



## Renewing Adult Civic Engagement

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

AS A FORMER civics teacher, I welcome the articles in this issue about the importance of teaching students how to be active citizens. In the wake of the Parkland, Florida, shootings, of course, many young Americans have turned the tables and are teaching their elders what democracy looks like. You won't find a bigger cheerleader for civics education than me, but since that's so well covered elsewhere in these pages, I want to use this space to discuss the need for renewing *adult* civic engagement. Democracy is fragile, as we see in the United States and elsewhere, and it requires us to be more engaged than ever before.

Yale historian Timothy Snyder (*On Tyranny*) and Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (*How Democracies Die*) point out that, today, democracies die more often through a gradual whittling away of rights and the atrophy of civic engagement than they do in an outright coup d'état.

### Every Vote Counts

Civic engagement in the United States, as measured by voting, is anemic. The U.S. ranks 31st out of 35 OECD countries for voter turnout. We know better than most that every vote counts. The 2000 presidential election ultimately was decided by the Supreme Court, after only 51 percent of the voting-age population voted. In 2016, just 59 percent of eligible voters went to the polls.

Consider the last six months: In Alabama last December, 22,000 votes determined who would be senator. In Virginia, in January, a House of Delegates race ended up tied, decided by random drawing. Imagine living in that district and not having voted. Or, take Pennsylvania, where a grass-roots movement organized to elect a new state Supreme Court. The new court then ruled that the state's congressional maps had been drawn unconstitutionally—gerrymandered—to guarantee that its delegation to the U.S.

House of Representatives would be overwhelmingly Republican, despite roughly equal numbers of Pennsylvania Republicans and Democrats. Now they have brand new maps. Votes count.

### Voter Suppression

Precisely because every vote counts, since 2008 the right wing has fought to keep millions of Americans, especially the poor and people of color, from voting.

When the Supreme Court struck down a key enforcement provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in 2013, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas passed voter restrictions aimed squarely, and successfully, at keeping people of color away from the polls. The Trump campaign used social media to run voter suppression campaigns targeted to communities of color.

When people say, "It doesn't matter—everyone is a crook," or "They're all the same," it makes voters stay home from the polls. Why are voter suppression and voter apathy such a big deal? Because voting doesn't just count—it affects *everything*.

Voting populates the three branches of government, providing our government's checks and balances. Supreme Court justices and other federal judges—all confirmed by the U.S. Senate—shape the foundational elements of American democracy: public education, labor rights, and voting rights. And so do all our state legislatures, and our town boards, school boards, city councils, boards of supervisors, and county legislators.

### Democracy on the Move

The remarkable democratic upsurge since January 21, 2017, is the largest and most

energetic of my lifetime. Beginning with the Women's March (the single largest demonstration in U.S. history), to the nationwide airport protests against the president's travel ban, to the Parkland survivors pulling off one of the biggest young people's demonstration in American history, to the moving teacher walkouts in deep-red West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, and North Carolina—Americans are on the move.

## Voting doesn't just count—it affects everything.

We've taken on issues many of us thought we couldn't do much about—from sexual harassment to gun violence—and put them on the national table for conversation, debate, and action. This has helped stop the repeal of key aspects of the Affordable Care Act and secured vital resources for public schools. The system isn't so immune to political movements that it can ignore us when we act together, in numbers, in a public commitment to our values.

Now it's time to convert these moments into enduring change. That happens at the ballot box. The teacher walkouts forced public officials to come up with hundreds of millions for public education. Now educators and their allies are going to work electorally to ensure they won't lose ground when new legislatures convene next January.

I believe we are at a crucial moment in American history, and in the future of American democracy. After a decade of unrelenting attacks on the right to vote, on labor rights, and on public education, the era of passive resignation is over, and we're having a totally new conversation about civics.

How all this energy and caring translates to the ballot box is now up to all of us.



# The Power of Active Citizenship

A RENEWED FOCUS ON TEACHING CIVICS EDUCATION

BY BOB GRAHAM AND RANDI WEINGARTEN

At the end of the day, the students at my school felt one shared experience—our politicians abandoned us by failing to keep guns out of schools. But this time, my classmates and I are going to hold them to account. This time we are going to pressure them to take action.

—Cameron Kasky, a junior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School

**E**arlier this year, a horrific tragedy unfolded at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Broward County, Florida. On February 14, a former student walked into the school with an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle and mur-

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dered 17 students and staff in the deadliest high school shooting in American history. Only the 2012 mass killing at Sandy Hook Elementary School, with a toll of 26 young children and adult staff, resulted in a greater loss of life in a K-12 school. Since the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, 187,000 students have experienced gun violence at their schools, and active shooter drills are now commonplace.

We were devastated by the needless loss of life and anguished that yet another mass school shooting had taken place while commonsense gun safety legislation to protect America's students and educators lingered in Congress and many state legislatures. Yet we were heartened by what came next. Because, rather than allowing themselves to be further victimized, the students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas began to take matters into their own hands, meeting and networking on social media, speaking to the media, participating in vigils, organizing walkouts and demonstrations, establishing coalitions with others who share their outrage and goals, and traveling to Tallahassee and Washington, D.C., to lobby on behalf of meaningful gun safety laws.

In other words, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas students have been acting as informed and activated citizens, utilizing their constitutional rights to assemble and speak freely, and they have

learned competencies to petition the government for the redress of their grievances.

It is notable that Florida, like most states, stopped teaching civics—the study of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy—in the 1960s, only to restore it by legislative action in 2010, with citizenship instruction making its way back into schools around 2011. (For more on each state’s civics education requirements, see the article on page 10.) Thus, these Marjory Stoneman Douglas students were among the first wave of students in Florida public schools to be taught civics in nearly four decades. For many of them, their civics education started in middle school and continued through a 12th-grade Advanced Placement government course where the teacher, Jeff Foster, espoused a simple mantra: “If you don’t participate, you can’t complain about things. I tell them in order to make a difference in the country, you need to participate. Unfortunately, we had this event happen [at Marjory Stoneman Douglas], and now it’s in live action.” Evidently, the education provided at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School served these courageous students well: they credit their teachers with introducing them to the civic knowledge and skills they have been using so effectively. Indeed, before the shooting, some students had just had this debate on guns in Foster’s class.

The fact that these students feel empowered to take a stand on their own behalf is a testament to the value of educating young people on their rights and responsibilities as citizens in a democracy, as well as teaching them how to exercise the power of active citizenship.

### An Antidote to Authoritarianism

The events in Florida are taking place at a time when democracy itself is confronting serious threats,\* both in the United States and internationally. In October 2017, the Albert Shanker Institute brought together leading scholars and democracy activists from across the globe to discuss these challenges.<sup>1</sup> They are many: growing economic inequality, intense political polarization, government dysfunctionality and paralysis, the decline of civil society institutions such as organized religion and organized labor, attacks on science and factual knowledge, and the emergence of movements of racial, religious, and nativist intolerance. The conference’s participants, who included Han Dongfang, a leader of the independent unions in the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy protests, and Mac Maharaj, a leader of the antiapartheid struggle who had been a prison mate of Nelson Mandela, agreed that the future of democracy cannot be taken for granted but must be actively promoted and secured by confronting these challenges. That is our work as citizens.

Education for citizenship is the first, essential part of securing the future of American democracy. (For more on the importance of civics education in preserving our republic, see the article on page 14.) This is not because—as some have incorrectly suggested—popular support for democracy is flagging or because today’s youth are less committed to democratic governance than previous generations. In fact, the best evidence indicates that support for democracy has increased modestly and American youth



Students at Edison Preparatory School protest a lack of funding for teachers in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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are more stalwart in their support for democracy than those who are older.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it is because openness to authoritarian rule is greatest among those who are disaffected and disengaged from politics, and who are under the sway of prejudice toward fellow citizens of different backgrounds. When a person lacks a sense of his or her own power as a citizen, experiences a problem that dysfunctional democratic institutions have been unable to solve, and has little experience in working constructively with other citizens on common goals, he or she is more likely to give up on democracy and turn to a “strongman” to solve his or her problems. Education is a powerful antidote to this authoritarian temptation, because it can impart that needed sense of civic efficacy and common cause. We know from national and international studies that increases in educational attainment are highly correlated with increases in civic participation and support for democracy.<sup>3</sup> So the more education we provide to Americans—and the better we make that education—the healthier our democracy will be.

To be most effective, civics education must be resonant and relevant. Any serious effort to ensure that young people are fully educated about the values, processes, and institutions of democracy depends on accomplished and experienced teachers who both know their subjects well and actively engage students in their learning. Research both here and abroad confirms that those students who understand democracy best—and who participate most actively in civic life as adults—are those whose teachers know their material and dare to run classes that involve students in civic work and in discussions of controversial subjects.

\*For more on these threats, see “Hope in Dark Times” and “History and Tyranny” in the Summer 2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/summer2017](http://www.aft.org/ae/summer2017).



Chicago students march to the U.S. Department of Education to deliver report cards to Secretary DeVos.

for them to know that there are 435 members of the House of Representatives. This concept of bottom-up civic engagement is what the book *America, the Owner's Manual: You Can Fight City Hall—and Win* is all about (see the sidebar below).

Teaching civics should be more than just understanding the structures and functions of government. In an era of “fake news”<sup>\*</sup> and Internet conspiracy theories, it is crucial that students learn how to gather and evaluate sources of information, and then use evidence from that information to develop and support their ideas and advocacy positions.<sup>†</sup> No polity can make wise decisions if its citizens do not know how to separate fact from opinion, and how to gather and weigh relevant evidence. Education for democracy shapes attitudes, values, and actions—it creates the foundations for a culture of democracy, not just an understanding of what it is. It takes time and long-term funding. It requires new forms of professional training.

Citizenship education at its best is a unification of foundational knowledge with civic values and key competencies. Together, these elements represent action civics. One of the biggest roadblocks to participatory democracy is the perception that everyday Americans can't influence government policy, and that only the privileged and special interests can command the levers of power or change bureaucracies. But if students can actually identify a problem in their school or community that is important to them, consider the options to solve that problem, marshal evidence in support of their selected solution, identify which public decision-maker can make a difference and how he or she might be persuaded to take action, determine the best time

<sup>\*</sup>For more on the proliferation of fake news and the importance of civic reasoning in a social media environment, see “The Challenge That's Bigger Than Fake News” in the Fall 2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/fall2017/mcgrew\\_ortega\\_breakstone\\_wineburg](http://www.aft.org/ae/fall2017/mcgrew_ortega_breakstone_wineburg).

<sup>†</sup>For more on developing arguments and teaching evidence-based writing, see “For the Sake of Argument” in the Spring 2018 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/spring2018/friedrich\\_bear\\_fox](http://www.aft.org/ae/spring2018/friedrich_bear_fox).

## It shouldn't take a shooting for students to become civically engaged.

Civics instruction should be “bottom up.” We need to teach students to interact directly with their government and make government respond to their concerns. The Marjory Stoneman Douglas students have done this, but it shouldn't take a shooting for students to become civically engaged. Civic engagement should begin close to home. It is more important to teach students how to seek effective action from their school board or persuade their city commission to place a stop sign on the corner than it is

# Teaching Civic Engagement

BY BOB GRAHAM

I am a former U.S. senator, Florida governor, and member of both houses of the Florida Legislature. In my campaigns for governor and the U.S. Senate, and while serving in those offices, I was known for working full days in a variety of occupations, including as a factory worker, busboy, fisherman, and ironworker—in total, 408 workdays over a 30-year span. One job—my very first job—certainly stands out, however, and shaped much of my later work. It was 44 years ago, when I spent a semester teaching civics at Miami Carol City Senior High School.

Before working in the classroom, I was the head of the Florida state Senate's Education Committee, and I was surprised

by how little students understood about their local government institutions and how to influence change. I observed the decline in the teaching of civics, and how the curriculum placed too much emphasis on teaching about government, with too little attention to civic engagement. If students are not engaged, I found, they too often become cynical and divorced from community life, as well as the activities of a democratic society.

While bringing these concerns to a gathering of civics teachers, I was challenged to stop preaching, come into the classroom, and learn the reality teachers faced—indifferent students, parents who would not attend parent-teacher nights, an overly bureaucratic school administration,

and all those laws politicians placed on teachers. I accepted this challenge for what became a semester-long transformational experience.

With the help of my students and Donnell Morris, a young social science teacher at Carol City High School, I developed a citizen-centric civics curriculum constructed around the essential skills of effective citizenship and hands-on projects applying those skills. Our goals were to tackle real issues that students were concerned with in their school and community. Students would learn ways to advocate for real change—this was not a simulation, but an exercise in advocacy. We wanted to teach students how to make government work for them.

and conditions to pursue a decision, attract allies to an expanding coalition of support, devise a plan to engage both traditional and new media, and propose credible fiscal solutions for challenges requiring public funding—then students can both move the needle toward success for the problem at hand and gain the confidence and experience necessary for a lifetime of action civics.

The active-citizenship approach we encourage focuses on five key principles for teaching action civics:

- Help students recognize challenges or opportunities in their school, community, state, or nation that can be addressed through effective citizenship;
- Instruct students on the competencies required for civic success (i.e., the skills of effective citizenship);
- Provide students with foundational knowledge of democratic institutions and processes while teaching citizenship skills (e.g., exploring federalism to identify which level of government can resolve the challenge a student has selected);
- Instill in students the dispositions of democratic citizenship, such as respect for fellow citizens of different races, religions, classes, and sexualities, and tolerance for different political



viewpoints; and

- Encourage students to utilize their newly learned skills, knowledge, and values to address the challenge or opportunity they have identified.<sup>4</sup>

We must provide students with the opportunity to acquire the above-described citizenship skills. Civics is not an accumulation of dry facts and abstract ideas. As with any endeavor that we wish to perform well, it must be practiced. You don't learn to play the piano by reading a textbook about the piano or even memorizing famous scores. You don't learn to make persuasive oral arguments by studying the science of speech or even watching great speeches. You learn to play the piano by playing the piano. You learn to make persuasive oral arguments by practicing such arguments. And you learn the skills of civics—the habits and attitudes of democracy—by engaging in civic activities.

America needs a “crash course” in civics. More important, we need to instill an understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizens into our collective experience. Perhaps the need has grown so acute because civics education, like other areas of social studies, has been pushed to the back burner in American schools, a victim of the single-minded focus on English language arts and mathematics wrought by our recent national obsession with standardized testing. But, in a very real sense, the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School have proven the vibrancy and strength of American democracy. Despite the horror of their circumstances, they fell back on an education that provided them with the knowledge and skills to demand change from local, state, and national elected leaders. It is up to us to see that their citizenship education experience is provided to all American students. □

(Endnotes on page 43)

High school students in Boston get out the vote as part of a civics class.

Three decades later, after three terms in the U.S. Senate, I—as a senior fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University—led a class of Harvard undergraduates in an updated version of the Carol City High School curriculum. I then used these ideas last year as the basis for a new book (coauthored with my former Senate speechwriter Chris Hand), *America, the Owner's Manual: You Can Fight City Hall—and Win*, which encourages strong civics education and participation.\*

I'm honored that the United Teachers of Dade (UTD) Teaching Excellence Foundation has converted my book into a curriculum guide, combining it with professional development taught in part by me. More than 100 Miami-Dade teachers were trained in a series of union-sponsored professional development sessions this past school year, and my ideas on civic engagement are now being piloted in middle and high school civics classrooms across the county. This would not have been possible without the strong support of UTD President Karla Hernandez-Mats and her team at the union. It's my hope that next school year, we will be able to expand the program piloted by UTD's foundation to other school districts across the nation.



Senator Graham holds up his book, *America, the Owner's Manual*, during an April 2018 professional development session based on his work, as Karla Hernandez-Mats, the president of the UTD Teaching Excellence Foundation, looks on. The foundation has funded a curriculum guide and professional development sessions based on the book. This workshop was held in Miami.

\*To learn more about my ideas and review case studies of everyday Americans who have developed the skills to make changes in government policies, read *America, the Owner's Manual: You Can Fight City Hall—and Win*, published by CQ Press.

# Activating Student Engagement

BY RANDI WEINGARTEN

My passion for politics has been lifelong, but the art and science of turning that passion into student engagement was kindled in the classrooms of Clara Barton High School, where I learned how to teach civics education. While serving as legal counsel for New York City's United Federation of Teachers in the late 1980s, I had worked closely with Clara Barton, helping it through a health and safety crisis caused by construction work that had been improperly conducted on asbestos-containing insulation, ceilings, walls, and floor tiles. The relationships that were formed in that work led to an invitation to teach in the school, and I joined its faculty as a social studies teacher in September 1991.

More than a quarter of a century later, I can still vividly recall my excitement and anticipation—and my nervousness—the day I first stood in front of a political science class at Clara Barton. My students were intellectually curious, thoughtful, and hard working. As students of color, mostly of African descent, and with many first-generation immigrants from the Caribbean among their number, they brought a rich set of real-world experiences to the study of politics and government. The challenge for me as a new teacher was how to actively engage them in their learning so that their great potential could be fully realized.

Clara Barton had a solid cohort of experienced and accomplished educators, and I drew upon their professional expertise and advice as I developed my own pedagogical approach. They helped me more than I can ever properly thank them, in particular Leo Casey, with whom I taught several Advanced Placement (AP) United States Government and Politics classes. I had practiced law and litigated cases—in courts and in arbitration forums. I knew that the practice of law was more important than the study of law. Likewise, I had studied John Dewey's educational philosophy and believed in his focus on learning by doing, but I did not appreciate the full power of this approach until I saw how Barton teachers used it, and I began applying it in my own teaching.

For instance, one of my classes took part in the We the People civics competition on the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Students participated in mock congressional hearings and debates to demonstrate their

ability to apply their knowledge and understanding of American government to contemporary issues. Since this was shortly after the first Gulf War, students debated the war-making powers of Congress and the president. And, at a time when the Supreme Court had upheld laws criminalizing gay sexuality, they analyzed the rights of all Americans to privacy and intimacy. They spoke eloquently on the First Amendment protections of their speech in the schoolhouse, on how the principles of the Fourteenth Amendment should be applied to affirmative action programs, on what the Fourth Amendment had to say about police stopping and searching them on the street, and on whether the United States still needed a strong Voting Rights Act. And they related these questions to the very principles underlying American government—natural rights philosophy, republicanism, and the Lockean social contract.

In sum, my students learned how to be democratic citizens by actively using civic knowledge and practicing the skills of citizenship. Empowered by this method of education and its relevancy to their lives, they were motivated to give this work their all and went on to defeat schools from much more advantaged settings, winning the New York state championship and placing fourth in the nation in the We the People competition.

During my years at Clara Barton, I went on to teach courses in law, American history, and ethical issues in medicine, and I applied the insights I had acquired on how to actively engage students in their

learning. My law class was centered on a mock trial, in which students acted out the different roles of judge, jury, prosecution, and defense. In my ethical issues in medicine class, our practical nursing students debated real-life challenges and dilemmas in healthcare, and, weighing values such as respect for life and respect for patient autonomy, discussed how they should be handled. In my history class, students engaged in a project of researching candidates for elected office and volunteering on the campaign of the candidate of their choice.

What I learned from my teaching is that engagement is essential. Student engagement and knowledge lead to critical thinking, confidence, judgment, and empowerment. While I am a teacher of social studies and civics, and my approach is rooted in my experience, the same practices of active student engagement—project-based instruction, student inquiry, and experiential learning—are no less applicable in other subjects. But I believe these practices hold a special value and importance for civics education today: the future of our republic and democratic governance hangs in the balance at this critical moment, and active democratic citizenship is essential for its survival. Civics education, in which students learn democratic citizenship by practicing it, is essential not just for good education, but for democracy itself.

**Weingarten, bottom right, with her students at Clara Barton High School in 1994.**



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# Safeguarding Democracy through Education

If the political turmoil roiling our country has you feeling a bit discouraged, you are not alone. Several of the articles in this issue of *American Educator* make the case that democracy is at risk. But they also highlight how educators, by building students' knowledge, can help improve our national discourse and ultimately the state of the world.

As educators know, ignorance threatens basic freedoms. Our nation's founders knew the importance of an informed and engaged citizenry in a constitutional democracy. For instance, Thomas Jefferson famously wrote about the need for educating the masses in order to protect freedom.

Amid today's heated political debates, valuing freedom should be one area of common ground. After all, as many political scientists and philosophers agree, power left unchecked in the hands of a few erodes freedom. To teach this lesson to students, explore Share My Lesson's "Foundations of Democracy" collection, which discusses terms such as "authority" and "rule of law," as well as the rise of fake news.

The need for educators to fill troubling knowledge gaps is clear. One recent survey found that 49 percent of millennials cannot name a single Nazi concentration camp and 41 percent do not believe that 6 million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust. Fortunately, 9 out of 10 survey respondents felt that students should learn about the Holocaust in school.\* Visit Share My Lesson's new "Holocaust Remembrance" collection to find resources for teaching this tragic history.

Equally worrying is a report by the Southern Poverty Law Center that high school seniors struggle to answer basic questions about slavery in the United

\*To read the survey, visit [www.claimscon.org/study](http://www.claimscon.org/study).

States, and that teachers report a lack of strong resources in order to teach it well.† Visit our updated "American Slavery" collection to find resources from several partners to supplement your lessons on this difficult topic.

## Hook Students with Current Events

In learning about issues of the day, many young people become engaged in their schools and communities. Visit our newly reorganized "Climate Change" collection to build on student interest in animal welfare and the environment.

Many young people also feel strongly about addressing gun violence. Share My Lesson's new "Gun Violence in the United States" collection contains dozens of resources as well as a keynote webinar, "When Enough Is Enough," that features a panel of experts discussing solutions.

Are your students passionate about gender equality, immigration, or racial justice? Visit our "Social Justice Issues" collection dedicated to the #MeToo and #MeTooK12 movements.

Perhaps the growing wealth gap in the United States and worldwide interests

†To read the report, visit [www.splcenter.org/teaching-hard-history-american-slavery](http://www.splcenter.org/teaching-hard-history-american-slavery).

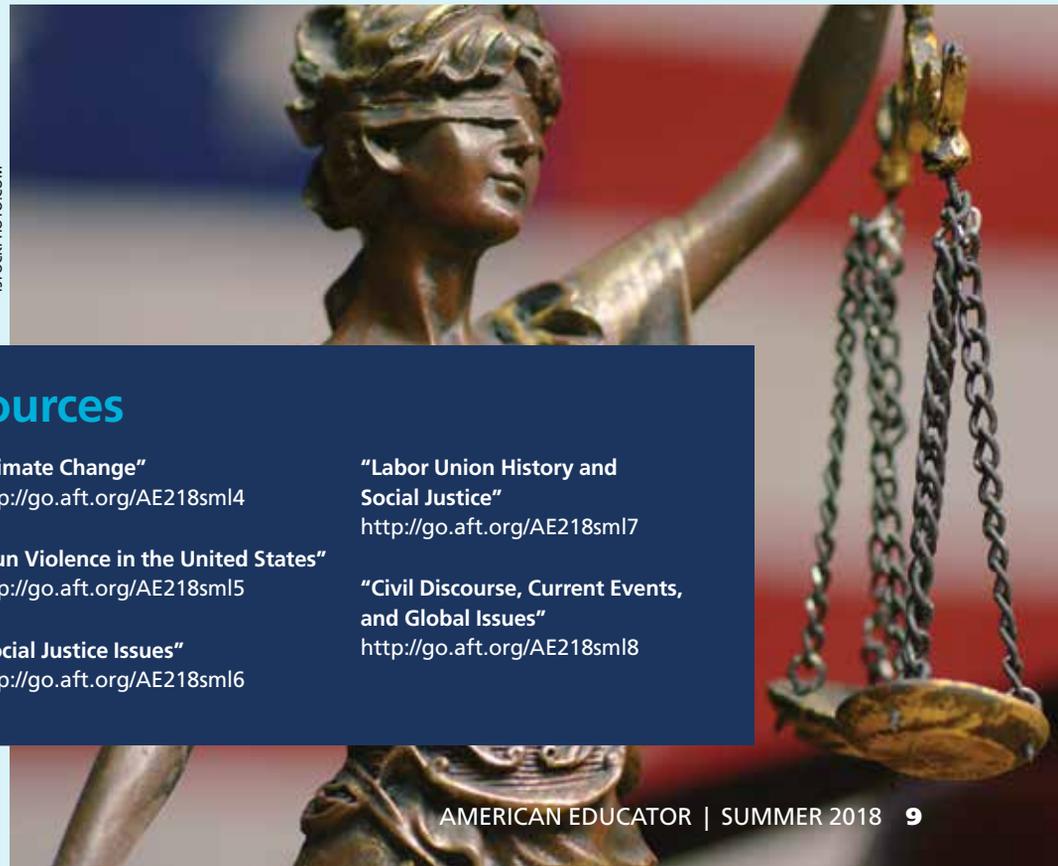
your students? Our "Labor Union History and Social Justice" collection provides lesson plans, videos, and other resources to help students understand the ways in which organized labor promotes workers' rights at home and abroad.

## Build Strong Participation Skills

Last but not least, we must help students engage effectively in our democracy. Take a look at our free webinars on "Civil Discourse, Current Events, and Global Issues," where there is bound to be one of interest. For example, if you are eager to enhance your curriculum by having students try to solve real-world problems, check out the webinars "Teaching Big Ideas for Real-World Transfer of Learning" and "Tackling World Issues by Fostering Global Competence in the Classroom."

Whatever lesson you choose, your efforts will go a long way toward strengthening our democracy. Hats off to all our users, partners, and contributors who make Share My Lesson a world-class website for learning and who contribute to the civic mission of schools. Send an email to [content@sharemylesson.com](mailto:content@sharemylesson.com) with any comments or ideas for how we can further support you.

—THE SHARE MY LESSON TEAM



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## Recommended Resources

"Foundations of Democracy"  
<http://go.aft.org/AE218sml1>

"Holocaust Remembrance"  
<http://go.aft.org/AE218sml2>

"American Slavery"  
<http://go.aft.org/AE218sml3>

"Climate Change"  
<http://go.aft.org/AE218sml4>

"Gun Violence in the United States"  
<http://go.aft.org/AE218sml5>

"Social Justice Issues"  
<http://go.aft.org/AE218sml6>

"Labor Union History and Social Justice"  
<http://go.aft.org/AE218sml7>

"Civil Discourse, Current Events, and Global Issues"  
<http://go.aft.org/AE218sml8>

# A Look at Civics Education in the United States



BY SARAH SHAPIRO AND CATHERINE BROWN

Civic knowledge and public engagement are at an all-time low. A 2016 survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that only 26 percent of Americans can name all three branches of government, which was a significant decline from previous years.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, public trust in government is at only 18 percent<sup>2</sup> and voter participation has reached its lowest point since 1996.<sup>3</sup> Without an understanding of the structure of government, our rights and responsibilities, and the different methods of public engagement, civic literacy and voter apathy will continue to plague American democracy. Educators and schools have a unique opportunity and responsi-

*Sarah Shapiro is a research assistant for K-12 education at the Center for American Progress, where Catherine Brown is the vice president for education policy. This article is excerpted with permission from their 2018 report for the Center for American Progress, The State of Civics Education, which is available at [www.ampr.gs/2CAoxTP](http://www.ampr.gs/2CAoxTP).*

bility to ensure that young people become engaged and knowledgeable citizens.

While the 2016 election brought a renewed interest in engagement among youth,<sup>4</sup> only 23 percent of eighth-graders performed at or above the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics exam, and achievement levels have virtually stagnated since 1998.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the increased focus on math and reading in K-12 education—while critical to preparing all students for success—has pushed out civics and other important subjects.

The policy solution that has garnered the most momentum to improve civics in recent years is a standard that requires high school students to pass the U.S. citizenship exam before graduation.<sup>6</sup> According to our analysis, 17 states have taken this path.<sup>7</sup> Yet, critics of a mandatory civics exam argue that the citizenship test does nothing to measure comprehension of the material<sup>8</sup> and creates an additional barrier to high school graduation.<sup>9</sup> Other states have adopted civics as a requirement for high school graduation, provided teachers with detailed civics curricula, provided

community service as a part of a graduation requirement, and increased the availability of Advanced Placement (AP) United States Government and Politics classes.<sup>10</sup>

When civics education is taught effectively, it can equip students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to become informed and engaged citizens. Educators must also remember that civics is not synonymous with history. While increasing history courses and community service requirements are potential steps to augment students' background knowledge and skill sets, civics is a narrow and instrumental instruction that provides students with the agency to apply these skills. Our recent report on civics education in high schools across the country, *The State of Civics Education*, from which this article is drawn, finds a wide variation in state requirements and levels of youth engagement. While this research highlights that no state currently provides sufficient and comprehensive civics education, there is reason to be optimistic that high-quality civics education can impact civic behavior.

## Educators and schools have a unique opportunity and responsibility to ensure that young people become engaged and knowledgeable citizens.

### Key Findings

Here is the current state of high school civics education:\*

- 1. Only nine states and the District of Columbia require one year of U.S. government or civics**, while 30 states require a half year and the other 11 states have no civics requirement. While federal education policy has focused on improving academic achievement in reading and math, this has come at the expense of a broader curriculum. Most states have dedicated insufficient class time to understanding the basic functions of government.<sup>11</sup>
- 2. State civics curricula are heavy on knowledge but light on building skills and agency for civic engagement.** An examination of standards for civics and U.S. government courses found that 32 states and the District of Columbia provide instruction on American democracy and other systems of government, the history of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, an explanation of mechanisms for public participation, and instruction on state and local voting policies. However, no state has experiential learning or local problem-solving components in its civics requirements.<sup>12</sup>

- 3. While nearly half the states allow credit for community service, only one requires it.**<sup>13</sup> Only one state—Maryland—and the District of Columbia require both community service and civics courses for graduation.<sup>14</sup>
- 4. Nationwide, students score very low on the AP U.S. government exam.** The national average AP U.S. government exam score is 2.64 out of 5, which is lower than the average AP score of all but three of the other AP exams offered by schools.<sup>15</sup> Most colleges require a score of 3 or higher, and some require a score of 4 or higher, to qualify for college credit. Only six states had a mean score of 3.0 or above, and no state had a mean score of 4.0 or above, on the AP U.S. government exam.<sup>16</sup>
- 5. States with the highest rates of youth civic engagement tend to prioritize civics courses and AP U.S. government in their curricula.** The 10 states with the highest youth volunteer rates have a civics course requirement for graduation and score higher than average on the AP U.S. government exam. Seven out of the 10 states with the highest youth voter participation rate score higher than average on the AP U.S. government exam.<sup>17</sup>

### Bright Spots in Civics Education

While models for civics education vary widely, innovative programs designed by states, nonprofits, and schools have chosen new ways to promote civics education and increase youth community engagement.

#### States with rigorous curricula

While most states require only a half year of civics education, Colorado and Idaho have designed detailed curricula that are taught throughout yearlong courses. In fact, Colorado's only statewide graduation requirement is the satisfactory completion of a civics and government course.<sup>18</sup> Because all Colorado high schools must teach one year of civics, teachers are expected to cover the origins of democracy, the structure of American government, methods of public participation, a comparison to foreign governments, and the responsibilities of citizenship. The Colorado Department of Education also provides content, guiding questions, key skills, and vocabulary as guidance for teachers.

In addition, Colorado teachers help civics come alive in the classroom through the Judicially Speaking program, which was started by three local judges to teach students how judges think through civics as they make decisions.<sup>19</sup> As a recipient of the 2015 Sandra Day O'Connor Award for the Advancement of Civics Education, the Judicially Speaking program has used interactive exercises and firsthand experience to teach students about the judiciary. With the assistance of more than 100 judges and teachers, the program was integrated into the social studies curriculum statewide. Between the rigorous, yearlong course and the excitement of the Judicially Speaking program, Colorado's civics education program may contribute to a youth voter participation rate<sup>20</sup> and youth volunteerism rate that is slightly higher than the national average.<sup>21</sup>

Idaho has focused on introducing civics education in its schools at an early age. The state integrates a civics standard into every social studies class from kindergarten through 12th grade. While a formal civics course is not offered until high school,

\*For more details and state-by-state tables, see the full report at [www.ampr.gs/2CAoxTP](http://www.ampr.gs/2CAoxTP).

kindergarten students learn to “identify personal traits, such as courage, honesty, and responsibility,” and third-graders learn to “explain how local government officials are chosen, e.g., election, appointment,” according to the Idaho State Department of Education’s social studies standards.<sup>22</sup> By the time students reach 12th grade, they are more prepared to learn civics-related topics—such as the electoral process and role of political parties, the methods of public participation, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship—than students with no prior exposure to a civics curriculum. While Idaho does require a civics exam to graduate from high school, students have already had experience with the material through a mandatory civics course and are permitted to take the test until they pass.<sup>23</sup>

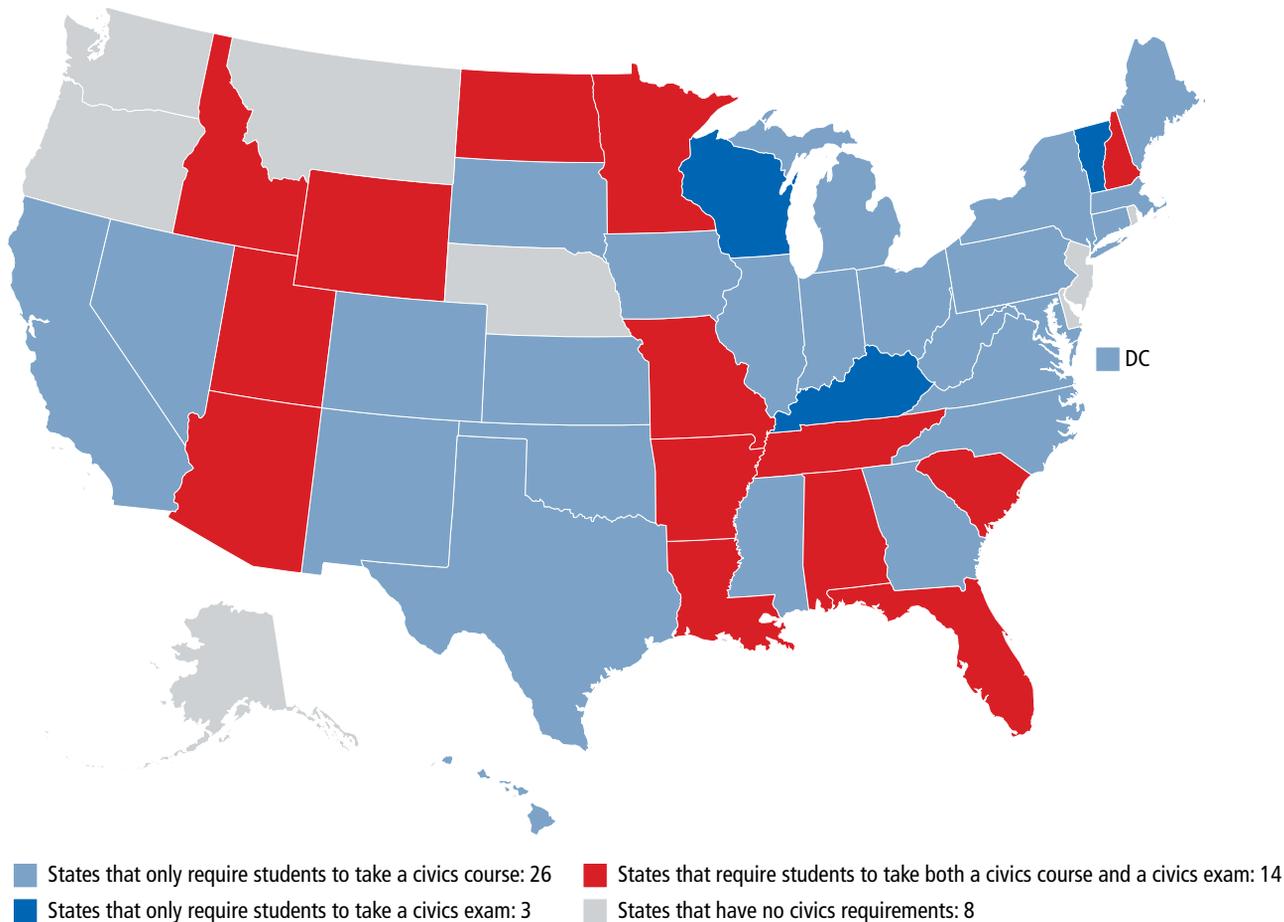
### Nonprofits that support civics education

Generation Citizen is a nonprofit that teaches what it calls “action civics” to more than 30,000 middle school and high school students.<sup>24</sup> The courses provide schools with detailed curricula and give students opportunities for real-world engagement as they work to solve community problems. Throughout a

semester-long course, the nonprofit implements a civics curriculum based on students’ civic identities and issues they care about, such as gang violence, public transit, or youth employment. The course framework encourages students to think through an issue by researching its root cause, developing an action plan, getting



## State-by-State Look at Civics Learning in High School



SOURCE: THE STATE OF CIVICS EDUCATION, 2-3.



## Few states provide service-learning opportunities or engage students in relevant project-based learning.

involved in their community through engagement tactics, and presenting their efforts to their class. At the end of the 2016–2017 school year, 90 percent of the students self-reported that they believed they could make a difference in their community.<sup>25</sup> With the goal of encouraging long-term civic engagement, Generation Citizen classes combine civics and service learning through a student-centered approach.

Teaching Tolerance, an initiative through the Southern Poverty Law Center, provides free materials to emphasize social justice in existing school curricula. Through the organization's website, magazine, and films, its framework and classroom resources reach 500,000 educators.<sup>26</sup> Because Teaching Tolerance focuses on teaching tolerance "as a basic American value,"<sup>27</sup> its materials are rich in civic contexts. The website, for example, provides teachers with student tasks for applying civics in real-world situations and with civics lesson plans on American rights and responsibilities, giving back to the community, and examining historical contexts of justice and inequality. Teaching Tolerance also funds district-level, school-level, and classroom-level projects that engage in youth development and encourage civics in action.

There are many policy levers for advancing civics education in schools, including civics or U.S. government courses, civics curricula closely aligned to state standards, community service requirements, instruction of AP U.S. government, and civics exams. While many states have implemented civics exams or civics courses as graduation requirements, these requirements often are not accompanied by resources to ensure that they are effectively implemented. Few states provide service-learning opportunities or engage students in relevant project-based learning. In addition, few students are sufficiently prepared to pass the AP U.S. government exam.

Moreover, low rates of millennial voter participation and volunteerism indicate that schools have the opportunity to better prepare students to fulfill the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship. While this article calls for increasing opportunities for U.S. government, civics, or service-learning education, these requirements are only as good as how they are taught. Service learning must go beyond an act of service to teach students to systemically address issues in their communities; civics exams must address critical thinking, in addition to comprehension of materials; and civics and government courses should prepare every student with the tools to become engaged and effective citizens. □

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(Continued on page 43)

# The Need for Civics Education

## Public Intellectuals Reflect on Democracy at Risk

On Wednesday, January 10, the American Federation of Teachers and the Albert Shanker Institute cosponsored a panel moderated by AFT President Randi Weingarten on the role that American education should play in responding to the threats confronting our democracy. Two leading public intellectuals, Timothy Snyder, the Richard C. Levin Professor of History at Yale University and the author of *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, and Danielle Allen, the James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard University and the director of Harvard's Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics, discussed the importance of civics education in preserving our republic and sustaining the American ideals of liberty and democracy. Below is an excerpt of their wide-ranging conversation.

—EDITORS

**Randi Weingarten:** In the 2016 presidential election, 3 million more people voted for the person who is not president. About 77,000 votes in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin decided the election. In Alabama, 22,000 votes decided the recent Senate election. Yet, a University of Wisconsin–Madison study on voter suppression showed that as many as 45,000 people statewide in Wisconsin were deterred from voting in 2016 by state ID laws.

Why do I say all this? Because clearly voting matters, and clearly the policies, practices, and constitutional norms in this country change radically based upon who is in office. And that has probably never been clearer than in the last several months.

This may be the social studies teacher in me, but I'm hoping that after so many years of people rolling their eyes when it comes to any conversation about democracy or civic engagement, we've actually arrived at a new stage in the conversation,

which is: How do we make civics real in our classrooms and in our communities?

And frankly, that's why we asked the two people with us today, Danielle Allen and Timothy Snyder, to help us make sense of this moment. For our members and for all educators, I'm hoping they can answer two fundamental questions: How do we teach about democratic citizenship when democracy is at risk, and how do we build a new sense of civic engagement?

**Timothy Snyder:** For me as a citizen, American democracy is aspirational. Before 2016, there were already significant ways in which the United States was not a democracy. I would say thanks to two Supreme Court decisions, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* in 2010 (which legalized unlimited political spending by corporations) and *Shelby County v. Holder* in 2013 (which weakened the Voting Rights Act), we were actually moving away from and not toward democracy, even before the election. For example, when I hear about the many recent cases of gerrymandering, I think of the 1920s and 1930s, when tiny East European dictatorships did exactly the same thing.\* They drew up electoral districts so that one ethnic group would always win.

It's clear that after watching President Trump for a year in office, this is not an individual who feels comfortable within a

\*For more on how tyranny in European history can inform our country's current political climate, see "History and Tyranny" in the Summer 2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/summer2017/snyder](http://www.aft.org/ae/summer2017/snyder).



Timothy Snyder

rule-of-law state. This is not an individual who feels comfortable with constraints. His behavior constantly violates the norms that we took for granted, which hold our democratic system together.

These behaviors include an admiration for foreign dictators, such as Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Rodrigo Duterte, which tells you what kind of system he would like to be in. The fact that he cannot tell the truth is not just a quirk, and neither is his way of speaking about U.S. history. The slogan of his administration is "America First." In the 1930s, the phrase was used by people who opposed Roosevelt's New Deal and immigration to the United States, including that of Jewish refugees from Europe. In 1940, America First was the name of a movement that opposed war with Nazi Germany. Its spokesman, Charles Lindbergh, believed that Americans had more in common with Nazis than with people of color. To use the phrase now is to suggest a kind of alternative history, where America never entered the war and never asserted any values.

I find it interesting that Trump and White House chief of staff John Kelly refer to the Civil War as a war that could have been avoided. That's revealing about the kind of country they think they want to be in, or they think is possible. A country where we didn't need to fight a civil war, where reasonable people could have made a deal, where slavery could have reasonably continued for decades.

It's very important for us not to say we had this democracy, and now it's under threat. Instead, we must recognize that we started from an imperfect starting point, and Trump is helping us see a lot of the problems that were incipient in the system.

**Danielle Allen:** I think we should spend a little less time thinking about Trump, and we should spend more time thinking about the American people—who we are and what we need to be. I want us to think about our institutions for a second—all the big buildings in Washington, the U.S. Capitol, the Supreme Court, and the White House. Those constitute an asset, a huge body of property that in many ways is owned by all of us.

These institutions are a concrete form of knowledge. Our country's founders in the 1700s, and throughout the 1800s, tried to think through this question of how ordinary people, not aristocrats—men, yes, but ordinary people—can do collective decision making together. They conceived of a way to build institutions in order to check power, and in order to distribute power in an egalitarian way, which contrasted with what they knew from Europe.

They built institutions, these deposits of knowledge. Now, the problem with storing knowledge that way is people lose sight of the fact that those institutions are actual treasuries of insight, wisdom, and discovery. I would say that this democracy has been at risk for decades, because we, the people, have lost the knowledge that went into building those things. Consequently, we barely know how to operate them.

Even before the presidential election, my worry had been focused on young people. Were they getting enough time on civics? Were they getting enough time not just to learn about the structure of institutions but to understand the nature of agency, of personal empowerment; the personal skills of speech, of interaction

with other people, of imagination; and the courage necessary to operate democratic institutions?

Then after the election, I got so many calls and inquiries from people who wanted to know what to do. They didn't know what to do, and that really blew me away. I literally had to sit down with people and say, "OK, here's how you run a meeting. Here's how you start brainstorming what the problems are in your community, in your



Randi Weingarten

**"Clearly voting matters, and clearly the policies, practices, and constitutional norms in this country change radically based upon who is in office."**

**—RANDI WEINGARTEN**

city, in your state, and then get to the country. Here's how you prioritize. And once you figure out what are the things you care most about, here's how you find your menu of policy possibilities. And here's how you start evaluating which ones are the best ones, and here's how you find allies to help you advance that cause."

To me, this stuff is really basic, and I think it's probably basic to anybody who's been part of an organizing tradition. But that knowledge is almost gone through most of our society. So we have a big job to do to recover the bodies of knowledge that once upon a time were deeply embedded in our culture.

How does this relate to issues of race and equity? This country has been plagued by racial injustice from the beginning. We sit at a moment where very soon no particular ethnic group will be in the majority. But we've never known how to operate political systems where that's true. We've operated political systems for centuries based on the conception that somebody was in the majority and somebody was in the minority. So, the fact of the matter is, as we work

toward building an equitable, multicultural society, we don't just have to recover bodies of knowledge that we've lost; we simultaneously need to innovate, to develop egalitarian institutions in a multicultural context. My metaphor for all this is that we have to rebuild the ship while we're trying to sail it. That's the challenge we face.

**RW:** I would argue that if Leo Casey, the executive director of the Albert Shanker Institute, and I were still teaching in high schools, and teaching our juniors and seniors, we would talk about how democratic citizenship is essential to preserving and nurturing democracy. And we would talk in our classes about how voting is a sacred right and responsibility of every citizen, and the government's job is to promote the broadest possible involvement of citizenry in the elections. As Tim has already said, that is the aspiration.

Even when I was teaching in the 1990s, there was still a consensus about that aspiration. It was well before all of today's voter suppression. What's interesting now is that political polarization is the lens

through which everyone looks at everything. As a result, even when you start talking about wanting more people to vote, which is what we used to teach, that is now a political issue, not a democracy issue. How can we navigate this age of polarization and teach the importance of democratic citizenship?



Danielle Allen

**DA:** It's a really hard question. At some level, I think in communities across the country, we do need to rebuild cross-ideological alliances. Forget about solutions for the moment. Can we even imagine cross-ideological problem-exploration conversations? Fortunately, there are people working on this. There is a man named Bill Doherty at a program called Better Angels,\* which actually started a few years before the election, and it has exploded since then. He's a psychologist and a family therapist, and he builds projects that bring together people who are on opposite sides of a divide, not always partisan.

For example, one program in Minneapolis brings together police officers and African American men who have a lot of exposure to the police. It takes a lot to build up the trust that makes it possible to do meaningful problem solving. I think we need an expansion of efforts like that. I know of another group of people in Ohio working on a shared values initiative to build workshops that bring together people from divergent positions around basic

concepts of liberty and justice for all. If we can rebuild cross-class alliances, we can rebuild our capacity to do problem solving throughout the country. Then you start to have more capacity to talk about things like voting again, and not have that fall into a polarized partisan trap.

**TS:** Voting is one of the very few times we actually get our bodies out to do anything that involves the entire country. It seems to me that a common thread in some of Danielle's answers has to do with precisely that. You have to get your body out and do something. These conversations about what we might have in common, recognizing problems, even if we don't know solutions, require face-to-face discussions. It just doesn't happen over the Internet.

You can bring people out to the street by mobilizing them through the Internet, you can do cool

stuff with the Internet, but you can't have that kind of conversation. I think the reason for that has to do with recognition. You have to see the other person and recognize him or her as a human being. So, one of the things that has happened to us, which has made all this much more difficult—and it gets to the polarization and the question of what it means to be a citizen—is that it's just much easier to not recognize somebody as an individual, as a human being, if you're on the Internet.

The whole point of education is to create individuals. It takes a huge amount of collective investment. If you want to have a nation, you must invest in education to create individuals, and that's where we have punted, I think, in the last quarter century.

**DA:** Creating individuals requires educating young people for civic agency. They need to know how to identify community problems, how to articulate the problem, how to find people who also care about that problem, and how to brainstorm solutions. Then they need the basic know-how of, well, given this is the problem, what are the levers to pull to change it?

For us to make progress on rebuilding civics education, we need to let that con-

versation really operate at the level of the states and accept a diversity of approaches. But we must recognize the importance of teaching civic bodies of knowledge. For instance, in the vast majority of states, there is a requirement, primarily in high school, to teach the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

But the Declaration—you can hang a heck of a lot of stuff on the Declaration. It's a "how-to" manual. That how-to manual goes, first, you've got to figure out what your problem is and draw up a list of grievances. Then you've got to figure out what your values are: all people are created equal and we should build governments to provide for our safety and happiness together. And then, you have to put together your grievances and the things you care about in a rhetorically effective structure that will bring you allies, like Spain and France, not to mention everybody else in the colonies. And, you've got to be committed to some actions at the end of it.

**TS:** The Declaration also talks about what happens in the course of human events. This is why history is so important. In the last 25 years, we really have lost track of history. I say this as somebody who spends a lot of time talking to Americans about history. We've gotten ourselves into a mental state nationally where we think that everything is just the way it is, and that it has to be this way. Until everything changes, and then we have no idea how to react to it.

If you don't know what I'm talking about, think back to November 2016. Some of us said, "Nothing like this has ever happened before to anyone. So, what can we possibly do?" What percentage of the American population reacted like that? History tells us that not everything is totally new, that shocks are normal.

We find ourselves in a historical moment where the consequences of choices, in education and in civil life generally, are magnified and profound. Education means precisely becoming that active individual, that citizen, who is able to recognize his or her place in history and act in time and act to good effect. It just so happens that we're in a moment where the course of human events is flowing. We're at a moment where what we decide to do has multiplying effects down the generations. □

\*For more on Better Angels, visit [www.better-angels.org](http://www.better-angels.org).

evidence, administrators and policymakers must ensure that second language learning is central in the curriculum of every school. □

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## Active Citizenship

(Continued from page 7)

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