful life,”](#) Shlain, a filmmaker, recently told me. “Non-academic skills like teamwork, persistence, adaptability, taking initiative, and curiosity, among others, are really important for both career and life.” Character Day, somewhat like iCivics provides access to [free resources](#)—such as online modules on values ranging from “[social intelligence](#)” to “[appreciation of beauty](#)”—to children, parents, and educators. There’s no curriculum or framework or rules. Teachers are encouraged to get creative.

Asked about the Joe Foss approach, though, Shlain said she sees its point. “I think there are some things that have fallen by the wayside,” she said. “Knowing about your country and about how things work—it’s empowering, ultimately ... My focus is different, but I think [the citizenship-test requirement] is a good thing. You have to know about how the government works in order to make change, and a lot of people don’t.”



The Future of Puerto Rican Education

The island's public universities could lose significant funding within the next few years.

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