

“Action Civics,” “New Civics,” “Civic Engagement,” and “Project-Based Civics”: *Advances in Civic Education?*

September 2020



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with editorial and research assistance from Lucy Meckler

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Executive Summary

This study examines the origins, nature, and educational effects of a movement in civic education that goes by a number of names—“Action Civics,” “New Civics,” “Civic Engagement,” and “Project-Based Civics”—all of which shall be explained below, and all of which shall be referred to throughout this paper under its latest name, Action Civics.

The rise of this movement has produced considerable debate. But the disagreement between the two opposing camps over the role and place of Action Civics has arisen out of a fundamental agreement on both sides that civic education in America is broken and that something must be done about it if we are to preserve our experiment in self-government.

For the sake of clarity, this paper attempts to proceed in a “point-counterpoint” mode of presentation, presenting the responses of Action Civics’ defenders against their critics, and vice versa. In the course of this examination, we will come to see that, in the final count, the debate over Action Civics presents two contrasting views of democracy. Action Civics stems from a communitarian, participatory view of democracy, which finds its roots in Rousseau’s concept of the “general will.” At its philosophic roots, this agenda tends to distrust the checks on popular will offered by the representative democracy crafted by our founders and enshrined in the Constitution. In contrast, Action Civics’ defenders place more confidence than both their contemporary critics and America’s Founders in what they deem to be the salutary political and moral effects of political participation itself. This camp argues that students become more informed and effective citizens through “doing civics” rather than merely reading about it ([Curran, 2017](#)).

At its core, the debate over Action Civics revolves around two different views of democracy, which in turn, stem from two contrasting conceptions of human nature. The American Founders distrusted an overreliance on virtue in political affairs. “Enlightened statesmen,” Madison tells us in *Federalist 10*, “will not always be at the helm” (Hamilton et al., 1788/2003). To remedy this lack of virtue, *Federalist 51* informs us that the Constitution’s separation of powers scheme makes ambition “counteract ambition” (Hamilton et al., 1788/2003). That is, it relies on self-interest, not because it deems human nature reducible to self-interest always and everywhere, but because this is the most reliable basis on which to govern human beings. After all, argues Madison, “if men were angels, they would need no government” (Hamilton et al., 1788/2003).

The Founders deemed themselves neither pessimists nor optimists, but rather, realists, regarding the possibilities of human nature. Defenders of Action Civics regard the conception of human nature underlying separation of powers and

Key Points

- This study examines the origins, nature, and educational effects of a movement in civic education that goes by a number of names—“New Civics,” “Action Civics,” “Civic Engagement,” and “Project-Based Civics.”
- Action Civics’ defenders point to what they deem to be the failure of the “dominant, book-learning approach to civics education.”
- Critics contest Action Civics’ claim that content-based civic education should be replaced by “doing civics.”
- Critics further contend that Action Civics is simply a pseudonym for “teaching kids how to protest.”
- If Texas adopts a “doing civics” approach, it should clarify in legislation that “doing civics” is secondary to, and derives its value only from, a Founding-documents-based approach to civic education.

representative democracy to be guilty of pessimism, of failing to glean the democracy-promoting consequences of democratic participation.

Against Action Civics' confidence in the educational effects of political participation stand figures like Lincoln, who predicted that the loss of "reverence" for the Constitution would cause America to degenerate into what he called "mobocratic" rule ([Lincoln, 1838](#)). Thus, critics of Action Civics fear that its intended remedy for our civic illiteracy is more virulent than the disease, producing the worst of both worlds: Civic ignorance married to a false sense of political entitlement—in short, "mobocratic" rule.

The Case for "Action Civics"

Is a new day dawning in American civic education?

An article by Catherine Gewertz in the March 2019 edition of *Education Week* appears to suggest so. Titled "Action Civics' Enlists Students in Hands-on Democracy: Through 'Action Civics' Lessons, Students Become Activists in Their Communities," it tells the story of how "teenagers turned anger into legislative action ... that's being replicated in varying forms around the country as an activist brand of civics education gains a foothold in classrooms" ([Gewertz, 2019, para. 2](#)).

What precisely is "Action Civics," and why is it deemed necessary today? The *Education Week* report answers: "The name of this instructional model—'action civics'—signals its mission: not only to teach students how their government works but to harness that knowledge to *launch them into collective action* [emphasis supplied] on issues they care about" ([Gewertz, 2019, para. 3](#)). Action Civics' "lofty goal is to revitalize democracy with a new generation of informed, engaged citizens" ([para. 3](#)).

One student who completed an action-civics course, DeAngelo Irving at public Del Crest Middle School in Oklahoma, "said he was surprised that state lawmakers responded to his emails when he reached out to them on behalf of his class. The experience has changed his view of his role in society. 'Last year, I didn't think I could really change anything, that anyone would care what I think,' he said. But working on the bill 'says that I have a voice, and even though I'm not old enough to vote, I can still make changes'" (quoted in [Gewertz, 2019, para. 12-13](#)).

Another student, age 14, commented, "Adults want to dismiss us, like, 'You're a kid and you don't know what you're

talking about.' But sometimes we do," she said. "And I actually did something" (quoted in [Gewertz, 2019, para. 15](#)).

Action Civics' defenders point to what they deem to be the failure of the "dominant, book-learning approach" to civics education. They point to the fact that "only 23 percent of 8th graders scored 'proficient' or better" on the 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress. Action Civics, it is held, will remedy this through "blending action with book study" ([Gewertz, 2019, para. 17](#)).

The report cites Brian Brady, president of Mikva Challenge, who avers, "Civics is transformational when we teach it as a lab and not just a sedentary class." Mikva Challenge offers action-civics training and curricula for schools in 11 cities. "It's just good project-based learning," adds Brady (quoted in [Gewertz, 2019, para. 18](#)).

In this light, Action Civics is the latest version of experiential or project-based learning, one that departs from the early-2000s version, known as "service learning," which focuses on incentivizing students to serve their local communities.

As explained by Shawn Healy of the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, which funds the Mikva Challenge, because "many schools received federal grants to support service learning ... [these schools] tended to encourage student projects that were decidedly nonpolitical" ([Gewertz, 2019, para. 30](#)). From the

standpoint of those championing Action Civics, it is precisely this "depoliticization" that is the problem, for it "often meant that students didn't work on the issues that are most important and relevant to them and didn't get the chance to see a role for themselves in solving societal problem" ([para. 31](#)).

The report goes on to outline the history of the Action Civics movement, which launched in 2010 when six organizations joined to develop content and approaches for this innovation. "Central to that work was the idea that volunteering wasn't enough" ([Gewertz, 2019, para. 33](#)).

This new organization, the National Action Civics Collaborative (NACC), announced its overarching purposes in its 2010 founding document *Action Civics: A Declaration for Rejuvenating our Democratic Traditions*. In order to better understand this new movement on its own terms, I have reprinted its self-definition, in part, immediately below:

American democracy is at risk. The risk comes not from some external threat but from disturbing internal

The American Founders distrusted an overreliance on virtue in political affairs.

trends: an erosion of the activities and capacities of citizenship. —*Democracy at Risk*

We must constantly work to renew our democracy: the contributors to the above book, along with many other educators, philanthropists, elected officials and concerned citizens are deeply alarmed by our failure, as a society, to provide individuals with the knowledge, skills, motivation and opportunities necessary to participate in our democratic way of life. Democracy is not a battle that has been won; rather, it is an on-going process that needs constant attention, nurturing and renewal. Failure to equip people to meaningfully participate in this process will only lead to further disengagement, threatening our legitimacy, stability and, ultimately, our overall health as a democratic community, society and nation. Youth, especially marginalized youth, are disengaged from democratic processes: despite numerous studies documenting the prevalence of youth disengagement, we have not adequately addressed this issue. Preparation for a democratic life, to the extent that it does exist, is typically relegated to fact-based, textbook oriented “civics” classes which, research has shown, have little to no effect on students [emphasis supplied]. In fact, the distance between what is taught and the students’ personal experiences may further discourage them from political and civic engagement. And, while some schools do provide more experiential approaches for their students, which have positive impacts on learning and participation, these opportunities tend to be limited to more affluent school districts, thus creating a civic empowerment gap that mirrors and reinforces the well-known academic achievement gap.

OUR STRATEGY

Re-define civics education: in September 2010, six community, school and university-based organizations came together to discuss their concerns about, and approaches to, engaging youth in the types of activities that foster the motivation, knowledge, skills and behaviors necessary for a life of constructive civic and political participation. Geographically and programmatically diverse, these organizations share a passion for, and expertise in, providing youth with the kind of experiences that research demonstrates does enable people to

take action and leadership on community problems. Out of these discussions came a commitment to collaborate on promoting and expanding the practice of Action Civics as an evidence-based approach to creating an engaged citizenry capable of effective participation in the political process, in their communities and in the larger society. Through the sharing of practices and tools, through research, dissemination and advocacy, and through professional development activities, the National Action Civics Collaborative (NACC) seeks to re-define the way civics is understood and practiced both in schools and in out of school time activities [emphasis supplied].

ACTION CIVICS IN PRACTICE

Action Civics, an authentic, experiential approach in which students address problems through real-world experiences that apply to their lives, can be a powerful motivating experience setting them on a path towards lifelong civic and political engagement. In practice,

Action Civics is an iterative process typically comprised of issue identification, research, constituency building, action, and reflection. The process is integral to building the skills, developing the knowledge and cultivating the values and behaviors mentioned throughout this document. During this process, adults provide the guidance and scaffolding for successfully launching

youth-driven projects [emphasis supplied]. Action Civics is not content area specific; what matters are the guiding commitments to:

- *Action, especially collective action*
- *Youth voice, including experiences, knowledge, concerns, and opinions*
- *Youth agency, including action, authority, and leadership*
- *Reflection, especially as it enriches the process*

[\(National Action Civics Collaborative, 2010\)](#)

The report provides an example of how the Action Civics approach differs from and is more effective than mere service learning: “*Instead of just serving in a soup kitchen, for instance, students should study the root causes of homelessness [emphasis supplied], identify the local government systems empowered to improve it, and research strategies*

Lincoln predicted that the loss of reverence for the Constitution would cause America to degenerate into what he called “mobocratic” rule.

that might bring about those improvements" ([Gewertz, 2019, para. 34](#)).

A Place for the U.S. Founding Documents in Action Civics?

Although "many organizations now offer programs and curriculum aimed at integrating the old-school book learning about civics with newer-age action projects," defenders of Action Civics "advise that both are needed, in appropriate balance. Encouraging students to venture into community projects without a solid education in the government systems they'll confront is misguided," they caution. The report cites Amy Curran, executive director of Generation Citizen in Oklahoma, who cautions, "We don't want students to go in blindly on something. It won't help them. Anyone can be upset about something. Understanding how the government works, [and] what students can do and can't do in those systems, is part of learning government and civics" (quoted in [Gewertz, 2019, para 36-37](#)).

As shall be detailed in the pages below, Action Civics has its critics. These critics fear that "a solid education in ... government systems"—that is, a Founding-documents-based approach to civic education—will inevitably be sacrificed at the altar of "newer-age action projects," despite Action Civics defenders' assurances to the contrary ([Gewertz, 2019, para. 36](#)).

Promised Benefits of Action Civics

Action Civics' defenders trumpet a number of benefits that they believe this approach will confer on students: "By giving students the experience applying 21st century skills to bring about change in their own lives and communities, action civics helps schools fulfill both their academic and civic missions" ([Warren & Millenson, 2012, para. 8](#)).

Moreover, some research suggests that students who are taught current events are more likely to acquire needed civic skills and engage politically throughout the course of their post-graduate lives ([Kahne & Middaugh, 2008, p. 22](#)). Students "learn through citizenship and not just about citizenship - and then challenge students to reflect upon the experience as a means of consolidating their learning and empowering them to take effective action in the future" (Levinson, 2012, pp. 224-225).

Supporters of Action Civics also cite studies purporting to identify other benefits of this approach. According to one study, low-income students who engage in service learning or community service achieve higher grades, better attendance records, and experience a greater feeling of attachment to their schools than those who do not engage in these activities ([Scales et al., 2006, pp. 38-60](#)).

A University of Chicago study of 4,000 Chicago public schools students found that classroom civic education

opportunities and service-learning projects exert the greatest influence over students' commitment to political participation than any other factor ([Kahne & Sporte, 2008](#)).

Agreeing with these assessments is former Obama U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who observes, "Unlike traditional civic education, civic learning and democratic engagement 2.0 is more ambitious and participatory than in the past. To paraphrase Justice O'Connor, the new generation of civic education initiatives move beyond your 'grandmother's civics' to what has been labeled 'action civics'" ([Duncan, 2012, para. 32](#)).

Action Civics as a Remedy in a "Time of Social Uncertainty"?

Steven Zemelman is a prominent advocate for Action Civics. His May 2017 *New York Times* op-ed tells us why. In "Ideas for Student Civic Action in a Time of Social Uncertainty," Zemelman, author of the book, *From Inquiry to Action: Civic Engagement with Project-Based Learning in All Content Areas*, offers five broad steps Action Civics classes should follow:

1. Identify issues important in their lives and community, and decide on one to address.
2. Research the chosen issue and decide how to change or improve the situation.
3. Plan an action, including determining a goal for change; identifying who or what body in the community has power to make the change; and deciding how to approach that person or those people.
4. Carry out the action through letters, talks, meetings with officials, policy proposals, and activities, depending on the specific goals of the project.
5. Reflect on the effort when it is over in order to understand their successes, challenges, and ways to continue learning in the future. ([Zemelman, 2017](#))

Zemelman (2017) stresses the importance of classroom work eventuating in "some action focused on change in the school or community. It's not enough to just talk about change, practice mock legislatures, or serve in a soup kitchen (as valuable as these activities may be). Only when students see adults listening to them with respect, do they realize they have a voice and can make a difference in their world. Their efforts may not always succeed, but in being heard they come to value the studying, reading, writing and planning that they have done" ([para. 12](#)).

Was the Prior, "Grandmother's Civics" Agenda as Deficient as Presently Claimed?

We read earlier that a key component of the defense of Action Civics is the claim that "preparation for a democratic

life, to the extent that it does exist, is typically relegated to fact-based, textbook oriented 'civics' classes which, research has shown, have little to no effect on students" ([National Action Civics Collaborative, 2010](#)).

This assertion, that a content-based civics education has little to no educational effect on students, is problematic when viewed in the light of prior research.

That is to say, it may not be the presence of content-based civics, but rather, its *absence*, that explains our civic illiteracy. Consider the findings of the 1992 study of this subject, *Stability and Change in the U.S. Public's Knowledge of Politics* ([Carpini & Keeter, 1991](#)). The study looks at students' civic knowledge in 1989 as compared to the 1940s and '50s. It found that, when the level of education is controlled, "levels of knowledge appear to have declined for most of the items" on which students were questioned ([p. 583](#)).

An article published in the American Society for Public Administration's (ASPA) 2014 newsletter *PA Times* offers an answer to why our students fare worse on tests of civic knowledge today than they did in the '40s and '50s. In "Whatever Happened to Civics Education?" David H. Folz and Cameron Dodd ask whether "the litany of government scandals that seem to erupt weekly have anything to do with the lack of training in the foundational values and principles of the republic?" ([Folz & Dodd, 2014, para. 1](#)). They postulate that growing corruption in government "seem[s] to parallel the decline of civic education in American classrooms. When individuals do not understand their duties and responsibilities as citizens or know-how to participate in governmental processes, then there will be trouble, [as Ben Franklin noted](#), in keeping the Republic. If Franklin was right, the nation may be reaping exactly the quality of governance that has been sown by the benign attention to, or outright neglect of, civics education" ([Folz & Dodd, 2014, para. 6](#)).

Folz and Dodd posit that the "abundant evidence of an abysmally low level of understanding of the constitution, our system of government, and American history in general" is a "problem [that] has been in the making for a long time" ([para. 7](#)). They cite a Carnegie study ([Gould, 2011](#)) that notes, until the 1960s, "three courses in civics and government were common in American high schools." Folz and Dodd find one reason for this diminution in content explained in Hirsch's *The Making of America*, which attributes the fall of civic education to the "'anti-curriculum movement' that shunned a common core in favor of a child-centered approach" ([para. 10](#)).

If Folz and Dodd are correct, *contra* Action Civics' defenders, it is not that content-based civic education has been

tried and found wanting. Instead, our departure from this educational regime, beginning with the '60s "anti-curriculum movement," brought on us the poor state of civic literacy under which we suffer today.

Hence, it may not be enough that Action Civics' defenders, such as Curran, whom we read earlier, intend their "doing civics" project to not take away study time from learning content. The superior civic knowledge of past generations, reared in a content-based approach, suggests that what is needed is *more time* devoted to the study of our Founding principles, and not necessarily more time spent on "action" projects.

In sum, the defenders of Action Civics fail to prove what they deem the linchpin of their case—that studying content accounts for our civic illiteracy today. Instead, comparing the civic knowledge Americans possessed under the prior content-heavier regime with that of today suggests the opposite: It has been the loss, not the presence, of a content-based civic education that has spawned our civic ignorance. (I supply a sample, content-based high-school civics curriculum in [Appendix I](#).)

Moreover, as we will read next, there are those who wonder whether still-civically-ignorant students are in fact bolstered in their political capacities—or, instead, made to feel "entitled"—by "adults listening to them with respect" ([Zemelman, 2017, para. 12](#)).

Is "Action Civics" a Pseudonym for "Teaching Kids How to Protest"?

In March 2019, Robert Pondiscio, a former proponent as well as practitioner of Action Civics, announced in an *Education Next* article, "Kids as Political Props," that he was breaking ranks with the movement. He begins: "I'm starting to sour on 'authentic engagement' of kids in civic education, a concept I've long supported, and occasionally supervised and even led as a teacher" ([Pondiscio, 2019, para. 1](#)). Why? Although he agrees that "preparing young people for active and engaged citizenship is an essential and neglected purpose of public education," he finds that "how best to cultivate these qualities in school ... is far from settled" ([para. 1](#)).

Pondiscio continues, "In some circles [i.e., the Action Civics movement], it takes the form of encouraging children to be directly involved in activism and advocacy, ostensibly student-led." The problem Pondiscio identifies is the "morphing" of this approach "from a valuable instructional strategy into a manipulative and cynical use of children as political props in the service of causes they understand superficially, if at all" ([para. 1](#)).

As an example of the malady he believes he has discovered, he reminds his readers of the now-famous 2019 confrontation between “student ‘activists,’ some of them quite young, from the youth climate change group Sunrise Movement,” and U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein “over the Green New Deal.” For Pondiscio, the “main response to that confrontation largely painted the California senator as the heavy in a testy exchange in which she offers an ad hoc civics lesson about how meaningful legislation is drafted and passed, something the kids arguably should have learned before showing up at a senator’s office with cell phone cameras recording the student activist theater piece” ([para. 2](#)).

When Senator Feinstein “tries to discuss her own version of the legislation ... the kids aren’t impressed or seemingly even listening. They are there to pronounce and perform, not to engage. ‘I’ve been doing this for thirty years. I know what I’m doing,’ Feinstein tells the kids bluntly, but not unreasonably. ‘You come in here and you say, “It has to be my way or the highway.” I don’t respond to that” ([Pondiscio, 2019, para. 3](#)).

Assessing this confrontation, Pondiscio finds it “deeply embarrassing, even upsetting, that adults allowed kids, the oldest of whom was sixteen (the rest appeared to be much younger) to be so badly overmatched and unprepared.” He blames this on “the decidedly *inauthentic* role we have assigned to children in our public discourse. In refusing to play along, Feinstein revealed the hollow core of fashionable ideas about civic education and ‘action civics.’” Moreover, and “bizarrely, it was Feinstein who was called to account for her condescension and dismissal in the aftermath. Her only sin was taking the students seriously” ([para. 5](#)).

Worse, according to Pondiscio, “this sort of thing is fast becoming the norm.” He cites the aftermath of the Parkland, Florida, shooting, “when a fawning media put the Parkland kids somewhere on the spectrum between gun control saviors and public policy savants.” Pondiscio quotes David Hogg, “then emerging as the most visible and voluble member of the youthful group,” according to whom adults “don’t know how to use a f***ing democracy. ... When your old-ass parent is like, ‘I don’t know how to send an iMessage,’ and you’re just like, ‘Give me the f***ing phone and let me handle it.’ Sadly, that’s what we have to do with our government; our parents don’t know how to use a f***ing democracy, so we have to” (quoted in [Pondiscio, 2019, para. 6](#)).

Pondiscio denies that it is “condescending or dismissive to challenge kids’ youthful idealism; it is condescending *not* to educate them in how things actually get done and why they happen as they do. ... Feinstein tried to explain as much to

the young Green New Deal supporters, noting, “There’s no way to pay for it, so nothing will happen” ([para. 7](#)).

Pondiscio offers another egregious example of education sacrificed to activism: “A video posted on Twitter last month showed striking Oakland, California, teachers chanting, ‘Students, students, what do you see?’ Small children respond, ‘I see my teachers standing up for me’” ([para. 8](#)).

To be sure, Pondiscio is in no wise suggesting that “there’s never a role for school-age children to participate in public affairs and politics, and to do so authentically and effectively.” However, “the onus is on educators to be clear on the difference between civic engagement and civics theater, and to draw a line between the two.” Because, in the final count, “our first responsibility is teaching, not activism. If the ‘why’ is driven by political or activist impulses, not educational ones, we’re losing our way” ([para. 11](#)).

Nor is Pondiscio blaming the children. Far from it, in fact. “It’s the adults who brought the children to her [Senator Feinstein’s] office, whether parents, teachers, or activists, who ought to wish for one—and in the future think twice before using children as puppets and props” ([para. 9](#)).

Pondiscio’s personal, anecdotal account of his concerns over the effects of Action Civics has come to be buttressed by a national study conducted by the nonpartisan higher education organization, the National Association of Scholars (NAS).

NAS’s Massive Critique of the “New Civics”

In January 2017, the National Association of Scholars’ David Randall and Ashley Thorne published *Making Citizens: How American Universities Teach Civics — With Case Studies of the University of Colorado, Boulder; Colorado State University; University of Northern Colorado; and the University of Wyoming*.

Randall and Thorne ([2017](#)) commence by announcing, “A new movement in American higher education aims to transform the teaching of civics” about which “Americans should be concerned” ([p. 9](#)). Why? They answer, “[T]he ‘New Civics’ redefines civics as *progressive political activism* [emphasis supplied]. Rooted in the radical program of the 1960s’ New Left, the New Civics presents itself as an up-to-date version of volunteerism and good works. Though camouflaged with soft rhetoric, the New Civics, properly understood, is an effort to repurpose higher education” ([p. 9](#)).

These opening salvos are quite pointed. Are they true? Is Action Civics a Trojan horse?

Randall and Thorne continue:

The New Civics seeks above all to make students into enthusiastic supporters of the New Left's dream of "fundamentally transforming" America. The transformation includes de-carbonizing the economy, massively redistributing wealth, intensifying identity group grievance, curtailing the free market, expanding government bureaucracy, elevating international "norms" over American Constitutional law, and disparaging our common history and ideals. ... America must be transformed by "systemic change" from an unjust, oppressive society to a society that embodies social justice. (p. 9)

The method to accomplish this goal consists in "teaching students that a good citizen is a radical activist, and it puts political activism at the center of everything that students do in college, including academic study, extra-curricular pursuits, and off-campus ventures" (p. 9). According to the NAS report, the "New Civics builds on 'service-learning,' which is an effort to divert students from the classroom to vocational training as community activists. By rebranding itself as 'civic engagement,' service-learning succeeded in capturing nearly all the funding that formerly supported the old civics" (p. 9).

What this new civic education regime means in practice is that, "instead of teaching college students the foundations of law, liberty, and self-government, colleges teach students how to organize protests, occupy buildings, and stage demonstrations" (p. 9). For Randall and Thorne, these new agendas "are indeed forms of 'civic engagement,' but they are far from being a genuine substitute for learning how to be a full participant in our republic" (p. 9).

Worse, the New Civics "has still further ambitions. Its proponents want to build it into every college class regardless of subject. The effort continues without so far drawing much critical attention from the public. This [NAS] report aims to change that" (p. 9).

The NAS's objections to the "New Civics," of which Action Civics is a subspecies, are further clarified in the report's prefatory comments, authored by NAS President Peter Wood, who begins by declaring that,

What is most new about the New Civics is that while it claims the name of civics, it is really a form of anti-civics. Civics in the traditional American sense meant learning about how our republic governs itself. The topics ranged from mastering simple facts, such as the branches of the federal government and the obligations of citizenship, to reflecting on the nature of Constitutional rights and the system of checks and

balances that divide the states from the national government and the divisions of the national government from one another. A student who learns civics learns about voting, serving on juries, running for office, serving in the military, and all of the other key ways in which citizens take responsibility for their own government. (p. 11)

Regarding the above, traditional civics education topics, "the New Civics has very little to say," given that it "focuses overwhelmingly on turning students into 'activists'" (p. 11). Although the New Civics' "largest preoccupation is getting students to engage in coordinated social action ... [s]ometimes this involves political protest, but most commonly it involves volunteering for projects that promote progressive causes" (p. 11). As an example, Wood cites NAS's study of civic education at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where "the New Civics includes such things as promoting dialogue between immigrants and native-born residents of Boulder County; marching in support of the United Farm Workers; and breaking down 'gender binary' spaces in education" (p. 11). Such activities, "whatever one might think of [them] in their own right, ... are a considerable distance away from what Americans used to mean by the word 'civics'" (p. 11).

Still worse, "[t]hese sorts of activities are not something added to traditional civics instruction. They are presented as a complete and sufficient substitute for the traditional civics education" (p. 11).

NAS is loath to blame students for their resulting civic illiteracy. Quite the contrary. True, our society must confront the alarming fact that today, most *native-born* Americans under the age of 45 are civically illiterate. A recent national survey by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation quizzed Americans on questions drawn from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services citizenship test. The good news: Over 90 percent of immigrants pass the test ([U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.](#)), which consists of 10 random multiple-choice questions, of which 6 must be answered correctly to gain citizenship ([Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2018](#)). The bad news: Only 19 percent of native-born Americans under the age of 45 can pass the test. Moreover, the Woodrow Wilson survey reveals a troubling "age gap" among native-born Americans when it comes to civic literacy. Seventy-four percent of native-born senior citizens pass the test. This suggests that something has gone seriously awry in our teaching of civics over the past several decades. It is to this that the NAS report points and against which it labors.

However, and as the NAS report ([Randall & Thorne, 2017](#)) is quick to confirm, "[t]he truth ... is that most of these

students have never had any basic instruction in civics. They can’t be blamed for what they have never been taught. Their answers merely reflect the neglect of traditional civics instruction at every level of education, from grade school through college” (p. 12).

At the same time, the NAS report recognizes the rhetorical obstacles standing in the way of its project to alert the public and usher in needed reform. “[A] casual observer of New Civics programs might well miss both the activist orientation and the antagonism [to America’s Founding principles]. That’s for two reasons. First, the New Civics includes a great deal that is superficially wholesome. Second, the advocates of New Civics have adopted a camouflage vocabulary consisting of pleasant-sounding and often traditional terms” (p. 14).

For example, “[w]hen New Civics advocates urge college students to volunteer to assist the elderly, to help the poor, to clean up litter, or to assist at pet shelters, the activities themselves really are wholesome. Why call this superficial? The elderly, the poor, the environment, and abandoned pets—to mention only a few of the good objects of student volunteering—truly do benefit from these efforts” (p. 14).

To this the NAS report counters that, “volunteering itself is not necessarily superficial or misguided. But, again, context matters. In the context of New Civics, student volunteering is not just calling on students to exercise their altruistic muscles. It is, rather, a way of drawing students into a system that combines some questionable beliefs with long-term commitments” (p. 14). Although “seemingly innocent,” these “forms of volunteering, as organized by the patrons of New Civics, are considerably less ‘voluntary’ than they often appear,” in part because a growing number of colleges and universities are turning “such ‘volunteer’ work into a graduation requirement” (p. 14). Some students have caught onto this fact, and now call such programs “voluntary tyranny,” given the heavy hand of the organizers in coercing students to participate” (p. 14). Such “volunteering” submerges “the individual into a collectivity. They ripen the students for more aggressive forms of community organization. And often they turn the students themselves into fledgling community organizers” (p. 14). As an example, the report cites the University of Colorado at Boulder’s Public Achievement Program, which “includes a sub-program in which college students are sent out to organize grade school students into teams to pick up litter. This is certainly wholesome if taken in isolation, but in context, it is what we call superficially wholesome” (p. 14).

Deceptive Language?

When the NAS report calls attention to what it terms “camouflage vocabulary,” it is asserting that “[t]he world of New

Civics is rife with familiar words used in non-familiar ways” (p. 14). Upon inspection, “democracy and civic engagement in New Civic-speak do not mean what they mean in ordinary English” (p. 14). Randall and Thorne accuse the “advocates of New Civics” of nothing less than having “adopted a camouflage vocabulary consisting of pleasant-sounding and often traditional terms” (p. 14). Why? Because “these seemingly innocent forms of volunteering ripen the students for more aggressive forms of community organization” (p. 14).

In light of the above, the NAS report compiles what it terms “A Dictionary of Deception,” beginning with the word “active” (p. 15). Active, for proponents of New Civics, translates into “engaged in political action, as opposed to the pursuit of knowledge” (p. 15). This Newspeak is “exemplified in a catchphrase used by Syracuse University’s civic program: ‘Citizen isn’t just something you are. Citizen is something you do’” (p. 15).

This is the thread that connects Action Civics with “New Civics,” “Civic Engagement,” and “Project-Based Civics Learning”: “The idea is that students aren’t getting a full education just by reading books, listening to lectures, writing papers, speaking in class, debating with each other, and participating in the social life of the college community. They must also ‘learn by doing.’ Another phrase for this is that students should ‘apply their academic learning’ or ‘practice’ it in the real world. ‘Active’ always means ‘active in progressive political campaigns’ [emphasis supplied]” (p. 15).

Also cited in the NAS report’s “Dictionary of Deception” is the term, “awareness,” which means for New Civics’ advocates “enlightened about the essential oppressiveness of American society, although not yet ‘active’” (p. 15).

As examples, the “‘aware’ student knows the true meaning of words: ‘academic freedom’ ... is really ‘a hegemonic discourse that perpetuates the structural inequalities of white male power.’ ‘Awareness’ requires politically correct purchases and social interactions—reusable water bottles, fair-trade coffee, a diffident approach to pronouns—but it does not require active participation in a campaign of political advocacy” (p. 15). Hence, “being ‘aware’ requires a lower level of commitment than being ‘engaged.’ ‘Awareness’ is low energy virtue-signaling” (p. 15).

Also cited in the “Dictionary of Deception” is the term, “intersectionality” which “is a way to align progressives’ competing narratives of oppression and victimhood by making every purported victim of oppression support every other purported victim of oppression. ... Practically speaking, the greatest effect of ‘intersectionality’ is that BDS activists—pro-Palestinian activists pushing for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctioning of Israel—are using it as a

rationale to remove Jews from positions in campus leadership and from jobs as progressive activists” (p. 24).

In sum, “intersectionality is both a way to whip progressive activists into following a broader party line and, increasingly, a rationale for anti-Semitic discrimination by progressives” (p. 24).

Perhaps more worrying is the New Civics’ use of another term identified by the NAS report, “pervasiveness.” “The New Civics seeks to insert progressive advocacy into every aspect of higher education, inside and outside the college” (p. 24). Here the report cites the civic education initiative proposed by the Obama Department of Education, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy’s Future*, which “summons higher education institutions to make civic learning ‘pervasive’ rather than ‘peripheral.’ ‘Pervasiveness’ justifies the extension of progressive propaganda and advocacy by student affairs staff and other academic bureaucrats into residential life and ‘co-curricular activities’—everything students do voluntarily outside of class. It also justifies the insertion of progressive advocacy into every class, as well as making progressive activism a hiring and tenure requirement for faculty and staff” (p. 24).

The above account provided by the NAS report explains the basis for its “distrust of the New Civics movement” and with it, *A Crucible Moment* (p. 26). The report states its concerns baldly, declaring that the New Civics’ “declarations about its aims and its avowals about its methods can seldom be taken at face value” (p. 26). Nor is this “a minor point. Civics in a well-governed republic has to be grounded on clear speaking and transparency. A movement that goes to elaborate lengths to present a false front to the public is not properly civics at all, no matter what it calls itself” (p. 26).

Regarding the history of the New Civics movement, the NAS report traces it back to the 1960s, “as part of the radicalization of the teachings of John Dewey and the influence of the Marxist pedagogue Paulo Freire” (p. 27). Randall and Thorne find this to be the source of the notions that *doing* civics is better for students than book-learning civics and that civics’ purpose is to teach students how to wrest power in society. Under New Civics, “students should be initiated into the life of social activism. The purpose of ‘school’ is to turn as many students as possible into community organizers” (p. 28).

Priming the Pump for Replacing Scholarship With Ideology

The NAS report identifies three conditions on American campuses that created a vacuum to be filled by New Civics: (1) The dismantling of core curriculum requirements, beginning in the 1960s, which was done in part to deal with

the decline in student quality caused by (2) mass higher education—with the rise of the “college for all” mentality, schools found that the additional students now in college could not survive a genuine curriculum in the liberal arts and sciences.

The third is the dismantling of in loco parentis—the efforts that colleges formerly took to regulate the behavior of students on campus through well-enforced rules. The rules included such things as single-sex dorms, bans on underage drinking, and parietal hours [rules governing visits to dorm room by members of the opposite sex]. The end of in loco parentis was connected with the protests of the 1960s and the sexual revolution. But as college moved out of the work of building and fostering normative communities of students on campus, students felt more and more adrift. Reports in the late 1980s registered that one of the chief complaints of college students was “lack of community on campus.” Into this breach stepped the campus bureaucrats responsible for student activities. There followed a series of manifestos from student life organizations that they knew how to bring “community” back to campus. These were among the first steps to programs that elevated “student engagement” over academic study. (p. 30)

For all these reasons, the NAS report analogizes the New Civics to a national pandemic: “The New Civics is now everywhere in American higher education—not just as civic engagement, but also as global learning, global civics, civic studies, community service, and community studies. The New Civics is also endemic in leadership programs, honors programs, cocurricular activities, orientation, first-year experience, student affairs, residential life, and more” (p. 31).

The report adds that the phenomenon over which it is concerned is “more than a scattering of like-minded programs at the nation’s many colleges and universities. A national infrastructure buttresses these programs” (p. 31). No less than the Association of American Colleges & Universities “finances and coordinates the New Civics with dozens of other activist organizations” (p. 31). In addition, “career bureaucrats of the Department of Education use their regulatory power and grant money to aid the New Civics” (p. 31). Finally, the “accreditation bureaucracies that determine whether a college or university is eligible to receive federal money push ‘learning goals’ that can only be satisfied by creating New Civics programs—and college bureaucrats slip in New Civics programs in the guise of satisfying accreditation ‘learning goals’” (p. 31).

Hence, “any effort to change the New Civics on a single campus has to take account of the fact that it is part of an

ideologically committed national movement”—one that “redefine[s] ‘civic’ around the techniques of radical activism and discard[s] the idea that civics should provide students a non-partisan education about the mechanisms of government” (p. 32).

Nor is this all. Randall and Thorne conclude that the “New Civics advocates aren’t satisfied with what they’ve already achieved. *A Crucible Moment* outlined what they want to do now—to make New Civics classes mandatory throughout the country, to make every class ‘civic,’ and to require every teacher to be ‘civically engaged’” (p. 33). In NAS’s view, New Civics advocates “want to take over the entire university” (p. 33). And after that task is accomplished, they “want to take over the private sector and the government as well. Every business and every branch of government is meant to support civic engagement. The same subterfuge that has been used to organize the university will be used to organize the country” (p. 33).

The report goes still further. “The New Civics advocates have already changed the country. The point of the New Civics was to create a cadre of permanent protestors, and justify their agitation as ‘civic’—and they have succeeded” (p. 33).

To cite a recent example of what the NAS deems to be Action Civics’ empire-building, it points to the case of Pomona College in California. “At Pomona College, the Draper Center for Community Partnerships advertized [*sic*] a November 9 anti-Trump rally in Los Angeles on Facebook and reimbursed transportation costs for students to attend. The Draper Center personnel knew what they were doing: ‘The Draper Center is organizing a bus that will take students to downtown LA TONIGHT to stand against Trump.’ As a result, Pomona College is being sued for violating its 501(c)(3) status, and is liable to sanctions up to and including losing its tax-exempt status” (p. 34).

NAS Recommendations for Reform

In light of this, the NAS issues a call to action, recommending that “citizen groups around the nation look closely at what the New Civics programs in universities are doing, and that they sue their host universities for each and every political act they commit. Lawsuits, and the threat of lawsuits, may actually prod academic administrators to shut down New Civics programs. This is an extreme remedy, but a necessary one” (p. 34).

Still more pointed, the NAS report “recommends that the New Civics be removed root and branch from higher education precisely because each individual program is part of a national movement that is ideologically committed toward radical left politics, with enormous reservoirs of

bureaucratic power to repel any attempt to reform it. The New Civics cannot be reformed; it can only be dismantled. And it should be dismantled as soon as possible, before it does worse damage to our country” (p. 35).

To accomplish this, the report argues, “state and federal legislatures have to do the hard work of defunding the New Civics. They need to freeze New Civics spending at once, and move swiftly to eliminate New Civics programs entirely” (p. 35). The NAS report offers “detailed suggestions about how precisely this could be done—for example, by tying government funding of universities to reestablishing traditional civic literacy curricula and removing the compensation of class credit from volunteer work” (p. 35).

NAS offers four recommendations to state legislators nationwide:

1. *Mandate a course in traditional American civics as a graduation requirement at all colleges and universities that receive public funding. If the institution itself is unwilling or unable to offer such a course, students must be permitted without penalty to meet the requirement by taking a qualified civics course at another institution.*
2. *Establish a public body to set the guidelines for the required civics course, which should at a minimum teach the history, nature, and functions of our institutions of self-government, and which should aim to foster commitment to our form of self-government. The public body should also be charged with reviewing and approving civics textbooks to be used in these courses.*
3. *Require that the traditional civics requirement be met only through classroom instruction. Service learning, civic engagement, or analogous extra-curricular activities will not be accepted as a substitute, supplement, or alternative.*
4. *End funding for service-learning and civic engagement programs and bureaucracies.* (p. 10)

Defending Action/New Civics Against the NAS’s Broadside

To be sure, the NAS report on Action/New Civics is the most thorough, comprehensive—and damning—analysis offered on the subject. Thus, its critique has not gone unnoticed by Action/New Civics’ defenders.

Generation Citizen’s Oklahoma Executive Director Amy Curran, joined by Generation Citizen’s CEO Scott Warren, took up the defense of Action/New Civics in an article titled, “Partisan Takes Won’t Define Nonpartisan Action

Civics.” Their rebuttal piece was written “in response to a commentary published by the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs’ Center for Independent Journalism criticizing the civics-education nonprofit Generation Citizen” ([Curran & Warren, 2020](#)).

Curran and Warren tout the fact that, over the past 10 years, Generation Citizen has “worked together with a politically diverse range of state education agencies and lawmakers — from New York and North Dakota to Oklahoma and Massachusetts — in order to revise social studies standards and pass legislation expanding student access to integrative civic education that blends knowledge of how our government works with opportunities to interact with our public institutions” ([para. 2](#)).

By Curran and Warren’s lights, the criticism of Action Civics is “largely focused on a false notion that the discipline exists to promote progressive ideals. The latest version of this criticism came from David Randall of the National Association of Scholars.” They attribute Randall’s critique of Action Civics to “America’s current climate, especially in the political realm,” where “everything has become polarized” ([para. 3-4](#)).

Crafted in the fog of political and cultural war, “Randall’s claim simply does not reflect reality.” Yes, Action Civics “does include action, youth voice, youth agency and reflection,” write Curran and Warren. But Action Civics includes “these elements not because they breed progressivism, but rather because they are based on effective and proven learning approaches that studies show are the most efficient ways to teach civics education, period” ([para. 5](#)).

Curran and Warren go on to argue that, “for far too long, civics education, when taught at all, has been a static discipline in which young people learn about a form of democracy that does not pertain to their own lives. Students are taught facts and figures, and told to take a test on how a bill becomes a law. This approach has contributed to diminishing levels of civic competency and knowledge among all young people, most acutely among young people from under-represented backgrounds, who receive less relevant civics education than their affluent counterparts” ([para. 6](#)).

To remedy this, Action Civics aims “to ensure that young people understand how government operates and why it is relevant to their lives” ([Curran & Warren, 2020, para. 7](#)). They claim NAS constructed an “artificial dichotomy between civic knowledge and civic participation, believing that the former prepares students for the latter in terms of basic duties like voting, performing

jury service and so on.” And Curran and Warren deny that Action Civics’ practitioners “tell our students how to advocate for change. In fact, we acknowledge and affirm their hope for a more just society.”

“Success for Generation Citizen is not predicated on the success of young people’s action projects, but rather their ability to become engaged, informed and thoughtful citizens” ([para. 8](#)). To this end, they argue, Action Civics proponents “have welcomed supporters and board members from all political stripes.” *Contra* Randall and the NAS, Generation Citizen’s “past board members and volunteers have run for state legislatures and even the U.S. Senate — as Republicans” ([para. 9](#)).

Assessing Current Action Civics Projects’ Political Character

As we have read, Curran and Warren strongly deny the claims of Pondiscio, Randall, and Thorne that Action Civics ineluctably degenerates into teaching students how to protest in favor of progressive political causes.

To better understand this key point in the debate between Action Civics’ defenders and critics, Lucy Meckler and I reviewed Generation Citizen’s list of Action Civics projects. We reviewed 27 political projects listed on Generation Citizen’s and its allies’ websites, in order to get a better sense of the reality beneath the contesting claims advanced by Action Civics’ defenders and its critics.

Fuller details on each of these projects are provided in **Appendix II**. For the reader’s convenience, we have summarized these projects below, quoting directly from Generation Citizen’s own descriptions in an effort to be as objective as possible. The numbering of the projects aligns with those provided in the full presentation in **Appendix II**.

Examples of Action Civics Projects Provided by Generation Citizen and its Allies

1. Raising the minimum wage/putting body cameras on officers.
2. Climate change/Green New Deal.
3. Challenge youth and LGBTQ+ homelessness in Berkeley by advocating for funding for the city’s first year-round youth shelter.
4. Launching a campaign for a state senate seat.
5. Advocating to continue the Lowell Gun Buyback Program in Lowell and petitioning representatives to pass the “Red Flag Bill” (H.3610).
6. Teachers use Action Civics to strengthen their walkout for fair wages.

7. Fighting “issues of oppression”: Islamophobia, the school-to-prison pipeline, and undocumented drivers’ licenses, specifically through lobbying and protesting.
8. Using strategies learned during the Vietnam War to protest climate change and gun violence.
9. Walkout to protest gun violence in schools.
10. School walkout over gun violence.
11. 1,800 students participated in addressing such topics as mental illness, racism, the environment and perceptions about women.
12. Pre-registering 16- and 17-year-olds to vote.
13. Dream Act, climate change, and making reusable bags commonplace.
14. Some suggested ideas for civic action projects: Bullying, climate change, and homelessness.
15. HIV education and LGBTQ issues.
16. Environmental sustainability and a gun buyback program.
17. Posters displaying #NoBanNoWall, lobbying against gentrification, mass incarceration, and gun violence. Discussing black masculinity and angry black woman trope, farm animal antibiotics, and the school-to-prison pipeline. Branding the Founding Fathers as wealthy, white, economically motivated slaveowners.
18. Protest climate change.
19. Homelessness and social justice.
20. Power analysis, feminist perspectives, influencing public policies, social justice orientation, and critical stances to help people rethink what is normal.
21. School-sanctioned protest.
22. Climate change.
23. Three excused absences to participate in protest during the school day.
24. Social justice, gun reform, helping the homeless, immigration, and the environment.
25. Petitioned governor to create a climate change task force.
26. Generation Citizen’s senior director of policy and advocacy: formally recognize protest as an important aspect of a student’s civic formation.
27. Youth organizing, “including a workshop to educate students about injustices in the school system, like inequitable funding.”

Surveying the projects listed above is illuminating, for it seeks to find evidence for Curran and Warren’s denial that Action Civics teaches students how to protest in favor of progressive political causes. None of us can read into hearts and minds; therefore, we should be reluctant to impute motives. Instead, our survey of its projects sought evidence for Generation Citizen’s claim of non-partisanship by examining the documented, real-world fruits of its agenda.

That said, even a cursory glance at this list of 27 projects reveals a progressive bias in the assumptions underlying many of the projects listed above. These assumptions (e.g., anthropogenic climate change) may or may not be true. It is the task of a genuine education to investigate them. When “action” proceeds instead from unexamined assumptions, the result is not learning, but indoctrination.

This is easiest to see when we examine the details behind item 27, immediately above, which is not a political project like the preceding 27, but rather a clear—a very clear—mission statement by Generation Citizen’s Senior Director of Policy and Advocacy Andrew Wilkes. Titled, “Youth Protesting Racism Are the Civic Educators the Nation Needs,” the article argued on June 6, 2020, that “conventional wisdom often posits a false choice between knowing how our political system works and the contentious action of protest.” But this “dichotomy is wrong,” because it neglects “the fact that young people often protest because they understand how our system should work on paper and how it tends to work in practice — especially when we consider how policing happens among communities of color in metropolitan areas” ([para. 2](#)).

Hence, rather than viewing young student protests as “uninformed civic participants,” we should instead “see them as innovators within a deeply American civic tradition, calling the country to actualize its potential as an equitable democracy and to undo its ingrained practices of structural racism” ([para. 3](#)).

Although Generation Citizen’s Wilkes grants that “community service and joining organizations are important measures of civic spirit,” they are not the “most important ones in every civic situation. Protest and direct action are also crucial benchmarks of civic engagement” ([para. 11](#)).

In this light, Wilkes deems the 2020 spring and summer of civil unrest as “an ideal time to listen to, and learn from, young people protesting racism as innovative civic educators, calling us to appreciate the full range of constructive participation in our public life. The health of our democracy and the integrity of our political traditions depends on valuing the lessons our students are teaching us: Protest is a key

barometer of involvement in our democratic life, a precious American tradition, and increasingly, a recognized aspect of state and local education policy” ([para. 18](#)).

Our survey of Generation Citizen’s civics projects, together with Wilkes’s endorsement of student protest, suggests that, during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, while the rest of the country dons masks, Action Civics’ defenders have taken their masks off, rendering NAS’s “deceptive language” critique all the more credible.

Earlier Rumblings Over the “Contested Curriculum”

In June 2011, the American Enterprise Institute’s (AEI) Daniel K. Lautzenheiser, Andrew P. Kelly, and Cheryl Miller published a report titled *Contested Curriculum: How Teachers and Citizens View Civics Education*.

The AEI report finds that Americans are “rightly concerned that schools are not providing students with the knowledge and habits necessary to be good citizens” ([Lautzenheiser et al., 2011, p. 1](#)). As evidence, it cites the 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Report Card, which found that “a mere 24 percent of high school seniors scored on the proficient level on the NAEP civics exam, a slight decrease from four years ago. A similar pattern held true for fourth and eighth graders: 27 percent and 22 percent, respectively, scored proficient or higher. Only 64 percent of seniors scored on even the basic level, with a paltry 4 percent considered advanced” ([p. 1](#)).

Although the evidence of our growing civics ignorance abounds, “its causes—and possible remedies—are not so well understood.” We read earlier that, for Action Civics’ proponents, a cause, if not *the* cause, of our civic ignorance is traditional civics education’s putative emphasis on content. To find out for itself, the AEI report “set out to explore what teachers and the public think our high schools should be teaching about citizenship and whether they believe high schools are actually achieving those goals” ([p. 1](#)).

What AEI found—and which we witnessed in the debate between NAS and Generation Citizen—is that, “while citizens and teachers often have similar beliefs about what topics and concepts are most essential to teach about citizenship, important differences emerge on issues like whether schools should emphasize teaching facts and dates and on topics like tolerance and global citizenship.” The report discovers a “significant amount of pessimism from the public about whether high school students are actually learning much about citizenship in high school” ([p. 1](#)).

Of particular importance for this paper’s purposes, the AEI report finds “evidence that citizens are reluctant to

recommend that high schools promote civic behaviors like community service and raising money for causes, believing instead that teaching facts and concepts should take priority” ([pp. 1-2](#)). Not surprisingly, it also finds that Republicans and Democrats differ on the content of genuine civic education. “So long as these concepts divide party identifiers, consensus will be difficult to reach” ([p. 2](#)).

AEI surveyed over 1,000 public and private high school educators. When it asked teachers “how confident they were that the students from their high school had learned a list of twelve concepts—for example, learning about the protections in the Bill of Rights or developing habits of community service—no more than 24 percent of public school teachers reported that they were ‘very confident’ with respect to any of the concepts.” Teachers’ reported confidence levels fell still lower “—between 6 and 15 percent—when it came to issues like developing good work habits and understanding concepts such as federalism.” Finally, it is noteworthy that the teacher respondents, “when asked what content, skills, and knowledge are most important ... emphasized notions of tolerance and rights, while giving less attention to history, facts, and constitutional concepts such as the separation of powers” ([p. 2](#)).

When both “teachers and citizens were asked to rank the five broad priorities that high schools may have in teaching their students to be informed and engaged citizens... the results are striking. Almost 40 percent of citizens rank teaching facts first or second, *compared to half that percentage for teachers* [emphasis added]” ([p. 2](#)).

In a like manner, “63 percent of citizens rank instilling good work habits first or second, a priority that just over 40 percent of teachers feel is that important. *On the other end, a meager 18 percent of the public want schools to promote civic behaviors like voting and community service, compared to almost half of all teachers* [emphasis added]” ([p. 2-3](#)). At the same time, all three groups surveyed—public school teachers, private school teachers, and citizens—“view teaching students to be activists who challenge the status quo as a low priority (this item had the lowest or second-lowest percentage of ‘absolutely essential’ responses for each group)” ([p. 4](#)).

The AEI survey also reveals that citizens value “students learning facts and dates (it was tied for sixth for citizens compared to twelfth for public school teachers and eleventh for private school teachers) and understanding economic principles (fifth for citizens, ninth for public school teachers, and tenth for private school teachers, although the percentages were closer)” ([p. 4](#)).

Alternatively, over 75 percent of teachers in the survey answered that it is “absolutely essential” to “teach students to be tolerant of people and groups who are different from themselves.” But “only half of citizens feel it merits that degree of attention.” The same cleft evidenced itself when it came to the priority of “teaching students to see themselves as global citizens living in an interconnected world”: “57 and 67 percent of public and private school teachers, respectively, feel this is ‘absolutely essential,’ compared to just 35 percent of citizens” (p. 4).

Assessing the data, the AEI report infers that citizens’ “preference for teaching facts over values and behaviors may reflect fears that social studies teachers may politicize the classroom,” for close to “half of citizens polled feel that ‘too many social studies teachers use their classes as a “soap box” for their personal point of view” (p. 4).

This is not to imply that the average citizen does not “want schools to inculcate certain attitudes among students toward America.” The citizen respondents in the survey showed themselves to be “more comfortable than teachers with encouraging assimilation, and they want students to hold a more positive view of their country.” A super-majority of citizens surveyed answered that it is “more important for high schools to get students to understand *the common history and responsibilities of America* [emphasis added] than it is to get students to celebrate the unique identities of various ethnic groups,” whereas “teachers are more evenly split” (p. 4).

Two other noteworthy findings from the study are that (a) citizens, much more than teachers, “prefer high schools to teach students to ‘love their country’ (about a quarter [of citizens], versus about 10 percent for teachers),” and (b) whereas 80 percent of teachers “would rather teach students to ‘respect [the United States] but recognize flaws,’” the number of citizens who concur falls to 58 percent (p. 4).

In sum, the AEI survey strongly suggests that, while there is broad consensus that civic education needs reforming, “attempts to reemphasize or reform citizenship education in our high schools may trigger traditional fault lines in American politics” (p. 6). As we have seen, American citizens do not possess a great deal of confidence that “high school graduates are learning each item. . . . Barely one-third

of respondents are confident that most high school students have learned the protections identified in the Bill of Rights; even fewer are confident that students have learned good work habits or key concepts like the separation of powers and federalism” (p. 5). Although two thirds of citizens believe it absolutely essential that students understand political concepts like federalism and separation of powers, “only 22 percent are confident that students are learning these concepts” (p. 5). In these instances and others, “the subjects that citizens feel are most important for students to learn are the same ones they feel the *least* confident that students are, in fact, learning” (p. 5).

At the same time, the AEI survey reveals that a “number of items that citizens feel are least important for students to learn are ones they feel high schools are doing a good job of teaching” (p. 5). The four items that “citizens placed the lowest priority on teaching—developing habits of community service, learning tolerance of different groups, becoming

activists who challenge the status quo, and seeing themselves as global citizens—are the *same four* they feel most confident that students are actually learning” (pp. 5-6).

In this, the AEI report correctly notes a “pattern of incongruence,” one that “suggests that the public is quite pessimistic about the quality of citizenship education in American high schools” (p. 6).

But the finding that the report regards as “most striking” is that “both Democrats and Republicans are unlikely to rank ‘promoting civic behaviors’ as a first or second priority in the teaching of citizenship.” Under 20 percent of either party’s membership “ranks this priority first or second, a lower proportion than any other priority.” Although Democrats and Republicans “do not necessarily agree on much . . . they seem to be equally reticent to have high school teachers promoting civic behaviors in the classroom” (p. 6).

Finally, although the AEI survey reveals a number of sharp disagreements regarding the character of civic education, teachers as well as citizens do agree on some important items: Both think that “students should be able to identify the protections in the Bill of Rights; understand concepts such as federalism, checks and balances, and separation of powers; and learn to follow rules and have good work habits.” That is to say, schools need to “teach students a base of

To a super-majority of citizens surveyed it is more important for high schools to get students to understand the common history and responsibilities of America than it is to get students to celebrate the unique identities of various ethnic groups.

knowledge about American government and prepare them to be productive citizens” (p. 9).

Ending on a hopeful note, the report concludes that “perhaps these are the areas where the reform of citizenship education should begin” (p. 9).

The civics syllabus for high school teachers, provided in **Appendix I**, seeks to merge these areas of agreement.

Chester Finn’s Critique of the Intentions Underlying A Crucible Moment

Some doubt is cast on the hopeful scenario advanced by the AEI report by education analyst Chester E. Finn, Jr.’s article, “Should Schools Turn Children into Activists? And Should Uncle Sam Help?”

Finn (2012) begins by noting the broad consensus that exists in the country over the need to improve civic education. “It is,” Finn notes, “a modern platitude that ‘we must do something to improve Americans’ knowledge of civics and government’” (para. 2).

But this apparent, surface-level consensus masks “a problem in civics education, a sort of dividing line”: From one camp, “we find an emphasis on infusing kids with basic knowledge about government, an understanding of the merits (as well as the shortcomings) of American democracy, and a sense of what can still be called patriotism: the belief that this country and its values need to be defended” (para. 3).

From the other camp, “we find much greater emphasis on civic participation and activism, on voluntarism and ‘service learning,’ and on what is often termed ‘collective decision making’ (or problem solving) and ‘democratic engagement,’” which, by Finn’s lights, “often boils down into the communitarian view that issues facing society are best dealt with through group action, by people joining hands and working together rather than through the political process” (para. 4).

In Finn’s view, our schools carry a “special responsibility to the young people in their care, which is to be exceptionally careful about providing lessons and activities of a political nature or enlisting them in adult causes, however worthy some may deem them.” Moreover, the federal government, likewise, has a “special responsibility not to ‘take sides’ in the big debate—or, if it does, to come down on the side of patriotism.” However, and “unfortunately, a new report out of the U.S. Department of Education” suggests that the president at that time, Barack Obama, was “tilting toward the other side” (para. 6).

What Finn has in mind we encountered above when rehearsing the debate between the NAS report and its

rejoinder by Generation Citizen. Finn’s analysis pushes deeper to the foundations of this disagreement over the place and role of civic education in our representative democracy. Like NAS’s Randall and Thorne, Finn finds that the “‘democratic engagement’ faction within civics education has recently re-energized ... and is pressing hard on schools to push kids into activism. You can see a vivid example of this in a recent publication called (cutely) *A Crucible Moment* and billed as ‘a national call to action.’” Finn adds that, “although it’s primarily aimed at colleges and universities,” *A Crucible Moment* “is meant for primary and secondary schools, too” (para. 8).

Reviewing the Obama administration’s *A Crucible Moment*, Finn detects in it three proposed “essential actions” that are “at least a bit troublesome, particularly when applied to compulsory public education of impressionable children rather than the voluntary education of young adults:

1. ‘Advance a contemporary, comprehensive framework for civic learning—embracing U.S. and global interdependence—that includes historic and modern understandings of democratic values, capacities to engage diverse perspectives and people, and commitment to collective civic problem solving.’ *Global interdependence? Collective civic problem solving?*
2. ‘Capitalize upon the interdependent responsibilities of K–12 and higher education to foster progressively higher levels of civic knowledge, skills, examined values, and action as expectations for every student.’ *Values examined by whom? What sort of ‘action’?*
3. ‘Expand the number of robust, generative civic partnerships and alliances, locally, nationally, and globally to address common problems, empower people to act, strengthen communities and nations, and generate new frontiers of knowledge.’ *What exactly are ‘generative civic partnerships’ and who in particular is supposed to be ‘empowered’ to do what?* (quoted in Finn, 2012, para. 9-10).

Moreover, argues Finn, rather than this being a merely “academic and irrelevant” debate, the Obama administration was, at the time, putting its “thumb on this side of the civics-education scale” (para. 11-12).

These assertions are based on his review of the 2012 Obama Education Department’s publication *Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy: A Road Map and Call to Action*. Despite the fact that *A Road Map and Call to Action* is directed primarily toward higher education, it “makes no real age-specific distinctions and explicitly urges the nation’s K-12 schools to, for example, ‘both expand and transform their approach to civic learning and democratic

engagement, rather than engage in tinkering at the margins” (Finn, 2012, para. 13).

According to the Obama administration proposal, education mandates and funding “could incorporate evidence-based civic learning and democratic engagement approaches—such as service-learning” (quoted in Finn, 2012, para. 16). Finn questions whether this is “really a proper federal role in K-12 education”: he notes that the “kids to be affected probably cannot even name the mayor of their town or the governor of their state, nor have much idea what political parties are and how legislation gets passed (or not)” (para. 17).

To be sure, Finn entertains no qualms over the Education Department’s efforts “to seek a broadening of the K-12 curriculum and an overdue consolidation of too many discipline-specific curriculum-related programs into a single block grant” (para. 18).

What he finds unacceptable, however, is for the federal government to push “‘action civics’ on our nation’s schools” (para. 18). As we read in the NAS report as well as Pondiscio’s account, this is precisely what is occurring.

“Civics Education Should Be About More Than Just Facts”: Defenders of Action Civics Respond to Finn’s Critique

In an article (Hansen et al., 2018) published on the Brookings Institution website, four defenders of Action Civics take on Finn’s critique. “Civics Education Should Be About More Than Just Facts” is coauthored by Michael Hansen, the Herman and George R. Brown chair and director at Brown Center on Education Policy; Elizabeth Mann Levesque, nonresident fellow in governance studies at the Brown Center on Education Policy; Jon Valant, fellow in governance studies at the Brown Center on Education Policy; and Diana Quintero, research analyst in governance studies at the Brown Center on Education Policy.

The four authors take aim at Finn’s “critique of the 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education” (Hansen et al., 2018). They read Finn to “lament” that the Brown Center report “espouses a view of civics education in which knowledge doesn’t really matter.” They disagree: “That isn’t what the report says.” They “agree” that “building a strong foundation of knowledge is essential.” For the four, “a well-rounded civics education develops students’ civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Developing skills and dispositions alone—without instilling a basic knowledge of government, history, and more—would leave students with the desire and skillset to participate constructively in political life without having a core of information and

context to guide that participation. That isn’t a desirable outcome” (para. 1-2).

Where the authors disagree with Finn, and “strongly,” is over “his apparent view that preparing students for civic life is really just about instilling facts. We think that an honest, careful look at the country right now exposes that view as misguided and even dangerous” (para. 3).

The United States, in the opinion of these four authors, has become a land in which “we shelter ourselves from perspectives and facts that disagree with our own” (para. 4). In point of fact, “our politics seem more rooted in contempt and schadenfreude than empathy and reason. Politicians exploit racial, ethnic, and class divisions, leaving many Americans feeling even more targeted and disenfranchised. And a foreign adversary disseminates false information through social media because it believes that Americans cannot (or won’t really care to) distinguish reality from manipulative fiction.”

The authors next contend that “believing that schools ought to sharpen students’ civic skills and dispositions isn’t, as Finn suggests, a product of political correctness run amok, nor is it an inherently left-of-center idea. Americans have long seen this kind of thing as a core function of schools, and even Milton Friedman’s argument for vouchers is built on a notion that schools ought to instill a common set of values” (Hansen et al., 2018, para. 5).

The authors speculate that Finn’s critique of Action Civics “perhaps” owes to his conviction that “teaching facts is the way to develop civic skills and dispositions, or that students develop these skills and dispositions without schools teaching them explicitly.” But the authors see taking such a tack as a “missed opportunity”: “[W]e see little reason to believe these skills and dispositions will develop so indirectly or serendipitously. Schools can help students see how they can engage civically, what it can do for them, what the practice of democracy looks like, and what skills it requires” (para. 6).

The authors also defend against what they deem to be Finn’s “particularly strong objection to our [the Brown Center’s] discussion of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) framework that some states have used to develop or modify their civics standards.” Finn criticizes the C3 regime over what “he believes is a dearth of factual, substantive content” (para. 7).

However, the authors rejoin, the C3 framework was never “intended as a substitute for state content standards.” Instead, its goal is “to provide states with resources to update their standards such that students develop core

competencies through their coursework.” The C3 framework is not a replacement. It is a “complement” to “content standards” (para. 8). In fact, the four authors’ own review of practices nationwide indicates “about half of the states have used this framework” (para. 9).

Finally, the authors insist that their report “did not mean to imply—nor did we say—that civics knowledge is irrelevant or that the C3 framework (or any other framework) is flawless or sufficient.” They agree that students need the type of content for which Finn calls. That being granted, however, their “concern is that the civic mission of schools has been lost in an era that has placed such dominant emphasis on math and reading proficiency and the important-but-incomplete goal of preparing students for college and career success.” Because they deem “many of the country’s greatest challenges today” to be “political in nature,” they insist that remedying these deficiencies “will require schools not only to develop students’ civic knowledge, but also their civic skills and dispositions” (para. 10).

With this last statement, the four Action Civics defenders concede that their civic education project, like “many of the country’s greatest challenges today,” will be ineluctably “political in nature.”

But this raises the unavoidable query, political in what manner, and to what purpose?

Teaching for “Power”? Nathan Glazer on Meira Levinson’s *No Citizen Left Behind*

One of the academic authorities to which the Action Civics movement looks is Meira Levinson, author of the 2012 book *No Citizen Left Behind*. Nathan Glazer, professor emeritus of education and sociology at Harvard University, reviewed Levinson’s book in the Spring 2013 edition of *Education Next*.

Levinson’s book, according to Glazer, “brings a new twist to the issue of the gap between American minority low-income children and middle-class children; what has engaged her passions and formidable abilities is not the academic gap, though of course she is fully aware of it, but the gap in the ability to participate effectively in the civic life, to influence political choices, the ‘Civic Empowerment’ gap, as she labels it” (Glazer, 2013, para. 1).

Glazer finds that the uniqueness of Levinson’s argument consists in her assertion that minority students are “disempowered, and a key necessity of their education is to teach them how to increase their power, their effectiveness in the real world, beginning with their immediate environment: the world of school and neighborhood” (quoted in Glazer, 2013, para. 4).

Levinson’s remedy to civic illiteracy is “student involvement in the issues that concern them, and learning through that involvement. *The aim is systemic change, and if learning is aided by it, good, but secondary to overcoming the gap in empowerment* [emphasis supplied]” (para. 5).

By Glazer’s lights, “this is ‘Civics’ of a sort, but of a sort” he thinks “many readers will find unfamiliar.” Why? For Levinson, “whatever progress has been made in this nation in overcoming the disadvantages of our minorities is owing to their struggles, and there is still so much to do. ‘Action civics’ is what is needed,” and “this activity is far beyond ‘service learning,’ which is implemented in many schools, and for which students may receive credit: reading to the homebound, or collecting and turning in cans to aid the hungry, or the like. Rather, systemic change is required.” In this, Glazer “can’t help being reminded of Marx’s disdain for the softer socialism of his time” (para. 6).

Levinson’s project is termed by her, “Guided Experiential Civic Education.” Her project rejects the traditional approach to civic education, in which she finds too many “key questions and concepts, more vocabulary words . . . overall just more ‘stuff’ to cover. This is also her complaint with the requirements in American history, which she formerly taught” (para. 9).

Levinson knows well that “on the one hand, action civics teaches students the ways of democratic activity and participation to effect change; on the other, [action civics] will run into conflict with the program and objectives that democratic control of the schools has implemented in many places, such as which heroes to place before the students for emulation. She sees no way of resolving this conflict: the two kinds of democracy, both valid, must remain in tension” (para. 10).

Glazer concludes, “This is Dewey updated, with education for democracy in conflict with democracy in action as it acts in the real world on education” (para. 10). While granting that Levinson’s ideas as presented in her book are “effectively presented,” he nonetheless remains “skeptical whether any democratically controlled school system could accommodate the explosive potential of action civics as she describes it” (para. 11).

With this conclusion, Glazer corroborates the AEI report’s data demonstrating the cleft between American citizens and the Action Civics agenda.

“Would Revived Civics End Up Being Progressive Ed Redux?”

In his published review of the NAS report, the Heartland Institute’s Robert G. Holland asks, “Would Revived Civics End Up Being Progressive Ed Redux?” (2017).

Like the education analysts examined above, Holland is consoled somewhat by the “good news”—“that civics education, which teaches children the basics of good citizenship, is quickly gaining fans after being dormant for decades. There is a growing recognition that democracy cannot endure if three fourths of American students don’t know what makes their country tick” ([para. 1](#)).

However, in the midst of this good news, Holland believes himself to have identified a “big unknown,” which consists in the question “whether revived civics coursework will become a means of teaching kids that they live in an exceptional republic whose founders molded a constitutional system within which citizens can find their niche and enjoy the blessings of liberty. Or will it be a vessel for something else entirely?” ([para. 2](#)).

The “something else entirely” of which Holland hints is the “bad news” that “education progressives and the political left appear to be determined to make civics a playground for their pet causes” ([para. 3](#)).

Agreeing with the conclusions of the NAS report, Holland asserts, “A handy way to install this ideology in ... K-12, is to argue that civics education should be action-packed and exciting for children. Along that line, *Education Week* recently featured an article advocating for a personalized civics education in which a grasp of fundamental knowledge takes a backseat to students engaging in civic activism via project-based learning” ([para. 6](#)).

Offered as Exhibit One for the prosecution of his case against Action Civics, Holland cites Generation Citizen, whose rebuttal to the NAS report we examined earlier. Holland identifies Generation Citizen as “a nonprofit pushing this activist approach, offer[ing] ways students essentially could construct their own civics as opposed to sitting through lectures on the separation of powers and such. One tipoff to the built in slanting of such instruction lies in this sample topic: ‘After learning about the role of climate change in the recent hurricanes, they can pressure their local governments to explore alternative forms of energy or upgrade the town sewage system’” ([para. 7](#)).

Holland notes that this “project posits as a certainty that the active 2017 hurricane season has been the product of man-made global warming. Science has not validated that speculation. And never mind that twelve years of unusually light hurricane activity preceded this year’s fierce tropical cyclones, even as carbon dioxide emissions have risen” ([para. 8](#)).

Moreover, Holland finds it “laughable when educrats claim ownership of project-based learning as some bright

innovation. In truth, the concept goes back at least 100 years, to the genesis of progressive education, which took root in teacher-training institutions and has hung out there since” ([para. 9](#)). In the year 1918, writes Holland, “a high-powered commission on secondary education determined that history should be merged into a mishmash of disciplines called ‘social studies’ and greatly de-emphasized. Civics should be about not knowledge, but instead ‘social efforts to improve mankind,’ stated the Committee on Social Studies. ‘It is not so important that the pupil know how the President is elected as that he shall understand the duties of the health officer in his community’” ([para. 10](#)).

Looked at in historical perspective, the “battles between advocates of traditional civics and utilitarian civics have raged for all these decades.” “Soon,” Holland argues, “they may be at their fiercest level ever.” This “tension,” which he finds “rooted in basic divisions as to the purpose of education, strengthens the argument for parental choice. Let families decide whether they want their children to learn about the principles of self-government that make this country exceptional or if they would prefer that the kids gather petitions to submit to the local waterworks department” ([para. 11](#)).

As we already have learned from the polling data cited above, a majority of Americans “want their children to learn about the principles of self-government.”

The American Revolution Versus the French Revolution: Ground Zero of our Civic Education Debate

According to its website, Mikva Challenge ([n.d.](#)) first coined the term “Action Civics” in 2007. But Action Civics’ lineage goes much further back in time than 2007. Its genealogy can be traced back at least to the 18th century, to the political thought of the French political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. To understand Action Civics more fully, then, requires a deeper dive into its philosophic antecedents, which is the purpose of this section of the paper.

The late Allan Bloom—made famous through his 1987 critique of American higher education, *The Closing of the American Mind*—was no less a scholar of Rousseau. In addition to his translation of and commentary on Rousseau’s *Emile, or On Education*, Bloom also researched the relation between the American Founders’ political vision and that of Rousseau’s. As editor of *Confronting the Constitution*, a series of essays by various authors examining America and her critics, Bloom contributes a chapter titled, “Rousseau—The Turning Point,” to which I now turn.

Bloom’s analysis ([1987](#)) helps to take us to the deepest level of the debate between those advancing a

Founding-documents-based approach to civic education and those championing Action/New Civics. He begins by noting, “At the moment the Framers wrote ‘We the People of the United States ...’ the word ‘people’ had been made problematic by Jean-Jacques Rousseau” (p. 211). This confrontation explains much of what is being debated, as well as much of what is at stake, in our current debate.

To be sure, notes Bloom, Rousseau commences from a standpoint that is in “overall agreement with the Framers ... about man’s nature and the origins and ends of civil society.” In short, human beings are “born free” and “equal, that is, with no superiors” who can marshal a “valid claim to command” them (p. 211). However, while the American Founders had grown accustomed to critiques of their Enlightenment project coming from the defenders of nobles and kings—whose critiques the Founders decisively defeated—Rousseau was the first to attack the Founders’ project from the Left, sparking an inter-Enlightenment struggle that continues to this day: “The element that was so much more extreme in the French Revolution than in the American Revolution can be traced, without intermediaries, to Rousseau’s influence on its [the French Revolution’s] principal actors. And it was by Rousseau’s standard that [the French Revolution] was judged a failure and only a preparation for the next, and perhaps final, revolution. ... [Rousseau’s] camp of radical equality and freedom has very few clear political successes to show for itself, but it contains all the dissatisfactions and longings that put a question mark after triumphant liberalism” (pp. 212-213).

Rousseau’s influence has not been limited to the political Left. Rousseau’s “regret of the lost happy unity of [natural, that is, pre-political] man was the source of the romanticism that played at least as much of a role on the Right as on the Left.” Such influence “was direct on Alexis de Tocqueville, indirect, by way of Wordsworth, on John Stuart Mill. The Thoreau who for America represents civil disobedience and a way of life free from the distortions of modern society was only reenacting one part of the thought and life of Jean-Jacques” (p. 213). Rousseau’s doctrine influenced Tocqueville’s defense of political participation at the local level.

Bloom goes so far as to identify Rousseau as the “seedbed of all these schools and movements that enrich, correct, defend or undermine constitutional liberalism” (p. 213). Although his “breadth and comprehensiveness make it impossible to coopt him completely into any single [political] camp,” Rousseau’s assault on “modern economics and his questions about the legitimacy of private property are at the root of socialism, particularly Marxism” (p. 214). Rousseau writes, by way of criticism, “Ancient political

writers spoke constantly about morals and virtue; ours speak only about commerce and money” (p. 219). America’s Founders followed Locke, for whom “the establishment of private property” is “the beginning of the solution to the political problem.” But for Rousseau—though by no means “a communist” intent on “do[ing] away with private property”—private ownership of property nonetheless “is the source of the continuing misery of man” (p. 220). Our modern commercial republic doubtless succeeds at producing an “expanding economy,” but it “can never keep up with the expansion of desire” (p. 220). This expansion is directly attributable to the commercial republics’ emancipation of desire, in contrast to the ancient republics’ efforts to moderate the desires of its citizenry.

For Rousseau, our commercial republic turns politics “into economics.” This gives preeminence to “selfishness and calculation” over “generosity and compassion.” In place of our Lockean regime, Rousseau asserts the superiority of “agricultural communities, where production requires only simple skills ... where inequalities of land and money are, if not abolished, limited, where avarice has little opportunity for activity” (p. 222). Rousseau’s “great rhetoric was used to make compassion for the poor central to relations among men and indignation at their situation central to political action” (p. 223).

The crux of the difference between Locke and Rousseau on the issue of property is this: Locke taught that the protection of private property is “both efficient and just.” At the same time, Locke’s “justice is harsh natural justice—the protection of unequal natural talents for acquisition from the depredations of the idle, the less competent, the envious, and the brutal.” And here we see Rousseau’s lasting effect on both the political Left and Right in this country today. Although Locke’s “argument for efficiency remains,” Rousseau’s project succeeded in producing a culture today where “hardly any of the economists who are capitalism’s most convinced advocates defend the justice of the inequalities in which it results.” Instead, it is defended as “at best an effective way of increasing collective and individual wealth” (p. 224).

Hence, Rousseau is “at least partly” responsible for the “interesting situation where we do not entirely believe in the justice of our [modern commercial republican] regimes” (p. 224).

The preceding account prepares the ground for Rousseau’s “most famous innovation,” the doctrine of the “general will” (p. 224). Rousseau rejects the Founders’ “formula that one gives up a bit of freedom [which exists fully in the state of nature] to enjoy the rest undisturbed [in civil society, arrived at through consent]” (p. 225). This leaves citizens

with no truly *moral* basis by which to justify subordinating their own interests to the common good. Instead, they practice a “utilitarian morality,” which is “no morality at all” (p. 225).

Rousseau’s point here can be gleaned from our reflection on a popular saying, “honesty is the best policy.” What this means is that honest dealings best promote sound policy, including business success. But honesty in this maxim is presented as the means, and good policy, the end. All means are subordinate to the respective ends they serve. Hence, on the basis of this very formula, if “good policy,” or success, was furthered by dishonesty in a particular instance, this maxim allows for it.

Rousseau endeavors to replace utilitarian morality with “real duty, the un-self-regarding moral deed,” which, under our system of democratic capitalism, becomes but a “will-o’-the-wisp.” How? Through the “general will”: “Only the man whose private will wills only the common good would experience no tension between his individuality and society,” between “freedom and duty.” General will is Rousseau’s “attempt to establish a moral politics,” for “general will is the common good” (p. 225).

To go further, for Rousseau, “willing generally constitutes a new kind of human freedom, not the satisfaction of animal inclination but real choice.” So understood, “obedience to the general will is an act of freedom” as well as constitutive of the “dignity of man” (p. 225). Men’s private wishes are controlled “by the imperative of their possibility for all men” (p. 226).

For this vision to be constituted in political practice, citizens must be placed in a community, necessarily small in size, in which they are “woven so tightly” that no one can “think of himself separately from it,” for, under this dispensation, “the public business is identical to his private interest.” Each citizen “must understand himself . . . as a lawmaker for his city and thereby for himself. Every decision . . . of the city must be understood to be the result of his own will.” To accomplish this, the “core” of each citizen’s life consists in “concern with public business in the assembly of citizens” (p. 226).

Such civic intimacy requires a territory and population so small that the “whole body of citizens must be able to meet regularly. Moreover, they must know one another” (p. 227). This contrasts sharply with the conditions of democratic equality and freedom as America’s Founders understood them. James Madison, in *Federalist 10*, praises the large size of the American republic. Large territories and large populations are preconditions of not only commercial strength, but, more importantly, of democratic freedom and equality for the Founders. The large, extended commercial republic,

with its multiplicity of economic interests as well as its multiplicity of religious sects, makes it much harder for factions to gain the needed majority power to exercise sway under a democratic form of government.

For Madison, the ancient Greek democracies failed *precisely* because they were small. Under the conditions of smallness, with its concomitant static economy, the only way the poor can rise is through overthrowing the rich, that is, through civil war. But democratized commerce (modern capitalism) offers citizens a way out—and up, one that can be accomplished peacefully. Most important, our largeness-spawned diversity makes it necessary for any faction to moderate its demands—if only out of self-interest, because not to do so would cause it to fail to garner the needed majority. Added to this scheme is a dependence on self-interest, which the Founders sought not to suppress but to emancipate, as a precondition of economic prosperity. Instead of attempting to establish a republic of virtue, the Founders’ system relies on the moderating clash of opposing interests. Our separation of powers system is animated by the conviction that virtuous leaders are not always “at the helm”; instead, “ambition must be made to counteract ambition” (*Federalist 51*).

But for Rousseau, what the Founders’ regime “sacrifices” for peace and prosperity is “autonomy and human connectedness” (Bloom, 1987, p. 227). He also “connects large size with despotism” (p. 227). For Rousseau’s pro-American critics, his attempt to recover autonomy and human connectedness comes at the price of what Lincoln called “mobocratic rule.”

In addition, Rousseau trumpets smallness because he deems it “necessary to avoid the modern democratic device of representation.” For America’s Founders, representation was not simply a concession to the vast size of the American republic, it was a blessing for liberty. But for Rousseau, representation leaves the “effort of determining general wills” to the “representatives without having a citizen body that wills generally.” Rousseau derides this as merely a formula for “interest politics,” in which the “idea of a common good disappears,” replaced by the “conflict of parties.” Under a scheme of representative democracy, citizens find themselves “hopelessly dependent on the wills of others” (p. 227). Against this, our reliance on constitutional checks and balances serves only to encourage “the selfishness of partial interests” (p. 228).

To those who entertain doubts about the possibility of Rousseau’s plan to recover man’s lost unity, the bloodiness of the French Revolution provides support. “As Locke and Montesquieu were the presiding geniuses of Adams, Madison, Hamilton, and Jefferson in their moderate founding, Rousseau was the presiding genius of the excesses of

the French Revolution” (p. 230). Under Robespierre, the Terror, also known as the Reign of Terror, ensued, producing the first modern genocide. But, in time, Robespierre, an admirer of both the early Roman Republic and Rousseau, would find himself the victim of the guillotine, the latest casualty of the insatiability of the revolution’s principles.

Some historical background may be helpful to those desiring more knowledge of the Terror, which occurred between September 5, 1793, and July 27, 1794. This *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2020) entry informs us:

With civil war spreading from the Vendée and hostile armies surrounding France on all sides, the Revolutionary government decided to make “Terror” the order of the day (September 5 decree) and to take harsh measures against those suspected of being enemies of the Revolution (nobles, priests, and hoarders). (para. 1)

Laws were passed that defined those who should be arrested as counterrevolutionaries, and committees of surveillance were set up to identify suspects and issue arrest warrants. Later laws suspended the rights of suspects to both legal assistance and public trials and mandated execution of all those who were found guilty. Other laws set up government control of prices, confiscated lands from those found guilty of failing to support the Revolution, and brought public assistance to the poor and disabled. The French republican calendar was adopted as part of a program of de-Christianization. About 300,000 people were arrested, and 17,000 of them were tried and executed. As many as 23,000 more were killed without trial or died in prison. (“What major events” question)

On the one hand, Locke and Montesquieu “would certainly in general have approved of the handiwork of their great pupils,” the American Founders among them (Bloom, 1987, p. 230). On the other hand, Rousseau would “just as certainly have disapproved of Robespierre” (p. 230). But his disapproval comes too late. Political philosophy that is true to its intention—to understand and elevate political life—must first be *politically responsible* philosophy; that is, it must do no harm. The harm caused by Rousseau consisted in the impracticality of his seductively presented political project, an impracticality which, when attempted to be implemented, predictably led not to the improvement but to the transmutation of political life.

Although Bloom blames what he terms “Rousseau’s dangerous impracticality,” he acknowledges that Rousseau “could not be put aside as just another failure.” Why? “His articulation of the problem of democratic politics was just too potent” (p. 230). But “taking Rousseau seriously” need not entail our “despising and rejecting the regime of the U.S. Constitution” (p. 232). After all, that great friend of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, was also “one of the most serious of those thoughtful men influenced by Rousseau” (p. 230). But Tocqueville’s “very obvious Rousseauism is masked to contemporary eyes by his conservative admirers, who refuse to admit that he could have any connection with Rousseau, the leftist extremist” (pp. 232-233).

Perhaps Tocqueville’s most explicit debt to Rousseau is found in what today is viewed as a “conservative” position on the relation of the American federal government to the 50 states. Tocqueville was moved by Rousseau’s insistence on smallness. Tocqueville, in his most famous work, *Democracy in America* (1835/1969), “concentrated

on the importance of local self-government, which approximated the participation of the independent city, and saw the New England town as the real foundation of American freedom” (Bloom, 1987, p. 233).

Tocqueville sought to preserve political liberty in the face of modern democracy’s all-consuming “passion for equality.” By “liberty” here, he meant

more than what we term today, “negative liberty,” which is freedom from governmental interference. Liberty in its higher sense was political participation, engaging in what Aristotle terms, “ruling and being ruled in turn [or, in part]” (Aristotle, 1984).

But there are only 535 national legislators, 9 Supreme Court Justices, and one president and vice president; so, how are average citizens to receive the opportunity to develop their political capacities? The answer for Tocqueville is through participation at the local level. But participation at the local level requires that there be duties and projects of sufficient gravity to attract and then to ennoble the souls of participants in the local political process. And this gravity at the local level requires that the federal government not swallow up all meaningful tasks for itself. But this is precisely what has happened. The Civil War began a process of successive usurpations of powers and duties originally reserved to the states under the U.S. Constitution and continues to this day.

Political philosophy that is true to its intention—to understand and elevate political life—must first be *politically responsible* philosophy.

Hence, Tocqueville is identified today as a defender of federalism. But whereas federalism acquired a bad odor when the antebellum South attempted to transform it into “states’ rights,” and even “state nullification” of federal law—and all this in the service of preserving chattel slavery—Tocqueville’s intention is to restore some of the civic intimacy that has been lost with our adoption of a large representative democracy. Participation is an antidote to the “individualism” that Tocqueville saw as a threat to American democracy. By this Tocqueville is not referring to the “rugged individualism” that Americans see in the Old West. He means self-absorption, materialism, and a general retreat into oneself.

Following Rousseau, Tocqueville “also concentrated as liberals did not on the connectedness between man and woman and their offspring as constituting an intermediate community, a bridge between individual and society” (Bloom, 1987, p. 233). Again, and like Rousseau, Tocqueville attempts here to restore modern democratic man’s lost unity. Or, more precisely, Tocqueville attempts to *gently* reunite the individual with the political community. As we have seen, Rousseau’s project, as well as the powerful rhetoric he used to champion it, produced anything but gentleness, or political moderation, in political practice. Tocqueville’s project for modern democratic man is, like that of the American Founders, far more sober in its expectations. Such sobriety of expectations is indispensable to a moderate politics, as the success of the American Revolution and the failure of the French Revolution attest.

Hence, in the final count, argues Bloom, although “Rousseau’s specific projects were quickly exploded,” his appeal remains powerful for us, for he “concentrates not so much on what threatens life as on what makes life worth living” (p. 233).



Bloom’s account has helped us to better understand the anthropological foundations of Action/New Civics. Our question then becomes, “In which direction does the Action/New Civics agenda move—toward Tocqueville, or toward Robespierre?”

The answer, in my opinion, is that it is up to us to decide which direction this movement goes. And that decision will be based on what we deem desirable and possible in political life. Simply put, if we embrace Rousseau’s dismissal of representative democracy, this will necessarily lead us in the direction of what is termed “direct democracy,” which was practiced in the ancient Greek republics. However, as I will try to demonstrate next, the Action Civics movement’s rise reveals that we have lost the understanding of why America’s Founders went to such pains to dismantle forever the idea that direct democracy is more consistent with our natural freedom and equality than is representative democracy.

An example of the possible political consequences of such an ahistorical longing for ancient “unity” can be found in a recent *New York Times* op-ed titled, “Think the Constitution Will Save Us? Think Again,” to the examination of which I now turn.

Participation is an antidote to the individualism—by which Tocqueville means self-absorption, materialism, and a general retreat into oneself—that he saw as a threat to American democracy.

Consequences of our Loss of a Meaningful Sense of Who We Are: Presenting the U.S. Constitution as Designed to “Subvert Democracy”

In light of the above reflections, we now find ourselves in a better position to discern the full effects of the Action Civics agenda on our public discourse about the nature and recti-

tude of America’s representative democracy. To fulfill this task, I recur to an essay that previously appeared in *Forbes* (Lindsay, 2018), and which addresses the *New York Times*’s claims.

I begin by addressing the meaning of a survey finding that only 36 percent of Americans can identify the three branches of American government, with a mere 27 percent knowing that it takes a two-thirds majority of the House and Senate to override a presidential veto (Wilson, 2014).

This civic illiteracy, in my view, is not to be blamed on our students. They study what they are tested on. Unfortunately, U.S. Department of Education statistics testify that, today, only 1 in 3 students takes even one course in American government before graduating from college. This means 2 in every 3 students graduate without receiving any further instruction in American government at all. Why? Because a growing number of universities no longer require them to do so. Hence, our civic-knowledge deficit.

This deficit may help somewhat to explain the take of a recent *New York Times* op-ed titled, “Think the Constitution Will Save Us? Think Again,” by Meagan Day and Bhaskar Sunkara (2018), who write for the website *Jacobin*. Their sub-head conveys their thesis: “The subversion of democracy was the *explicit intent* [emphasis supplied] of the framers.”

As evidence for their contention, Day and Sunkara cite the federal character of the Electoral College and the U.S. Senate, both of which are based in part on statehood itself. These constitutional elements convince the writers that, “The American government is structured by an 18th-century text that is almost impossible to change” (para. 1).

To these charges, one can respond that the Constitution also provides for its own amendment—if and when a sufficient number of Americans comes to believe, with Day and Sunkara, that fundamental change is needed.

But the amendment provisions won't save us either, they counter. America's structure is “almost impossible to change” because the Constitution intentionally prevents it (Day & Sunkara, 2018, para. 1). For proof of this, they cite a fellow *Jacobin* contributor, Seth Ackerman, who argues that, unlike “most countries,” securing “an amendment to the U.S. Constitution requires the consent of no less than *thirty-nine [sic] different legislatures*” (quoted in Day & Sunkara, 2018, para. 5).

Thus, Day and Sunkara assert, “As long as we think of our Constitution as a sacred document, instead of an outdated relic, we'll have to deal with its anti-democratic consequences” (para. 6).

As evidence that the Constitution pans democracy, they point to the most famous of the 85 *Federalist* essays, *Number 10*, written by Madison. There, Madison wrote: “[D]emocracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property” (Hamilton et al., 1788/2003). To “subvert democracy,” Madison, write Day and Sunkara, “helped create ... a system of government that *rules over* [emphasis added] people, rather than an evolving tool of *popular* [emphasis added] self-government” (Day & Sunkara, 2018, para. 2, 2018).

Unfortunately, Day and Sunkara miss entirely the true meaning of Madison's critique of “democracy.” But they are far from alone in this failure. Such distortion of the Founders' intentions has a long pedigree, going back at least to the historian Charles Beard's 1913 broadside against the Constitution, titled, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*. A number of Beard's findings have been refuted by subsequent scholars, though his economic-determinist views largely dominate among college historians and other academics to this day.

In 1959, the late political scientist Martin Diamond offered the most exhaustive critique of the view that *The Federalist* is anti-democratic. In “*Democracy and The Federalist*,” Diamond demonstrates that when Madison critiques “democracy,” he is referring to a “pure” democracy, where all the citizens deliberate and vote on all matters, as was practiced in the small democracies of ancient Greece (Diamond, 1959, p. 53).

How does Diamond know this? Because, unlike Day and Sunkara, he read and reported to the reader what Day and Sunkara *left out*. Their half-quote promotes a half-truth by ignoring what precedes it in the *very paragraph from which they cite*—here's the whole quote: “From this view of the subject, it may be concluded that a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens,

who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction” (Hamilton et al., 1788/2003).

It is only then that Day and Sunkara's half-quote appears: “Hence it is that *such [pure] democracies* [emphasis supplied] have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention.” Madison is not rejecting “democracy” as such, but only “pure democracy.” He embraces instead the other species of popular government, a “republic.” A republic, for Madison, differs from a “democracy,” writes Diamond, “in that the people rule through representatives” (Diamond, 1959, p. 54). A republic is a democracy—a representative democracy.

With the true meaning of Madison's “critique of democracy” now restored, I suspect that Day and Sunkara—on reviewing the atrocities committed under the pure democracies of antiquity (anyone remembers Socrates's execution by

Action Civics' rise reveals that we have lost the understanding of why America's Founders went to such pains to dismantle the idea that direct democracy is more consistent with our natural freedom and equality than representative democracy.

democratic Athens?)—would wholeheartedly concur with Madison’s observation that these ancient, pure democracies “have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention.” Would not this condemnation properly apply with equal, if not more, force to the genocidal French Revolution—and to the Jacobins who supervised its atrocities, and after whom Day and Sunkara’s home website takes its name?

I will now address Day and Sunkara’s contention that the amendment process makes American government “almost impossible to change.”

The first response to this charge is simple: The Constitution has in fact been amended 27 times, most recently in 1992. This record hardly justifies the description, “almost impossible to change”—unless you think fundamental transformation of the country should come much sooner and easier than at present.

Madison didn’t think so. Here’s why: Under Article V of the Constitution, any proposed amendment must be ratified by three quarters of the states. The *Jacobin’s* Ackerman writes that this translates into 39 states. By my arithmetic, three quarters of 50 is 37.5. Thus, it is 38 states, not 39, that are needed to ratify an amendment, by my numbers. No matter, be it 38 or 39, what counts for the Constitution’s critics is that either number empowers a small minority of states (13) to kill any proposed amendment. For Day, Sunkara, and Ackerman, this barrier confirms their view that the Constitution is anti-democratic.

To this, Diamond rejoins that the amendment process “was not at all to give power to minorities, but to ensure that passage of an amendment would require a *nationally* distributed majority, though one that legally could consist of a bare numerical majority”; that is, bare majorities in 38 states can defeat supermajorities in the other 12 states ([p. 57](#)).

Ensuring passage of all amendments by nationally distributed majorities was deemed by the Founders to be indispensable to guaranteeing that “no amendment could be passed simply with the support of the few states or sections sufficiently numerous to provide a bare majority.” The Founders hoped and believed that it “would be difficult for such a national majority to form or become effective save for the decent purposes that could command national agreement” ([p. 57](#)).

Therefore, the difficulty in ratifying amendments “was surely deemed a great virtue of the amending process” ([p. 57](#)).

This is why those who deem the Constitution “anti-democratic” would do well to take seriously Madison’s appraisal of the amending process in *Federalist* 43: “It guards equally against that extreme facility [ease], which would render the Constitution too mutable; and that extreme difficulty, which might perpetuate its discovered faults.” Diamond summarizes Madison’s reasoning thus: “The actual method adopted, with respect to the numerical size of majorities, is meant to leave all legal power in the hands of ordinary [simple, not super-] majorities so long as they are *national* [emphasis supplied] majorities” ([p. 58](#)).

Even this thumbnail sketch of *The Federalist* is sufficient to suggest that perhaps the Constitution may not be the “outdated relic” Day and Sunkara believe it to be. At the least, our closer reading of *The Federalist* demonstrates that

the Constitution is decidedly pro-democracy, while anti-“pure democracy”—as history shows we should all be.

The power quickly to alter our country’s fundamental governing document should not be wished for. Making the amendment process “easier” promises only to transmogrify the “Supreme Law of the Land” into a partisan football.

Each time one side wins national elections, the Constitution would come to mean something new, which would then only be reversed or reoriented when the other side wins the next election. Is this not the very “turbulence and contention” about which Madison warned us?

After a few election cycles had produced a few more “constitutions,” what would be the effect of this new dynamic on American citizens? Lincoln told us in 1856: “Don’t interfere with anything in the Constitution. That must be maintained, for it is the only safeguard of our liberties” ([Lincoln, 1856](#)).

Lincoln also foresaw ([Lindsay, 2015](#)) the disastrous effects that would follow our failure to provide a serious civic education to succeeding generations. At the age of 29, in his speech to the Young Men’s Lyceum, he argued that the only antidote to democratic degeneration was to teach “reverence for the Constitution” in “schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs; let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in

Lincoln told us in 1856: “Don’t interfere with anything in the Constitution. That must be maintained, for it is the only safeguard of our liberties.”

legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice” ([Lincoln, 1838](#)).

If we fail to teach our young the Constitution, warned Lincoln, in time, the country will be vanquished by the growth of a lawless “mobocratic” spirit. To this we must add that, the mob rule feared by Lincoln is, sadly, the likely consequence of following Day and Sunkara’s mistaken reading of the Founders’ intentions regarding democracy.



To the above account it must be added that the ease with which the *New York Times* piece is debunked demonstrates just how debased popular presentations of our Founding principles have become. What the *Times* piece constitutes is a conclusion in search of arguments. But the arguments are not to be found in the Founding texts on which the piece purports to rely. Instead, it can advance its case only through the sloppiest sort of reasoning, together with taking quotes out of context or presenting only half of a quote in order to attempt to persuade citizens of what are only half-truths at best.

Such scholarship-impoverished, ideological projects travel a much surer path to power when the citizens on whom this new regime will be imposed know little about the intellectual, moral, and philosophical foundations of the American experiment in self-government. And, as seen from the surveys summarized above, Americans—through no fault of their own—are becoming just the civic illiterates who will more easily fall prey to falsehoods such as those perpetrated in the *New York Times* piece.

Most important for the objectives of this study, note the extent to which the *Times*’s critique of America’s representative form of democracy harmonizes with the criticisms of the Action/New Civics’ camp.

Summary and Conclusion: Whither Civic Education in the 21st Century?

The argument to incorporate project-based or experiential learning into civic education has some merits. We all recognize the benefits that come from political participation. Indeed, as we have seen, this is one of Alexis de Tocqueville’s chief praises of the American system of federalism, which gives everyday citizens the opportunity to develop their political capacities through participating

in the political space left open to them by the Constitution’s division of state and federal tasks and powers.

That said, project-based civic learning, with whatever title it takes for itself—Action Civics or New Civics—places too much stress on participation and too little on the acquisition of the knowledge of the fundamental political, philosophical, and moral principles undergirding the Constitution.

Action Civics is neither liberal education, nor genuine civic education; it is ideology. A genuine liberal education questions the unexamined assumptions that underpin every culture, including our own. In conformity with the Socratic assertion that gave rise to liberal education, “the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being” (Plato, 1998). Ideology, whether it comes from the political Right or Left, begins with assumptions about human nature and political justice that it takes for granted.

An example of such an anti-liberal-education mindset is found in Levinson’s assertion that “[d]emocratic governance relies on participatory citizens” (Levinson, 2012, p. 48). On its face, of course, who would contest the need for a self-governing people to acquire and perfect the skills and temperament required to govern themselves? But, sad to say, what is aimed at here is the “participatory democracy” alternative to the Founders’ project for a representative democracy. As we have seen, the case

advancing participatory democracy is most indebted to Rousseau.

Is Rousseau’s vision for democracy superior to the Founders’ vision? It is the job of civic education to examine these two alternatives critically and train students to think through the debate themselves, aided by guided examination of the seminal texts describing and defending both. But the Action Civics project presupposes the simple superiority of a more participatory model, which, even if true, constitutes not education per se, but well-meaning indoctrination.

Instead, a genuine civic education would juxtapose Rousseau’s, Levinson’s, and other defenses of participatory democracy with the Founders’ critique of it. For example, Hamilton, writing under the pseudonym “Publius,” in *Federalist* 9, examines and rejects the “pure” or “direct” democracies (which parallel Benjamin Barber’s “strong democracies”) of ancient Greece: “It is impossible to read the history of the petty republics of Greece and Italy without feeling sensations of horror and disgust at the distractions with which they were continually agitated, and at the rapid

Action Civics is neither liberal education, nor genuine civic education; it is ideology.

succession of revolutions by which they were kept in a state of perpetual vibration between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy” (Hamilton et al., 1788/2003). An informed citizenry needs to know both sides of this argument before it can plausibly claim that its “action” is “informed.”

Another example of the unexamined assumptions animating the Action Civics project is found in Generation Citizen’s effort to organize “a workshop to educate students about injustices in the school system, like inequitable funding” (cited above, as example 27 of the list of 27 Action Civics school projects). Again, this may be valid, as may be concerns over income inequality generally, and certainly need to be discussed. But to do so as part of a truly liberal education, the project should have presented a point-counterpoint approach to this issue. That is to say, in the case of economic inequality generally, Madison, in *Federalist 10*, argues that government protection of the human “faculties” is among its chief aims. But such protection of naturally unequal faculties, Madison acknowledges, cannot help but to produce “different degrees and kinds of property”—that is, income inequality. In sum, for the Founders, freedom of opportunity, when enjoyed by a multitude of citizens possessing different and varying degrees of productive capacities, will yield inequality. The only means by which to eradicate such inequality is to first eradicate individual freedom.

A genuine, robust civic education would invite students to compare and contrast Madison’s argument (that liberty gives rise to natural inequality) with critiques of income inequality. Instead, Action Civics begins with the unexamined assumption that income inequality is *prima facie* unjust. Again, this may be true, but it is the job of civic education to equip students to question and debate these principles. Action Civics fails to do this.

Having criticized the intellectual framework of this project, allow me briefly to suggest a half-dozen fundamental questions on which a truly effective civic education should focus. These questions should be the engine driving subsequent exercises in civic engagement. These questions are adapted from an essay of mine:

First, what is the meaning of human equality as articulated in the Declaration’s assertion that “all men are created equal”? Equal in what respects? What view of human nature does this presuppose? Does the Declaration mean to include African Americans, as

Abraham Lincoln, along with Frederick Douglass and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., insisted?

Second, what does the Declaration mean by asserting that we possess rights that are not “alienable”? Who or what, precisely, cannot alienate our rights? Are all rights deemed inalienable, or only some? And why?

Third, why does the Founding generation consider government just only when it is instituted by the consent of the governed? Is justice for the Founders merely consent-based? If not, what might trump consent?

Fourth, why did the Founders opt for representative democracy over the “pure” version of democracy practiced in ancient Athens? What did The Federalist (penned by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay) assert was the inadequacy of ancient democracy?

Fifth, how does the Constitution seek to reconcile democracy, which means rule by the majority, with the rights of minorities? Stated differently, how do we do justice both to the equality of all and to the liberty of each?

Sixth, and finally, what economic conditions make American democracy possible? Why does the Constitution protect property rights? Why do its critics, such as Marx, believe

private property to be the root of injustice? How would Madison and Hamilton have responded to Marx’s and his followers’ critique? (Lindsay, 2008)

Implicit in these questions are at least 10 fundamental documents and major speeches that every American citizen should study. The questions regarding the meaning of human equality, inalienable rights, popular consent, and the right of revolution clearly require an examination of the Declaration, along with Frederick Douglass’s “The Meaning of the Fourth of July to the Negro,” and Chief Justice Taney’s infamous opinion for the majority in the *Dred Scott* case (where Taney denies that African Americans have any rights that Whites are bound to respect). Against Taney, Frederick Douglass’s and Lincoln’s scathing critiques of the *Dred Scott* opinion need to be taught.

The Declaration also needs to be scrutinized in its relation to the pro-women’s suffrage, 1848 Seneca Falls “Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions,” and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered on the National Mall in 1963. Why did Elizabeth Cady

It is the job of civic education to equip students to question and debate these principles. Action Civics fails to do this.

Stanton look to the form and substance of the Declaration of Independence in crafting the Seneca Falls Declaration? What did the Reverend King mean by asserting that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution constituted a “promissory note to which every American was to fall heir”?

The Constitution, of course, must be taught to our students. As both critics and admirers of the Constitution agree, there is no more authoritative commentary on that document than *The Federalist*, the series of 85 newspaper essays defending and explaining the Constitution, written during the period that the states were debating its ratification. Specifically, the questions regarding representation, minority rights, and the economics of democracy require examination of the Constitution and *The Federalist*, along with Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt’s writings and speeches on economic democracy.

Finally, all students need to be introduced both to Tocqueville’s defense of democratic equality and to his concerns over the intellectual conformism to which American democracy lies exposed.

Needless to say, these questions are not exhaustive; others should be added. I provide an example of the syllabus I advocate in **Appendix I** (“Texas Public Policy Foundation Syllabus for Its Summer Institute for High School Civics Teachers”). These questions and the primary sources I’ve recommended *are* accessible to high-school students if they are guided by a knowledgeable instructor.

While the Action Civics’ defenders criticize “traditional civic education” for focusing too much on learning “*about* citizenship” but not about “*how* to actually engage as democratic citizens and why they should do it,” the Action Civics project’s cure is worse than the disease. For example, the project’s desire is to recraft civic education to create students who “seek out and address areas of *injustice*” ([Generation Citizen, 2020](#)). Suggesting that students should gain experience in justice seeking and in removing barriers to justice sounds a bit like those posters up and down campus hallways urging students to “get involved.” Instead, what I am urging is that what students should “get” is *understanding*. To press students to get down to the business of justice seeking is to presuppose that they know what justice is—which, again, transforms education into ideological indoctrination. The effect, if not the intention, of Action Civics is to turn everyone into “activists” without sufficiently addressing the question of what the qualifications are for activism.

In sum, while I, like all of us, want to see more civic engagement, such engagement, to promote our country’s twin ends of liberty and equality, must spring from a thoughtful

encounter with the intellectual core of American democracy. Action Civics fails to provide this indispensable foundation for civic action.

Policy Recommendations for Texas

Recommendation Regarding Higher Education

Texas public higher education is in the fortunate position of already requiring two college courses in American history. According to “Some Background on Texas’s U.S. History Requirement,” the Legislature imposed this requirement in 1955 and codified it into the Education Code in 1971. (See **Appendix III** for the full text of the law.)

To improve these courses, the Legislature should make explicit the spirit behind the 1955 law requiring these courses. That is, it should be made explicit in legislation that the courses are to be General Survey courses, not Special Topics classes. The latter are acceptable for students who have already fulfilled the Survey course requirements and want to go deeper into specific areas. But to replace this vitally needed general civic knowledge with limited expertise in a “special topics” area runs counter to the spirit of the 1955 legislation.

To see this, consider just how few students major in history today. According to a 2018 study conducted by the American Historical Association (AHA), since 2008, “of all the major disciplines, history has seen the steepest declines in the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded. . . . Even as university enrollments have grown, history has seen its raw numbers erode heavily. The drops have been especially heavy since 2011–12, the first years for which students who saw the financial crisis in action could easily change their majors” ([Schmidt, 2018, para. 1](#)).

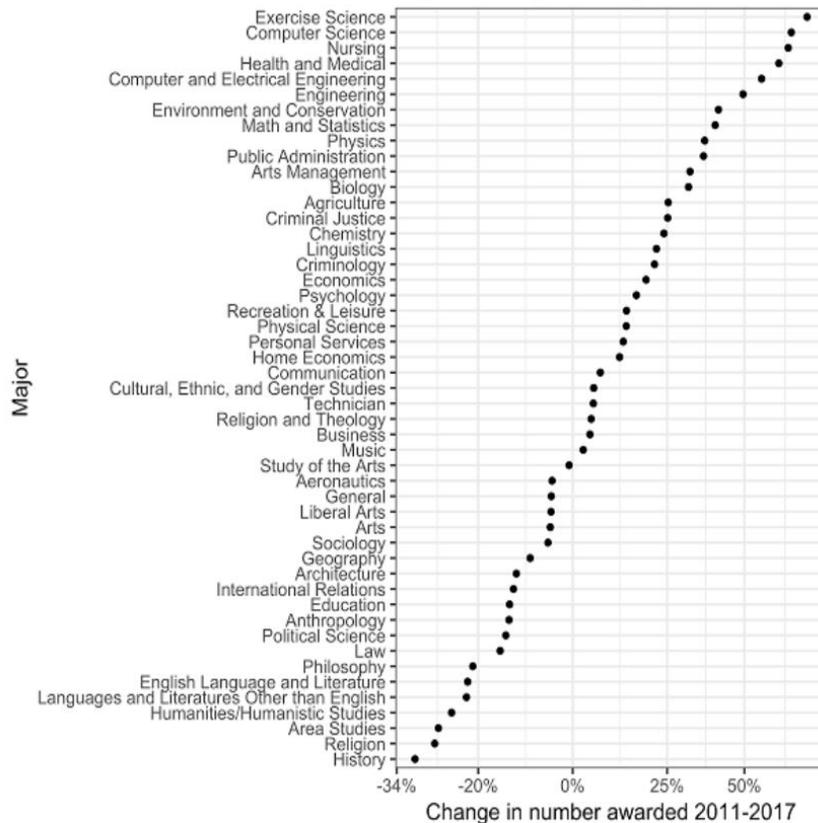
The AHA report provides **Figure 1**. As the graph demonstrates, the overwhelming majority of students do not major in history, and even this small number has been decreasing over the last 6 years. From the standpoint of pedagogy, this means that Texas’s two American history courses requirement must take account of the fact that these classes will be their students’ only “bite at the apple” of American history. For this group of laypersons, General Survey, not Special Topics, courses are the best educational approach.

Hence, the Texas Legislature should clarify its 1955 law, making explicit that its American history requirement can be fulfilled only through two General Survey courses in the subject.

Recommendations Regarding Texas K-12 Civic Education

I concur with NAS’s final three recommendations for improving K-12 civic education, discussed earlier:

Figure 1
Change in Degrees, 2011-2017



Sources: NCES IPEDS data; taxonomy adapted from American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Note. From *The History BA Since the Great Recession*, by B. M. Schmidt, American Historical Association, November 26, 2018 (<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2018/the-history-ba-since-the-great-recession-the-2018-aha-majors-report>).

- Establish a public body to set the guidelines for the required civics course, which should at a minimum teach the history, nature, and functions of our institutions of self-government, and which should aim to foster commitment to our form of self-government. The public body should also be charged with reviewing and approving civics textbooks to be used in these courses.
- Require that the traditional civics requirement be met only through classroom instruction. Service learning, civic engagement, or analogous extra-curricular activities will not be accepted as a substitute, supplement, or alternative.
- End funding for service-learning and civic engagement programs and bureaucracies (p. 10).

I earlier stated my reasons for agreeing that service learning, civic engagement, or analogous extra-curricular activities should not be accepted as satisfying course and graduation requirements. Until and unless students regain needed knowledge of content, any time taken for “doing civics” must only subtract from needed time to learn *how what they plan on doing draws from, contradicts, or ignores the “Supreme Law of the Land,” the U.S. Constitution.*

I would add to NAS’s K-12 civics recommendations another: If the Legislature decides not to exclude from credit service learning, civic engagement, or analogous extra-curricular activities, it should enact legislation making clear that a Founding-documents-based agenda is in the charioteer, with “action” or projects composing the horses. It should be made incumbent on schools to demonstrate that (a) they have first remedied the civic-knowledge gap, and that (b) their proposed “doing civics” projects spring and take their ultimate guidance from the primacy of understanding our country’s core principles.

The primacy of understanding flows from the nature of the American regime as founded. The Declaration of Independence submitted its argument for American independence “to a candid world,” for the Founders mindful of the fact that “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.” That is, the Founders invited the world to examine their case for liberty and equality, confident that they would win this debate.

A genuine civic education in America would, at the very least, instruct students in the arguments that established their country, which is the indispensable condition of any subsequent, thoughtful debate about the merits and demerits of these arguments. Civic education should be neither a thoughtless condemnation nor a thoughtless celebration of America.

It should and must be a cerebration—a “thinking through”—as the Founders requested. ★

Appendix I: Texas Public Policy Foundation's Summer Institute for K-12 Civics Teachers
Sample Course Syllabus: Summer Civics Institute Texas Public Policy Foundation
 901 Congress Ave., Austin, Texas

Reading and Discussion Schedule

(Unless otherwise indicated, all pg. references are to *Investigating American Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2012) [hereafter: *IAD*])

Monday (4.5 hours CPE): Welcome to Institute Scholars

12:00 – 1:30: Lunchtime keynote lecture (speaker TBA)

CPE: 1.5 hours

1:45 – 3:15: “What is the American “Theory of Justice”

- *Reading:* The Declaration of Independence (Jefferson’s draft plus the approved version).
- “Draft” excerpt is on page 6 of this document. Approved version, pp. 281-284, **IAD**.

CPE: 1.5 hours

3:30 – 5:00: “The ‘House Divided’ – What the battle over slavery reveals about America’s core principles”

Readings:

Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Query XVIII) 1784, pp. 28-30, **IAD**

Frederick Douglass, “The Meaning of the Fourth of July for the Negro” (1852), pp. 30-38, **IAD**.

Alexander Stephens, “Cornerstone Speech” (1861), pp. 38-43, **IAD**.

Abraham Lincoln “Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg” (Gettysburg Address) (1863), p. 44, **IAD**.

CPE: 1.5 hours

Tuesday (7.25 hours CPE): A Nation of States

9:00 – 10:30: “Was America founded as a democracy or a republic?”

Readings: *Federalist* 10, 39, pp. 8-15, **IAD**.

CPE: 1.5 hours

10:45 – 12:15: “The Founders’ debate over ‘small’ vs. ‘large’ democracy, and why it still matters today.”

Readings: *Federalist* 10 versus *Brutus I* and *Centinel I*, pp. 75-85, **IAD**.

CPE: 1.5 hours

12:30 – 1:30: Lunchtime keynote lecture (speaker TBA)

CPE: 1 hour

1:45 – 3:15: “Federalism”

Readings: Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, “Advantages of the federal system,” pp. 104-107, **IAD**.

CPE: 1.5 hours

3:30 – 5:15: **End-of-daily-class breakout sessions:**

- The class will be divided into four breakout groups, whose members will discuss how to render the day’s content and discussion accessible to the particular grade each in the group teaches.
- These three-daily end-of-the-day meetings (Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday) will culminate with Friday’s session, which will be devoted wholly to group presentations of the Fellows’ grade-specific lesson plans for the course material.

- Each group will choose a different person each day to craft a poster-size Post-It note for his/her summary of the presentation. These will be presented to the whole class on Friday.

CPE: 1.75 hours

Wednesday (7.25 hours CPE): Leading Characteristics of American Democracy

- 9:00 – 10:30:**
- “Agrarian or industrial democracy?”
Readings:
Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* versus Alexander Hamilton’s “Report on Manufactures,” pp. 99-102, **IAD**.
 - “What is democratic representation meant to accomplish?”
Readings:
Alexander Hamilton, Publius Letter III, “On the Character of the Legislator” (1784); pp. 158-159, **IAD**.
Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*: Chapters titled “Why It Can Wstrictly Be Said That the People Govern in the United States” and “Parties in the United States,” pp. 159-163, **IAD**.
 - “Should representation take account of individuals, groups, or both?”
Readings:
Robert Goldwin’s *Why Blacks, Women, and Jews Are Not Mentioned in the Constitution* versus Lani Guinier’s *Groups, Representation, and Race-Conscious Districting*, pp. 174-179, and pp. 183-190, **IAD**.

CPE: 1.5 hours

- 10:45 – 12:15:**
- “Why does American democracy separate the powers of government?”
Readings:
Federalist 47, 48, 51, pp. 201-211, **IAD**.
 - “How does separation of powers aim to secure liberty?”
Reading: *Federalist* 51, pp. 208-211, **IAD**.
 - “How and why does separation of powers aim to make possible an ‘energetic’ president who is ‘independent’ of the legislature?”
Readings:
Federalist 37, *Federalist* 70, pp. 212-218, **IAD**.
Franklin D. Roosevelt “Interview by Arthur Krock” (1937), pp. 219-222, **IAD**.
Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, “How American Democracy Conducts the External Affairs of the State,” pp. 223-225, **IAD**.
 - “How and why does separation of powers aim to make possible an independent judiciary?”
Readings:
Federalist 78 versus Thomas Jefferson, “Against Judicial Supremacy in Constitutional Interpretation,” pp. 225-231, **IAD**.

CPE: 1.5 hours

- 12:30 – 1:30:** Lunchtime keynote lecture (speaker TBA)

Our Persistent Debates over Religion, Citizenship, and Law—What They Reveal About the Soul of American Democracy, Part One

CPE: 1 hour

- 1:45 – 3:15:**
- “How can religion be understood to be a ‘political institution’ in American democracy?”
Readings:
George Washington, “Farewell Address” (1796), pp. 240-245, **IAD**.
Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, “On Religion as a Political Institution” (1835), pp. 246-253, **IAD**.

- “How can religion be understood to be a political problem for American democracy?”

Readings:

Thomas Jefferson, “A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom” (1786), pp. 253-255, **IAD**.

Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to Nehemiah Dodge and Others: A Committee of the Danbury Baptist Association, in the State of Connecticut” (1802), pp. 255-256, **IAD**.

Justice Hugo Black, opinion of the Court in *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947), pp. 256- 262, **IAD**.

CPE: 1.5 hours

3:15 – 5:00: End-of-daily-class breakout sessions:

- The class will be divided into four breakout groups, whose members will discuss how to render the day’s content and discussion accessible to the particular grade each in the group teaches.
- These three daily end-of-the-day meetings (Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday) will culminate with Friday’s session, which will be devoted wholly to group presentations of the Fellows’ grade-specific lesson plans for the course material.
- Each group will choose a different person each day to craft a poster-size Post-It-Note for his/her summary of the presentation. These will be presented to the whole class on Friday.

CPE: 1.75 hours

Thursday (7.25 hours CPE): Our Persistent Debates Over Religion, Citizenship, Law, and Equality—What They Reveal About the Soul of American Democracy, Part Two

9:00 – 10:30: “Citizenship: What makes one an American?”

Reading:

14th Amendment, pp. 266-267, **IAD**.

Lincoln’s speech in reply to Douglas at Chicago (1858), pp. 267-269, **IAD**.

Steven A. Douglas from the fifth joint debate with Lincoln (1858), pp. 270-272, **IAD**.

Lincoln’s reply to Douglass at the fifth joint debate (1858), pp. 272-274, **IAD**.

Taney’s opinion for the court in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), pp. 274-280, **IAD**.

CPE: 1.5 hours

10:45 –12:15: The Status of Law Under American Principles

- “Is lawlessness built into the very foundations of American political life?”

Readings:

Declaration of Independence, pp. 281-284, **IAD**.

- “What is law-abidingness in the American context?”

Readings:

Lincoln’s speech on the *Dred Scott* decision, pp. 284-286, **IAD**.

Frederick Douglass, “On the *Dred Scott* Decision,” pp. 286-291, **IAD**.

- “Why should we obey the law?”

Topic four: Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*; Chapter: “Respect for Law in the United States,” pp. 291-292, **IAD**.

Lincoln, “The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions” (1838), pp. 292-297, **IAD**.

- “The case for civil disobedience”

Reading: Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), pp. 298-307, **IAD**.

CPE: 1.5 hours

12:15 – 1:15: Lunchtime keynote lecture (speaker TBA)

CPE: 1 hour

1:30 – 3:00: Sexual Equality

- “Does the Declaration of Independence provide a principled basis for the equal rights of women?”
Reading: “The Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions” (1848), pp. 128-130, **IAD.**
- “Jane Addams’s argument for the practical benefits of extending the franchise”
Reading: Jane Addams, “Why Women Should Vote” (1910), pp. 130-133, **IAD.**
- “Why did an earlier Supreme Court deny that the 14th Amendment extends the vote to women?”
Readings: Chief Justice Morrison Waite, opinion of the court in *Minor v. Happersett* (1875), pp. 133-135, **IAD.**
19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1920), p. 135, **IAD.**

*CPE: 1.5 hours***3:15 – 5:00:** **End-of-daily-class breakout sessions:**

- The class will be divided into four breakout groups, whose members will discuss how to render the day’s content and discussion accessible to the particular grade each in the group teaches.
- These three daily end-of-the-day meetings (Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday) will culminate with Friday’s session, which will be devoted wholly to group presentations of the Fellows’ grade-specific lesson plans for the course material.
- Each group will choose a different person each day to craft a poster-size Post-It-Note for his/her summary of the presentation. These will be presented to the whole class on Friday.

*CPE: 1.75 hours***Friday (3.75 hours CPE)****9:00 – 10:00: Breakout Session***CPE: 1 hour*

10:15 – 12:00: Four 25-minute presentations by the four breakout groups on how to teach the above material in a grade-appropriate manner.

CPE: 1.75 hours

12:15 – 1:15: Lunch keynote lecture (speaker TBA)

*CPE: 1 hour***TOTAL CPE HOURS: 30**

Excerpt from Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration of Independence (Full first draft can be found at <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/rough.html>.)

he has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it’s most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them to slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportations thither. this piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain determining to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold this ^ excrable commerce and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distiguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms against us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.

Appendix II: 27 Projects Listed on Generation Citizen's and its Allies' Websites

1. ['Civic Action' projects put Ledyard sophomores on the path to changing policy](#)

"Ledyard — It's a rare opportunity for anyone to chat face to face with his or her state representative about raising the minimum wage, or the police chief about putting body cameras on officers.

"Ledyard High School sophomores got the chance on Friday through the third annual 'Civic Action' roundtable to get feedback on their ideas about changing policy — and learn what to do next.

"In previous years, students have worked on successful projects that ranged from cutting down on waste by bringing bottle-refilling water fountains to the high school, to a project that used Title IX to ensure the high school's softball field is properly maintained."

2. [Climate change summit teaches students what's at stake](#)

"College and high school students from Houston, Pearland, Bellaire, Katy and elsewhere heard about governmental efforts aimed at combating climate change, including the Green New Deal, a congressional resolution that sets goals for tackling climate change, and the city of Houston's own climate action plan.

"I hear a lot about climate change nationally, but I've never really heard about how it affects Houston," Janelle Barnett, a senior at DeBakey High School for Health Professions, said.

"Barnett is part of a civic action project in her Advanced Placement government class and she attended the youth summit in hopes of sharing some of what she learned with her classmates."

3. [Lexie Tesch: Student Changemaker](#)

"When Willard Middle School 8th grader Lexie Tesch and her classmates chose to challenge youth and LGBTQ+ homelessness in Berkeley by advocating for funding for the city's first year-round youth shelter, they realized that in order for things to get better in their community, they had a big role to play. The class' goal was to persuade Berkeley City Councilmember Jesse Arreguin, who represents the Downtown Berkeley area, to pass a resolution to fund a year-round youth homeless shelter."

4. [John De Vito, New York University: Democracy Coach Alumni](#)

"In Fall 2015, Generation Citizen alumnus and former NYU Chapter Director John De Vito launched a campaign to run for office as the Democratic Candidate for the New York State Senate's 3rd District. At 25 years old, John is an advocate for getting young people involved in the Democratic [sic] process at a local and national level. During his time at NYU, John served as a Democracy Coach in an 8th grade classroom at the Mott Hall School in Harlem. There, he empowered his students to organize and execute a 'Sustainable Living Curriculum' that those students taught to their 6th grade peers and presented to their Assembly Member. John credits his decision to run, in part, to his experience with Generation Citizen."

5. [Safiya Alsamarrai: Student Changemaker](#)

"Safiya Alsamarrai was the recipient of the 2018 MA Student Changemaker Award. Safiya was a student at Lowell High School and a student in the class that received the Overall Civics Day Award. She gave the following speech at the Spring 2018 Massachusetts Civics Day. Safiya was an inspiring leader in her class, convincing her peers to take on two related goals instead of compromising on one. Her class focused on Gun Violence in their community finding the ack of gun holder prevention for individuals that indicate dangerous behavior to be a root cause. The class advocated to continue the Lowell Gun Buyback Program in Lowell and petition our representatives to pass the 'Red Flag Bill' (H.3610)."

6. [Using lessons from civics class to help Oklahoma teachers do more than just walk out](#)

“From Altus to Miami, Oklahoma, teachers are considering a walkout to force the state legislature’s hand on teacher pay raises. Oklahoma pay wages are among the lowest in the country and many teachers have to work second and third jobs to support themselves and their families. While striking, a long-time tactic for civic leverage, may seem intuitive, without a collective goal to solve a systemic root cause and targeting the person or group of people who can make the policy change, a teacher walkout will fall on deaf ears.

“Action Civics, a curriculum being integrated in public schools across Oklahoma, is used across the country to promote project-based civics education. ...

“Such a structure can help any group working to collectively change a policy or a budget, and teachers in Oklahoma deserve to have access to it to strengthen their approach as they strike for a fair wage.”

7. [To Educate Good Citizens, We Need More Than The ‘New’ Civics](#)

“Action Civics turns traditional civics upside down,’ one activist in the movement has explained. ‘Instead of starting at the top with the Constitution and how a bill becomes a law, our hands-on teaching starts with a community or personal issue and works up through local government and politics and then to the federal system.’

“Students are encouraged to identify an issue they care deeply about and perhaps know from personal experience. One description of YPAR gives as examples ‘issues of oppression’ like ‘Islamophobia in America’ and ‘Black girls’ experience in the school-to-prison pipeline.’ In Korby’s book, a class with many immigrant students decides to work on making it easier for undocumented people to get drivers’ licenses. Research is supposed to be involved, but the key element is action—perhaps lobbying or protesting.”

8. [Strengthening Democracy with a Modern Civics Education](#)

“In addition to YPAR, students can utilize another form of civic engagement: activism through protest. For decades, youth-led political activism in the United States has garnered social change. From the Freedom Riders protesting segregation policies in the early 1960s to Vietnam War protestors in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to anti-apartheid protesters in Los Angeles in the 1980s, youth civic engagement illuminates vital political issues. This is especially true for youth of color, who have been at the forefront of activism despite limited access to civics education and formalized civic engagement opportunities. Before the 2018 midterm elections, hundreds of thousands of students gathered across the country to elevate the need for gun violence prevention legislation through the March for Our Lives. In 2019, millions of young people in the United States and around the world gathered for the Youth Climate Strike to advocate for governmental action to address the climate crisis through both executive action and legislation, focused on eliminating fossil fuel use, reducing national and global greenhouse gas emissions, increasing K-12 education on climate change, and more.”

9. [Student-led initiatives tie civic action, advocacy to social studies lessons](#)

“On March 14, 2018, many students at a Massachusetts middle school participated in a [walkout to protest gun violence](#) in schools. Some teachers, including Dinah Mack, founder of the Youth Activism 101 blog, connected this walk-out with her classroom lessons on the history of protests. Finding topics students relate to, such as gun violence, can help them find common ground with historic movements, deepening their understanding of lessons.”

10. [Educators push for more diverse voices in the young and energized electorate](#)

“Student activism is on the rise, and young voters are both expanding as a bloc and mobilizing to demand action from the politicians of 2020. ...

“Educators at a CivXNow coalition convening last year realized that ‘we’re missing people of color, we’re missing rural communities, we’re missing student voices,’ Coleman-Mortley says. Both the in-person youth fellowship and the online youth network set out to remedy that by inviting students to weigh in. ...

“Like their adult counterparts, the young people agitating for change are not immune from accusations that voices of color are being left out or silenced. When students at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., sparked a nationwide movement of school walkouts over gun violence, some credited the state’s comprehensive civics education mandates. But others bemoaned the news media’s failure to report on the black youth resistance movements that had preceded Parkland.”

11. [Our Civics Duty](#)

“Moe points to the district’s Project Soapbox as a good example of action civics. Students have to come up with a two-minute speech that includes a call to action. In the 2019 contest, about 1,800 students participated in their classrooms, addressing such topics as mental illness, racism, the environment and perceptions about women. Later at the Overture Center, 115 students read their essays at a district-wide event. ‘It was really good and powerful,’ says Moe. ‘Students liked adults listening to their voice.’”

12. [Pre-Registering 16- and 17-Year-Olds to Vote the Focus of Second Annual City ‘Civics Week’](#)

“After a new law passed last year to allow it, the city focused this year’s Civics Week on pre-registering 16- and 17-year-olds to vote, beginning with such a voter registration drive for high school students at William Cullen Bryant High School in Long Island City, Queens, on Monday March 2.”

13. [Constitutional Rights Foundation – Civic Action Project – Student Action](#)

Features examples of Student Action Projects from “Crime and Safety” and “Environment” to “Health” and “Social Justice.”

In their “[Immigration](#)” section, students wrote a letter to President Obama regarding the Dream Act, while the “[Environment](#)” section features projects on “Climate Change” and making reusable bags a “common place.”

14. [Civics Project Guidebook: Guidance to support implementation of Chapter 296 of the Acts of 2018, An Act to promote and enhance civic engagement. October 2019](#)

“Students at a middle school in Lynn created a goal of increasing the number of social workers at all schools across their district in order to improve student mental health throughout their city. Through their research, they found that the ideal clinical ratio of students to social workers in a school is 250:1. The ratio in their middle school was 1400:1. They scheduled a meeting with their superintendent during which they shared their research, argued their case, and made their request: enough money in the school budget to increase the number of social workers at each school in Lynn by a minimum of 1. The superintendent did some quick math, and delivered some unfortunate news: that ask was simply too expensive to put in the budget this year. He provided an excellent explanation of the challenges and tensions of creating a budget, and then made them a promise. He promised that his budget would include a radical increase in funding for student mental health, including a number of social workers (though not quite enough for one per school), and that he would do so every year until they reached the clinical ideal. Hopefully by the time they, currently in the 8th grade, graduated from high school, they would be there. Sure enough, his ambitious budget does include funding for more social workers, and the local paper has made a point of highlighting this fact...”

“Eighth grade students at a school in Lowell were discussing substance abuse as a potential issue to tackle in their civics project, given the vaping ads that targeted them on social media (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat). This issue resonated with the entire class, and so they took on an ambitious goal of proposing new e-cigarette and vaping legislation at the state level. The class spent months on research and outreach to file a bill limiting the sale of flavored vaping products state-wide to adult-only stores. Never relenting, the students continued to work on their project into the spring even beyond the formal end of the program—and their commitment paid off. With the help of a state legislator, legislation based on this project, HD.1484, officially arrived at the MA State House in late April.”

Some ideas for civic action projects in the paper are listed below:

“Bullying:

- Amend school policy to create an anonymous reporting form for instances of bullying.

- Advocate for inclusion of content related to bullying, cyberbullying, prevention, and response in the mandatory middle school curriculum.

“Climate Change/Environment:

- Advocate for solar energy sites throughout the city.
- Advocate for building code policy that addresses carbon emissions.
- Pass a city ordinance to eliminate plastic bags.

“Homelessness:

- Support homeless shelters in the area by advocating for the coordination of donations from local supermarkets and restaurants throughout the city.
- Advocate for more of district budget to be allocated towards cold weather materials for students in need.
- Advocate for the passage of S.2043: An Act to provide identification to homeless youth and families.
- Increase funding for job training centers in the city.”

15. [‘Action Civics’ Enlists Students in Hands-On Democracy](#)

“The 8th graders in a civics class in Oklahoma may be too young to vote, but they’ve learned how to bring about change in their government anyway. Because of their work, lawmakers in the state Capitol are considering a bill that would require schools to provide students with accurate information about HIV and AIDS. ...

“The name of this instructional model—‘action civics’—signals its mission: not only to teach students how their government works but to harness that knowledge to launch them into collective action on issues they care about. And its lofty goal is to revitalize democracy with a new generation of informed, engaged citizens.

“Using the action-civics approach recently, middle school students in Anaheim, Calif., researched the water quality in their drinking fountains and persuaded their principal to install new filtration systems in an upcoming school renovation. ...

“In Del City, Okla., the HIV-education bill got its start last fall in the classroom of Aaron Baker, who had begun using an action-civics curriculum designed by Generation Citizen, which works with schools in six states. The process began with his civics class weighing dozens of social issues to see what they cared most about.

“The class decided to focus on LGBTQ issues.”

16. [Civic Participation Begins in Schools](#)

“As an example, students in the Generation Citizen program in New York City recently responded to the debate around monuments by taking a proactive approach of lobbying the city to build memorials dedicated to African-American abolitionists. The students studied historical movements, noted the lack of representation in monuments throughout New York City, and met with the Mayor’s office to plan next steps. An education that included Action Civics provided an opportunity for them to experience citizenship in their community, while also understanding the shared history of the abolitionist movement. As a result, and most importantly, the students became excited about their coursework. Education, and democracy, were not abstract concepts to them but real issues that they were helping to mold, shape, and change. ...

“Earth Force is an organization that integrates real-world science problems with civic problem solving. As an example of one type of activity, through a partnership between government agencies, business, schools, and local parks, students explore the root causes of stormwater runoff in their neighborhoods and develop sustainable solutions. In another partnership with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, students monitor water quality and watershed health, and use the data to educate fellow citizens and inform decision-makers about the condition of Colorado’s water. ...

“Recent Lowell classes have focused on gun control by working with the police department to create a gun buy-back program and founding a food pantry within the school to support students who were coming to school hungry.”

17. [They're a Blue Tidal Wave—If They Vote](#)

"I was steered to Brianna's class by Generation Citizen, a decade-old group that has developed an 'action civics' curriculum being used in eight urban public-school systems across the country, mainly serving students of color. 'Our job is to teach them that politics isn't a dirty word. And that they have the power to make change,' says DeNora Getachew, executive director of New York City's Generation Citizen.

"In the GC program, students in a social studies, government, or history class spend a semester choosing among themselves an issue they want to tackle, then figuring out how to make their case and whom to lobby—be it a principal, school board member, city councilman, state legislator, or member of Congress. The issues run the gamut from small bore (dress codes, cellphone bans, cafeteria food) to big ticket (gentrification, mass incarceration, gun violence). ...

"Lee's classroom is a shrine to the civil rights movement. Its walls are covered with pictures of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks, along with iconic photos of the marchers at the bridge in Selma and the protestors at the lunch counter in Greensboro. Other wall hangings evoke more-recent struggles. One poster displays the hashtag '#NoBanNoWall.' Another depicts the Statue of Liberty with a caption, 'I'm with Her.' Another offers guidance about 'How to Stop Fake News,' advising: 'Be Skeptical. Verify. Look for Other Clues. Get Help.' ...

"A few weeks later, the students began giving their talks in class (eventually some would go on to a citywide Soapbox competition). Relatively few presentations covered topics that fell into the orbit of politics, government, or civics. A good many were about sexual stereotypes and mores, not surprising given today's turmoil in gender relations.

"Jassmyn took on 'slut shaming.' She wanted to know why teenage boys are treated 'as heroes and gods for having multiple sex partners,' while girls are treated 'like sluts and ho's ... for wearing clothes that show off their bodies and their self-confidence.' Jayla railed against the 'Angry Black Woman' trope by calling on her female classmates to 'get loud. Take back the word 'angry.' Be the change you want to see.' Marquis delivered a riff on 'black masculinity' that poked fun at his friends for wearing their pants below their butts and buying designer brands they can't afford, all in an effort, he said, to mask their insecurity. 'I love to party and I dress to impress,' he concluded, 'but I buy my clothes at Walmart.'

"Other topics ranged across a varied landscape—from the school-to-prison pipeline to the scarcity of mental-health services to the overuse of antibiotics on farm animals. All got boisterous receptions from the class. 'You have incredibly beautiful ideas about the way the world should be,' Lee told them. 'And what chokes me up is the way you care for each other.'

"The educators and social entrepreneurs leading the action civics movement believe that things are ripe for a turn-around. 'I sort of joke that Trump is the best thing that's happened to my course,' said Lee. 'I used to get eye rolls when I told people what I did,' said Scott Warren, who launched Generation Citizen from his dorm room at Brown University a decade ago. 'Now people can't wait to tell me how important this work is.' ...

"In a country that has historically oppressed people who are not white, acknowledging this real history is crucial in cultivating an effective civics education,' he says.

"How does that approach play out in the classroom? 'Nobody is on a pedestal,' Karen Lee says about the way she teaches the American Revolution and the U.S. Constitution. 'Basically, we look at the founding fathers as wealthy white men, slaveholders, who were out to protect their own economic interests.'"

18. [Students Swarm the Capitol Grounds to Protest Climate Change](#)

"Hundreds of students rallied at the U.S. Capitol building today calling on lawmakers to take quick steps to curb climate change, as thousands of other U.S. students held their own rallies in nearly every state.

"'We Don't Want to Die,' read a banner students unfurled moments before beginning a program of speakers, chants, and reminders to write and lobby legislators to pass a version of the Green New Deal, a controversial platform that couples economic projects with a timeline for winding down fossil fuel consumption."

19. [Civics education: Make it your school district's priority](#)

“Within the St. Louis Public Schools (SLPS), students have engaged in action civics in various ways during the past few years. SLPS students used design thinking strategies, which mirrors the action civics process, to address homelessness, food deserts, and school space re-utilization. Other SLPS schools have developed social justice organizations that work on cultivating peaceful resolutions to disputes and encouraging greater cooperation between the police and the community. Programs revolving around empathy and trauma-informed teaching have also been a part of the district's response to issues within the community.”

20. [Action Civics in the Classroom](#)

“Youth organizers from the HSTF, for example, have successfully organized to get a youth center constructed next to a notoriously unsafe housing project, implement a pilot civics curriculum in Boston public high schools, and develop an action plan to improve relations between public transportation police and youths. Furthermore, as these examples demonstrate, these organizations and the civic engagement they foster build on students' strengths. Students are positioned as knowledgeable insiders whose insights enable them to make a positive contribution as effective and powerful agents of change. This approach stands in stark contrast—especially for low-income youth of color—to their traditional positioning as bundles of deficits who traumatize the community via academic failure, idleness, and even criminal delinquency. Brian Schultz, for example, has vividly described work he conducted as a teacher with fifth graders at a public school next to Chicago's Cabrini Green housing project, in which they used action civics techniques to try to replace their crumbling, bullet-hole pockmarked building. Students at Cesar Chavez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy in Washington, D.C., complete interdisciplinary freshman and sophomore 'capstone projects,' a three-week junior year public policy internship, and year-long senior project focused on making 'this world a better place by influencing the public policies that affect their communities.' First Amendment Schools and Big Picture Schools also demonstrate potential. The best action civics educators help students make sense of their experiences within a critical frame. They challenge students to take on a social justice orientation in reflecting upon their lived experiences and the actions they propose to take. They teach media literacy, power analysis, feminist perspectives, and similar critical stances to help young people rethink what is 'normal' or acceptable about both the lives they lead and the changes they would like to bring about.”

21. [How Civic Engagement and Activism Begin in the Classroom](#)

“During my junior year, students were allowed to leave their classes and gather outside for the 17 minutes of silence that commemorated the lives lost in the [Stoneman Douglas shooting](#). Toward the end of the year, our school held a voter registration drive so that students who were old enough could register to vote. Our ACLU club was even allowed to organize a three-day Washington D.C. Youth Civil Rights Summit. They brought in ACLU lawyers and keynote speakers to teach the attending high school students from schools all over D.C. about the work of the ACLU, social justice issues, and their rights as Americans.

“Now that I'm a senior, I have discovered the importance of staying knowledgeable on current events and advocating for issues that I care about, thanks to the culture of my school. Unfortunately, not every student attends a school that emphasizes the importance of civics education.”

22. [To Teach Civic Engagement, Put Students Into Action, Advocates Say](#)

“Summers, a former teacher, recounted the experience at a recent Education Writers Association seminar in New Orleans where journalists explored the role of schools in promoting character and civic engagement.

“We are doing all core four (subjects), plus we are adding in civics,” Summers said of the activity. “The kids are like, “This isn't school,” But yeah guys, this is school and this is what it means to do school in a way that really impacts the community.’ ...

“In New Orleans, where climate change has led to the erosion of land around the Mississippi River Delta, New Harmony High plans to focus on coastal restoration and preservation.

“Students will participate in hands-on lessons that not only educate, but also inspire community engagement, Summers said.

“Like all other public high schools, students at New Harmony High will be required to master core content for graduation and parents will expect students to be set up for college or a career. But, according to Summers, the real value of the new school will be the future impact its students have on their community.”

23. [Civic engagement versus civic education](#)

“A new policy that the school board [Montgomery County, Maryland] is expected to ratify in early January that, according to the Washington Post, will ‘allow public high school students to take as many as three excused absences a year to participate in political protests and other forms of ‘civic engagement’ during the school day.’”

24. [Action Civics LA empowers young generation to participate in local communities](#)

“On April 24, Action Civics LA hosted their 3rd annual Action Civics Showcase, an event in which students displayed projects they had created that provided their own take on solutions regarding communal and national concerns. Taking place in the Bradley Tower Room at Los Angeles City Hall, this showcase featured students from multiple high schools including Responsible Indigenous Social Entrepreneurship (RISE) School, Community Health Advocates School (CHAS), Social Justice Humanitas Academy, Mendez High School, and Alliance Patti and Peter Neuwirth Leadership Academy. ...

“The work presented by these students emulated a passion and drive for making a difference in our society. Projects ranged from that of social justice — gun reform, helping the homeless, and immigration — to general advocacy for a multitude of other issues — obesity, mental health, the environment.

“It was hard at first creating momentum for our project because not many people wanted to speak up or saw the importance of it,’ Social Justice Humanitas Academy senior Samantha Gonzalez said, ‘but to be able to make it to this showcase and see our project come to life has made the struggle worth it.’

“Gonzalez and her group created a project revolving around undocumented immigrants and the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy. Personally impacted by President Donald Trump’s decision to phase out DACA, this group decided to create awareness for the problem by sharing stories of undocumented teenagers.”

25. [Teens press for climate change task force](#)

“A Yukon Kuskokwim Delta teen travelled to Juneau over his spring break to be part of the annual Alaska Youth for Environmental Action Civics and Conservation Summit. He and 21 others took their activism straight to the capitol building to ask Governor Bill Walker to create a climate change task force.

“Joseph Phillips entered the program with one goal: help his community battle climate change. It wasn’t until just last year that he realized that this was an issue, but he says winters are getting warmer and in the summer there aren’t enough berries to go around. He says it’s hurting his people’s way of life.”

26. [Youth protesting racism are the civic educators the nation needs](#)

“Young people participating in protests are not uninformed civic participants. Instead, we should see them as innovators within a deeply American civic tradition, calling the country to actualize its potential as an equitable democracy and to undo its ingrained practices of structural racism. ...

“First, protest is a legitimate indicator of civic engagement. ... Second, young people protesting racism can remind us of an American tradition of informed, civic participation. ... Third, state education policy systems and districts, in varying degrees, are beginning to formally recognize protest as an important aspect of a student’s civic formation.

“In a time of racial unrest, state and district education policy systems should recognize protest as a crucial aspect of a well-rounded civic education.

27. [Giancarlo Castenda: Community Change Fellow](#)

“In Summer 2015, Giancarlo Castenda, a student at Margarita Muniz Academy, was chosen to be a Community Change Fellow, GC’s summer internship program designed to sustain students’ civic engagement after graduating from the GC program. Giancarlo was paired with the Boston Education Justice Alliance (BEJA) and discovered a passion for youth organizing. As an organizer with BEJA, Giancarlo gained experience in concrete organizing tactics, like canvassing and screen printing. Giancarlo also coordinated a workshop to educate students about injustices in the school system, like inequitable funding.”

Appendix III: Some Background on Texas’s U.S. History Requirement

Texas Statute—American History Requirement Texas Education Code Ann. § 51.302 (b)

Texas Statutes - Section 51.302: AMERICAN OR TEXAS HISTORY (b) Except as provided by Subsection (c), a college or university receiving state support or state aid from public funds may not grant a baccalaureate degree or a lesser degree or academic certificate to any person unless the person has credit for six semester hours or its equivalent in American History. A student is entitled to submit as much as three semester hours of credit or its equivalent in Texas History in partial satisfaction of this requirement. The college or university may determine that a student has satisfied this requirement in whole or part on the basis of credit granted to the student by the college or university for a substantially equivalent course completed at another accredited college or university, or on the basis of the student’s successful completion of an advanced standing examination administered on the conditions and under the circumstances common for the college or university’s advanced standing examinations. The college or university may grant as much as three semester hours of credit or its equivalent toward satisfaction of this requirement for substantially equivalent work completed by a student in the program of an approved senior R.O.T.C. unit.

Acts 1971, 62nd Leg., p. 3072, ch. 1024, art. 1, Sec. 1, eff. Sept. 1, 1971. Amended by Acts 1995, 74th Leg., ch. 5, Sec. 1, eff. March 23, 1995.

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