



Toward Strengthening Civic Education in Texas

by Thomas K. Lindsay, Ph.D.
Director

Key Points

- National polling finds that only 26 percent of Americans can name all three branches of the government. This is down from 38 percent in 2011.
- 33 percent of Americans surveyed were unable to name even one branch of government.
- The Annenberg Center survey found that 37 percent of those polled could not name even one right protected by the First Amendment.
- A 2018 article, "[Civics Education Helps Create Young Voters and Activists](#)," informs us: "Youth voter turnout is notoriously low in the U.S., especially when social studies classes are notably absent."
- Only nine states and the District of Columbia require one full academic year of civics or American government classes in high school. Texas requires a half year of such study.

Growing Bipartisan Concern Over Civic Illiteracy in America

American government is divided into three branches. Can you name them?

If so, you're in the minority. National polling finds that only 26 percent of Americans can name all three branches of the government. This is down from 38 percent in 2011 ([Annenberg Public Policy Center](#)).

Worse, 33 percent of Americans surveyed were unable to name *even one* branch of government.

The reality and importance of our civic literacy crisis is no longer subject to partisan debate ([Lindsay](#)). In 1983, the Reagan administration published *A Nation at Risk*, which detailed the decline of American public education. The report was criticized as "conservative" ([Ansary](#)). In 1987, when Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* argued that "higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students," it too was greeted by some as a "conservative" critique ([Sleeper](#)).

No more. Concern over Americans' civic illiteracy has gone bipartisan. The title of a CNN.com op-ed by Chris Cillizza screams its conclusion: "Americans know literally nothing about the Constitution" ([Cillizza](#)). He draws evidence for his contention from the latest Annenberg survey, mentioned above, the results of which testify to, in Cillizza's words, a "bouillabaisse of ignorance."

Among other things, the Annenberg Center survey found that 37 percent of those polled could not name even one right protected by the First Amendment.

What are the political effects of our growing civic illiteracy? A 2018 report in *The Atlantic*, "[Civics Education Helps Create Young Voters and Activists](#)," tells us: "Youth voter turnout is notoriously low in the U.S., especially when social-studies classes are notably absent." The author of the report, Alia Wong, provides the following details:

During the 2014 midterm elections ... the youth-voter-turnout rate was just 20 percent, the lowest ever recorded in history, [according to an analysis of Census data](#). These troubling voting rates follow decades of declining civics education. Starting in the 1960s, [robust civics instruction](#), which usually took place through three standard high-school courses, started to atrophy. It's likely not a coincidence, then, given evidence [suggesting a link between civics education and voter participation](#) that the 1960s [coincided with a slump](#) in the rate of young adults who cast ballots ([Wong](#)).

According to a 2018 report from the Center for American Progress, only nine states and the District of Columbia at present require one full academic year of civics or American government classes in high school ([Shapiro and Brown](#)). Texas

requires a half year of such study, taken usually in the junior year (“U.S. History from 1877 to the Present”).

Sad to say, the polls cited above are not alone in their conclusions. A new study finds that [most Americans would fail the U.S. citizenship test](#). The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation gave native-born respondents a series of multiple-choice questions based on the test administered by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Only 13 percent of respondents could identify the year that the U.S. Constitution was written (1787) ([Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation](#)).

The U.S. citizenship test requires a score of only 60 percent to pass. Test takers are given 10 questions from a database of 100 questions (see Appendix A: “USCIS FAQ on the Citizenship Test”). They need answer merely six of these questions correctly to pass the USCIS test. But the Wilson Foundation study found that only 36 percent of the 1,000 citizens they surveyed could achieve a passing score.

Commenting on the survey results, Wilson Foundation President Arthur Levine observed that “unfortunately, this study found the average American to be woefully uninformed regarding America’s history and incapable of passing the U.S. Citizenship Test.” Wilson went on to label it an “error to view these findings as merely an embarrassment. Knowledge of the history of our country is fundamental to maintaining a democratic society, which is imperiled today” ([Dinan](#)).

The Wilson Foundation study also reveals an age gap in civic literacy. And this gap speaks directly to the issue in front of us, as well as to how we might address it: Fully 74 percent of senior citizen respondents answered a sufficient number of questions correctly to pass the test. However, *only 19 percent of those under the age of 45 could reach the 60 percent score needed to pass* ([Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation](#)).

State Legislatures Move to Fill the Civic Education Vacuum

It has been said that “the philosophy of the classroom in one generation becomes the philosophy of government in the next.” If so, the precipitous decline in civic education in this country cannot but give rise to alarm. What can be done?

Duly alarmed over these results, a growing number of state legislatures are taking on the civic literacy crisis ([Lindsay](#)). According to a recent article, “more than half of the states in their last legislative sessions—27 to be exact—have considered bills or other proposals to expand the teaching of civics” ([Cardinali](#)).

The Keystone State is the latest to pass such legislation. In June, Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf signed a bill mandating civics testing for all students. The bill passed with a supermajority in the Pennsylvania state House. It will require students in grades 7 through 12 to be tested in “U.S. history, government and civics” ([Thomsen](#)).

Although Pennsylvania students need not pass the exam in order to graduate, those who garner a perfect score will receive a certificate of achievement from the state’s Department of Education. In addition, schools will be required to report how many students passed the test.

Although Pennsylvania chose not to require passage of the exam as a precondition of graduation, eight states now require students to pass a civics test to graduate from high school. This information comes from an Education Commission of the States report updating the Civics Education Initiative, a two-year project overseen by the Joe Foss Institute ([Education Commission of the States](#)).

Texas may become the ninth state to require passage of the USCIS test to graduate from high school. In its last legislative session in 2017, the Texas House passed HB 1776 (aptly numbered), which would include a civics test in the graduation requirements for public high school students. It would replace the current United States history end-of-course assessment.

Although the bill passed in the House, it died in the Senate.

Jefferson warned us that “no nation” can expect to be both “ignorant *and* free” ([Founders online](#); emphasis mine). We expect immigrants to this country to pass the USCIS test in order to become citizens. And yet, 4 out of 5 native-born Americans under 45 cannot fulfill this minimal condition.

At a time of growing concern over the rise of “fake news” and voter manipulation generally, there is no better antidote to these ills than to ensure that our future voters, now in high school, emerge, not only with a diploma, but also armed with the civic knowledge that is indispensable to their becoming more informed and effective citizens ([Meyer](#)).

But is taking the USCIS citizenship test asking too much of our high school students? Not in the slightest. To see this, spend five minutes taking the practice test yourself (see Appendix B: “Sample United States Citizenship Test”).

Although requiring the USCIS test for graduation is a far better civic education strategy than what passes for it in most states today, Texas may be able to craft a solution that is better still.

Recommendations:

If the Texas Legislature is to become the next state to seek to strengthen K-12 civic education, how might such efforts be best implemented? Will it, too, add the United States citizenship test as one more high school graduation requirement?

In a time when some decry adding “yet another test” to the K-12 curriculum, adding the USCIS citizenship test as a separate, standalone item is likely to garner significant opposition. The question then becomes: Can the goal of enhancing civic education be accomplished in a manner that simultaneously satisfies those who desire no additional examinations?

The following recommendation would reach closest to the desideratum of enhancing civic education without additional, burdensome new tests.

Incorporating the U.S. Citizenship Test into the Texas 11th-Grade STAAR End of Course (STAAR EOC) Exam

At present, all Texas public high school students generally take United States history in the junior year. Completion of this course is followed by an end-of-course exam in U.S. history—the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), which is the Lone Star State’s student testing program. Below is the enabling language as it appears in the Texas Education Code (TEC):

[TEC 39.023\(c\)](#)

(Texas Education Code § 39.023. Adoption and Administration of Instruments)

(c) The agency shall also adopt end-of-course assessment instruments for secondary-level courses in Algebra I, biology, English I, English II, and United States history. The Algebra I end-of-course assessment instrument must be administered with the aid of technology. The English I and English II end-of-course assessment instruments must each assess essential knowledge and skills in both reading and writing in the same assessment instrument and must provide a single score. A school district shall comply with State Board of Educa-

tion rules regarding administration of the assessment instruments listed in this subsection. If a student is in a special education program under Subchapter A, Chapter 29, the student’s admission, review, and dismissal committee shall determine whether any allowable modification is necessary in administering to the student an assessment instrument required under this subsection. The State Board of Education shall administer the assessment instruments. The State Board of Education shall adopt a schedule for the administration of end-of-course assessment instruments that complies with the requirements of Subsection (c-3) (Texas Education Code).

In order to enhance Texas K-12 civic education, and to do so in a manner that neither adds an additional test nor prevents otherwise-competent students from graduating on time, the Legislature should mandate the inclusion in the U.S. History STAAR test of 10 questions from the 100-question USCIS database of possible questions. To allow for this in a manner that is not unduly burdensome, 10 questions from the current test could be deleted, thus keeping the test the same length as it is currently.

Moreover, the proposed legislation should only require questions from the USCIS citizenship test that align with the existing U.S. History TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) to be included in the U.S. History STAAR EOC. If there are fewer than 10 questions that align with the TEKS, this would be the number that should be included. When the TEKS are next rewritten, the State Board of Education should be directed to include in them the concepts found in the USCIS citizenship test.

The proposed legislation should also direct the Texas Education Agency to annually report the USCIS citizenship test questions it asked students as well as the data on responses by campus, districts, and state.

Doing so would provide schools, parents, and legislators with needed data on how Texas K-12 students fare on the USCIS test. This data would inform and enhance subsequent civics teaching. Additionally, this measure would not require the addition of a new test. ★

Appendix A

USCIS FAQ on the Citizenship Test ([Longley](#))

Information on the Test for US Citizenship

How Many Pass It?

By **Robert Longley**

Updated March 19, 2018

Before immigrants to the United States seeking citizenship can take the Oath of U.S. Citizenship and begin enjoying [the benefits of citizenship](#), they must pass a naturalization test administered by the [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services](#) (USCIS), formerly known as the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The test consists of two parts: the civics test and the English language test.

In these tests, applicants for citizenship are, with certain exemptions for age and physical impairment, expected to demonstrate that they can read, write, and speak words in ordinary daily usage in the English language, and that they have a basic knowledge and understanding of American history, government, and tradition.

The Civics Test

For most applicants, the most difficult part of the naturalization test is the civics test, which assesses the applicant's knowledge of basic U.S. government and history. In the civics portion of the test, applicants are asked up to 10 questions on American government, history and "integrated civics," like geography, symbolism and holidays. The 10 questions are randomly selected from a [list of 100 questions](#) prepared by the USCIS.

While there may be more than one acceptable answer to many of the 100 questions, the civics test is not a multiple choice test. The civics test is an oral test, administered during the naturalization application interview.

In order to pass [the civics portion](#) of the test, applicants must correctly answer at least six (6) of the 10 randomly selected questions.

In October 2008, the USCIS replaced the old set of 100 civics test questions used since its old INS days, with a [new set of questions](#) in an attempt to improve the percentage of applicants passing the test.

...

How Many Pass?

According to the USCIS, more than 1,980,000 naturalization tests were administered nationwide from October 1, 2009, through June 30, 2012. USCIS reported that as of June 2012, the overall nationwide pass rate for all applicants taking both the English and civics tests was 92%.

In 2008, the USCIS redesigned the naturalization test. The goal of the redesign was to improve overall pass rates by providing a more uniform and consistent testing experience while effectively assessing the applicant's knowledge of [U.S. history and government](#).

Appendix B

[Sample United States Citizenship Test \(Associated Press\)](#)

Could you pass the US citizenship test? Here, try it out

By the Associated Press April 3, 2017

More states are [requiring](#) high school graduates to know at least as much about U.S. founding documents as immigrants passing the citizenship test. Can you ace it?

An applicant must correctly answer six of 10 questions, selected from 100 possible questions, to pass the civics portion. A sample test, with the answers at the bottom:

QUESTIONS

1. What does the Constitution do?
2. The idea of self-government is in the first three words of the Constitution. What are these words?
3. What is an amendment?
4. What do we call the first 10 amendments to the Constitution?
5. How many amendments does the Constitution have?
6. What are two rights in the Declaration of Independence?
7. Under our Constitution, some powers belong to the federal government. What is one power of the federal government?
8. The Federalist Papers supported the passage of the Constitution. Name one of the writers.
9. There are four amendments to the Constitution about who can vote. Describe one of them.
10. What is one right or freedom from the First Amendment?

ANSWERS

1. Sets up the government, defines the government and protects basic rights of Americans
2. We the People
3. A change or an addition to the Constitution
4. The Bill of Rights
5. 27
6. Life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness
7. To print money, to declare war, to create an army or to make treaties
8. James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay (under the collective pseudonym Publius)
9. Citizens 18 and older can vote; you don't have to pay to vote; any citizen can vote, a male citizen of any race can vote
10. Speech, religion, assembly, press, petition the government."

SOURCE: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

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Thomas K. Lindsay, Ph.D., is director of the Center for Innovation in Education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. He has more than two decades' experience in education management and instruction, including service as a dean, provost, and college president.

In 2006, Lindsay joined the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) staff as director of the agency's signature initiative, We the People, which supports teaching and scholarship in American history and culture. He was named deputy chairman and chief operating officer of the NEH in 2007.

Lindsay received his B.A., *summa cum laude*, in political science and went on to earn his M.A. and Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. Oxford University Press published Lindsay's American government college textbook *Investigating American Democracy* (with Gary Glenn). He has published numerous articles on the subject of democratic education, many of which have appeared in the world's most prestigious academic journals, including *American Political Science Review*, *Journal of Politics*, and *American Journal of Political Science*.

Lindsay has published articles on higher education reform in *Real Clear Policy*, *Los Angeles Times*, *National Review*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *Washington Examiner*, *Knight-Ridder Syndicate*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Houston Chronicle*, *American Spectator*, and *Austin American-Statesman*, among others. He is also a regular contributor to *Forbes.com*.

In recognition of his scholarship on democratic education, Lindsay was made the 1992-93 Bradley Resident Scholar at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

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