

## Civic Education

*Are students learning how to be good citizens?*

For years, voter turnout has been dropping, political polarization has been rising and the art of compromise has been waning. Then came the bitter 2016 presidential campaign and its aftermath. The new lows in nastiness, civic education proponents say, have helped demonstrate the need for schools to do a better job teaching youngsters good citizenship in the hopes that they will improve civic discourse as they become adults. Some schools, state governments and private groups are experimenting with programs to build citizenship skills, including a comprehensive approach known as “action civics” that sends students on community improvement projects. However, conservative and liberal advocates of civic education hold different visions for civic learning. Experts also disagree on the internet’s impact on civic engagement. But they agree on the importance of helping students navigate the increasingly complex landscape of internet information and social media to sort accurate information from false stories.



*Students from Democracy Prep Charter School in East Harlem, N.Y., conduct a voter registration drive before the November election. Proponents of civic education say teaching young people about good citizenship is more vital than ever today, given low voter turnout, poor knowledge of the Constitution and rising concern about the vitriol in politics.*

## THIS REPORT

I  
N  
S  
I  
D  
E

THE ISSUES .....	99
BACKGROUND .....	105
CHRONOLOGY .....	107
CURRENT SITUATION .....	111
AT ISSUE .....	113
OUTLOOK .....	115
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	118
THE NEXT STEP .....	119

**CQ Researcher • Feb. 3, 2017 • [www.cqresearcher.com](http://www.cqresearcher.com)**  
**Volume 27, Number 5 • Pages 97-120**

## THE ISSUES

- 99 • Can education increase civic participation?  
• Are young Americans less civically engaged than earlier generations?  
• Should students be required to pass the U.S. citizenship test to graduate from high school?

## BACKGROUND

- 105 **Fragile Democracy**  
The new American government gained strength from civic participation.
- 106 **Schools' Civic Mission**  
Early Americans disagreed on what should be taught.
- 108 **Civic Mission Fades**  
The space race spurred greater attention on math and science.
- 109 **Public and Private Initiatives**  
Groups collaborated with schools to implement "action civics."

## CURRENT SITUATION

- 111 **Renewed Activism**  
Post-inauguration women's marches drew more than 1 million people.
- 112 **Civic Education Needed**  
Experts say holding the government accountable is vital.
- 114 **Reviving Civic Groups**  
Social media may be changing political engagement.

## OUTLOOK

- 115 **Civic Surge?**  
The election may be reigniting activism.

## SIDEBARS AND GRAPHICS

- 100 **Civics Test Adopted by 15 States**  
The exam consists of questions from the U.S. citizenship test.
- 101 **Eighth-Graders Lacking in Civics Knowledge**  
They continue to score below proficiency level.
- 104 **Half of Young Adults Didn't Vote in 2016**  
Turnout peaked when Barack Obama was elected in 2008.
- 107 **Chronology**  
Key events since 1787.
- 108 **Media Literacy Called Vital to Citizenship**  
"Facts . . . are the medium in which democracy lives and thrives."
- 110 **'Action Civics' Students Tackle Real Problems**  
Participants "begin to actually feel like they have a voice."
- 113 **At Issue:**  
Should states make the U.S. citizenship test a graduation requirement?
- FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**
- 117 **For More Information**  
Organizations to contact.
- 118 **Bibliography**  
Selected sources used.
- 119 **The Next Step**  
Additional articles.
- 119 **Citing CQ Researcher**  
Sample bibliography formats.



Feb. 3, 2017  
Volume 27, Number 5

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*CQ Researcher* (ISSN 1056-2036) is printed on acid-free paper. Published weekly, except: (March wk. 4) (May wk. 4) (July wks. 1, 2) (Aug. wks. 2, 3) (Nov. wk. 4) and (Dec. wks. 3, 4). Published by SAGE Publications, Inc., 2455 Teller Rd., Thousand Oaks, CA 91320. Annual full-service subscriptions start at \$1,131. For pricing, call 1-800-818-7243. To purchase a *CQ Researcher* report in print or electronic format (PDF), visit [www.cqpress.com](http://www.cqpress.com) or call 866-427-7737. Single reports start at \$15. Bulk purchase discounts and electronic-rights licensing are also available. Periodicals postage paid at Thousand Oaks, California, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *CQ Researcher*, 2600 Virginia Ave., N.W., Suite 600, Washington, DC 20037.

# Civic Education

BY MARCIA CLEMMITT

## THE ISSUES

American democracy got some help on Election Day from 1,670 Chicago high school students. Before dawn, the civic-minded juniors and seniors reported to polling places to work a 15-hour day as election judges. For the 17th year, the Chicago nonprofit group Mikva Challenge and the Chicago Board of Elections trained students for the job, which involved setting up equipment, checking in voters, answering questions and helping citizens vote.<sup>1</sup>

“Seeing a bunch of people cast a ballot and making their voices heard was really exciting,” said Lincoln Park High School senior Sharon Alvarado, who also worked during the primary elections in March.

“It’s rare that students are given an opportunity for leadership on this scale,” said Meghan Goldenstein, director of Mikva’s Elections in Action program. “They are protecting and empowering people to cast real votes.”<sup>2</sup>

Such real-world learning about civic duties and rights helps build the knowledge, skills and attitudes students need to become active and informed citizens, many civic-education experts say.

The election-judge program is part of a campaign by private and public organizations to improve civic education in Illinois.<sup>3</sup> Other states also are trying to improve civic learning as concerns mount about record-low voter turnout among Americans under age 30 and about the state of civic discourse in the United States.

For proponents of civic education — teaching young people about government and good citizenship — the



*High school student Navil Babonoyaba, 16, attends a civics class in Yuma, Colo., home to many Hispanic immigrants. Experts disagree on what good civic education should encompass. Some say conservatives tend to focus on the responsibilities of American citizens, while liberals emphasize teaching about rights-based movements. With many schools emphasizing college preparation and career readiness, advocates fear civic education is getting less attention.*

AP Photo/Brennan Linsley

problem has been building for years. Besides low voter turnout, experts cite poor knowledge of the Constitution and the government, the breakdown of compromise in the political system and the decline of civility in discussions of race, abortion and other charged issues.

The Nov. 8 election, they add, offered further evidence for why the country needs to improve its civic education. The campaign saw apocalyptic rhetoric on both sides, vilification of the major-party nominees, the spread of “fake” news and rising fears about the survival of civil rights for Muslims, immigrants and others.

With emotions running high, “It is vital that we seize on [the election] to teach our young people valuable lessons about government and democracy,” wrote two members of Generation Citizen, a nationwide civic-education group.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, though, experts disagree on what good civic education should encompass, and high schools strongly emphasize college preparation and career readiness, making it unclear how far efforts to beef up civic learning will go.

Americans’ understanding of civics is not impressive, polls show. In a December 2014 survey, only 37 percent of adults said it was very important to keep informed about public issues, down from 56 percent in 1984.<sup>5</sup> Another poll found Americans’ knowledge of government weak, such as knowing how many women serve on the Supreme Court.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, U.S. voter turnout ranked 27th among industrialized countries, at 53.6 percent in 2012.<sup>7</sup> (Preliminary figures

indicate turnout rose in 2016 to nearly 55 percent, but the international ranking remained unchanged.<sup>8</sup>)

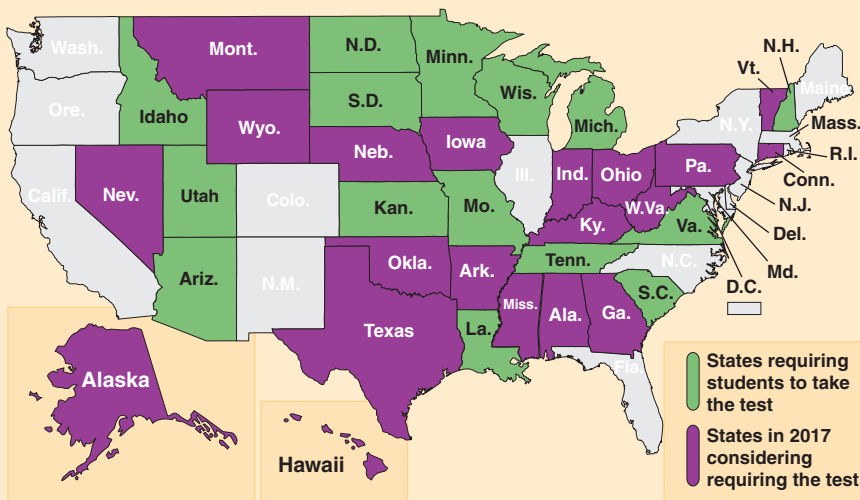
Millennials — born between 1980 and about 2004 — score lowest on virtually all citizenship measures. The voting rate among Millennials under 25 dropped from 51 percent in 1964 to 38 percent in 2012.<sup>9</sup> And in 2016, only 16 percent of Millennials said they trust government and political institutions such as Congress, and just 18 percent said they trust major news media.<sup>10</sup>

Young and old questioned whether the 2016 Democratic and Republican nominees were trustworthy. In the Democratic primaries and the general



## Civics Test Adopted by 15 States

*Fifteen states require high school students to take the U.S. citizenship test, and another 17 are considering doing it. The Civics Education Initiative wants to make the citizenship test part of high school graduation requirements in all 50 states by Sept. 17, 2017.*



Source: Joe Foss Institute

## Sample Test Questions

*The U.S. citizenship test consists of 100 questions on American government, history and geography. Here are 10 sample questions from the 2017 test; correct answers are in parentheses.*

***What does the Constitution do?*** (sets up the government; defines the government; protects the basic rights of Americans)

**How many amendments does the Constitution have? (27)**

**What is one responsibility that is only for U.S. citizens?**  
(serve on a jury; vote in a federal election)

***What do we show loyalty to when we say the Pledge of Allegiance?***  
(the United States and the flag)

**Who lived in America before the Europeans arrived?**  
(American Indians; Native Americans)

***There were 13 original states. Name three.***  
(NH, MA, RI, CT, NY, NJ, PA, DE, MD, VA, NC, SC, GA)

***The Federalist Papers supported passage of the U.S. Constitution. Name one of the writers.*** (James Madison; Alexander Hamilton; John Jay; Publius)

**Who was president during World War I? (Woodrow Wilson)**

**Who did the United States fight in World War II?** (Japan, Germany and Italy)

**Name one U.S. territory.** (Puerto Rico; U.S. Virgin Islands; American Samoa; Northern Mariana Islands; Guam)

Source: "The Civics Education Initiative 2017," Civics Education Initiative, Jan. 18, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/j85nru7>

campaign, news reports about Clinton Foundation fundraising and Hillary Clinton's email use, among other things, had many voters doubting her honesty.

President Trump has his own critics. Some commentators question his knowledge of, and interest in, U.S. governing traditions. The president repeatedly has made false statements, such as claiming he would have won the popular vote if millions of illegal votes hadn't been counted, that "undermined critical democratic norms," said Evan McMullin, chief policy director for the U.S. House Republican Conference, who ran for president as an independent conservative in 2016. Those norms include peaceful debate and transitions of power, commitment to truth, freedom from foreign interference and abstention from the use of executive power for political retribution.<sup>11</sup>

Given what McMullin sees as threats to American democracy, he said, “We need a new era of civic engagement that will reawaken us to the cause of liberty and equality. That engagement must extend to ensuring that our elected representatives uphold the Constitution, in deed and discourse.”<sup>12</sup>

To meet this challenge, civic scholars are calling for steps to reverse the decline of civic knowledge, increase voter turnout, improve public knowledge of current events and teach the value of compromise.

Schools must play a leading role, these scholars say, noting that U.S. leaders throughout the nation's history have stressed schools' vital role in teaching citizenship. "That the schools make worthy citizens is the most important responsibility placed on them," said President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-45).<sup>13</sup>

Schools, however, are doing a poor job of teaching civics, said David E. Campbell, a professor of American democracy at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. Most states require a civics course for high school graduation, almost all as part of a multiyear

requirement for history and social studies courses. The call for renewed commitment to civics “means doing it better,” Campbell said.<sup>14</sup>

But conservative and liberal advocates of improving civics hold different visions for civic learning, says Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI) in Washington. Conservatives generally want courses to “focus on the responsibilities of American citizens,” such as obeying laws and voting. “On the other side, the focus is on rights-based movements — what you can demand from the country,” such as civil-rights campaigns, he says. “People tend to teach it from one point of view or the other.”

Another challenge is the “incontrovertible evidence that poor and non-white students are receiving demonstrably less and worse civic education than middle-class and wealthy white students,” said Meira Levinson, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This deficiency likely puts already disempowered segments of the population at further disadvantage in political life and may threaten political stability by deepening a sense of alienation in large numbers of Americans, she said.<sup>15</sup>

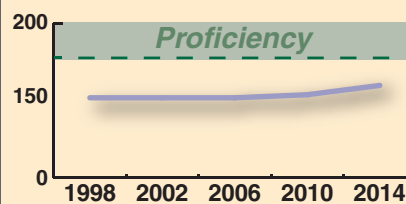
Much of the push to invigorate civic education has come from proponents of augmenting factual learning with activities, including projects in which students seek policy changes from their school administrations or city councils. (See sidebar, p. 110.) “Older students can and should be expected to develop the skills of monitoring and influencing public policy,” said a paper by the Communitarian Network, a nonpartisan coalition of scholars interested in ways to create positive social change.<sup>16</sup>

Some conservative groups strongly disagree. A new report on college civic education from the National Association of Scholars, a New York group working for “reasoned scholarship,” argues that service- and project-based civics teach-

## 8th-Graders Lacking in Civics Knowledge

*Eighth-grade students continue to score well below proficiency level on an exam that measures “civics knowledge and skills.” For example, “they should understand how and why powers are divided and shared between the national and state governments.” In 2014, scores averaged 154 out of a possible 300, well below the 178 indicating proficiency.*

### Average Scores Among Eighth-Graders on the Civics Assessment Exam



Source: “2014 Civics Assessment,” *The Nation’s Report Card, National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/gsn6725>*

ing is a stealth attempt to turn students into activists for liberal causes such as climate change and wealth redistribution. Condemning what it sees as attempts to teach students “that a good citizen is a radical activist,” the group calls for a return to “traditional” civics emphasizing in-class instruction on self-government.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, some state governments, individuals and private organizations want civics to go beyond memorization of facts about government that have formed the core of many courses in the past.

In Illinois, a public-private civics coalition is celebrating a major milestone this school year: The state is

beginning to implement a law requiring all high school graduates to complete comprehensive civics training that will include discussion of current and controversial public issues and community service.<sup>18</sup>

The Joe Foss Institute, an Arizona group seeking to improve civic knowledge, is spearheading a multistate Civics Education Initiative to get state lawmakers to require high school graduates to pass the U.S. citizenship test, which immigrants must pass to become citizens. As of January 2017, 15 states have approved some version of the measure.<sup>19</sup> (See map and sample questions, p. 100.)

Historically, schools did not carry the full burden of civic education. Americans have had a long tradition of participating in town hall meetings and voluntary associations of all kinds, from sewing circles to labor unions and homeowner associations. Such groups provided opportunities for people to practice leadership skills and cooperate to accomplish community goals, said Robert D. Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard University and author of the 2000 best-seller *Bowling Alone*, about the breakdown of community ties. However, membership in voluntary associations has plummeted, with the drop steepest among younger generations, Putnam said. Membership in the Masons fraternal service organization, for example, fell from over 4 million members in 1964 to 1.2 million in 2015.<sup>20</sup>

To encourage civic participation, many high schools and some colleges are requiring or encouraging students to volunteer in the community, such as working in a soup kitchen, says Peter Levine, a professor of citizenship and public affairs at Tufts University in Medford, Mass. Largely because of such programs, volunteerism rates for Millennials have risen to record highs of about 25 percent, up from 20 percent in the 1970s, he says.

That trend raises hopes among civics educators that young people’s enthusiasm

for community service can spur an interest in voting and other civic activities, but exactly how to make that leap remains unclear, Levine says.

As educators, policymakers and others discuss civic learning and engagement, here are some of the questions they are asking:

## ***Can education increase people's civic participation?***

The wide variation in curriculum and approaches, as well as the existence of many additional influences

One review of multiple studies from countries worldwide concluded that civic education has no apparent effect on whether people will vote or register to vote. The study did find that civic education appears to make it more likely that someone will express a political opinion, such as by signing a petition, said authors Nathan Manning, a lecturer in sociology at England's University of York, and Kathy Edwards, a senior lecturer in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia.<sup>21</sup>

ier peers, but experts find it harder to judge the effects of civics classes because of the differences in the political engagement levels in students' home environments.

Furthermore, the particulars of a civics-related class make a big difference in whether it builds engagement, Levine says.

In recent decades, one of the most unhelpful changes was "a shift to more academic and college-like courses" in high school, says Levine. "AP [Advanced Placement] American Government is one of the most rapidly growing courses. But it's a full-fledged college-like political science course." Typically, students in such classes no longer learn the basics of how to participate in elections, he says.

AP courses also don't discuss current events enough, Levine adds. By contrast, "in the mid-20th century, 40 percent of kids took a course in current events. If you want engagement, you have to focus on current events and media," including helping students recognize inaccurate or biased information found online, he says.

Some types of civic education may actually drive students away from participating in real-world politics, according to John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, professors of political science at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Classes that avoid "controversial political issues rather than teaching students to be comfortable in dealing with those issues [leave students] more likely to react negatively when in the real world they are exposed to the gritty, barbaric side of politics," they wrote.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, "there are still a lot of classes where people are going just for mastery of facts rather than asking a range of critical questions that push for a deeper exploration of citizenship," says AEI's Hess.

"We know that in many places, most of what happens is memorization, fill-in-the-blank [facts]," says Notre Dame's Campbell. "But we know that students learn more when there's discussion in their classes," he says. That's especially



Getty Images/Detroit Free Press/Mandi Wright

*Michaela Mast, 21, of Harrisonburg, Va., signs a mockup of the U.S. Constitution during the Women's March on Washington on Jan. 21. After that march and others, Barack Obama's spokesman said the former president was "heartened by the level of engagement taking place in communities around the country. Citizens exercising their constitutional right to assemble, organize and have their voices heard . . . is exactly what we expect to see when American values are at stake."*

on students' civic behavior, make civic education's long-term effects hard to gauge. Nevertheless, some scholars say recent small studies demonstrate that civics classes in which teachers lead informed and open discussion of public issues improve students' knowledge of civics and their engagement with politics.

Overall, evidence shows that education levels are closely related to voting rates, "but when it comes to whether civics classes matter for [who votes], it's not clear," says AEI's Hess.

A few factors make the effects hard to judge, says Tufts' Levine. Civic education in the United States is unequal, he says. Students from wealthier, better-educated families often take good civics classes because they are in stronger academically performing schools. But they would likely have participated in civic life anyway, Levine says, because they come from families and neighborhoods where people often get politically involved. Poorer students at weaker schools are not only at a disadvantage compared with their wealth-



true in “open classrooms” — learning environments in which students feel “teachers encourage questions and discussion of issues, even controversial ones,” Campbell says.

Furthermore, recent research shows that low-income students’ knowledge and attitudes toward civic participation improve most in such open classes, Campbell says. “School seems to be compensating for what is not learned at home.”

“We know that it makes a critical difference if students have a deep and broad understanding of the issues of the day, of election processes and of how, quite literally, to take part in an election,” said Diana Hess, dean of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education. “Recent studies have shown that young people who choose not to participate — especially those who could vote but don’t — sit out elections because they are afraid that they don’t know enough to make an informed choice or because they are intimidated by the mechanics of voting.”<sup>23</sup>

Kahne of the University of California says one study found “that what happens in junior year [of high school] matters for early adulthood. The evidence is reasonably strong. When you discuss political ideas, kids get more interested in politics.”<sup>24</sup>

Effective school-based civic education goes beyond the classroom, says Campbell. Adolescents’ social environment, including in their schools, educates them about civic participation and influences future political behavior, he said. For example, a school with “strong civic norms” — that is, a school in which many people promote the idea that voting and participating in political life are an important responsibility — will “lead to a greater likelihood of voting well over a decade following high school.”<sup>25</sup>

“We do know a lot less about what works in citizenship education than in math and science, for example,” Campbell says. “Civics never gets as much research attention as those subjects.

More attention from policymakers would increase progress.”

Research on how to implement good civics teaching throughout the nation is needed most, says Levine. “We do know what good teaching looks like,” he says. “But we don’t know what good policies are to take small examples of good teaching and scale them up” to implement good civic teaching everywhere.

### *Are young Americans less civically engaged than earlier generations?*

On virtually every measure — from voting turnout to civic knowledge — young people seem less civically involved than earlier generations, experts say. However, surveys do find that Millennials express deep concern about many public issues, from the environment to poverty — representing a reservoir of public spiritedness that schools could tap to awaken civic engagement in politics, some analysts say.

When it comes to knowledge and awareness of political issues, younger generations have not always lagged older people, researchers say. In the 1940s and ’50s, surveys of political knowledge found no age gap, according to Michael Delli Carpini, dean of the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School of Communication in Philadelphia, and Scott Keeter, senior survey adviser at the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan research organization in Washington.

By 1989, however, “18- to 29-year-olds were considerably less informed than older citizens,” they said.<sup>26</sup>

The age-related knowledge gap has widened in the 2000s. Data indicate that the knowledge gap does not exist because older people have lived longer and thus have had time to accumulate more knowledge. Later-born generations are learning less and less about politics, Delli Carpini and Keeter said.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, voter turnout has declined in recent decades among most age groups, most steeply among voters under age 25, whose turnout rate

dropped from 51 percent in 1964 to 38 percent in 2012. (In 1972, the voting age dropped to 18.) From 1964 to 2012, turnout for voters age 25 to 44 dropped from 69 percent to 49.5 percent. For voters age 45 to 64, the drop was less steep — from 75.9 percent to 63.4 percent. Among those age 65 and older, turnout actually rose, from 66.3 percent to 69.7 percent.<sup>28</sup>

Other measures of civic engagement include how actively people participate in community groups, such as unions, lodges or political parties, and to what degree they believe the political system can solve problems. Young Americans score lower on both.

The “frightening” declines in civic engagement “do not involve young people’s political knowledge but rather their actual experience participating in voluntary groups and deliberating with others who hold different views,” said Levine of Tufts. “Membership in groups, attendance at meetings and discussion of issues have fallen badly” among young people, he wrote, for reasons that are unclear.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, young Americans “do not see the political system as the best way to enact change,” said a white paper by the nonprofit group Generation Citizen, which assists schools with civic education. “Institutions are seen as the problem and not the solution,” it said. According to survey data from 1973, a majority of young people said they trusted the government to do the right thing, while today only 20 percent say so. “These attitudes influence behavior, leading to a decrease in youth political involvement,” the paper said.<sup>30</sup>

The picture is not entirely bleak, however.

Early data suggest that voter turnout in 2016 for those under 30 may have resembled 2012 — close to 50 percent — and was even higher in 11 battleground states with highly competitive presidential or Senate races, according to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), a research organization at Tufts.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, some details about young voters' turnout rates could point the way to remedies, according to Levine.

For one thing, he says, today's youngest voting generation is more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse than previous generations. Among those 55 and older, 75 percent are white; the figure for those 35 to 54 is 61.5 percent white. But the 18-to-34-year-old age group is only 55.8 percent white, and under 18 the percentage is 51.5 percent.<sup>32</sup> This means that "the turnout rate for a whole generation in any given election is misleading," because it conceals wide demographic differences among people of the same age, Levine says.

Notably, voter turnout is low and falling among the least educated but is much more stable among the most educated. In the 2004 election, those with a high school education or less made up 31 percent of the electorate; in 2016, they made up only 19 percent.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, effective efforts to raise turnout rates should focus on less educated young people, Levine says.

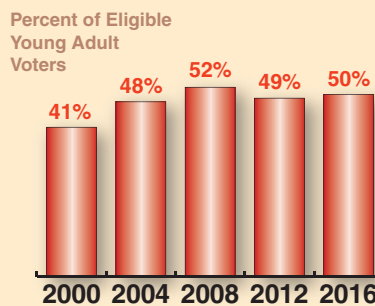
Research also shows that some political campaigns and other groups have not aggressively targeted young people, compared with outreach efforts for older voters, says Levine. Increasing outreach to younger generations would likely raise their voting rates, he says. Barack Obama's two presidential campaigns was one of the exceptions. It hired young people for important jobs and highlighted issues that mattered to them, Levine said.<sup>34</sup> The Democratic presidential campaign of Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont also effectively reached out to Millennials in 2016, analysts say.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, while young people generally distrust politics and government, in study after study they say they care about an array of social problems, according to Generation Citizen. Climate change and homelessness concern those on the left while restricting abortion and expanding religious freedom concern those on the right, for example.

## Half of Young Adults Didn't Vote in 2016

*Only about 50 percent of eligible voters ages 18 to 29 cast ballots in the 2016 presidential election, according to preliminary exit-poll data. Since 2000, turnout among young adults in presidential elections has hovered around 40 to 50 percent. It peaked in 2008 at 52 percent when Barack Obama was elected president.*

### Turnout Among 18-to-29-Year-Old Voters



Source: Clara Hendrickson and William A. Galston, "How Millennials voted this election," Brookings Institution, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Nov. 21, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hpbvwcw>

That's a reservoir of commitment toward the community that could be tapped to increase civic engagement, the group suggests. "Across the board, evidence shows that our youngest generations . . . want to make a positive impact [and] work towards a better and fairer country," Generation Citizen said.<sup>36</sup>

### **Should students be required to pass the U.S. citizenship test to graduate from high school?**

The Civics Education Initiative spearheaded by the Joe Foss Institute is a nationwide campaign to make the U.S.

citizenship test a high school graduation requirement. All immigrants applying for citizenship must pass the 100-question, multiple-choice test on U.S. history and basic civics facts.

Skeptics, however, fear that requiring the test would make it too easy for educators and lawmakers to avoid making deeper investments in civic learning.

"It's an empty symbolic effort," said Kahne of the University of California, Riverside. "There's not any evidence base to show that this will be effective. . . . Making the short-answer test a key requirement of civics education is the equivalent of 'teaching democracy like a game show.'" <sup>37</sup>

The Joe Foss Institute disagrees, calling the test a "first step to ensure all students are taught basic civics." <sup>38</sup> Fifteen states now require high school students to take the test.

The test contains such questions as: What is the supreme law of the land? (the Constitution). We elect a U.S. senator for how many years? (six) How many amendments does the Constitution have? (27) <sup>39</sup> Supporters of the test point out that knowing the basics of how government functions is a necessary first step to participating in it.

"I like the idea," says Robert Pondiscio, a senior fellow and vice president for external affairs at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education think tank in Washington that focuses on parental choice and standards-based school reforms. "By no means do I suggest that it's a proxy for a full, rich, robust civics education. But I also think we shouldn't overlook the fact that it does show us something valuable," he says. "If kids who get any kind of civics education at all cannot pass that test, then we'll quickly know that there's something really wrong" with their civics learning.

Pondiscio also said that since the test requires only memorization, it could work as an exit exam for elementary school students. <sup>40</sup>



After a unanimous vote in the Legislature, South Carolina in July 2015 enacted a law requiring the test for all high school students. It will not be a graduation requirement, however. Instead, South Carolina will use the results to gauge the success of the state's civics education.<sup>41</sup>

"It is absolutely critical that all South Carolina students have a sound knowledge of civics," said former South Carolina Gov. Richard Riley, who was U.S. secretary of Education under President Bill Clinton and co-chaired a South Carolina panel that examined the test. "This is not a partisan issue. It is an American issue."<sup>42</sup>

Even the most ardent supporters of using the test nationwide say doing so should be only the beginning of improving civics education.

Implementing the test as a high school graduation requirement is a way of "shining a light on the issue" of America's civic-learning problem, says Lucian Spataro, chief academic officer and vice president of legislative affairs at the Joe Foss Institute. "It's a first step toward minimum competency, like the multiplication table or the periodic table" of the chemical elements, he says.

The idea is to put civics learning "back on the front burner where it belongs by bringing this fun, attractive and important subject" back into every school, Spataro says. The test is a good starting point "because there's very little cost attached to it. A teacher can get the test online, Google 'citizenship,' and find all kinds of free materials to build a free online course."

Campbell of Notre Dame says he worries about the test's lasting value for students' civic education. "I appreciate the spirit behind the initiative. It would be hard for legislators to decline," he says. "But if there's nothing there but the test, then some people will just cram for it short term, which doesn't result in any long-term learning."

Making the test the centerpiece of a state civics program is "the exact op-

posite of what we want," said Louise Dubé, executive director of iCivics, a Cambridge, Mass., group founded by retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor that produces interactive online civics games.

Effective civics learning occurs when students actively discuss issues and

republic, believed democracies were fragile and needed careful tending if they were to survive.

"[History] teaches us that few countries have sustained democratic governments for prolonged periods, a lesson that we Americans are sometimes inclined to forget," wrote Margaret Stim-



Getty Images/Asahi Shimbun

*Abortion foes rally on the National Mall for the 44th annual March for Life on Jan. 27, the anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision, which opponents of abortion want to overturn. Some experts on civic education cite such activism as evidence of a growing interest in civic engagement, especially among the nation's youth.*

write analytical essays, Dubé said. A short-answer test can't accomplish those things or tell students what they need to hear about government, she said: "that that big machine that seems like it has nothing to do with you matters more than you think."<sup>43</sup>

## BACKGROUND

### Fragile Democracy

The nation's Founders, who were well versed in classical history, including the fate of the ancient Roman

mann Branson, associate director of the Center for Civic Education, an independent nonprofit resource center in Calabasas, Calif.<sup>44</sup>

Government by and for the people survives only when citizens are committed to informed voting, respect the law and demonstrate concern for the common good — habits that no one is born with, Branson said. "Each new generation . . . must acquire the knowledge, learn the skills and develop the . . . traits of private and public character that undergird a constitutional democracy."<sup>45</sup>

Americans in the new nation learned self-government by working together in New England town hall meetings

and in churches, fraternal organizations such as Elks Lodges and reform groups such as temperance societies.<sup>46</sup>

American democracy gained its strength from people's widespread participation in voluntary public and private groups, said Alexis de Tocqueville, a French political scientist who traveled throughout the United States in the early 1830s. Public "town-meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it," he wrote.<sup>47</sup>

"Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations," de Tocqueville observed. "I have often admired the extreme skill with which the inhabitants of the United States succeed in proposing a common object for the exertions of a great many men and in inducing them voluntarily to pursue it."<sup>48</sup>

For much of U.S. history, such groups were "a civil training ground" for citizenship and public office, says Michael Johanek, a senior fellow at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. "People got practice talking about issues with people with different points of view, running for office, using Robert's Rules of Order" — a parliamentary procedure guide on running meetings — and learning skills of group participation and leadership, he says.

### Schools' Civic Mission

Only a small fraction of people went to school in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and the few schools that existed were poorly run. Nevertheless, the founding generation hoped schools would play important roles in building the nation. In the Land Ordinance of 1785, Congress dedicated a portion of public land in every township to support schools.<sup>49</sup>

Philadelphian Benjamin Franklin — scientist, inventor, signer of the Declaration of Independence — wrote that schools should lay "such a foundation of knowledge and ability as . . . may qualify [individuals] to . . . execute the several offices of civil life, with advantage and reputation to themselves and country."<sup>50</sup>

Early Americans didn't agree on what schools should emphasize in teaching citizenship. Thomas Jefferson, who in 1779 proposed a taxpayer-funded public school system and later founded the University of Virginia, thought American schools should emphasize critical-thinking skills. He believed such skills would enable people to govern themselves in a democracy and avoid tyrannical rule by helping them think independently and critically.<sup>51</sup>

Others, such as Noah Webster of Connecticut, who compiled a dictionary that bears his name, believed schools should help build a sense of American unity and national identity, distinct from Europe, especially Britain. Webster's view of schools as nurseries of nationalism dominated 19th-century civic education.<sup>52</sup>

Horace Mann (1796-1859), a Massachusetts reformer who became that state's first secretary of education, originated the "common school" tradition in the United States. "Education must be universal," he said. "The qualification of voters is as important as the qualification of governors, and even comes first, in the natural order."<sup>53</sup>

In the mid-to-late 19th century, immigrants streamed into the United States, and Catholic immigration, in particular, grew. "People were wondering how to keep this very diverse set of people together," says Johanek. "Worried about the democratic competencies of new people coming in," schools again wanted civic lessons to build a sense of national identity.

Not until the 1920s did the proportion of Americans graduating from high

school top 20 percent.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the first half of the 20th century saw a growing high school population and a few experiments aimed at broadening schools' citizenship mission.

American education reformer John Dewey (1859-1952) proposed that civic education engage students in "active inquiry and careful deliberation in the significant and vital problems" that crop up in their classrooms, schools and communities. Such lessons would best engage students' interest, said Dewey, a professor of philosophy and psychology who founded the private University of Chicago Lab Schools that still use his "experiential" teaching approach.<sup>55</sup>

In the 1930s and '40s, New York City educator Leonard Covello turned East Harlem's Benjamin Franklin High School, a public boys' school, into a community resource center where students, parents and local citizens researched and implemented programs to improve life in their multiethnic community. The goal, said Covello, was to "make the school the training ground for democratic living."<sup>56</sup>

Few schools attempted anything so ambitious. However, by the mid-20th-century the majority of Americans attended high school, so more people received civic education than ever before. Moreover, many high school students took three civics-related courses: a current-events course; a civics course on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship such as voting; and a government course explaining the structure of local, state and national governments.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, few of the classes were "noted for stimulating student interest," said Charles Quigley, executive director of the Center for Civic Education. "The most common method of teaching was lecture." Skills important for active citizenship, such as discussion and debate, got short shrift.<sup>58</sup>

*Continued on p. 108*

# Chronology

## **1780s** *Founders call citizenship education vital to nation's survival.*

**1787**

Northwest Ordinance declares that to help promote “good government . . . schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

**1789**

“[W]herever the people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government,” Thomas Jefferson says.

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## **1830s-1930s** *Schools teach American citizenship to immigrants and citizens.*

**1837**

All children, not just the well-off, should attend public “common schools” to learn about freedom, says reformer Horace Mann.

**1882**

In this peak year for the 19th century, 788,992 immigrants enter the United States.

**1900**

Philosopher John Dewey warns, “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.”

**1929**

Share of 14- to 17-year-olds attending high school passes 50 percent for the first time.

**1934**

Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem, N.Y., is established to build students’ citizenship skills.

## **1950s-1990s** *Americans increasingly disengage from civic groups.*

**1957**

Soviets’ launch of *Sputnik* satellite shifts schools’ focus toward science and math and away from civics.

**1963**

Decade’s tumults, from Vietnam War protests to civil rights marches, begin making civics courses controversial.

**1972**

First presidential election is held allowing 18-year-olds to vote.

**1983**

“A Nation At Risk” report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education urges schools to focus on practical subjects, such as math and science.

**1998**

Voter turnout for Americans ages 18 to 29 is just 25 percent, down from 58 percent in 1972.

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## **2000s-Present** *Young Americans’ civic engagement continues to drop.*

**2000**

Harvard professor Robert Putnam publishes *Bowling Alone*, showing steep decline in Americans’ participation in organizations since 1970.

**2002**

No Child Left Behind Act requires standardized testing in reading and math. Critics say the testing drains resources from civics.

**2003**

The Home School Legal Defense

Association founds Generation Joshua to help Christian teens learn political and leadership skills.

**2006**

First Democracy Prep charter school opens in Harlem.

**2008**

Brown University students launch nonprofit Generation Citizen to help schools give students hands-on experience in policy-making.

**2009**

Retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor founds iCivics to create interactive online civics games.

**2012**

U.S. voter turnout rate of 54 percent ranks 27th among industrialized democracies. . . . Tennessee begins assessing civics achievement based on projects in which students choose issues, research them and suggest solutions.

**2015**

Illinois enacts civics graduation requirement.

**2016**

Generation Joshua volunteers contact nearly 700,000 registered voters on behalf of Republican Senate candidates. . . . Only 16 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds say they trust Congress.

**2017**

Donald Trump inaugurated as 45th president amid concerns that he lacks civic knowledge; a day later, more than 1 million participate in rallies for women in Washington, D.C., and across the U.S., plus major cities worldwide. . . . Fifteen states now require high school students to take the U.S. citizenship test.



# Media Literacy Called Vital to Citizenship

*"Facts . . . are the medium in which democracy lives and thrives."*

Learning to be an active citizen means mastering skills and attitudes that don't come naturally to students, civic educators say. Chief among them are the ability to distinguish between reliable and unreliable information sources and discuss controversial issues with people holding different views.

"When we think about civics and news and media literacy, we have to realize that facts held in common are the medium in which democracy lives and thrives," says Peter Adams, senior vice president for literacy programs at The News Literacy Project, a Bethesda, Md., nonprofit that creates media-literacy resources for schools. "If we arrive at a point where we hold no facts in common, there's nothing to sustain our civic dialogue. And then it becomes impossible to create policy."

The way people get information in the internet age is putting commonly agreed-upon facts further out of reach, many educators say.

"People feel today that if news is important, it's going to come to them" through social media such as Facebook, says Shawn Healy, who advocates for civic learning at the Chicago-based Robert R. McCormick Foundation, established by the late Chicago Tribune publisher McCormick to support programs for improving education, journalism and civic knowledge. But most such news is forwarded by like-minded friends or written to persuade readers of a particular point of view rather than to provide facts, says Healy.

Last fall, an analysis by the news website BuzzFeed found that 38 percent of posts by highly partisan conservative websites

and Facebook pages were partly or mostly false. For highly partisan left-wing sites, the figure was 19 percent.<sup>1</sup>

False tweets and other statements by prominent people can sow distrust of vital institutions, media analysts say. After his election and again on Jan. 23, President Trump sent a series of tweets charging that voter fraud was rampant, potentially totaling millions of votes, with no evidence. "Simply by raising the question, the president-elect sows the seeds of doubt," which "may yet ripen into an utter lack of faith in the system," said political reporter David Graham of *The Atlantic*.<sup>2</sup>

Former President Barack Obama made similarly questionable statements about his health care plans, such as stating in June 2009 that "no matter how we reform health care, I intend to keep this promise: If you like your doctor, you'll be able to keep your doctor; if you like your health care plan, you'll be able to keep your health care plan." Critics noted this was too sweeping and that the Affordable Care Act would lead to some Americans changing their plans or doctors.<sup>3</sup>

Helping students understand what well sourced and vetted information looks like and how to distinguish it from biased or false material is "not a choice for teachers any more. They have to do it," says Adams.

Another necessary habit for democratic citizenship is the willingness and ability to discuss controversial topics with people who hold different views, said Peter Levine, professor of citizenship and public affairs at Tufts University in Medford, Mass. "Good citizens deliberate," he said. "By talking and listening

*Continued from p. 106*

## Civic Mission Fades

Beginning around the 1960s, civic education began losing ground in the public school system.

To some extent, the courses were a victim of the changing — and more contentious — times. The 1960s brought the Vietnam War and massive campus protests, race riots, marches for civil rights and assassinations, all of which strained the political system and shredded civic discourse. The 1970s brought the Watergate scandal, the unprecedented resignation of a president, a constitutional crisis over that scandal and widespread loss of faith in government.

Current-events courses, in particular, says Tufts' Levine, "may have seemed

too hot to handle as the '60s, '70s proceeded. In 1955, you could have a big debate in class on taxes," but when current political events involved controversial issues such as race, war and the Watergate scandal, schools and parents may have become reluctant to encourage students to discuss them.

But the main driving force for civics' loss of place in the schools was almost certainly changing education priorities, Levine and others say.

The Soviet Union's launch in 1957 of the first man-made Earth-orbiting satellite, *Sputnik*, spurred American schools to devote more hours to math and science, says Paul Baumann, director of the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement at the Denver-based Education Commission of the States, a nonpartisan resource center sponsored

by the U.S. states and territories.

Americans now thought of schools as an economic driver for individuals and the country, obscuring the civic mission, Baumann says. And then, beginning in the 1980s, policymakers pushed to make schools more accountable for what students learned, mostly measured through standardized reading and math tests. For many schools, that meant shifting resources from other subjects, including civics. "What's measured is what matters, and other things sort of get pushed aside," he says.

Despite the changing curriculum, most states retained civics as a graduation requirement. As of 2014, all but Alaska, Delaware, Illinois, Montana, Oregon and Rhode Island required a civics course for graduation, according to CIRCLE.<sup>59</sup>

to people who are different from themselves, they . . . build a degree of consensus” that can then be translated into action for the public good.<sup>4</sup>

Diana Hess, dean of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, says schools play a role in teaching this quality. “We’ve got, I think, really strong evidence that high quality classroom discussion of political issues is very important and highly effective” in encouraging students to become civically engaged, she says.

A key is “the understanding that we have to live in this world together,” says Constance Flanagan, a professor of human ecology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Teachers can impart that principle even to fifth-graders by asking students doing a project “to sit at a table with people with whom they don’t agree.”

By contrast, when adults choose conflict over cooperation, students tend to follow suit, some analysts say. For example, teachers and school administrators in a November survey reported that the presidential campaign had increased fighting, bigotry and threats of violence in their schools. “In over 15 years of teaching high school, this is the first year that swastikas have been appearing all over school furniture,” wrote a Washington state teacher, while others said some students who backed Trump were harassed in school.<sup>5</sup>

Some conservative analysts worry that discussion classes can potentially indoctrinate students because of what they call a widespread bias in the civics-teaching community toward liberal

rather than conservative views.

“You’ll find a lot of civics classes where teachers will ask, ‘Is it fair that Johnny’s family is poor?’ ” says Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington. But where is the flip side that questions the fairness of high taxes? he asks.

Other civic-education scholars say research demonstrates most teachers try to avoid such bias.

“There’s a popular view that teachers are trying to indoctrinate students and that they’re all liberal Democrats,” says Healy. But the overwhelming majority of teachers “don’t disclose their own views” to students, he says. “And we know that teachers often play the devil’s advocate,” arguing in class for a position that no one in the class is taking.

— Marcia Clemmitt

<sup>1</sup> Craig Silverman *et al.*, “Hyperpartisan Facebook Pages Are Publishing False And Misleading Information At An Alarming Rate,” *BuzzFeed*, Oct. 20, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/jny4csw>.

<sup>2</sup> David A. Graham, “The Lasting Damage from Trump’s False ‘Voter Fraud’ Allegations,” *The Atlantic*, Nov. 28, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hzkg5xb>.

<sup>3</sup> “Obama: ‘If you like your health care plan, you’ll be able to keep your health care plan,’” *PolitiFact*, <http://tinyurl.com/lng93o2>.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Levine, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America* (2013), Kindle edition, location 55.

<sup>5</sup> “The Trump Effect: The Impact of the 2016 Presidential Election on Our Nation’s Schools,” Southern Poverty Law Center, Nov. 28, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/jlz2xyq>.

Around 1970, participation began to plummet in groups of all kinds, from town meetings to labor unions, churches and lodges — even bowling leagues and bridge clubs, Harvard’s Putnam wrote. The reasons for the nationwide decline remain little understood but likely include the spread of television, population sprawl into suburbs where distance between neighbors was greater and time stresses on two-earner families, he said.<sup>60</sup>

And along with the groups went many opportunities to learn civic habits such as cooperation, public spiritedness, thoughtful deliberation of issues and opportunities to share political ideas and be recruited to political causes, Putnam said.<sup>61</sup>

The youngest generations experienced the steepest declines in partici-

pation, according to Putnam. “The more recent the cohort, the more dramatic its disengagement from community life.”<sup>62</sup>

Political activities, including voting, have seen similar declines and also have fallen most among younger voters. In 1972, the first year in which 18- to 20-year-olds could vote, voter turnout for 18 to 29-year-olds was 58 percent. By 2000, turnout had dropped to 46 percent.<sup>63</sup>

Yet this period also saw a few countervailing trends. The religious right in the 1980s mobilized in the political arena to fight for conservative and Christian values. While the effect of the Internet is hotly debated and still largely unknown, some believe that the rise of social media in the 1990s and 2000s may be providing new op-

portunities for organizing. And after the election of Barack Obama in 2008, the political world saw the grass-roots conservative movement known as the tea party that successfully pushed the Republican Party further to the right.

## Public and Private Initiatives

Throughout these ups and downs, private groups, individuals and some state governments have sought to make civic participation more compelling.

In 2009, retired Justice O’Connor, the first woman to serve on the high court, started iCivics, a nonprofit group that develops free online games. As of 2015, the group had released 19 games

## 'Action Civics' Students Tackle Real Problems

*Participants "begin to actually feel like they have a voice."*

Mary Breslin's seventh-grade students in Arlington, Va., are finding solutions to environmental issues in their community, working with politicians and simultaneously meeting state-mandated learning standards.

Breslin's students work with Earth Force, a program that provides training and funding for civic-engagement projects with a focus on the environment, and they have done everything from growing wetland plants as a way to reduce bacteria in the watershed to reducing trash levels in their community.

Earth Force is a member of the National Action Civics Collaborative, a Chicago-based network of civic education reform organizations, educators and researchers. The collaborative is promoting "action civics," a comprehensive approach to civic education that encompasses traditional classroom learning, project-based experiential learning and leadership development.

The goal, says the collaborative, is "to create a world that invites young people to take collective action inside and outside the classroom."<sup>1</sup>

Advocates say this multifaceted approach to civics is the key to greater student engagement.

"We know from the research that [traditional approaches focusing on facts is] a component of an effective civic education, but it's quite limiting," says Shawn Healy, a civic learning scholar at the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, which awards grants to improve civic education and engagement opportunities in the Chicago area. "We want people engaged in our democracy in lots of different ways."

Jan Brennan, a project leader with the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement, highlights four practices that

action civics incorporates: pursuing active student involvement; encouraging diverse viewpoints; seeking real-world interactions with local leaders; and instituting professional development for teachers.

Breslin says these practices are a good start. "What I have the benefit of allowing my students to do is not to just learn these standards but to learn how these standards function within their local government," she says. "Not only are they learning how these learning standards work in their local government, but [they're coming to understand] the complexity of each different topic and how hard it is for communities to actually pass laws."

But critics say it is difficult to measure action civics' impact on student performance, and they worry that taxpayer dollars could end up supporting a political party or partisan viewpoint.<sup>2</sup>

Other critics say civic education should return to knowledge-based classroom instruction and not focus on experiential learning. The Heartland Institute, a conservative organization in Illinois, argues that although school-based projects may be "wholesome," it gives students "little insight into how our system of government works and what roles they must fill as citizens of a democratic republic."<sup>3</sup>

Healy disagrees, stressing that focusing on knowledge is not enough. "Both [approaches] matter," he says. "We need traditional civic education; there's far too many places where we don't even have that, but it has to be paired with these action civics components, where we get young people involved in not just elections but the policy-making process itself."

Healy, though, says he agrees that civics education should be nonpartisan. "We have a responsibility as educators writ

and accompanying teacher lesson plans on topics such as federal budgets and international diplomacy.<sup>64</sup>

Private groups also have worked with public school systems and state and local governments to develop and implement projects.

In 2008 two Brown University students, Scott Warren and Anna Ninan, founded Generation Citizen, a nonprofit that works with schools in six states to implement "action civics" classes in which students research solutions to local problems and approach government officials to seek change.<sup>65</sup>

"Part of the challenge is that young people don't think government institutions matter or represent them," says

Warren. That's especially true for "low-income kids who go to dilapidated schools, kids who walk through metal detectors every morning," he says. "But when kids in the Generation Citizen program engage with state reps and city council members and see that people actually are concerned about their issues, they are immediately transformed."

In 2015, after years of advocacy by a public-private coalition including universities, corporations and nonprofit foundations, Illinois lawmakers enacted their new public-school graduation requirement in civics, which is being phased in this school year. Unlike most such laws, the statute spells out that

an acceptable class must include instruction "on government institutions, the discussion of current and controversial issues, service learning and simulations of the democratic process."<sup>66</sup>

"Most of the time when we focus on government, it's on what it does to us or for us," says Shawn Healy, who advocates for civic learning at the Robert R. McCormick Foundation in Chicago. But we are civic actors with the responsibility to help shape public policies, he says. "Civics teaching has been mainly 'Washington-centric.'" To foster student engagement, it makes sense to study local and state laws, because they are the ones that usually affect us most closely, he says.



large to create opportunities in our classrooms for students to pursue their own beliefs, their own causes for concern,” he says. “We should be pretty agnostic.”

Supporters say the most successful action civics projects tap into students’ passions.

“The really critical piece to it . . . is student voice,” Healy says. “The students are involved from the very beginning in determining whatever work of democracy they’re going to do.”

Brennan says, “Some of the most powerful action civics experiences are when you ask students, ‘What are you concerned about?’ ”

For Breslin’s students, participating in these projects allows them to develop core competency skills, which enables students to take the “next step in their educational learning process.”

“The students choose their own topics; they make their own decisions throughout the project [and] they begin to actually feel like they have a voice,” Breslin says.

Colleges and universities have also instituted action civics programs in recent years. In 2011, retired Democratic Sen. Bob Graham, who served as Florida’s governor from 1979 to 1987, established the Civic Scholars program at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Students selected for the program work together to research solutions for one or more challenging public issues in the state.

To date, Florida’s Civic Scholars have issued policy papers on homelessness, water resources, aging infrastructure, school cafeteria nutritional guidelines and mental health services for children, among other topics.<sup>4</sup>

“We need an investment and support for those programs



Courtesy EarthForce.org

*An Earth Force student works at a local nature center in Texas on a project to protect beavers. Earth Force provides training and funding for civic-engagement projects with a focus on the environment.*

. . . so they can provide a high-quality, nonpartisan civic learning experience,” Brennan said.

— Anika Reed

<sup>1</sup> “About Us,” National Action Civics Collaborative, <http://tinyurl.com/h57bzq3>.

<sup>2</sup> Joy Pullmann, “Research & Commentary: Civic Education,” The Heartland Institute, Jan. 31, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/zcy8by4>.

<sup>3</sup> “A Crisis in Civic Education,” The Heartland Institute, Jan. 14, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/zssh7g5>.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Civic Scholars, Bob Graham Center, <http://tinyurl.com/jpocbtv>.

Some other states also have sought new approaches, says Baumann. Alaska, California, Kentucky and Massachusetts, among others, have formed task forces to pursue innovations in civics learning. Arizona and Illinois recognize schools whose civics programs follow best teaching practices. Tennessee now assesses high school students’ civic learning based on projects they present, he says.

Two federal funding streams for civic learning, the Learn and Serve America grants for service learning and the California-based Center for Civic Education resource center, have essentially dried up since 2000, says Baumann. However, the federal Every

Student Succeeds Act of 2015 gives states more choice about how to use federal funds. It could provide resources for the many local school districts clamoring for more money for subjects other than math and reading, although funds will likely be quite limited.

“We need to get out of the zero-sum” mindset that sees a funding increase for one school subject as a threat to funding for another, Baumann says. With innovative programs, “you can do STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] and the arts and civics all in one fell swoop,” he says. “States are beginning to think about this.” ■

## CURRENT SITUATION

### Renewed Activism?

The Jan. 21 women’s marches held in Washington and across the country, which were held in reaction to Trump’s election, drew more than 1 million participants, with speaker after speaker urging participants to fight for women’s rights and other causes. A week later abortion foes held their annual march on the anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade*

decision that legalized abortion. For some analysts, the activism may have signaled greater attention to civic education and engagement.

Former President Obama “is heartened by the level of engagement taking place in communities around the country,” according to a Jan. 29 statement from his spokesperson Kevin Lewis. “Citizens exercising their constitutional right to assemble, organize and have their voices heard by their elected officials is exactly what we expect to see when American values are at stake,” said the statement.<sup>67</sup>

In the run-up to the election, “[one teacher] told me, ‘The elections are such a mess this year — so ugly, so charged — that I think I will give them a pass,’ ” said the University of Wisconsin’s Diana Hess. But “even though this year’s contests are undeniably challenging,” she said, they should be discussed among K-12 students, because research shows that “the knowledge that young people acquire by learning about campaigns predicts whether they will participate politically.”<sup>68</sup>

Several experts say civic knowledge is more important than ever. One rea-

with more civic and policy knowledge than Trump displayed during the final presidential debate.”<sup>69</sup>

Trump’s defenders dismiss such criticisms, stressing that he was elected as a populist outsider pledged to shake up political norms. In his inaugural address, Trump himself said “today’s ceremony . . . has very special meaning, because today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another, or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C., and giving it back to you, the people.”<sup>70</sup>



Supporters of Democratic presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders rally at the Presidio in San Francisco on June 6, 2016. Contrary to the common belief that young people are politically apathetic, Becky Bond, a coordinator of volunteers for the Vermont senator, said that the under-26 Millennials on the campaign were “incredibly hardworking.”

Normally, says Generation Citizen’s Warren, “it’s an uphill battle to get people to realize that civics is important, but in the last six months we’ve seen more interest than ever. People are realizing that we’ve got to change something. I’m seeing more policymakers talking about it.”

Others, however, worry the 2016 presidential campaign demonstrates the United States’ low state of civic discourse. The campaign’s negativity discouraged some teachers from discussing politics in class.

son, they contend, is the election of President Trump: They question his commitment to U.S. civic traditions and even his knowledge of them.

“When it comes to the issues any American president would face, Trump is a shockingly ignorant man,” wrote Michael Gerson, a former Republican Senate aide and speechwriter and senior policy adviser to President George W. Bush. “He bluffs through questions on campaign finance and foreign policy. . . . I have honestly met precocious high school students

## Civic Education Needed

Legal experts say strong civics education is vital if the citizenry is to act as a watchdog over government. The need for vigilance transcends any party or president, they say, citing two recent controversies that require watching. One involves presidents’ growing use of executive orders. Republicans heavily criticized former President Obama for resorting to these orders to bypass Congress, calling it dictatorial and tyrannical; Democrats are responding in kind, noting that Trump signed numerous executive orders during his first week in office.<sup>71</sup>

The other is the potential conflicts of interest involving Trump’s presidency. Critics say Trump’s business empire will result in him violating the Constitution’s so-called “emolument” clause, which bans a president from receiving payments or favors from foreign governments.

The ban is intended to wall presidents off from situations in which their business interests might expose them to attempts by foreign governments to unduly influence U.S. policy, says Pamela Karlan, a professor of public interest law at Stanford Law School in Palo Alto, Calif. “That’s why the president has to take an oath to support the Constitution. If he does something not

*Continued on p. 114*

## *Should states make the U.S. citizenship test a graduation requirement?*



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**JOE FOSS INSTITUTE**

WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, JANUARY 2017

**a**sk 10 adults what citizenship means and you'll probably get 10 different answers. Ask 10 students and you'll get a bewildered look and a shrug of the shoulders. Studies show that a majority of our students and many adults lack a basic understanding of how our country was founded, how it's governed and what it means to be a citizen. Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has termed this the "quiet crisis in education." We believe it is the quiet crisis in America.

In 2015, the Joe Foss Institute, dedicated to promoting civics education, set out to change this with the Civics Education Initiative and legislation in Arizona that requires students to pass a civics test before graduating. Since then, 13 other states have enacted this or similar legislation, and another 20 states will consider the legislation in 2017. By the end of this year, we hope to have the bill enacted in over half the country and that long-neglected civics education will be back on the front burner where it belongs.

The proposal requires high school students to score 60 percent or higher on the U.S. citizenship test to earn their diploma, the same test taken by immigrants, 92 percent of whom pass on their first attempt. Compare this to 29,000 eighth-graders who were tested in 2014. A scant 23 percent scored at or above proficiency in civics — an abysmal number by any standards.

States that have adopted the test as a graduation requirement are now engaging students and showing transformative results. For example, in Jamestown, N.D., not one freshman passed the pretest given on the first day of class last year; most were under 45 percent, but 95 percent scored over 70 percent at the end of the semester, using the very same study materials, readily available online, used by immigrants.

As a former professor, I know the one question students will always ask during a lecture is: "Is this going to be on the test?" Answer yes, and students lean forward, take notes and are engaged in the discussion. Answer no, and the entire class leans back, drifts off and disengages. As this relates to America, we must put civics on a test that matters today, so our students will lean forward and engage as active, informed and responsible citizens.



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WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, JANUARY 2017

**t**he Joe Foss Institute of Arizona has rightly focused its attention on the marginalization of civic learning in K-12 education throughout the United States. However, its solution — requiring high school students to pass the U.S. citizenship test before graduation — isn't the answer to fostering the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors among young people necessary for informed engagement in our democracy.

The test itself wasn't designed as a summative assessment for students. While many of the questions and answers constitute important factual knowledge that I would hope we all possess as Americans, some of them border on trivia. My fear is that a citizenship test will serve as more of a ceiling than a floor for civic learning in the United States.

Based on my analysis of the results of the last three iterations of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in Civics (1998, 2006 and 2010), instruction in the form of textbook reading, memorization of material and worksheet completion too often constitutes the sum of students' civic learning experience.

Moreover, I tested the link between teaching specific content knowledge, such as the U.S. Constitution or Congress, and student performance by measuring civic knowledge and skills. I found no relationship between these variables.

Instead, students did best when discussing current events in class daily, simulating democratic processes regularly and engaging in community service annually. These practices are too often neglected in content-centered courses, and students depart with a fleeting knowledge base and are poorly prepared for the demands of democratic governance.

Student-centered civic learning practices should lie at the heart of policy efforts to improve youths' civic knowledge. For example, Illinois recently passed a law requiring schools to offer a semester-long course that embeds these practices through discussion, service-learning and simulations.

Assessment is also imperative, and Tennessee opted for a project-based learning requirement in civics, where students demonstrate their civic capacity by doing, the heart of democratic governance.

Instead of a shallow exercise in memorization, let's unite around course requirements, standards and assessments that empower students not only with knowledge, but also skills, attitudes and behaviors requisite for lifelong civic engagement.



*Continued from p. 112*

because it defends the United States but because it advances his own personal interest, that's a conflict of interest" and citizens need to speak up.

Trump has said he sees no conflict. In a late-November interview with *The New York Times*, he said that while he intends to avoid situations in which personal benefit might cloud his judgment, he disagreed that the law required him to sell any businesses. "The law is totally on my side, meaning, the president can't have a conflict of interest," Trump said.<sup>72</sup>

Many experts disagree with the president's reasoning, and he already is facing a lawsuit arguing that he is violating the Constitution by allowing his hotels and other businesses to accept payments from foreign governments.<sup>73</sup>

"Voters have got to start to focus on this. Voters need to be educated about what's going on," says Richard Painter, professor at the University of Minnesota School of Law, who was chief ethics lawyer to President George W. Bush from 2005 to 2007.

Some polls show voters are paying attention to the controversy. A December survey by the Pew Research Center found that 65 percent of Americans are "very" or "somewhat" concerned that Trump's business and foreign government ties could affect his ability to serve the country.<sup>74</sup>

Yet another December poll, by Bloomberg, 69 percent of respondents said it would "go too far" to require Trump to "sell all his businesses so that neither he nor his family could potentially profit from actions he takes as president."<sup>75</sup>

That kind of thinking alarms some legal scholars.

Ultimately, it is voters and institutions such as courts and the media who must demand that public officials serve the people's interests and not their own, says Neil Siegel, a professor of law and political science at Duke Law School, in North Carolina. This fact

makes better civic education vital, he says. For example, if the public accepts Trump's assertion that he is not required by law to sell any businesses, "it's very important to make clear to people that that's simply not the case."

The public understanding of such issues ranges from excellent to non-existent, Siegel says. "That's why it's critical for our leaders, including our president, to lead by example instead of preying on the worst instincts and the greatest lack of understanding of their supporters."

This is not a liberal-versus-conservative issue, says Karlan. The concerns are "clearly anchored directly in various pieces of constitutional text and constitutional structure" that both liberal and conservative constitutional scholars agree form the bedrock of the American system, she says.

### Reviving Civic Groups

The impact of the internet and social media on civic engagement have been mixed, analysts say. Some say the internet age has made it easier for citizens to become civically engaged and for activists to organize. The Jan. 21 women's marches, they note, started out as a Facebook posting in Hawaii and grew into a worldwide event drawing huge crowds that exceeded expectations.<sup>76</sup>

But others say that activism in the Twitter age is superficial and that citizen-run groups of old have been replaced by professionally run organizations that rely on the internet to find members and raise money. The causes remain passionate — the environment, for example — but reliance on the internet limits face-to-face interaction by grass-roots members. "Clicking a check box on a website is a poor substitute for articulating and even defending your views in a public arena," said Notre Dame's Campbell.<sup>77</sup>

William Forbath, a professor and associate dean for research at the University of Texas' School of Law in

Austin, says it's important to rebuild the locally based citizen-run membership organizations that once helped average Americans learn about and exercise their civic duties.

And as civic skills and traditional grass-roots participation have declined, Americans have turned over their power to affect public policy to public officials, professional organizers and wealthy businessmen, Forbath says.

Wealthy activists on both the left and the right are funding political action committees (PAC) that operate independently from the political parties, and critics of money in politics say these "super PACs" are distorting American democracy. Forbath likens the influence of the rich in government to the "moneyed aristocracy" that the Founders feared in the eighteenth century. "From the beginning it was seen as a real peril to the constitutional order," Forbath says, because government will represent the people's interests only if its leaders are "derived from the great body of society, not a portion of it."

The only way to reverse this trend is for average citizens to raise their voices about public policy, as they did historically, he says. "We have to think about rekindling the kinds of organizations [such as unions] that once stemmed the domination of our policy-making by wealth."

Postelection, some civic groups are reporting good news and bad news.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which has been leading campaigns across the country to raise the minimum wage to \$15, expects to face severe obstacles with a Trump-led White House, a Republican-controlled Congress and many statehouses and a Supreme Court soon to have a conservative majority.

The union will cut its budget by 30 percent over the next year in the expectation that a conservative-dominated government may push regulations to curb "the ability of working people to join together in unions," thus dampening mem-

bership growth, wrote SEIU President Mary Kay Henry in an internal memo.<sup>78</sup>

The minimum-wage campaign will remain active, however, said Henry. “You can’t go smaller in this moment. You have to go bigger.”<sup>79</sup>

Others activists say young Americans are showing a new interest in civic engagement.

Contrary to the common belief that young people are unengaged, “the under-26 Millennials I found on the campaign were an incredibly practical, incredibly hardworking demographic,” said Becky Bond, who coordinated volunteers for the Sanders presidential campaign. “These are young people that came of age during the financial crisis in 2007, 2008. Many of them had been from downwardly mobile middle-class homes. Instead of being tracked to a four-year college, they’re being tracked to community college or having to take time off and work instead of going to college at all,” she said.<sup>80</sup>

After Sanders’ campaign ended last summer, one group renamed itself Millennials for Revolution, said Bond. It started as a Facebook group and then “became this big very active social media group that also pushed people to take action in real life,” she said. “They’re continuing to organize for their causes that they care about,” such as climate change, racism and immigration reform.<sup>81</sup> ■

## OUTLOOK

### Civic Surge?

Americans’ enthusiasm for political engagement seems high following the 2016 campaign and election, but experts are unsure whether it will last.

Normally after an election, things quiet down for a bit, says Carrie Davis, executive director of the Ohio chapter of the League of Women Voters. “This time, from the

very next day, people were wanting to do something,” she says. “That’s partly because it was the ugliest election we’d seen. No matter what people’s politics are, this got under their skins.”

Activism appears to be up in Ohio as well, says Davis. The league’s Ohio office is across the street from the Statehouse in Columbus, “and in the last two months, I can’t count how many rallies, demonstrations and marches I’ve seen,” she says. “You see a lot of young people carrying signs. That’s different. You always have winners and losers. You don’t always have people taking to the streets.” Across the country, for example, “Not My President” protests broke out the day after the election.

“The big question in my mind, though,” says Davis, “is, ‘Does it last?’ This is wonderful. But can we keep people engaged? You can’t tell at this point,” she says.

One driving factor is that people want a positive experience from the political process, says Chris Carson, president of the League of Women Voters of the United States, a 97-year-old nonpartisan group that works on voter education, voter turnout and defense of voting rights, as well as campaign finance reform. “People want the facts, the information they need to decide how to vote, and they want to debate issues,” she says. “But they want something that doesn’t include screaming or character assassination.”

Big questions remain about how to reignite civic engagement among Americans, experts say, and the schools’ role in it.

While the burden of reversing America’s civic-engagement decline shouldn’t be laid entirely on the schools, schools can help by teaching students to discuss complicated and contentious issues without descending into the personal attacks that are turning off Americans of all ages to politics, wrote Wisconsin’s Hess and Paula McAvoy, program director for the Madison Center for Ethics and Education at the University of Wisconsin.<sup>82</sup>

“Learning to talk about political differences is a ‘democracy-sustaining’ approach to education, because learning to talk about issues of the day is the cornerstone of a healthy and well-functioning democracy,” Hess and McAvoy said.<sup>83</sup>

“We’re a pretty disempowered people, but I don’t think we’re apathetic,” says Healy of the Illinois civics initiative. “People think the young are too busy playing on their cellphones to care about their communities. But it’s not true.”

“What I say to people is that being engaged as the league is engaged is a lot of fun,” says the League of Women’s Voters’ Carson. “It’s not boring. It’s great sport. You meet great people in the community,” she says. “And you’re doing really important work. And then I say — ‘If you don’t do it, then what are we left with?’ ” ■

## Notes

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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**Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)**, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, Lincoln Filene Hall, Tufts University, Medford, MA 02155; 617-627-2529; [civicyouth.org](http://civicyouth.org). Focuses on civic education and youth civic engagement.

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**Generation Joshua**, 1 Patrick Henry Circle, Purcellville, VA 20132; 877-338-8803; [www.generationjoshua.org/GenJ](http://www.generationjoshua.org/GenJ). Group established by conservative Christian homeschoolers offers training programs to help conservative Christian families learn and practice civic activism.

**iCivics**, 1035 Cambridge St., Suite 21B, Cambridge, MA 02141; 617-356-8311; [www.iCivics.org](http://www.iCivics.org). Creates interactive online games and teaching resources; founded by retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

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**National Center for Learning & Civic Engagement**, Education Commission of the States, 700 Broadway St., #810, Denver, CO 80203; 303-299-3600; [www.ecs.org](http://www.ecs.org). Resource and research center on civic education sponsored by the 50 state governors and leaders of the U.S. territories and the District of Columbia.

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A Harvard Graduate School of Education professor argues that it is crucial to improve civic education and civic opportunities in low-income and minority neighborhoods.

Putnam, Robert D., *Bowling Alone*, Touchstone Books, 2001.

A Harvard professor of public policy details in this classic work how Americans stopped participating in community groups over the past several decades and discusses the consequences for the nation's political life.

Schmitt, Gary J., and Cheryl Miller, eds., *Trendsetting Charter Schools: Raising the Bar for Civic Education*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

Authors assembled by the director of the American Enterprise Institute's Program on American Citizenship (Schmitt) and the program's former manager (Miller) provide analysis of charter-school civics programs around the country.

### Articles

Howe, Nora, and Thomas Kerr-Vanderslice, "Was Nov. 8 a massive failure of civics education?" *The Hechinger Report*, Nov. 17, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/j5sf7rz>.

Students are surprised to learn that so few adults vote in presidential elections, say staff members at the civic-education group Generation Citizen.

Pullman, Joy, "Report: Schools Are Teaching Kids to Hate America Under the Guise of 'Civics,'" *The Federalist*, Jan. 16, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/j5lcqqa>.

Project-based civics courses promote a progressive agenda damaging to the United States rather than teaching students crucial facts about U.S. history and government, the conservative National Association of Scholars argues.

Wong, Alia, "Why Civics Is About More Than Citizenship," *The Atlantic*, Sept. 17, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/zqals4c>.

Analysts debate whether states should require high school graduates to pass the U.S. citizenship test, which immigrants must pass to become naturalized citizens.

### Reports and Studies

"Young Voices at the Ballot Box: Advancing Efforts to Lower the Voting Age," *Generation Citizen*, December 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/hj8xybv>.

A nonprofit group that provides civic education lays out the arguments and evidence for lowering the voting age to 16 or 17 as a way of encouraging civic engagement among young people.

Kahlenberg, Richard D., and Clifford Janey, "Putting Democracy Back into Public Education," *The Century Foundation*, Nov. 20, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/jgvjoax>.

A senior fellow at the left-leaning Century Foundation (Kahlenberg) and a senior researcher at the Boston University School of Education (Janey) recommend public-policy changes to refocus schools on educating for citizenship.

Lautzenheiser, Daniel K., Andrew P. Kelly and Cheryl Miller, "The Contested Curriculum: How Teachers and Citizens View Civics Education," *Program on American Citizenship*, American Enterprise Institute, June 16, 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/h2ybljg>.

A survey of 1,000 Americans reveals sharp divisions between the kind of civic education teachers support and the kind that other Americans view as appropriate. The survey also points to Republicans' and Democrats' differing preferences for what civics classes should cover.

# The Next Step:

## *Additional Articles from Current Periodicals*

### **Action Civics**

**“State launches school civic engagement program,” *Wilton Bulletin*, July 6, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/jx33yxt>.**

Connecticut’s secretary of state and education commissioner started the Red, White and Blue Schools Initiative, which rewards schools that create and develop programs that encourage students to become civically engaged.

**Lambert, Diana, “New social studies guidelines encourage students as young as 5 to do community service,” *The Sacramento Bee*, Jan. 7, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/hsy7gku>.**

California’s most recent social studies and history guidelines encourage teachers to promote civic engagement for students as a way to teach them about politics and society.

**Smeltz, Adam, “City teen program offering a lesson in civics,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Jan. 23, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/hc3j2ld>.**

A new program in Pittsburgh will allow up to 21 young people to work closely with the municipal government and develop a proposal for the 2018 budget.

**Stevens, Heidi, “More than 1,600 Chicago high schoolers witnessing history as election judges,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 8, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/zwmd68k>.**

The nonprofit group Mikva Challenge and the Chicago Board of Elections joined forces to recruit and train high school juniors to serve as elections judges at polling stations for the 2016 presidential election.

### **Postelection Engagement**

**Fowler, Geoffrey A., “Can Tech Make Democracy Great Again?” *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 18, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/jqr4gj8>.**

Civic technologists and open-data advocates are pushing for increased use of technology and data as tools to better understand government and hold officials accountable.

**Rosenbaum, Steven, “Trump Fires Up Civic Tech Startups,” *Forbes*, Jan. 18, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/z75ummf>.**

The 2016 presidential election inspired increased civic engagement through technology from startups such as Act On This and ShiftSpark that seek to solve problems among voters, donors and local governments.

**Stein, Perry, Steve Hendrix and Abigail Hauslohner, “Women’s marches: More than one million protesters vow to resist President Trump,” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 22, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/zc3787w>.**

More than a million people rallied at the Women’s March on Washington and in cities around the country, sparked in part by President Trump’s controversial statements about women.

**Teehan, Sean, “Massachusetts AG Maura Healey encourages civic engagement at Springfield town hall,” *Mass Live*, Jan. 18, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/z5ffjjs>.**

In her fourth town hall since the presidential election, the Massachusetts attorney general urged greater civic engagement, urging people to run for office or volunteer.

### **State Legislation**

**“Missouri Law to Require Civics Test, CPR for High Schoolers,” *The Associated Press*, CBS St. Louis, June 22, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/jdgkm4p>.**

As part of a national push from the civic group Joe Foss Institute, a new Missouri law will require the state’s high school students to pass a civics exam and force public schools to set aside time daily for the Pledge of Allegiance.

**Mannion, Annemarie, and Diane Rado, “IL, Nazareth work to fit civics requirement into curriculum,” *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 9, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/hlu2674>.**

New legislation in Illinois mandates that high school students take two years of social studies, including a semester of civics, in order to graduate.

**Sisk, Chas, “Who’s George Washington? What’s Congress? Now, Tennessee High School Grads Have To Show They Know,” *Nashville Public Radio*, Jan. 6, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/jnlwdbw>.**

Tennessee school districts now require high school students to pass the U.S. citizenship test under a new law.

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#### MLA STYLE

Jost, Kenneth. “Remembering 9/11.” *CQ Researcher* 2 Sept. 2011: 701-732.

#### APA STYLE

Jost, K. (2011, September 2). Remembering 9/11. *CQ Researcher*, 9, 701-732.

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Jost, Kenneth. “Remembering 9/11.” *CQ Researcher*, September 2, 2011, 701-32.



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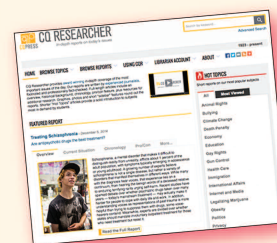
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