



Our Country 'Tis of Thee...

How much do we
know about our sweet
land of liberty?
Shockingly little.

BY MEGAN MCCLURE

You know how a bill becomes a law. But do your constituents? Do they know how the responsibilities of state legislators differ from those of our lawmakers in Congress? Or how a case gets to the Supreme Court? And, as far as state budgets go, do they understand what their taxes pay for?

Civics—the study of how government works and the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen—seems to be disappearing. Fewer than 30 percent of fourth-, eighth- and 12th-grade students were proficient in civics, and a significant gap persists between white students and students of racial and ethnic minority groups, according to the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress civics assessment. The assessment found a decline in the overall civics knowledge of high school seniors between 2006 and 2010. This ignorance of the responsibilities of citizenship results in young people being inadequately prepared to participate in the democratic process. With only about half our citizens bothering to vote, it's clear that “we the people” are not as engaged in government as we should be.

To achieve proficiency in civics is not particularly complex; it doesn't take years to learn the basics. And yet, less than half of eighth-graders tested in the most recent national civics exam knew the purpose of the Bill of Rights, and only one in 10 eighth-graders demonstrated acceptable knowledge of the checks and balances our country relies on through the three branches of government.

An Ongoing Concern

The problem is not just with today's students. Barely one-third of more than 1,400

adults could name the three branches of government in a survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. One-fifth of respondents thought that a 5-4 Supreme Court vote would be sent back to Congress for consideration. These results “demonstrate that many know surprisingly little” about our government, says Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Center, and offer “dramatic evidence of the need for more and better civics education.”

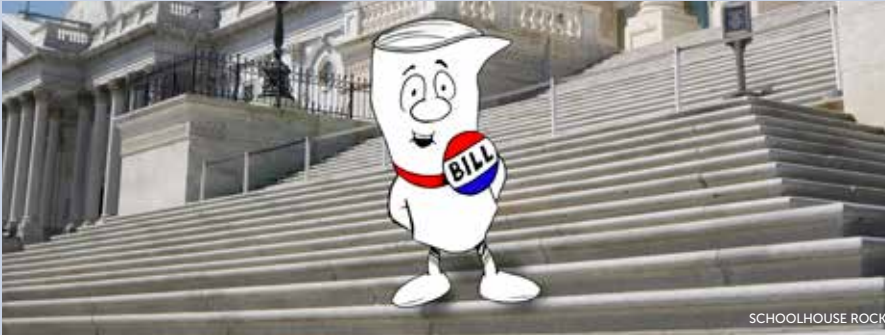
Why is this alarming? “A democratic government cannot function without citizens' participation, and civics education provides the bedrock for that participation. The less the population knows and understands about how the American system of government works and the values and history behind it, the more vulnerable the system becomes,” says Charles N. Quigley, executive director of the Center for Civic Education.

“Today's students are tomorrow's leaders, and giving them a strong foundation in civic values is critical to the vitality of America's democracy and economy in the 21st century,” said former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in 2012 with the release of the report “Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy: A Road Map and Call to Action.” Duncan stressed the need “to develop and improve civic learning as part of a well-rounded education so every student has a sense of citizenship.” The report, along with other dismal news, prompted the Joe Foss Institute to create the Civics Education Initiative. The nonprofit institute is dedicated to educating youth about the nation's unique freedoms.

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Test Your Civics Chops

Here are 20 of 100 possible questions on the U.S. citizenship test. To become naturalized citizens, immigrants must get at least 60 percent correct. On this mini-test that would be 12 correct answers. If you ace it, you're not only a citizen, you are a statesman. Answers are below.



1. What is the supreme law of the land?
2. What do we call the first ten amendments to the Constitution?
3. What is one right or freedom from the First Amendment?
4. How many amendments does the Constitution have?
5. What are two rights in the Declaration of Independence?
6. What is the economic system in the United States?
7. What stops one branch of government from becoming too powerful?
8. We elect a U.S. senator for how many years?
9. The House of Representatives has how many voting members?
10. If both the president and the vice president can no longer serve, who becomes president?
11. Under the U.S. Constitution, what is one power given to the states?
12. There are four amendments to the Constitution about who can vote. Describe one of them.
13. Name one of the two responsibilities of U.S. citizens.
14. Name two rights of everyone living in the U.S.
15. Who wrote the Declaration of Independence?
16. When was the Declaration of Independence adopted?
17. When was the Constitution written?
18. The Federalist Papers supported the passage of the U.S. Constitution. Name one of the writers.
19. What did the Emancipation Proclamation do?
20. What did Susan B. Anthony do?

Answers to Quiz

1. the Constitution 2. the Bill of Rights 3. speech, religion, assembly, press, petition the government 4. 27 5. life, liberty, pursuit of happiness 6. capitalists or market economy 7. checks and balances, separation of powers 8. six 9. 45 10. the Speaker of the House 11. provide schooling and education, provide protection (police), provide safety (fire departments), issue a driver's license, approve zoning and land use 12. Citizens 18 and older can vote; you don't have to pay a poll tax to vote; any citizen can vote; women and men can vote; a male citizen of any race can vote. 13. serve on a jury, vote in a federal election 14. freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom to petition the government, freedom of worship, the right to bear arms 15. Thomas Jefferson 16. July 4, 1776 17. 1787 18. James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay 19. Freed the slaves 20. Fought for women's rights

There is little time in the school day for civics education anymore, the institute says, partly due to the increased emphasis on testing subjects other than social studies. "Civics is being boxed out of the classroom today by an all-consuming focus on ... tests that are being used in many cases to determine funding and a host of outcomes for schools, students and teachers," says Lucian Spataro, the institute's chief academic officer and vice president of legislative affairs.

The institute's solution? Make the U.S. citizenship test for immigrants a graduation requirement for high-schoolers.

Test of Citizenship

The Civics Education Initiative wants state legislators to require high school students, as a condition for graduation, to answer at least 60 of the 100 questions on the U.S. citizenship civics test correctly—the same level of knowledge asked of immigrants seeking to become naturalized U.S. citizens.

State by state, the initiative is working with lawmakers, students, teachers and other concerned citizens. Twenty states and the U.S. Virgin Islands have passed legislation inspired by the initiative, and another three states have enacted versions of a civics-test bill through action by their education boards.

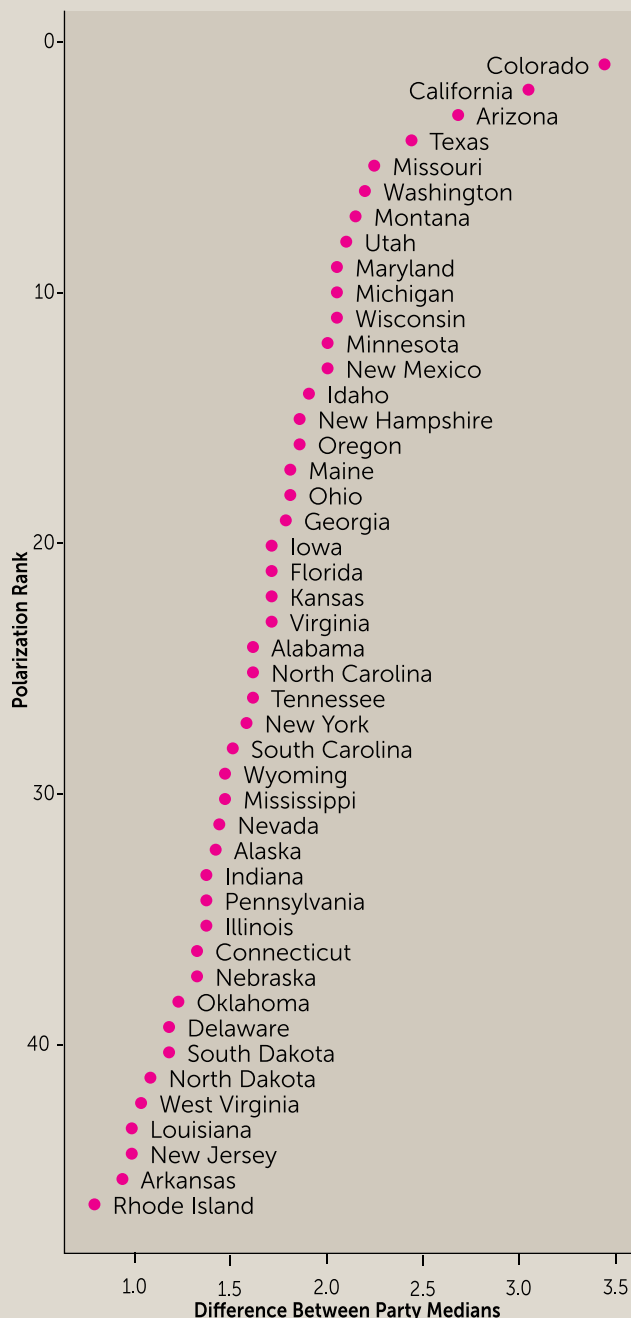
Teachers' unions, the ACLU and advocates for students with disabilities claim the requirement is an unfunded mandate that places even more pressure on classroom teachers who are already stretched to their limits. Several states have passed legislation by getting input from all those involved and tweaking the measures to address their concerns and fit their state's unique needs. The initiative's goal is to get legislation supporting civics education enacted in all 50 states.

Every state has passed legislation addressing civics education over the years, often within social studies requirements, according to the Education Commission of the States. Most states either require specific civics courses or describe what students must learn. Some require students to pass civics tests to receive credit for the courses, but not to graduate. Arizona, Missouri, North Dakota, Utah, Tennessee and Wisconsin are just starting to require the test for graduation.

How Polarized Are We?

We keep hearing how polarized we are these days. But how is that measured? Political scientists Boris Shor, of the University of Houston, and Nolan McCarty, of Princeton University, measure polarization by using roll call voting data and state legislators' responses to the National Political Awareness Test to calculate the ideological distance between the median Democrat and Republican in each state legislature. The larger the distance, the higher the score, and the greater the level of polarization. This is an update from the chart in the July/August 2017 issue.

State Legislatures' Level of Polarization in 2016



Plenty of Effort

There are many other groups focusing on civics education.

Former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, spurred by what she saw as the inadequacy of American civics education, founded iCivics in 2010. The nonprofit provides web-based games and tools to help students learn about and participate in civic life. ICivics has joined with the Annenberg Center, the American Bar Association, the Library of Congress and other organizations to create the Civics Renewal Network, which is "committed to strengthening civic life in the U.S. by increasing the quality of civics education in our nation's schools and by improving accessibility to high-quality, no-cost learning materials."

On the Civics Renewal Network website, teachers can find civics education resources, searchable by subject, grade, resource type, standards and teaching strategy. The "We the People Program," from the Center for Civic Education, also promotes "civic competence and responsibility among upper elementary and secondary students" using simulated congressional hearings, textbooks and other interactive strategies.

State legislators are doing their part to promote civics education as well. Almost every legislature offers civics education materials or learning experiences to students and the public. Mock legislative sessions give students a chance to see how the lawmaking process works. Legislatures also offer internships and page positions to young people interested in lawmaking and civics in general.

The Wisconsin Legislature received NCSL's 2016 Kevin B. Harrington Award for Excellence in Democracy Education, an annual recognition of an individual or organization for advancing public understanding of state and local representative democracy. A cornerstone of Wisconsin's civics education opportunities is the Senate Scholars Program, in which high school students spend a week at the Capitol learning about the legislative process and meeting with legislators, legislative staff professionals and the press.

NCSL's Legislators Back to School Program is a great source of materials and support for legislators interested in visiting classrooms and talking with students about civics and state legislatures. Unique to the program's materials is "The American Democracy Game," designed to put middle-school students in the shoes of a lawmaker to experience dealing with public policy issues, negotiating with stakeholders and finding ways to reach agreement.

When the Foss Institute's Civics Education Initiative began, it laid out these goals: "First, to bring attention to this 'quiet crisis' to ensure students graduate with the tools they need to become informed and engaged citizens; second, to get civics education back in classrooms across this country; lastly, that the Civics Education Initiative should be only the first step in expanding civic awareness and learning for our students ... to serve as a foundation for a re-blossoming of civic learning and engagement."

The initiative and other groups, including NCSL, provide support and educational materials to concerned teachers, civil servants and citizens. We can recover from the current civics crisis by valuing and supporting comprehensive, high-quality civics education. After all, who's going to run the country if no one knows how it works?