

# The Challenges of Civics Education

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Recent attention to issues and opportunities in civics education is welcome indeed. A variety of organizations, some explicitly focused on civics and others including civics amid a wider range of interests, urge renewed attention to civics and help to highlight basic goals in this educational field.<sup>1</sup> Some go beyond recommendations to offer specific analyses of civics curricula and student reactions. The participation of other groups, including state educational offices such as the Virginia Department of Education,<sup>2</sup> suggests wider interest and the possibility of translating the urgency of civics education into enhanced policies and programs. The breadth of concern certainly suggests a perceived problem – and there's no question that a number of difficulties beset the field – but also real opportunities for positive response.

This sketch, building on the several existing initiatives, will briefly outline the field itself and then suggest some of the curricular challenges that the field has long embraced. There are two key premises: first, that the current state of civics education does reflect a recent downgrading that deserves attention and remedy; but second, that there has really been no golden age of civics, that the field has long displayed some intriguing deficiencies that must be addressed in any effort at

revivification. Civics education sometimes functioned well in the past thanks to a particularly imaginative curriculum or, even more commonly, thanks to particularly inspired teachers. The effort as a whole, however, has never generated the results that civics proponents have sought, and the reasons can and should be explored.

Since its inception in the 1920s, civics has inherently lacked a clear disciplinary base. Unlike all other academic subjects in the schools, there is no explicit analogue in higher education, that might serve to guide and support the school effort. Obviously, civics links closely with political science, and historians and history teachers can note their overlap with the field. Further, it may be possible, as many social studies advocates would doubtless claim, to turn interdisciplinarity and K-12 specificity into advantages, in a subject that arguably, given citizenship demands, should be less tied to the college-bound than other segments of the school curriculum. Still, the feature is worth noting, in an area that, at the least, lacks the clear prestige that disciplinary conventions might provide.

A second basic feature is even more significant, and again it colors both current perceptions and the history of the field. Evaluations of civics often incorporate exceptionally demanding expectations, partly because advocates characteristically build the same expectations into their own arguments. Civics has a subject matter, to be sure, and most observers agree that it's an important one: knowledge of the political institutions and processes in the contemporary United States, hopefully at local and state as well as federal levels. It's legitimate to argue that this kind of knowledge is fundamental to democratic participation – a point that has been recognized internationally in recent years, as well as within the United States alone.<sup>3</sup> But subject matter in this area easily spills over into actual behavior, and this is where the heightened ambition comes in. The most extensive claims for civics point not just to relevant knowledge but to actual civic participation: products of civics education should be better and more active citizens than they would be without this kind of training. They should have a deeper appreciation of values like tolerance and inclusiveness – values that must not just be known, but internalized and use as guides in actual political engagement. This is a tall order, though in principle a very desirable target. Again, it differentiates civics from most other school subjects,

where values and measurable behaviors are less immediately involved. It is easy, as a result, to find civics results inadequate when, for reasons that may well stretch far beyond the educational process, American civic life itself seems wanting.

Civics was born in a climate of educational optimism and political apprehension. The legacy of the Progressive era included deep beliefs in the potential benefits of education, enhancing an American tendency to look to the school system for an unusually wide range of outcomes. But civics was also born in the crest of turn-of-the-century immigration, amid a real concern that, without some strenuous efforts, immigrant values might overwhelm the qualities essential to American citizenship; civics in this sense reflected a belief in exceptional American qualities that needed careful implantation for newer arrivals. Civics education, in other words, had a demanding mission from the outset. It is not surprising, in another age of immigration and attendant concern, that civics is once again hauled out for examination.

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Civics education today reflects a combination of deterioration and unevenness that is legitimately troubling. Deterioration has occurred particularly at the primary school level, with the rapid decline of regular social studies activity. A NAEP study in 1998 reflected a 20% reduction in time spent on social studies among fourth graders over the preceding decade (to a point where only 39% reported regular engagement with social studies materials), and the situation has worsened since amid the heightened focus on basic skills and on science and mathematics preparation. (We will turn to a key factor here, No Child Left Behind, a bit later on.) Unevenness has increased as well. Currently only 29 states (including the District of Columbia) require a civics or government course. Only 26 have reasonably explicit civics standards (three states have separate civics criteria, the rest build the standards into more general social studies goals), and while 18 other states have some relevant standards they tended to be rather diffuse – and six states currently do nothing at all. Only 23 states have developed

civics standards for subject-matter teachers themselves, which means that a general problem in the social studies, of lack of explicit expectations and training, is even worse for the civics category itself.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, in this situation, recent testing suggests that a third of high school seniors lack a basic understanding of how American government works, with 75% of those tested in 1998 scoring at below basic or, at best, at merely basic levels.<sup>5</sup> As in other facets of American education, high school may present a particular problem. Tests of 14-year-olds in 1998 suggested that American students did reasonably well, when assessed through international comparisons of civic and political knowledge, which is at least mildly encouraging and may reflect some continued strengths in the nation's distinctive emphasis on a civics category. But this level is not likely to persist, as primary school attention to social studies falters. And even in 1998 there was a particularly troubling finding, again in the framework of an international comparison: the range between well prepared and badly prepared students was exceptionally great, a point to which we must return given the relevance of a gap of this sort to democratic participation.

Concerns about civics do not rest on student evaluations alone, but on wider assessments of American political life – again, civics can be held to very demanding standards that stretch well beyond the school system. Low voting levels among young adults have become an obvious target. In 2006, 24% of the eligible voters in the 18-29 year old age range voted. This was a marked improvement from the congressional elections in 2002, when only 20% voted. Two million more young voters participated in 2006, making this age group the most rapidly improving of all categories. But amid these positive signs must still come the recognition that dramatic improvement is possible mainly because the base is so low, and that lack of involvement continues to be distressingly high. At least until very recently, surveys have also revealed a dramatic decline in levels of political discussion by young people – from over 30% involved in the late 1960s to a mere 16% in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> It's not a question of youth alone. Though political scientists now disagree as to whether overall American voting rates are a cause for concern or not – there is some evidence that they aren't too dreadful

when compared to levels in other mature democracies – there certainly seems reason for concern about American civic engagement more generally. The decline of participation in voluntary organizations, the growing isolation of Americans from the kinds of community systems that historically sustained American democracy, are well documented. Too many Americans are, as the most compelling single study suggests, bowling alone. And while all this surely does not result from the impoverishment of civics education, it is certainly tempting to look to a civics push to provide part of the remedy.<sup>7</sup>

Actual data provide some support for these wider connections, though not perhaps as much as one might wish. Young people who have had civics classes are 23% more likely than their peers to believe they are responsible for making things better for society, and 14% more likely actually to vote.<sup>8</sup> (The gap is striking, reflecting still the real disengagement of American youth from political life in the narrow sense, though less from social participation more broadly construed.) The figures caution against too much reliance on civics to make things right – again, it is important not to apply unrealistic standards – but they also provide some comfort for those advocates who would urge that more and better civics will have some positive impact on the political process more generally. And this is where the more specific data, on the decline of civics subject matter in the grade schools and the unevenness in attention across the states, cause legitimate concern.

Only a few observers would claim crisis, rather than significant problem. It is not clear that civics knowledge has deteriorated over time – it's chastening to remember that, in 1941-2, 15% of all draftees did not know who the American president was. Lack of political participation itself may not always be a bad thing. A group of political scientists have been pointing out that where voters are ignorant of the issues, abstention produces better results, in terms of candidate quality, than willy-nilly voting.<sup>9</sup> But this finding, intriguing in itself, is cold comfort to the civics case: for after all, we are ultimately interested both in more political participation and in better levels of informedness. Without more enlightened attention to civics in the schools, we may be settling for a second-best political life.

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Improving civics and its impact on students themselves involves a six-pronged attack, that addresses both the troubling recent trends and some longer-term vulnerabilities in the field itself. The agenda is challenging. Key goals complement each other for the most part, but there are a few internal contradictions that must be addressed as well. Teachers themselves can move the process forward to some extent, but the agenda as a whole involves wider involvement of the public and the educational policy community as well. There is a base to draw upon: 90% of all adults say civics education is important, and 66% of young people themselves favor mandatory requirements. But the base at best has not been effectively mobilized, at worst is dangerously diffuse. There are some clear targets to strive for, and a six-point agenda offers at least a starting point.

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We must, first, reverse the trend of declining levels of instruction, and we must work for more consistent nationwide interest in appropriate standards, for students themselves and for the teachers involved. Any serious improvement in civics education requires equally serious reversal of the current curricular decline of the social studies. The retreat at the primary school level is particularly troubling, for this is one of the more successful sectors of American K-12 education and it offers essential preparation for the classic high school civics course. Change here is a precondition for any wider gains.

The environment is not wholly unfavorable, despite the recent slippage. As noted, public opinion is in principle favorable to civics, and it might be tapped to support greater attention. The huge success of the Teaching American History program suggests that relevant federal support and funding might

be available for a comparable civics thrust. The advocacy of the new civics groups, with leading spokespeople like Sandra Day O'Connor, offers important backing and powerful arguments.

There are opportunities, furthermore, for gains even in the context of anxieties about basic skills. Most obviously, alliances might be formed with reading and writing programs. Reading enhancement can thus be combined with social studies basics, and indeed reading relevant civics material is arguably more important than the more common pre-literature approach. The ability to frame arguments in civics easily blends with the goals of writing programs, where data, clear thinking and effective expression coalesce. The other fashionable focus, on science and mathematics, can be respected without starving social studies and civics. Attention must be balanced with citizenship goals. Even here, some imaginative relationships can be formed, with some attention to the public issues of science and numeracy – for example, in the environmental area, or in the statistical literacy so essential for responsible evaluation of social trends. Fruitful combinations can thus support civics even amid current priorities, along with insistence on the importance of the subject in its own right.

Any campaign for greater priority for civics must also address teacher training, where cavalier policies are hardly novel. It is vital that social studies be taken seriously enough to improve relevant subject matter mastery on certified teachers in the field.

Stronger advocacy, and the potential alliances with basic skills programs, risk falling short unless two basic issues are confronted. First, relevant professional groups, notably in the social studies and history, need to be able to join forces with greater effectiveness than in decades past. And second, civics advocates need to make explicit decisions about their subject's place in currently powerful assessment projects.

Since the 1920s and 1930s, civics has frequently been a victim of tensions between social studies professionals, now organized in the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS), and teachers and

organizations more concerned with the history discipline that has its own claims for a strong place in the curricula of the schools. The common place of history courses in the secondary schools makes the role of disciplinary units like the American Historical Association and the Organization of American History, and the growing array of history teaching groups, vital allies in any general advocacy for citizenship education, even though the civics course itself is more classically a social studies than a history poster child. In recent years, tensions between the NCSS and the history organizations has eased – in part because of a recognition of the strong pressures against existing social studies programs of any sort. Inter-organizational collaboration has developed in statements concerning goals in international education, for example, or concerning habits of mind that should underpin any social studies/history program in the schools.<sup>10</sup> But the truce is fragile, after long struggles over social studies as a purely interdisciplinary and (in the disciplinary view) often non-chronological and therefore ahistorical subject area. Recent shared projects have been welcome, but they have tended to involve relatively low-stakes issues. Rifts can easily resurface. Discussions a few years back, over the preparation of new criteria for teachers in the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, showed how difficult it was to forge compromises between advocates of an interdisciplinary, issues-oriented approach to the social studies and the historians for whom disciplinary considerations come first in assessing subject matter competence. Any vigorous campaign for changes in educational policy concerning civics requires active pledges of collaboration between the two camps, rather than efforts to win a preferential place as conversations proceed. The goal of improved citizenship education is worth the effort, but we must guard against facile optimism and superficial pledges of cooperation. Creative organizational accords can be crafted in advance, to inhibit subsequent infighting. And we will note later the need for collaboration between the two approaches at the curricular, as well as the wider policy levels.

But the assessment challenge is even more formidable. The social studies began to fade before No Child Left Behind became law, with its needlessly narrow definition of the basics; but the decline has been massively exacerbated by the omission of civics and the social studies from the

requirements of the law. Quite understandably, the leading advocacy groups, and many individual teachers, have been openly ambivalent about the issues involved. The pain of seeing a whole field downgraded is counterbalanced at least in part by the fears of teaching even more to tests, of facing even more distortions of fundamental civics goals by often mundane memorization exercises and related pressures to perform. In many states, existing social studies testing standards already seem burdensome enough. Unquestionably, involvement in a broader program such as No Child would severely jeopardize the analytical goals of good civics training, to be discussed more fully below.

But there are costs of being excluded from the federal agenda as well, in terms of subject matter prestige, curricular space, and funding. If No Child continues, participation may be an essential sacrifice to make, simply to give civics some maneuvering room particularly prior to secondary school – though of course one would also expect efforts to modify the nature of the testing program as well. At the least, the subject must be explicitly discussed. The relevant social studies and history organizations are keenly aware of the losses exclusion has caused over the past five years, so there is every basis for constructive dialogue. Even if new political winds reduce the No Child Left Behind pressure itself, dilemmas associated with active inclusion in assessment priorities will not go away. Careful cost-benefit analysis remains essential, as part of the broader advocacy campaign.

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A larger place at the table for civics, though essential, must not distract from deeper issues, many of them not new but associated with some of the more distressing contemporary findings about the subject's impact even when explicitly taught.

The first issue is both intriguing and complex, and fundamental to the way civics comes across in many classrooms. When asked what they get out of civics courses, many current students emphasize, in their words, “heroes and virtues.” Unquestionably, civics programs have often been set

up to stress the positive qualities of the American political experience, as a means of drawing students in and giving them desirable pride and identity with their national system. The extent to which civics has often been associated with Americanization efforts for immigrants easily adds to this emphasis, which is hardly unusual in national education programs in most countries, whether civics is an identifiable subject or not.

Unquestionably also, many segments of the American public, if civics were called to their attention, would respond with a ringing endorsement of this approach. The connection between the social studies and expectations of national pride – and in some cases, statements of national superiority – is very tight, and tampering may come at some peril. It is not all that long ago – in 1994 – that a set of proposed curricular standards in American and world history – not, to be sure civics, but close enough in emotional valence – was condemned by the United States Senate 99-1 because of insufficient attention to national and Western civilization heroes, too much flattering treatment of other groups and regions.<sup>11</sup>

Civics programs neither can nor should participate in excessive criticism of the national self-image. The American political tradition is a successful one in many ways, including sheer durability, and these points must be made in civics instruction. There is reason for pride. There is opportunity for some careful comparative evaluations to note particular American strengths, though hopefully without crude boasting and inaccurate generalization (we are not, after all, the only successful democracy in operation).

But, with all due caution, the heroes and virtues approach is often overdone, with potentially counterproductive results. We need to consider introducing somewhat greater complexity, while preserving a reasonable sense of national achievements and political opportunity.

There are three interrelated problems. First, the American system has flaws as well as virtues, and it might arguably be better for our nation's future to draw students in with an awareness of challenges to be worked on as well as a healthy portion of self-satisfaction. We have a number of difficult problems, ranging from ugly political advertisements to policy areas left unattended, and it's a reasonable civics goal to seek involvement and, ultimately, leadership from the young to provide some spurs to further change. The lesson surely can be balanced, so that the many good qualities are preserved even as we seek to shape the system more fully in terms of our professed ideals.

Second, bright students readily see through the patriotic fog that surrounds too many civics efforts. Rather than being sold on an over-hyped system, they are turned off by the bombast. Civics programs must be able to appeal to the perceptive, and indeed should encourage perceptiveness. Cosmetic approaches to American institutions will not work in this regard. One wonders in fact if the gap between patriotic claims, encountered in classrooms and elsewhere, and the reality that many students see around them in what is in any event often a cynical phase of life, contributes to political non-involvement in the real lives of so many young adults.

And this question applies even more urgently to the students in so many classrooms who, particularly perceptive or not, can readily believe that the system has already abandoned them and their families. Many minority students, many students from families trapped in poverty – themselves among the growing numbers of children falling below the poverty line – know that the system is deeply flawed. They may of course exaggerate the flaws, but they are unlikely to be persuaded by boosterish rhetoric. Not only the rhetoric, but the solid knowledge of how the system can work and how disadvantaged voices can sometimes manage to be heard, risk being ignored. The data on the gaps in civics knowledge based on income and racial status must be factored into the evaluation of civics programs, and they argue strongly for a franker recognition, in the classroom, of areas where the system has lagged behind real need.

What's called for is a blend between reasonable appreciation for the national achievement and discussion of ongoing problems in the ways the system works, with far fewer punches pulled than the shallower rendering of the civics tradition has allowed. Of course there are some issues perhaps not appropriate in the classrooms at the primary level, but we need to be willing and able to handle a larger amount of controversy if civics is going to have any reality for several categories of students.

The challenge can be met. Civics programs should regularly embrace a limited number of real issues, discussing potential remedies that would actually build knowledge of how the system can be used for positive change. (The approach could also include reminders of past successes, such as aspects of the civil rights movement, but it is vital not simply to rest on historical laurels but to address the present as well.) Why not, for example, explicitly explore levels of non-voting, particularly among the young, to probe the reasons that so many people don't find the most basic measure of political participation worth their while. Why not take a couple of other issues that the system may not be adequately coping with – immigration would be an obvious current candidate; crime and punishment patterns another – that also potentially reach certain types of students in terms of connection with their own lives. The twin goals would be the enhancement of student involvement with real issues and not merely a level of patriotic promotion that too often seems hollow, and some sense of how the system might be utilized, and possibly somewhat adjusted, toward more effective response.

A problems approach would of course have the added advantage of immersing students in a sense of active debate, which is a real-like civics capacity in its own right.

There is, of course, an obvious danger in the problems approach, but this too can be averted, or at least modified, with one other tweak to the civics system. One reason many civics teachers fail to go beyond patriotic formulas is because of a reasonable fear that any controversy would generate public and parental protest. Obviously, any one-sided discussion of levels of imprisonment or a wall between Mexico and the southwest would legitimately spark an outcry. But bipartisan civics advisory boards,

operating on state or local levels, can be formed to provide pre-authorization for materials and viewpoints in the civics problems series, assuring that all major viewpoints and data claims are adequately represented and that teachers can responsibly organize study and discussion on this basis. Of course teachers themselves will still need to be careful not to get carried away with any single problem statement or potential remedy, but the imprimatur of a diverse advisory board will provide considerable protection. And the existence of such a board, by increasing community involvement in the civics program, offers some advantages in its own right, in providing additional awareness of and support for realistic civics goals.

A challenge remains: a bipartisan public must be persuaded that a certain amount of debate is a good thing, in enhancing student skills and creating more active civic engagement. Some adults – and considerable leadership might come from elected officials themselves – must be willing to look at problems materials without insisting that only their own view be represented and without demanding that only a whitewashed version of American politics be offered to students. There might be some civics education at the adult level required, but it's well worth a try. The target is one of the two most vulnerable features of civics education, historically and in the present day: the impulse to emphasize a level of sugarcoating that jeopardizes student attention and any serious impact. We can do better.

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Problem number three, involving the second great vulnerability in civics past and civics present, bears some relationship to patriotic excess, but it really involves a different set of issues. The feature here is the common tendency of civics programs – even programs not involved with standards assessments that undeniably promote rote memorization – to dwell excessively on low-level cognitive skills. Thus the Policy Research Project on Civic Education Policies and Practices found that on average state standards in civics “overemphasized lower-order thinking” and that “civic statements

requiring students to evaluate, take, and defend positions – the highest-order level of thinking – are the least prevalent in most state standards.”<sup>12</sup>

Once again, a clear dilemma emerges. Civics as a boring set of memorization exercises most obviously loses the ablest students, who often manage to learn a semi-adequate amount about American institutions anyway. But what of the categories where knowledge seems feeblest, who might also be seen to need to be exempted from undue cognitive challenge: is memorization at this level not better than nothing, a realistic adjustment to student capacity?

At one level, the answer is clearly no: disproportionate emphasis on low-level cognitive skills may seem appropriate but it is not producing the desired results – assessment data suggest that knowledge is shaky even so. Developing more demanding exercises may stretch some students, but it may also draw out better performances and produce more lasting impact. Certainly the leading civics advocacy groups have not shied away from urging greater ambition. Thus the 1998 NAEP report insisted that civics go beyond factual knowledge about the American constitutional system to insist that students demonstrate a “range of intellectual skills” including identifying, evaluating and utilizing information and defending positions with “appropriate evidence and careful reasoning.” The National Commission on the High School Senior Year insisted that “all Americans” demonstrate high levels of capacity, in civics and other subjects. “And, because they will be asked to decide complicated public questions (often with incomplete and conflicting information), all will need to be thoughtful observers of current events and be at ease with ambiguity.” So, despite some undeniable tensions in the formula given actual levels of student performance, the message is: aim higher.<sup>13</sup>

To enlist more seriously many students who find civics dull, and hopefully to stimulate other categories for whom civics with its currently low-level demands have little impact, we need to rethink the approach, asking for less straight factual knowledge about constitutional provisions and divisions of powers, and for more analytical skills or (as historians often like to put it) habits of mind that can

carry over into effective political engagement. Greater challenge can of course interact with the previous recommendation that civics include some problems segments and not just a set of patriotic endorsements.

What habits should we be working on? In a sense, the most important response is a need for active discussion among civics practitioners, who have too often been satisfied with coverage formulas that overstressed memorization and underemphasized effective utilization. A variety of approaches can be attempted, that move civics learning into more active modes. An ideal list would include some ability to assess current political issues in the light of past patterns, to help determine degrees of change and to provide perspective on often shrill contemporary claims. But an ideal list would also risk being overlong and overdemanding. Perhaps, while encouraging further debate and experimentation, three points could launch a transition to a more ambitious civics program, with more durable citizenship results – and the points also connect to several of the statements from existing advocacy groups.<sup>14</sup>

1. Provide varied and abundant experience in assessing political statements and their claims of fact, using both historical case studies where primary source evidence can be evaluated with less contemporary emotional baggage, but more recent materials as well. Students should be able to determine points of view. They should know how to check factual assertions against other sources of data. They should have some sense of the more common manipulation devices in political communications. They should be able to form arguments of their own from diverse kinds of data and rhetoric. This is a skill category that many history teachers have been emphasizing, with their work on documents. But in civics it must be expanded to include highly contemporary means of communication, including Internet deliveries and the troubling but seemingly inescapable political advertisements. The NAEP statement, cited above, on evaluating and using evidence captured a vital category that should receive priority attention in

the civics program. The ubiquity of Internet use in the classroom both challenges and facilitates student abilities to manage arguments and data.

2. Help students learn how to navigate amid debate and controversy, in ways that lead to constructive participation in the political process. This involves, obviously, the kind of comfort with ambiguity recommended by the Senior Year panel. It certainly requires the ability to define and defend a clear position amid debate. It also however involves some capacity to empathize with opposing arguments, not toward seeking an unrealistic degree of harmony but toward improving the capacity to address disputants and toward displaying a willingness to test one's own convictions against opposition – a willingness not to become permanently closed minded on vital issues. Tolerance is vital of course, without crushing a capacity to make political choices; but given the current fragmentation of American political information, thanks to the infinite possibilities of the Internet, simply creating participation in a community of discourse is a vital goal as well. The relevant skills go beyond assessing debate and controversy, to look for creative bridges between opposing camps.
  
3. Develop growing capacity in students to assess the outcomes of political and policy decisions. Understanding some of the complexities involved in moving from advocacy of a particular candidate or policy, to political success, to the actual consequences of a victorious candidacy or policy determination helps breath life into on-paper knowledge of political processes and institutions. In combinations with the attention to some real problems in the American political system, results-focused analysis can encourage students to move from “theirs” to “ours” in evaluating the political process. Here is a vital means of promoting constructive civic engagement, with knowledge that political participation can produce results but with awareness as well of characteristic constraints and counterforces. The goal is to build on the ability to mount coherent arguments in the civic arena, to see the relationship between arguments and

effective action and to take the further analytical step of assessing the outcomes of such action in turn.

Converting civics programs into more consistent engagement with analytical experience invites experimentation and an ability to share information about successes and failures. Challenging students can produce unexpectedly positive results – nothing assures humdrum performance like humdrum expectations – but there will missteps along the way as well. Rewarding teachers for good tries, as well as solid gains, and encouraging practitioner communication will be vital for further progress.

Ultimately, of course, the goal is greater consistency in students' capacities. The skills or habits of mind basic to a civics course obviously operate in regular interaction with advancing knowledge about American political institutions and values – this is not an either/or approach. But the habits of mind, the ability to gain meaning and not just memorization, need recurrent attention in the civics program, not just an occasional gesture. Above all, the ultimate goal is transferability: students must be encouraged to learn from one assignment in evaluating evidence how to handle another assignment with greater ease, and ultimately how to move this analytical skill outside the classroom altogether. The same applies to expanding capacities to deal with controversy and to analyze the outcomes of the political process. This means, while students are still in the classroom, repeated exercises with varied specific components in each of the three basic habits of mind.

Attention to the inculcation of habits of mind essential in constructive citizenship obviously has important implications for assessments in the civics program – assessments that ideally would demonstrate the extent to which transferable skills have been achieved. Memorization tests will not suffice and might positively discourage the higher order goals that ought to gain priority. The tension between this kind of assessment approach and most current standards testing is obvious. Civics advocates need to address the tension, experimenting with various kinds of outcomes efforts in order

to work toward more desirable strategies. Current efforts in Canada (in history, to be sure, rather than civics per se) to develop widely available assessments for relevant habits of mind deserve real attention: there may be ways to meet the evaluation challenge without falling prey to memorization alone.<sup>15</sup>

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Challenge number four is intriguing, but it can be more briefly stated. The values urged in civics programs frequently conflict with the institutional experience many students have in school itself. Not surprisingly, studies show that students (the target groups involved 14-year-olds) who believe they can make a difference in the way their school is run are far more interested in civics and in broader current events than other youth.<sup>16</sup>

There's a double issue here. First, school authorities might be willing to examine overall school policies for their relationship to civics values such as freedom of expression or participation in decision-making. Even higher officials might be involved, where issues deal with student access to civil rights. It would be presumptuous to offer formulas about complex disciplinary issues, but a greater awareness of the relationship between school rules and policies and the political formation of students would be a good start. Students themselves might be invited to comment on this very relationship and to propose changes that provide a greater sense of compatibility while maintaining appropriate order in the school itself.

The second task, even in schools with considerable openness and student representation, involves working harder with categories of students who feel alienated within the system, who need to be provided with opportunities for expression and prodded to take advantage of these opportunities. This is no easy assignment, particularly since it involves habits that begin to form in the primary grades, before we normally begin to think about formal student involvement of any sort.

Again, there is opportunity for experimentation. The first step is to recognize a common problem and, hopefully, agree on a desirable direction: civic life in the schools is an essential facet of the schools' contribution to civic life more broadly. There are limits to what good teaching can do if the students' own experience seems to run counter to what they are being taught. Some rethinking may be essential.

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Historically and still usually today, civics has been thought of as a domestic political subject, with foreign-ness involved mainly in the immigrant students who arguably need to be Americanized. Civics today, however, must involve a wider compass, and this is where the fifth challenge comes in. Most of the recent advocacy statements for civics have acknowledged a global component, and it is hard to deny its relevance.

The issue is tricky, however, in at least two senses. First, as a practical matter, adding global topics can seem to complicate an already crowded curricular agenda, so we need some boundaries to the global range. Second, elements of the American public, and some of their political representatives, are skittish about the whole idea of global – in some states, the term cannot be safely used in curricular discussions, presumably because it reminds too painfully of the extent to which the United States may not be in full charge of its own destiny or suggests some detraction from cherished national sovereignty. It's hard to know what to do with this second set of objections, save to frame the goals of any global program clearly and carefully.

The fact is that the nation does interact with other powerful international forces and institutions, and citizenship obligations inescapably include decisions in this area. Three types of global knowledge

relate closely to more conventional civics goals, in terms of enhancing student abilities to operate effectively as contemporary citizens.

Some comparative knowledge is obviously desirable, along with some explicit training in how to do comparisons. Students should have some awareness of political systems in other societies so that they can identify and assess distinctive features of the American context, and also discuss the reasons for and implications of major differences in systems elsewhere. Some awareness of international reactions to American institutions, in terms of commonly-emphasized commendations and criticisms, is also desirable. Again, the underlying theme here is the juxtaposition of American institutions and values with those of some other significant societies, along with appreciation of issues involved for the United States in dealing with systems similar to our own and with systems that are more authoritarian. Comparison can be introduced through some revealing individual examples, without the need to canvass the international spectrum systematically.

A second category of analysis involves the impact of American policies and interests on other societies, and reactions by other societies to this impact. Students should have some awareness of major directions of American foreign policy, along with broad outlines of the consequences of international business activities stemming from the United States. Specific attention to popular cultural impacts – cultural exports being the second largest export category for the United States – and to environmental impacts should be part of this package. There is every reason briefly to explore the interesting current disjuncture between the level of environmental concerns in the United States and that found in a number of other societies. Again, however, as in the comparative category, a responsible civics program can be fairly selective in offering examples of types of impact; the constraints of the normal curriculum prevent any sort of systematic coverage obligation.

But it's the third category, in the global arena, that warrants particular attention as part of the civics agenda: the impact of international systems and major foreign powers on the United States. Students

need some serious sense of issues and prospects in American relationships with other parts of the world, and particularly perhaps with rising economic powers such as China and India. They need a related sense of how key relationships – such as collaboration but also resource competition with China – translate into decisions in which they will participate as citizens. They certainly must gain some awareness of international systems that impinge on the United States – such as the World Health Organization, in areas of international disease control in which Americans have a vital interest. And, true to the problems orientation of a responsible civics program, they also need some appreciation of current and prospective weaknesses in the United States' international position, such as its considerable balance of payments problems.

Obviously, through work in all three categories but especially the third, students need to be able to include leading types of international issues as part of their sense of current events, as part of their appreciation of the framework in which they will make decisions as citizens. They need some attention to all three categories as they factor into the American electoral process: why foreign policy issues are not usually seen as decisive in political campaigns, but how and why they periodically rise up to shape voter choices. Above all, they need to see relationships among regional/national/and global levels – how international developments affect federal and local decision-making, but also how the reverse holds true, with local patterns – for example, factory closings – can shape international responses as well. It's hard to frame the capacity to see these mutual relationships as a specific habit of mind, but certainly the civics program must give students sufficient experience with the relationships that they can analyze problems and make decisions at several levels.

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The responsibilities of a good civics program – from analysis of problems as well as pangyrics to habits of mind to global range – set the stage for the final challenge: a better articulation of the relationship between civics and other subject matter in the schools and a better sense of sequencing

in civics itself. Quite obviously, the goals of a civics program cannot possibly be met by a single course. Their fulfillment depends both on collaboration between civics instruction and a number of other subject areas, and on the capacity to build somewhat systematically from one level of civics education to another.

The need for collaboration is vital, but it also offers real opportunities to kindred subject areas. Civics – with its goals of forming knowledgeable and analytically sophisticated citizens – is simply too important to be left to a single program component or a limited set of teachers however well prepared. We have already discussed using a small part of the science curriculum to discuss science policy issues. Better training in statistics, and the related capacity for risk assessment, would be a huge boon to American civic life, as a contribution from mathematics.

Tighter links with other social studies segments constitute the most vital target. A civics program that acknowledges the importance of dealing with historical choices and examples, in the formation and evolution of American political institutions, would go a long way to improving connections between civics and history, where the social science/history divide has impeded coordination. We have noted a number of cases where historical examples can help drive home both habits of mind and a sense of problems, both relevant to enhanced civics goals. But history teachers need to live up to a commitment as well: to take their courses, whether in U.S. or world history, up to the present, rather than dwelling so lovingly on features of the past that the connection between historical trajectories and contemporary civic experience are simply not made. Students must be able to see how the concerns they deal with in civics – including of course the global components – relate to historical benchmarks; what concerns depart from historical patterns, and why, and what issues reflect a long life in America's past. When and why, to take an obvious specific, did young people's voting levels become a concern in American public life? Here's an explicit civics-history link of importance in both directions, but one that depends on equally explicit connections between past and

present. There's no reason that good history teaching and active links to civics goals cannot more fully combine, but we need to change some habits to reach success.

Other social studies segments, and perhaps particularly economics, can be made part of the alliance as well. The purpose is not to turn social studies as a whole into civics alone, but to work actively on the connections between disciplinary data and skills and the knowledge and capacities sought in civics.

Equally important is a willingness to see civics in terms of successive building blocks, from the primary grades onward (another reason that the current social studies decline in the early grades must be reversed). Too often, in the past, an initial civics segment on local and state institutions is never explicitly referred to in a later course focused primarily on the national level. Desirable coverage, from the local to the federal to the global, depends on an ability to call on prior learning segments – lest the subject be seen simply (as is often the case now) in terms of disjointed snapshots. Sequencing is also essential to take best advantage of opportunities for internships and service learning, for the experiences in isolation from the academic curriculum risk having limited value. Here is an important subtopic in the pattern of civics education more generally.

The same attention to sequencing is equally important in building the desirable habits of mind. Certain skills – for example, beginning to build arguments from data or discussing points of view – can be launched fairly early, sooner for example than capacities to sort out controversies or determine outcomes of political choices. Yet starting early makes sense only if the skills are called upon later on, actively reinforced and built upon. Only better sequencing, in this vital area, really establishes the transferability that constitutes the ultimate goal.

Social studies planners have typically been loath to think in terms of curricular sequences, except perhaps in barebones divisions of factual coverage; and, without question, the subject is not as

rigorously sequential as mathematics. But without a fuller plan, the component parts of civics are very difficult to assemble, their learning results needlessly difficult to retain. We can do better.

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Responding to the challenges of civics education mixes a broad policy community, and at points an interested general public, with initiatives teachers can take in their own hands. The need for more curricular space and higher priority for civics curricula involves wider campaigning, as the advocacy groups recognize. Civics in school governance embraces a different set of actors. Opportunities for deepening a problems orientation, venturing a greater commitment to higher level cognitive skills, and improving coordination within the social studies will benefit from wider outside support, including greater encouragement for experimentation, but teachers and individual programs may have some room to maneuver even amid existing constraints. The same applies to more explicit global linkages.

Better civics will not, by itself, change the American political landscape. But a degree of ambition is not out of place. There is support as well as some inertia in the wider public and policy environment. Trends among young people themselves suggest modest momentum toward greater civic awareness, that can be used and furthered in the schools. The subject is vital; it is already interesting in the hands of skillful teachers, and it can be made more widely so with greater attention to debate and engagement. There is surely no higher educational calling than the contribution to informed citizenship.

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One final point: in the wake of the 2006 congressional elections, which included a particularly hard-fought senatorial campaign in Virginia, a teacher presented the following dilemma. He had worked hard with his middle-school students to follow the campaign, asking them among other things to follow

stump speeches and political advertising. He was appalled by the result: the majority of his students (and apparently many of their parents as well) were so repelled by candidates' mutual attacks and mudslinging, and the half-truths and distortions bandied about in the process, that they vowed never to vote at all. How to respond? Of course it's important to urge students to participate anyway, among other things to try to help clean the system up: after all, negativity apparently persists because voters are motivated by it. Perhaps a better-informed electorate of the future will exert more positive influence. Even aside from this optimism, it's also valid to note the adverse consequences of not voting, in resultant policy mistakes and political neglect. Surely one reason that many youth issues (such as educational costs and rising child poverty) are not adequately addressed by the system today is the knowledge that young people do not respond in the polls.

So it's possible to use a civics program that goes beyond mere preachiness about voting to some deeper political knowledge and sophistication to respond to students' understandable concerns. But the adjustment should not stop there. Just as we strive to extend and improve civics education to create more constructive civic engagement in youth and from youth to adulthood, so we legitimately ask the current generation of political leaders to keep civics goals in mind as well. We need a political process we can be proud to present to our children. Engagement in civics, in this sense, cuts both ways: we want the children to be watching.

## Footnotes

I am grateful to Beverly Thurston, Noralee Frankel, Glen Hoptman and Claire Snyder for advice and encouragement.

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Learning and Citizenship, State Citizenship Education Database; Constitutional Rights Foundation; Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools; National Alliance for Civic Education. See also National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Civics Framework* and CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation of New York, *The Civic Mission of the Schools*. Margaret Branson, *Content That Counts: education for informed, effective and responsible citizenship*, <http://www.civiced.org/articles.branson.ncss2001.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia, *Everyday Civics: Virginia Standards of Learning*.

<sup>3</sup> International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy, *Global Declaration on Civic Responsibility and Democracy*, <http://dc.ecml.at/>. See also Council of Europe, Higher Education Forum, June, 2006: *Higher Education and Democratic Culture: Citizenship, Human Rights and Civic Responsibility*.

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- <sup>4</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1998 Civics Assessment; National Alliance for Civics Education, Civic Requirements and Guidelines.
- <sup>5</sup> Civic Mission of Schools, CIRCLE, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, p. 19, <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/cmos/site/campaign/documents/CivicMissionofSchools.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> Civic Mission of Schools, CIRCLE, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/cmos/site/campaign/documents/CivicMissionofSchools.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (New York, 2000).
- <sup>8</sup> Civic Mission of Schools, CIRCLE, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/cmos/site/campaign/documents/CivicMissionofSchools.pdf>
- <sup>9</sup> Michael McDonald and Samuel Popkin, "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter," *American Political Science Review* 95 (2001): 963-74.
- <sup>10</sup> This ambitious and promising project is described in *Historica* and the Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness, University of British Columbia (Peter Seixas), Symposium on the Benchmarks of Historical Literacy: towards a framework for assessment in Canada, April 26, 2006.
- <sup>11</sup> Gary Nash, Ross Dunn, and Charlotte Crabtree, *History on Trial: culture wars and the teaching of the past* (Los Angeles, 1997).
- <sup>12</sup> Policy Research Project on Civic Education Policies and Practices, The Civic Education of American Youth: from state policies to school district practices. Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, *Policy Research Project Report*, no. 133, 1999.
- <sup>13</sup> NAEP Civics Assessment Governing Board, *Civics Framework for the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (United States Department of Education, 1998); National Commission on the High School Senior Year, *The Lost Opportunity of Senior Year: Finding a Better Way* (January, 2001).
- <sup>14</sup> Peter N. Stearns, *Meaning Over Memory: recasting the teaching of culture and history* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993).
- <sup>15</sup> Peter Seixas, "Historical Understanding among Adolescents in a Multicultural Setting," *Curriculum Inquiry* 23(3) (1993): 301-27 and "Confronting the Moral Frames of Popular Film: young people respond to historical revisionism," *American Journal of Education* 102 (1994): 261-85; Peter Seixas, ed., *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto, 2006).
- <sup>16</sup> Civic Mission of Schools, CIRCLE, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/cmos/site/campaign/documents/CivicMissionofSchools.pdf>