

Article: “Civic Education and Political Participation”
Author: William A. Galston
Issue: Apr. 2004
Journal: *PS: Political Science & Politics*



This journal is published by the American Political Science Association. All rights reserved.

APSA is posting this article for public view on its website. APSA journals are fully accessible to APSA members and institutional subscribers. To view the table of contents or abstracts from this or any of APSA's journals, please go to the website of our publisher Cambridge University Press (<http://journals.cambridge.org>).

This article may only be used for personal, non-commercial, or limited classroom use. For permissions for all other uses of this article should be directed to Cambridge University Press at permissions@cup.org.

Civic Education and Political Participation

The Current Condition of Civic Engagement

There are legitimate reasons to worry about the civic life of today's young adults. If we compare them with young adults of the past, we find evidence of diminished civic attachment.

Some of the basic facts are well known. In the early 1970s, about one half of 18–29 year olds voted in presidential elections. By 2000, only one third did. The same pattern holds for congressional elections—a bit more than one quarter in the mid-1970s, compared to less than one fifth in 2002.¹

Less well known are the trends charted by the remarkable UCLA study involving a quarter million matriculating college freshmen each year, conducted since the mid-1960s. Over this period, every significant indicator of political engagement has fallen by about half. Only 34% of freshmen think that keeping up with politics is important,

down from 60% in 1966 (though up a bit from the all-time low of 28% recorded in 2000). Only 22.5% say they frequently discuss politics, down from 33%.² Not surprisingly, acquisition of political knowledge from traditional media sources

is way down, and as yet not enough young people are using the Internet as sources of civic information to fill the role newspapers and network TV news once played.³

The news is not all bad by any means. Today's young people are patriotic, tolerant, and compassionate. They believe in America's principles and in the American dream. They adeptly navigate our nation's increasing diversity. And, as has been widely reported and discussed, they are more than willing to give of themselves to others. College freshmen are reporting significantly increased levels of volunteering in their last year of high school, a trend that seems to be carrying over to their college years.⁴

On the other hand, volunteering drops off sharply once young people reach their mid-twenties and enter the paid workforce (Lopez 2004). Nor is there a smooth path that links volunteering to wider civic engagement. On the contrary, young people often characterize their volunteering as an *alternative* to official politics, which they see as self-absorbed and unrelated to their deeper ideals. They have limited knowledge of government's impact,

either on themselves or on those they seek to assist. They understand why it matters to feed a hungry person at a soup kitchen; they do not understand why it matters where government sets eligibility levels for food stamps or payment levels for the Earned Income Tax Credit. They have confidence in personalized acts with consequences they can see for themselves; they have less confidence in collective actions (especially those undertaken through public institutions), whose consequences they see as remote, opaque, and impossible to control.

We ought not regard with equanimity the civic detachment of the young. In the first place, their disengagement increases the already powerful political tilt toward the concerns of the elderly. We should be debating higher education finance, job training, and family policy as vigorously as we do the future of Social Security and Medicare. We aren't, and we won't, unless younger Americans become more involved.

Second, I would offer an old-fashioned argument from obligation. Most young Americans derive great benefits from their membership in a stable, prosperous, and free society. These goods do not fall like manna from heaven; they must be produced, and renewed, by each generation. Every citizen has a moral responsibility to contribute his or her fair share to sustaining the public institutions and processes on which we all depend, and from which we all benefit.

Third, it is at least plausible to conjecture that under appropriate circumstances, political engagement helps develop intellectual and moral capacities that are intrinsically important: among them—enlarged interests, a wider human sympathy, a sense of active responsibility for oneself, the skills needed to work with others toward goods that can only be obtained or created through collective action, and the powers of sympathetic understanding needed to build bridges of persuasive words to those with whom one must act.

It may well be that even as civic engagement has declined, it has become not less, but more necessary for the development of the human capacities just sketched. Underlying this conjecture is the suspicion that as the market has become more pervasive during the past generation as organizing metaphor and as daily experience, the range of opportunities to develop non-market skills and dispositions has narrowed. For various reasons, the solidaristic organizations that dominated the U.S. landscape from the 1930s through the

by
William A. Galston,
University of Maryland,
College Park

early 1960s have weakened, and the principle of individual choice has emerged as our central value. Indeed, citizenship itself has become optional, as the sense of civic obligation (to vote, or for that matter to do anything else of civic consequence) has faded and as the military draft has been replaced by all-volunteer armed forces. When the chips are down we prefer exit to voice, and any sense of loyalty to something larger than ourselves has all but disappeared. In this context, the experience of collective action directed toward common purposes is one of the few conceivable counterweights to today's hyperextended principle of individual choice.

If civic engagement is more necessary than ever, our manifest failure to encourage it among young adults looms all the larger. The formative mechanisms and mobilizing arenas of civic opportunity are multiple. I will focus on the most traditional of these mechanisms and opportunities—our public schools—and on the most old-fashioned of their efforts to encourage political engagement—namely, civic education.

The Current Failure of Civic Education

In our decentralized system of public education, the closest thing we have to a national examination is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), devised by teams of subject-matter experts, and then carefully field-tested and revised, a process directed by the National Assessment Governing Board. For each subject, four different achievement levels are defined: “below basic” (which means little if any demonstrated knowledge of the subject); “basic,” which indicates partial mastery; “proficient”—the level representing a standard of adequate knowledge; and “advanced.” These achievement levels represent absolute thresholds, not percentiles. In principle, every student could reach the level of proficiency.

The results of the most recent NAEP Civics Assessment, administered in 1998, were not encouraging. For fourth, eighth, and (most relevant for our purposes) twelfth graders, about three-quarters were below the level of proficiency. Thirty-five percent of high school seniors tested below basic, indicating near-total civic ignorance. Another 39% were at the basic level, less than the working knowledge that citizens need.⁵

When we combine these NAEP results with other data from the past decade of survey research, we are driven to a gloomy conclusion: Whether we are concerned with the rules of the political game, political players, domestic policy, foreign policy, or political geography, student performance is quite low. This raises a puzzle. The level of formal schooling in the United States is much higher than it was 50 years ago, but the civic knowledge of today's students is at best no higher than that of their parents and grandparents. We have made a major investment in formal education, without any discernible payoff in increased civic knowledge.⁶

State-by-state analyses of civic education help explain these unimpressive results.⁷ While most states endorse civic education in their constitutions and declaratory policies, only half have even partially specified a required core of civic knowledge, fewer have made a serious effort to align their civics-related courses with challenging standards, and only a handful administer exams focused exclusively on civic topics. In many states, certification requirements do not ensure that teachers called upon to teach courses on civic institutions, processes, and controversies will have the background needed to do the job. Other studies indicate that a significant percentage of history and social studies teachers, who typically end

up leading civics classes, have little formal preparation for that task (or indeed for teaching history and social studies).

In addition, school-based civic education has been in decline over the past three decades. According to “The Civic Mission of Schools,” a recent national report cosponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), most high school civic education today comprises only a single government course, compared to the three courses in civics, democracy, and government that were common until the 1960s. Unlike the traditional civics course, today's government class analyzes and describes politics as a distant subject-matter, often with little explicit discussion of citizens' rights and responsibilities. Nor is the decline limited to high school. In just one decade, between 1988 and 1998, the proportion of fourth-graders who reported taking social studies daily fell steeply from 49% to only 39% (Carnegie and CIRCLE 2003, 14–15).

The causes of this decline are multiple and not easily summarized. Let me mention just two. Many teachers, principals, and school boards fear criticism or even litigation if they address topics that some parents or other members of the community may consider inappropriately controversial or political. In response, many school systems backed away from civic education. Moreover, the push for high-stakes testing in core academic subjects can come at the expense of subjects not considered to be part of the “core,” as civics often is not (Carnegie and CIRCLE 2003, 15).

Does Civic Knowledge Matter?

It is easy to dismiss these findings as irrelevant to the broader concerns with which I began. Who cares whether young people master the boring content of civics courses? Why does it matter whether they can identify their congressman or name the branches of government? Surprisingly, recent research documents important links between basic civic information and civic attributes that we have good reason to care about.⁸

To summarize:

1. Civic knowledge promotes support for democratic values. The more knowledge we have of the working of government, the more likely we are to support the core values of democratic self-government, starting with tolerance.

2. Civic knowledge promotes political participation. All other things being equal, the more knowledge people have, the more likely they are to participate in civic and political affairs.

3. Civic knowledge helps citizens understand their interests as individuals and as members of groups. There is a rational relationship between one's interests and particular legislation. The more knowledge we have, the more readily and accurately we connect with and defend our interests in the political process.

4. Civic knowledge helps citizens learn more about civic affairs. It is difficult to acquire more knowledge unless we have a certain basis of knowledge. The new knowledge we do gain can be effectively used only if we are able to integrate it into an existing framework.

5. The more knowledge we have of civic affairs, the less we have a sort of generalized mistrust and fear of public life.

Ignorance is the father of fear, and knowledge is the mother of trust.

6. Civic knowledge improves the consistency of citizens' views as expressed on public opinion surveys. The more knowledge people have, the more consistent their views across issues and over time.

7. Civic knowledge can alter our opinion on specific civic issues. For example, the more civic knowledge people have, the less likely they are to fear new immigrants and their impact on our country.

Doing School-Based Civic Education

As recently as a decade ago, the conventional wisdom (backed by academic research from the 1970s) was that school-based civic education is doomed to ineffectiveness. The most recent research, however, points in a more optimistic direction.⁹ While there is no single magic bullet, there are a number of effective approaches to civic education. The Carnegie/CIRCLE report summarizes their shared characteristics: a deliberate, intentional focus on civic outcomes such as students' propensity to vote, work on local problems, join voluntary associations, and follow the news; explicit advocacy of civic and political engagement, without adopting a particular position or partisan stance; active learning opportunities that engage students in discussions of relevant issues and encourage them to take part in activities that help put a "real life" perspective on classroom learning; and an emphasis on the ideas and principles that are essential to constitutional democracy (Carnegie and CIRCLE 2003, 21).

In addition, this report stressed the importance of school environment and culture to the acquisition of civic skills and attitudes. The most effective programs occur in schools that: consciously promote civic engagement by all students, with special attention to those who might otherwise remain disengaged; give students opportunities to contribute opinions about school governance—through student governments and other forums such as all-school assemblies and small working groups—and to understand how school systems are run; collaborate with the community and local institutions to

provide civic learning opportunities; provide teachers with access to professional development in civic education and; infuse a civic mission throughout the curriculum, offer an array of extracurricular activities, and provide a school climate that helps students put what they learn about civic education and democracy into practice (Carnegie and CIRCLE 2003, 21).

The Importance and the Challenge of Civic Education

The difficulty of the civic education task before us at least matches its importance. Not only do community-level disagreements about controversial policies continue to pose problems for teachers and school administrators, but also, at a deeper level, Americans do not wholly agree about the kind of citizenship they want our schools to foster. Some stress loyalty to current institutions and practices, while others emphasize critical reflection on them. Some focus on principles of national unity, while others want civic education to underscore the importance of demographic and ideological diversity. Some would teach our civic history as the story of fitful but palpable progress towards equality and inclusion, while others would insist on equal time for the effects of past and present oppression. Moral decency, voluntary service, voting, social movements . . . each of these can be taken as the paradigm of civic practice and placed at the core of civic pedagogy.

The question is whether it is possible to proceed in spite of these differences. There are grounds for hope. Unlike nations with highly centralized systems of public education, we are not obliged to agree on a single conception of civic education. Our decentralized system of public education provides enough flexibility to implement a range of pedagogies. In addition, we may not be quite as badly divided as students of the "culture wars" would have us believe. The experience of recent efforts to find common ground, spearheaded by such groups as the Center for Civic Education, the National Commission on Civic Renewal, and the joint Carnegie/CIRCLE project, points in an encouraging direction. The ultimate test, however, will occur on the ground, if and when every state decides to address this challenge in a serious way.

Notes

1. See Peter Levine and Mark Hugo Lopez, "Youth Voter Turnout has Declined, by Any Measure," CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, September 2002. All CIRCLE publications are available at civicyouth.org. Whatever may be the case for older voters, the decline in youth turnout has been so steep that it persists even after the statistical corrections urged in Michael P. McDonald and Samuel L. Popkin, 2001, "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter," *American Political Science Review* 95 (December): 963–974.

2. Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, "The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2003," released January 26, 2004. A summary of the reports' findings is available at gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html ("recent findings").

3. For details, see Michael Olander, "Media Use Among Young People," CIRCLE, July 2003.

4. For the 2003 statistics, see Higher Education Research Institute, "The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2003." For an analysis of long-term trends, see Mark Hugo Lopez, "Volunteering Among Young People," CIRCLE, February 2004.

5. For the 1998 NAEP Civics Results, see nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics. Unfortunately, these results do not include state-level data, so it is not possible to correlate differences among states in civic standards and curricula with actual achievement levels.

6. See especially Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

7. The best (and most recent) is Paul Gagnon, "Educating for Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core" (Washington, D.C.: Albert Shanker Institute, 2003).

8. For a comprehensive survey of the research underlying these propositions, see William A. Galston, "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001): 217–34.

9. See especially Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); and Judith Torney-Purta, "The School's Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-eight Countries," *Applied Developmental Science* 6, 4 (2002): 202–211.

References

- Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. 2003. "The Civic Mission of Schools." New York and Washington, D.C.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gagnon, Paul. 2003. *Educating for Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core*. Washington, D.C.: Albert Shanker Institute.
- Galston, William A. 2001. "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education." *Annual Review of Political Science* 4: 217–34.
- Higher Education Research Institute. 2004. "The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2003." Los Angeles: UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.
- Levine, Peter, and Mark Hugo Lopez. 2002. *Youth Voter Turnout Has Declined, By Any Measure*. College Park, MD: CIRCLE.
- Lopez, Mark Hugo. 2004. *Volunteering Among Young People*. College Park, MD: CIRCLE.
- McDonald, Michael P., and Samuel L. Popkin. 2001. "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter," *American Political Science Review* 95 (December): 963–974.
- National Assessment of Educational Progress. 1998. "Civics Assessment." nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/civics.
- Niemi, Richard G., and Jane Junn. 1998. *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn?* New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Olander, Michael. 2003. *Media Use Among Young People*. College Park, MD: CIRCLE.
- Torney-Purta, Judith. 2002. "The School's Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-eight Countries." *Applied Development Science* 6 (4): 202–211.