

To preserve our constitutional democracy we must teach civics

Our nation faces a problem: as civil discourse becomes more partisan and heated, with fewer spaces available for neutral debate and collaborative discussion, more people will become discouraged and react by turning away from civic engagement. That's especially true for students, who often search in vain for meaningful ways to be effective change agents. Both adults and students can become disillusioned and cynical about the democratic process when opportunities for civic engagement and conversation are lacking. But it's far worse when a student tunes out — that's our future turning away. The solution is not less engagement, but more; not fewer places to interact with people who have different opinions, but more. A key element of that solution is to lean into the civic education organizations that help create the next generation of informed, engaged, and empowered Americans. These civic education institutions are key to preserving the republic, and a greater focus on supporting their work is needed — but funding is waning exactly as demand is increasing.

The best, most recent example of the nation's civic education failure occurred on January 6, 2021, when a violent mob overran the U.S. Capitol and attempted to stop Congress from certifying the presidential election result. Several people died, dozens were arrested, and many wondered where we might find the common ground necessary to move our democracy forward. The event was a failure by many institutions on many fronts, and it showed our nation's fundamental failure to educate its citizens about the nature and meaning of American democratic institutions. No one who completed — and absorbed — a quality U.S. history or civics course could reasonably conclude that a mob attempt to forcibly thwart the presidential electoral process was either a lawful act of dissent or a constructive act of civil disobedience.

The failure to educate has adverse effects on both sides of the aisle and contributes to this country's hyper-polarization. The vast gulf that separates our two major political parties can be traced in part to a failure to ensure that all our youth have access to civic and constitutional education. It's a tragic cycle of educational failure

leading to political dysfunction, which furthers educational failures. That's the opposite of the founders' vision of educated citizens participating in government — instead, they created public education to prepare students to be good citizens. As Thomas Jefferson said in a letter to William Jarvis in 1820: "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power." Jefferson may have been flawed in his own life, and his audience was his fellow free white male citizens, but his point rings true: education is the key.

The link between education and good citizenry has long been acknowledged by policymakers and builders of civil society. Dr. Pauli Murray, the celebrated transgender civil rights lawyer who co-founded the National Organization of Women, wrote to President Roosevelt in December 1938: "My main interest, the tradition of my family for three generations, is education, which, I believe, is the basic requirement for the maintenance and extension of democracy." Civics is important because it teaches people about the co-equal branches of government, individual rights, and how to participate effectively in our democracy. In the 2013 Report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, research showed that adults who had high quality civics courses in high school had above average scores measuring informed voting. They were more likely to register to vote, answer campaign knowledge and general political questions correctly, vote consistently on campaign issues, and follow the news closely during election season.

Other prominent voices similarly emphasize civic education. More than 50 years ago, sociologist Robert Bellah argued for an American "civil religion," which he defined as "a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity." California's Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye has long advocated for adult civic education: "the strength of our democratic institutions relies on the public's understanding of those institutions." Two U.S. Supreme Court justices recently noted that our democracy is at risk of crumbling from within and falling to the domestic enemies of intolerance and factionalism.

Despite these calls to action, the Brookings Institution recently found that "real

concerns persist about the extent to which schools are equipping all students with the skills they need to be effective citizens [C]ritical parts of a civics education, namely participatory elements and community engagement, are often missing from state requirements.” Only an informed, educated electorate can hold representatives politically accountable, and to reach that level we need to increase civic education literacy by learning how to talk to one another, listen with respect, and discern truth from disinformation.

It’s not all bad news: there are some civic learning success stories, and the voices calling for greater civic and constitutional investment are not sitting idly by. For example, in his 2019 year-end report, Chief Justice John Roberts lauded the federal judiciary’s role in ensuring civic and constitutional education. In California, Chief Justice Cantil-Sakauye has for decades called for greater civic engagement, and she established multiple programs directed at fostering civic education under her Civic Learning Initiative. She has:

- Formed the Power of Democracy Steering Committee, which “guides and supports her civic education initiatives to further Californians’ understanding of their judicial branch”;
- Hosted two Civic Learning California Summits to advocate for civic education in California;
- Created an award program, in partnership with California’s Superintendent of Public Instruction, for public schools that engage youth in civics learning; and
- Supported a Judges in the Classroom program where teachers request (now virtual) visits from a judicial officer for a lesson on the rule of law and the role of the judicial branch.

Other organizations are similarly dedicated to creating resources for teachers to turn students into citizens who are equipped to engage in the democratic process. The Constitutional Rights Foundation educates, engages, and empowers the next generation through the proven practices of civic education. And the Center for Civic Education develops an enlightened citizenry by increasing understanding of the principles, values, institutions, and history of constitutional democracy among teachers, students, and the general public. All civics educators, and all civic

education-oriented organizations, recognize the bedrock civics principles: teaching students about civil discourse, the importance of the separation of powers of government, and individual constitutional rights. Those are the building blocks of knowledge within civic education, along with respectful communication, critical thinking, and valuing diverse viewpoints.

But the bad news is that civics often becomes sidelined in public-funding considerations, and some former stalwarts in this sector have closed shop. Recently, the Institute for Democracy and Justice announced it was forced to shut down, citing pandemic-related fundraising challenges. Increased public funding for civic education would expand and strengthen civic involvement in our democratic culture, yet such funding has dwindled over the last 20 years. In the first few years of the 21st century, the federal government invested roughly \$40 million per year in civics programs. Today, that federal investment is only around \$4 million per year — one-tenth of what it once was. This could change if the 116th Congress passes the bipartisan Civics Secures Democracy Act, which would increase that crucial funding to \$1 billion. In a year that began with a violent riot at the U.S. Capitol, it seems clear that civic education and civil discourse require more voices and more funding in this space, not fewer and less.

As a nation we face pressing questions about protecting the vitality and integrity of our democratic institutions. We view that as primarily a civic-education issue: only a well-educated citizenry is equipped to resolve those questions through public discourse and the democratic process. Teaching civic education and engagement empowers students to model constructive listening, consider alternatives, and find common ground. It is a fundamental part of how young citizens interact with the shared goals and principles that unite us all. Be part of the solution and find a local civics education program and help it succeed. By working together, we can ensure that a civic and constitutional education is available to all, and we can celebrate the strengths of our constitutional democracy while addressing and remedying its weaknesses together.

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