

From Classroom to Citizen

American Attitudes on Civic Education



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Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

Alliance for Representative Democracy

Center for Civic Education

Trust for Representative Democracy

National Conference of State Legislatures

The Center on Congress at Indiana University

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Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools is a long-term effort to renew and elevate civic learning as the best way to educate young Americans for Democracy. The Campaign works with coalition partners to bring about changes in state, local, and national policy that implement the recommendations in *The Civic Mission of Schools*, a report by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). www.civicmissionofschools.org



The Alliance for Representative Democracy www.representativedemocracy.org

The Center for Civic Education is a nonprofit, nonpartisan educational corporation dedicated to fostering the development of informed, responsible participation in civic life by citizens committed to values and principles fundamental to American constitutional democracy. CCE administers a wide range of critically acclaimed curricular, teacher-training, and community-based programs. www.civiced.org

The National Conference of State Legislatures is the bipartisan, nonprofit organization that serves the legislators and staff of the states, commonwealths, and territories. NCSL was formed in 1975 to improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures, to promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures, and to ensure states a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system. www.ncsl.org

The Center on Congress at Indiana University was established in 1999 to improve public understanding of Congress and to improve civic engagement, especially among young people, as a way to strengthen our basic institutions of government. The CCIU also seeks to inform a broad public audience about what citizens can do to participate more fully in the national representative process. <http://congress.indiana.edu>



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TRUST *for* REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY
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THE CENTER ON CONGRESS AT INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Executive Summary

Today, the American public believes that educating young people about democracy should be a central mission of schools. They think that civic learning can be an effective tool both in preparing students to be responsible citizens and in developing a broad array of character traits of value to society. Yet, most Americans also feel public schools are not fulfilling their civic mission and are not doing an adequate job preparing students to become good, engaged, active citizens. Likewise, they view young people as being unprepared to participate in the nation's civic life.

With their basic belief in the efficacy of civic education, many Americans support creating stronger civic education programs in schools. They believe policymakers should pay more attention to civic learning, and they are very ready to support officials who do.

These are among the key findings of a new public opinion survey that examined the attitudes of adults about civic education. The survey was conducted by the opinion research firm APCO Insights and Knowledge Networks for the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools and the Alliance for Representative Democracy.

Highlights of the survey include:

Schools and students are not doing well enough today.

- Americans give public schools a C grade for the job they are doing in training students to be competent and responsible citizens.
- Young people receive a C- for their civic awareness and engagement.

The public believes civic education should be a central part of public schools.

- Although the public believes the most important goal of public schools is developing basic skills, seven in ten say preparing students to be competent and responsible citizens is a “central purpose of public schools.”
- They rank civic education as just as important as preparing students for college.

Beyond its importance to our democracy, Americans believe civic education develops other positive character traits that are valuable to society.

- Ninety-one percent value civic education programs in public schools because they are “important for maintaining a healthy democracy.”
 - The public believes civic education makes a major contribution to developing responsible citizens (cited by 94 percent), instilling a sense of national pride (90 percent) and increasing political participation (88 percent).
 - Large majorities also endorse civic education as effective in improving student academic achievement (85 percent), preparing students for employment (84 percent) and improving student behavior (80 percent).

With their basic belief in the efficacy of civic education, Americans strongly support creating stronger civic education programs in schools.

The public sees schools as an answer to the country's civic deficits. They believe schools can be effective at teaching civic knowledge and skills.

- Nine in ten believe civic education programs in public schools can help address concerns about students being insufficiently prepared to participate in our democracy, with 37 percent saying schools can do “a lot.”
- Nearly two-thirds say that civic education content should be integrated into the teaching of other basic subjects.

Americans understand that schools face barriers to providing civic education.

- They see lack of funding as the biggest hurdle.
- A decline in the importance of values, such as patriotism, indifference toward politics and government, lack of classroom time, and insufficient teacher training were other barriers ranked as important.
- They see the current emphasis on testing in basic subjects as a less significant barrier to civic education.

They support paying more attention to civic education.

- The vast majority (88 percent) agrees that policymakers should pay more attention to civic education in public schools and 90 percent would support policymakers who make civic education a priority.

- There is very strong support for teacher training, student testing, integrating civic education more fully into the basic curriculum, and setting school standards for civic education. And more than eight in ten adults support increasing funding and course requirements for graduation as a means to ensure better civic learning.

The survey shows broad public support for improving and expanding civic education and their understanding of what stands in the way of doing so. It reveals changes in schools that could win their support. Most important, it underscores the public's deep appreciation for civic education and its optimism that schools can once again play a leading role giving young people the tools and encouragement they need to take their place as active and responsible citizens.

Introduction

“The only title in our democracy superior to that of President is the title of citizen,” said Justice Louis D. Brandeis. But, as the landmark *The Civic Mission of Schools* report noted, “Individuals do not automatically become free and responsible citizens, but must be educated for citizenship.”

“Civic education” has deep roots in America. In fact, preparing each new generation to be active participants in our democracy was a central reason for the first public schools in the new Republic.

But what kind of job do the schools do in teaching young people how to be engaged citizens and why good citizenship is important? What makes good citizens, anyway?

Can schools make a difference in this task of helping create responsible citizens of a democracy? Is it worthwhile for schools to educate for democracy at all, or should they simply leave it for the home, church, and other institutions?

The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools and the Alliance for Representative Democracy — a joint effort of the Trust for Representative Democracy of the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Center for Civic Education, and the Center on Congress at Indiana University — are working to answer these questions. Focusing primarily on young people, we want to improve Americans’ understanding of our representative democracy, the crucial role citizens play, and the need for all to participate.

A year ago, the Alliance conducted a survey that showed that young people do not understand citizenship, are disengaged from the political process, lack the knowledge needed for self-government, and have a limited appreciation for American democracy.

(www.representativedemocracy.org) This year, the survey addresses what to do about these shortcomings by assessing Americans’ views of civic education as a solution.

In this survey, we examine adults’ attitudes about how well schools are doing, what role they think schools can and should play in teaching civic education, and what barriers and opportunities exist. The survey provides valuable information and insights for policymakers, educators, and all Americans who care about preparing the next generation of citizens.

The Survey

The survey was conducted by the opinion research firm APCO Insight for the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools and the Alliance for Representative Democracy. The poll was administered online by Knowledge Networks (KN) to a panel representative of the U.S. population.

Knowledge Networks has developed a method of conducting true probability sampling on the Web, ensuring that findings from the sample are representative of the larger population.

Between July 7 and 12, 2004, 1,219 panelists were interviewed.

All KN panelists over age 18 were eligible to participate in the survey. APCO Insight adjusted the final data for non-response and other factors to be representative of the U.S. population on key demographic variables.

The sampling error for the results of the survey is plus or minus 2.8 percentage points for percentages near 50 percent at a confidence level of 95 percent. The sampling error diminishes slightly for questions with results at the extremes. The sampling error increases among subgroups.

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1. Schools and Students

Today, people see schools as doing only an average job in educating students to be informed and active young citizens. Not surprisingly, they rate young people as slightly below average in terms of their civic awareness and engagement.

The public schools received a C grade (1.89 on a 4-point grading scale, where an A is a 4.0) on the job they are doing providing civic education programs to elementary and secondary school students. The standard posed in the survey question was that the “goal of civic education is to train competent and responsible citizens who participate in our democratic society.” Asked how well schools are doing in meeting this standard, 54 percent gave the schools a grade of C. More than a quarter said the schools were doing a below average job, with 22 percent giving them a D, and five percent an F. Only three percent awarded an A, and 16 percent a B.

Fully 30 percent said that they had never had a course in civics or American government or could not remember if they had. This may come as a surprise to older generations of Americans, almost all of whom were required to take civics or government classes.

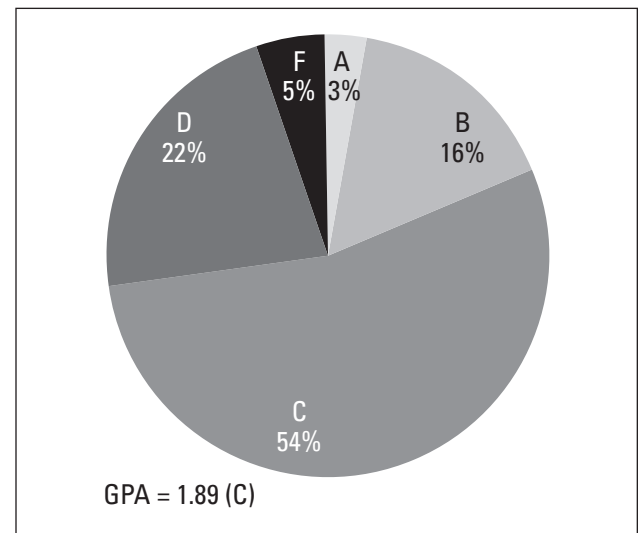
Ironically, those most likely to give civic education programs a good grade are those not significantly engaged in politics or government themselves. Parents of children who attend public schools give a higher grade to the job the schools are doing than do those with children in private schools or those without any children.

All surveyed gave young people, under 25 years old, an average grade of C- (1.72 on the 4-point grading scale) for their level of civic awareness and engagement. Here again, the less active politically or civically themselves, the higher the respondents’ perception of young people’s civic awareness. And conversely, those

respondents who are more active in civic affairs themselves are more likely to give a lower grade to today’s young people.

The respondents were asked to grade young people in six different ways: participation in youth groups or volunteer programs, voting, staying informed about news and major issues, understanding our system of government, respecting public officials and institutions, and participation in political activities. The highest grade was for the area of participating in youth groups or volunteer activities, and yet it was only a C (1.88 out of 4.) The other grade averages — all below C- — were for voting (1.73), staying informed (1.71), understanding the system of government (1.67), respecting institutions (1.70), and participating in political activities (1.62), with at least two in five giving American young people a D or F in these areas.

Grading public schools on the job they are doing providing civic education.



Grading young people on civic awareness and engagement.

	A Excellent	B Good	C Average	D Poor	F Failing	GPA
Participating in youth groups or volunteer programs	5%	15%	46%	29%	4%	C (1.88)
Voting in elections (18-25 year olds)	5%	14%	40%	34%	8%	C- (1.73)
Staying informed about major news and events	5%	13%	39%	36%	7%	C- (1.71)
Respecting public officials and institutions	4%	12%	43%	33%	8%	C- (1.70)
Understanding of our system of representative government	4%	11%	40%	37%	8%	C- (1.67)
Participating in political activities (campaigns, petitions, etc.)	3%	10%	40%	40%	8%	C- (1.62)

11. The Role of Public Schools

Americans clearly feel public schools are not doing an adequate job training students to be active and responsible citizens. That assessment will have political significance only to the extent the public attaches importance to civic education and believes it is part of the mission of public education.

The survey shows they do, in fact, feel civic education is an important responsibility and central goal of our public school system.

The survey asked the respondents to think about seven goals of public schools and to rank each one, using a seven-point scale where 1 is “not important” and seven is “very important.” The highest average importance grade was accorded to “teaching basic reading, math and science skills,” which received a 6.6 mark, with 89 percent giving this goal a grade of 6 or 7 on the scale.

Civic education also drew a high rating, with an overall grade of 6; 71 percent of the respondents gave civic education a 6 or 7.

The respondents most likely to consider civic education important were registered voters who are active in civic affairs. Civic education also ranks as more important with those who are over 45 years old, have no children, or took civic education courses in school.

Survey respondents also were asked to rank those seven goals from most important to least important. Teaching basic skills remained at the top of the list.

Civic education was in the middle, fourth on the list.

Of all seven goals, preparing students to be responsible citizens tied for second place (with forming critical thinking skills) in the number of respondents (16 percent) who ranked it as the single “most important” goal of the schools. That compares with the 35 percent of respondents who identified teaching basic skills as the most important goal, but is higher than the 13 percent who thought preparing students for college or the workforce was most important.

Civic education is considered a higher priority among people politically engaged, by senior citizens, by those without children and those living in the Northeast.

How important are each of these goals of public schools?

	Important (6-7)
Teaching basic reading, math and science skills	89%
Preparing students for the workforce and employment	81%
Forming critical thinking and decision-making skills	82%
Preparing students for college and life-long learning	79%
Developing positive character traits	75%
Preparing students to be competent and responsible citizens who participate in our democratic society	71%
Developing an appreciation for art, music and culture	55%

III. The Value of a Civic Education

It's one thing to learn that Americans think civic education deserves a central and important place in schools. It is quite another to realize that they believe civic education brings strong and broad benefits that reach beyond what most people typically associate with civics.

As the survey dug deeper and asked respondents to describe in their own words the most important reasons for including civic education in school curricula, they offered several different reasons, which fit into a dozen categories. By far the most frequently given reason (by 23 percent) was the idea that civic education makes “better members of society.” The second most frequent response was that civic education increases understanding and appreciation of American history and government.

Respondents also felt civic education programs are important for providing a well-rounded education, improving decision-making skills, preparing students for the “real world,” and developing better leaders. Some mentioned civic education's essential role in maintaining democracy, while other said it was “inherently” important or simply must be a part of schools because it's not taught elsewhere.

The survey reveals that the public strongly believes that civic education programs are valuable in addressing fundamental concerns about how individuals relate to the community. When presented with a series of statements about the value of civic education, 91 percent of respondents indicated they strongly agree (42 percent) or somewhat agree (49 percent) that civic education programs are important for maintaining a healthy democracy.

The public clearly feels civic education is an important tool in developing responsible citizens. To understand the import of that feeling, the survey also asked respondents to identify the qualities that make a good citizen. Three qualities ranked higher than all others as “highly necessary” to be a competent and responsible citizen. They are obeying the law (84 percent), providing for yourself and your family financially (86 percent), and voting in elections (73 percent). The only other quality that was considered “highly necessary” by more than half the respondents is staying informed on news and major issues (55 percent).

What is the most important reason for including civic education programs in K-12 public schools?

Makes better members of society	23%
Increases understanding and appreciation of U.S. government/history	14%
Provides a well-rounded education	11%
Improves decision-making skills	11%
Prepares for the “real world”	8%
Encourages civic/political involvement	6%
Inherently important (must be taught)	4%
Essential to maintaining democracy	4%
Prepares better leaders for the future	3%
Must be in schools (not taught elsewhere)	3%
Other/None/Not Sure	14%

How much do you agree with the following statements about the value of civic education:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	% Agree Strongly/Somewhat
Students need to learn the value of mutual respect and group problem-solving in early grades	69%	27%	96%
It is vital for youth to look beyond themselves and have a sense of the common good	65%	31%	96%
Teaching of mandatory subjects, like reading, math and science, should include material about history, government and important issues, when possible	64%	32%	95%
Graduates who have learned to be good citizens bring real benefits to the workplace	60%	34%	94%
Public school civic education programs are important for maintaining a health democracy	42%	49%	90%
The country would be better off if people understood our system of government better	52%	38%	90%
Preparing young people to be citizens in a democracy is a central purpose of schools	23%	48%	71%

IV. *The Promise of Schools*

Given its opinion that schools are not doing an adequate job in civic education and that young people are not well-prepared for citizenship, one might suppose the public is pessimistic about how well schools *can do*. Even so, Americans do express confidence in the potential and the promise of civic education. There is a strong belief that when done right, such programs can be effective in developing a responsible and engaged citizenry.

Fully 91 percent of respondents said civic education programs can provide “a lot” (37 percent) or “some” (54 percent) help in preparing graduating high school students to participate in society as responsible citizens.

There is broad agreement that civic education programs can be effective in achieving desired social and academic outcomes. The public feels such programs are most effective in the areas of developing competent and responsible citizens who participate in

democratic society (94 percent), instilling a sense of national pride (90 percent), and increasing voter turnout and political participation (88 percent).

Civic education in public schools is very effective in the following areas:

Developing competent and responsible citizens who participate in our democratic society	43%
Instilling a sense of national pride	42%
Increasing voter turnout and other political participation	39%
Developing positive character traits	36%
Improving respect for public officials and institutions	37%
Improving academic achievement	34%
Preparing students for employment	36%
Increasing volunteering and other activities	29%
Improving student behavior	32%

The numbers are slightly lower, but still very high, regarding “non-political” outcomes, such as developing positive character traits (87 percent), improving academic achievement (85 percent), preparing students for employment (84 percent), and improving student behavior (80 percent). These opinions were reflected in all the key demographic subgroups in the survey.

Perhaps because of the overall importance Americans place on civic education, they indicated strong support (64 percent) for the proposition that the teaching of mandatory subjects, such as reading, math and science, should include material about history, government and important civic issues when possible.

V. Support for Doing It Better

If people believe quality civic education programs can significantly help develop a responsible citizenry and that it is an important goal to pursue, what do they think is standing in the way? What specific proposals do they support to address concerns?

Among seven commonly cited barriers to providing civic education in the public schools, the greatest number of respondents (70 percent) agreed that “there is not enough money” spent on such programs. Three out of four adults think a societal decline in values, such as patriotism, and declining interest in govern-

ment and politics are prominent barriers. Two-thirds feel the lack of class time or insufficiently trained teachers are the problem.

We know from the survey that people believe in the importance of civic education, that they think schools should teach it, and that they understand it provides major benefits for the individual, society, and democracy. The question remains whether the public will support steps need to make improvements. So, what policy proposals earn their support?

Barriers to providing civic education programs in public schools:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	% Agree Strongly/Somewhat
Values, such as patriotism, have declined in importance	27%	49%	76%
People just don't care about politics and government today	16%	58%	74%
There is not enough money	34%	36%	70%
There is not enough classroom time	23%	44%	67%
Teachers are not sufficiently qualified	20%	47%	67%
Testing requirements for reading, math and science leave little room for other subjects	17%	36%	53%
Discussing political issues in the classroom is too controversial	9%	37%	46%

Increased teacher training commands the strongest support as a remedy, followed by testing students for a basic understanding of American history and democracy. Another four policy options — setting learning standards for civic education, incorporating it into basic skills curriculum, increasing funding and making civic education courses a requirement for graduation — all are endorsed by at least eight in ten Americans, with strong support by at least one-third.

For elected officials, these provide clues about what voters would support and how intensely. In addition, nearly nine in ten respondents believe legislators and

school board members should pay more attention to elementary and secondary civic education programs, with one third strongly agreeing. Similarly overwhelming majorities said they would support legislators or school board members who make improving civic education in public schools a priority, again with one-third professing strong support.

Officials and candidates looking for political traction or reassurance will be interested to know that the strongest support for these policies came from those who vote in most elections, including local and school board elections.

Support for the following policies related to civic education that have been proposed in public schools:

	Strongly Support	Somewhat Support	% Support Strongly/Somewhat
Increased teacher training in civic education	46%	47%	93%
Testing for basic understanding of American history/democracy	44%	45%	89%
Setting standards for what students are expected to learn in civic education programs	38%	51%	89%
Incorporating civic education lessons into existing basic skills (reading, writing and math) curriculum	42%	45%	87%
Increasing funding for civic education programs	32%	51%	83%
Requiring students to complete civic education courses to graduate	36%	45%	81%
Requiring students to participate in community service to graduate	33%	36%	69%

VI. Civic Education: Making a Difference for Democracy and Our Future

America's representative democracy depends on its people being informed and prepared to play an active role in self-government. That was the central reason 200 years ago for the public education movement. It is the central reason today for us to restore the civic mission of schools.

Many surveys and studies have shown that younger Americans lack the knowledge they need for effective self-government, and that they are largely disengaged from government and politics. The Alliance for Representative Democracy survey conducted last year, for example, found that eight in ten of 15- to 26-year-olds knew the hometown of the Simpsons cartoon family, and the great majority knew that year's American Idol. Still, less than half knew the political party of their state's governor, and only 40 percent could name the party that controls Congress.

This survey shows that Americans understand the connection between civic education and the future of our democracy. They also appreciate its additional character-building benefits for society and communities. While some may question how civic education can fit into crowded classroom schedules, most adults have confidence that schools can do the job, and they know it must be a priority.

It's up to us to make sure that today's young people have the preparation they need to become the enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and active participants our democracy needs.

Through this survey we see citizens speaking for citizens, caring about the future of our democracy and having a clear commitment to preparing the next generation to participate in our democratic system. They are willing to support policies that will address the barriers that exist today, and elected officials who will lead the way.

The 2004 elections saw passions ignited and a record number going to the polls. It showed that Americans take democracy and their role as citizens seriously. Younger voters too turned out at much higher levels, demonstrating that significant numbers can be engaged to participate in elections.

But it also showed that we have a long way to go. While 42 percent of eligible 18- to 24-year-olds voted, nearly six in ten stayed home in an election over big issues and big differences.

This election is a reminder that democratic participation is learned behavior that must be taught and taught well. It's up to us to make sure that today's young people have the preparation they need to become the enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and active participants our democracy needs in order to thrive. After all, as Thomas Jefferson instructed, our rights and liberties depend on a government whose just powers are derived from the consent of the governed.



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