

Civics education in the United States

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Abstract

High quality civics education is a vital, yet often overlooked, feature of a healthy democratic society. Due to decades of neglect at the hands of an indifferent public and government, civics education in the United States is significantly behind other topics (such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, commonly referred to as STEM), and as such, civic knowledge in the United States is low. In this report, several articles regarding the state of civics education in the US are reviewed, and then three programs to improve civics education are explored. Articles reviewed include one “report card” on various civics education programs and statistical evidence to support the assertions of low civic knowledge and low spending on civics education. Programs explored include the James Madison Memorial Fellowship, We the People, and Educating for American Democracy.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Review of the Literature	2
Findings	6
Conclusion	23
Bibliography	25

Introduction

Civics education is an essential feature of a healthy, functioning democracy. In the United States, civics education has been put on the back burner for a long time, and as such, democratic competence has declined. According to a study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, for example, only about a quarter of American adults can name all three branches of the US Government.¹ With such low knowledge of basic information, it is clear that progress is needed to close this gap. This paper will be divided into three parts, and will (in this order) examine some things that have already been written and explored about civics education in the United States, explore three different programs that have been created to try to improve civics education (the James Madison Memorial Fellowship, We the People, and Educating for American Democracy), and finally compare those last two programs to see what they are doing well and what could potentially be improved in each. There is a plethora of research available regarding the current state of civics education, and while this paper cannot hope to review it all, the author hopes to provide sufficient review to establish a baseline from which to begin a comparison. While there are more than these two tools available for teaching civics, We the People and Educating for American Democracy will be the primary focus in order to provide an in depth exploration and comparison. Educators need materials that are accessible, credible, and easy to use, and these two programs meet all of those criteria.

¹ Annenberg Public Policy Center, “Americans’ Knowledge of the Branches of Government Is Declining,” September 13, 2016, available at www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-knowledge-of-the-branches-of-government-is-declining.

Review of the Literature

It is useful to begin this review with an article written by Richard Niemi and Julia Smith in 2001 for the journal *PS: Political Science & Politics*. The article is titled “Enrollments in High School Government Classes: Are We Short-Changing Both Citizenship and Political Science Training?” In this article, Niemi and Smith argue that civics education was neglected for three decades because of a widespread belief that civics education did not benefit students at all and that political scientists saw themselves as being above the apparently menial task of secondary education.² Niemi and Smith dispute the idea that civics education does not benefit students, based on their own previous work and that of other researchers. The authors point out easy to find, publicly available information showing that, as of the late 1990s, roughly 75% of American high school graduates had taken a civics course prior to graduation. What is not as readily available is the content of those civics courses. While civics education appears to be widely available to American high school students (or at least it was in the 1990s according to this article), it appears that few students are enrolling in Advanced Placement government classes, and availability of these programs can vary greatly from public schools to private schools and based on geographic location. Race and other demographic factors appear to have little to do with the availability of civics education in general. Niemi and Smith’s primary argument in this article is that political scientists need to involve themselves more in the business of educating high school students in civics. This involvement is necessary to improve democratic competence among American citizens as well as helping to train potential future political scientists. The idea is that if high school students are not introduced to these ideas and processes during high school,

² Niemi, Richard G., and Julia Smith. “Enrollments in High School Government Classes: Are We Short-Changing Both Citizenship and Political Science Training?” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 34, no. 2 (2001): 281–87. doi:10.1017/S1049096501000518.

they will not have any interest in pursuing them in high school, leading to a pending shortage of political scientists. Niemi and Smith acknowledge that precise numbers of students taking civics course can be difficult to pinpoint due to various factors, including the difference in naming conventions between schools and districts. Niemi and Smith wanted political scientists to take a more active role in shaping K-12 civics education, believing this would help with both democratic competence across the United States and civic engagement. This article includes several helpful tables illustrating the different types of social studies classes that are available at different grade levels around the United States, when civics classes are offered, and separating some of this information based on demographic categories. These tables can help to understand the broad picture of civics education in the United States, and are helpful to the research interested in the state of civics education.

In 2015, Wayne Journell wrote a follow up to Niemi and Smith's work for the same publication. Journell's intent was to provide an update on the status of K-12 civics education in the United States. Enrollment in civics classes had increased by the time Journell wrote this article, with 86% of American high school students having taken civics classes prior to graduation.³ Journell attributes this increase to the fact that more states have adopted civics as a graduation requirement. 45 states, according to Journell, have a civics requirement for high school graduation. Journell is not encouraged by this figure, however, as only 8 of those states require any form of standardized civics testing prior to graduation⁴ (as of 2022, Missouri is one of those states). As of 2015 when Journell's article was published, Arizona was the only state in

³ Journell, Wayne. "We Still Need You! An Update on the Status of K-12 Civics Education in the United States." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48, no. 4 (2015): 630–34. doi:10.1017/S104909651500089X.

⁴ Ibid.

the US that required students to take the US Citizenship test in order to graduate high school. Missouri has since passed a similar law, requiring that students take a 100 question, multiple choice test based on the US Citizenship test in order to graduate. Instruction, contends Journell, is more effective when coupled with high stakes testing, therefore the civics education that is required in most states is not as effective as it could be. This is a necessary update to the previous information and is therefore essential to those interested in the state of civics education in the US.

The Public Policy Research branch of the Pioneer Institute recently released “Learning for Self-Government: A K-12 Civics Report Card,” authored by David Randall. “Learning for Self-Government” is a much more in depth review of existing civics education programs than this paper can afford, and is a valuable tool for those seeking to understand what is available to help educators teach this valuable material. “Learning for Self-Government” includes letter grades and in depth reviews for over a dozen different programs as diverse as the 1619 Project, We the People, Educating for American Democracy, and the iCivics website. The name of the institute itself (Pioneer) seems to indicate a conservative bias, and that indication is strengthened by the fact that the programs that are typically seen as being more liberal (such as the 1619 Project, given an F) are graded poorly, whereas the more conservative programs (such as the 1776 Curriculum from Hillsdale College, given an A-) have much higher grades. Randall acknowledges that classroom instruction should be nonbiased and nonpartisan, and claims that the newer programs reviewed within the report are “radical” and highly partisan. For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to spend much time on the programs Randall reviewed that are not also included herein. Interested parties may, however, find it enlightening and instructive to read Randall’s reviews and explorations of such diverse programs as The 1619

Project, iCivics, The Bill of Rights Institute, and the 1776 Curriculum. The descriptions of each program are accurate and informative, even if the analysis is heavily biased.

Randall provides a scathing critique of *Educating for American Democracy*, calling its pedagogy “impenetrable” and “jargon heavy.” *Educating for American Democracy* has earned a grade of F+ from Randall, whereas *We the People* has earned a B+. Randall has somewhat effusive praise for *We the People*, declaring the analysis of the founding era to be “lucid” and “relevant.” Interestingly, Randall’s earlier critique of the newer programs is flipped on its head when reviewing *We the People*, as he decries the weaknesses of a nonpartisan approach. The largest critique offered for *We the People*, however, is that it is not sufficiently rigorous. This white paper is a helpful guide for teacher searching for material to use to teach civics, but educators should be cautious to read the whole review of each program, rather than relying solely on the grades that Randall has assigned to each program.

Jonathan Butcher with The Heritage Foundation wrote a review of *Educating for American Democracy* in an Issue Brief for The Heritage Foundation the day EAD was publicly unveiled. Butcher is not a fan of EAD, complaining that EAD gives too much power to “Washington bureaucrats” when education is an issue that should be controlled and regulated by states, rather than the federal government.⁵ This argument is valid, as education should be a state matter in accordance with the 10th Amendment. While it is true that the federal government has had a hand in education at least as far back as the 1860s, significant involvement did not really occur until after the *Brown v Board of Education* ruling from the Supreme Court in 1954. With the creation of the Department of Education under President Carter in the late 1970s, Federal

⁵ Butcher, Jonathan. “Improving Civics Education Means Preserving America’s Character.” *Issue Brief* No. 661 (2021). Available at <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/improving-civics-education-means-preserving-americas-character>

involvement in education would appear to be here to stay. Butcher's argument against increased Federal involvement is not his only point, however. Butcher also wrote that civics education should celebrate the heritage of this country, rather than trying to explain away or even ignore some things that have happened in the past. The alignment between Randall's conclusions and those of Butcher are interesting, and this author agrees with many of their findings on Educating for American Democracy.

Findings

One program that has been developed to address the shortfall in civics education is the James Madison Memorial Fellowship, administered by the Foundation named after the Father of the Constitution. Madison Fellowships are awarded each year to one teacher of American history or civics from each state in the US, including territories. The Fellowship pays up to \$24,000 towards a Master's degree for each recipient. This amount has not changed since the inception of the program. The degree has to be specifically in American history or political science unless otherwise approved by the Foundation. This author, for example, was awarded the Fellowship for the state of Missouri for 2020 and is working on a Master of Science in Curriculum and Instruction focused on civics education through Kansas State University. In addition to paying for the graduate degrees, the Fellowship also funds a one of a kind summer institute in Washington, DC for each Fellow, typically the year after they are selected. The institute is a four week long, intensive study of the American Constitution, its philosophies, foundations, and construction. Unlike most teacher institutes, this one does not devote any time to pedagogy or instructional methods, opting instead to focus purely on content. The idea is that by teaching these educators about the constitution itself, they can better teach their students about it. Fellows

spend several hours every day in lectures from constitutional experts, then a couple of hours discussing the day's lecture and reading materials with the other Fellows. The reading material includes the Federalist papers, a selection of Anti-Federalist work, Madison's Notes on the Constitutional Convention, a textbook on the colonial, revolutionary, and convention time periods, and an additional three hundred sixty page packet of mostly primary sources. Each Fellow writes three papers throughout the course of the institute analyzing different facets of the Constitution, from philosophical foundations to the debates between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists. The only sources typically allowed for the papers are the reading list for the institute itself. Mixed in with the lectures, discussions, and paper writing are trips to Monticello, Mount Vernon, Montpelier, and Gunston Hall (home of prominent Anti-Federalist George Mason), as well as Arlington National Cemetery. Additionally, on the weekends, Fellows are free to explore the capital area or take any side trips they please. When this author was in the summer institute, trips were made to several of the Smithsonian museums, the national archives, the Gettysburg battlefield, and the museum of the United States Marine Corps. Other Fellows went to Ford's Theater, the Antietam battlefield, and the Capital building to meet with their elected representatives. All of the Fellows spent considerable time touring the national monuments and landmarks in the Washington area. The James Madison Foundation provides room and board for the Fellows during the course of the Institute, as well as funding the institute-related trips (Arlington and the Presidential homes, plus Gunston Hall). Transportation to and from the Institute is also provided by the Foundation.

While this program is a fantastic tool in the effort to improve civics education in the United States, it is not without its flaws. The foremost flaw is the numerical limitation on the program. One educator per state per year is a good start, but it is only a start to addressing all of

the issues with civics education. This flaw is mitigated, however, by the networking potential of having many Fellows, past and present, still in the field. Any single Fellow can help to increase the quality and effectiveness of civics education for their entire school or potentially even their whole district. Some might see the focus on content, rather than on pedagogy, as a shortcoming as well, but this author would disagree with that contention. By the time an educator is selected to become a Fellow, they have sufficient classroom experience to have a good handle on pedagogical approaches to this important subject matter; what Fellows need is not more Maslow and Bloom, but more Madison and Hamilton, and that is exactly what the Fellowship provides.

Funding can be an issue for a program such as the Madison Fellowship when anywhere from 45-50 Fellowships are awarded each year with an expected cost of up to \$24,000 per Fellow. This is one reason the Civics Supports Democracy Act that was proposed in 2021 and is back on the table in 2022 is a vital piece of legislation. This bill would direct \$20 million to the James Madison Foundation and would help potentially expand the program to help more educators in the future. This author recently met with a legislative aid to a US Senator (along with several other educators) to urge the Senator to cosponsor this bill. This meeting was not as productive as the author hoped, but it was not without its accomplishments. The aid informed us that the Senator could not cosponsor the bill due to his ranking position on an appropriations subcommittee, since the bill would require revenue to fund some grant programs, and co-sponsorship would represent a conflict of interest. The aid did mention that the Senator does support increased funding and attention for civics education in the United States however, so that is a positive sign. This Senator used to be a high school history teacher, so the support is understandable, if not to be anticipated.

Another program that has been implemented to assist in teaching civics is known as *We the People*. *We the People* is a tiered program that offers material for elementary, middle, and high school level students to understand the American system of government. *We the People* was first published in 1984, with the current (fourth) edition published in 2016. The Center for Civic Education was founded in 1965 with a mission to “promote an enlightened and responsible citizenry committed to democratic principles and actively engaged in the practice of democracy.”⁶ *We the People* provides text books for students to work from, with a teacher’s guide that makes delivering the content easier. The teacher’s guide is organized in the same way as the student books, and includes a Unit Overview and educational objectives for each unit. At the end of each textbook is the text of the Declaration of Independence, as well as the complete text of the Constitution along with all of the amendments thereto. There is also a selected reading list for students and teachers. A classroom set (30 textbooks plus one teacher’s guide) can be ordered for \$950 through the Center for Civic Education’s website, civiced.org. The books are broken down into units and then lessons that are focused on teaching a facet of the American government or part of the Constitution, and then asking open ended, complex questions that students have to break down, analyze, and respond to in depth. At both the middle school and high school level, there are state competitions surrounding these questions using lawyers, judges, and other experts to evaluate student responses. Schools that win their state competitions can advance to a national competition held each year in Washington, DC. *We the People* requires more than just rote memorization and simple recitation of facts; higher level thinking is prompted by the nature of the questions and the format of the competitions. Teams will have a

⁶ “Home,” civiced.org, accessed February 28, 2022, <http://civiced.org/>.

teacher as part of the classroom experience and typically a licensed attorney or constitutional expert as an outside advisor. This paper will focus on the high school level material.

The high school *We the People* textbook has a foreword that is written by Warren Burger, former Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court and Chair of the Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution. These positions clearly establish Chief Justice Burger's expert knowledge of the United States Constitution. This foreword was included in the first edition of this textbook. In this foreword, Chief Justice Burger does not offer any statistical information, but does state that most people in the United States have very little understanding of the constitution to which we swear our allegiance. *We the People*, then, is an attempt to rectify this lack of understanding held by young people so that they can grow up to be informed, educated, engaged citizens of the United States. Chief Justice Burger correctly acknowledged in the foreword that any undertaking of this sort has to include both historical information and lessons that would be considered political science rather than history.

After Chief Justice Burger's foreword is an introduction that includes the goals, organization, and rationale of the *We the People* curriculum. The rationale is compelling, correctly pointing out that the "role of educational institutions must be to help students increase their capacity to make intelligent choices for themselves-to learn how to think, rather than what to think."⁷ *We the People* is organized in such a way as to allow teachers to use the complete text from beginning to end or use pieces of the text to enhance their existing classroom curriculum. As a teacher of American history, the author of this paper has used the first unit to enhance student understanding of the American Revolution and our Constitution.

⁷ *We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution* (Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education, 2003).

There are six units in this text, and three of those units have seven lessons, while the other three units have six lessons each. It is not necessary in this format to dive into every lesson of every unit, but it is useful and instructive to examine some of them. Unit 1 of the high school text is about the historical and philosophical foundations of the American political system. Lessons include the views of Constitutional government held by those who founded this country, how ideas of civic life influenced the founding generation, the historical developments that influenced modern ideas of individual rights, the British origins of American Constitutionalism, basic ideas about rights and constitutional government that were held by American colonists, why colonists wanted to separate from Great Britain, and basic ideas about government and rights that were included in state constitutions. Objectives for this unit include describing major ideas of the natural rights philosophy, explaining the influence of British history on the Founders' thinking, and taking and defending positions on issues related to natural rights, classical republicanism, and constitutional government, among others. This list of objectives is rather ambitious; this unit seeks to accomplish quite a bit. The organization of the unit into smaller lessons is well designed to facilitate this rather aggressive list of objectives.

Each lesson begins with an explanation of the purpose of the lesson. For the first lesson of the first unit, the purpose includes introducing the basic ideas and experiences the founding generation drew on to create our government. This explanation of purpose is useful because it can help students identify the most important information to be looking for in the lesson, helping them to focus on the key ideas. In the Teacher's Guide, there is also a section at the beginning of the lesson that includes any needed preparation and lists helpful teaching materials to have on hand. For lesson 1 of Unit 1, this list includes the student text itself, chart paper and markers or smartboard/chalkboard/whiteboard, and a URL for the We the People Resource Center

(www.civiced.org/resourcecenter). The teacher's guide for this lesson provides some excellent questions for teachers to ask their students, such as defining "government" and explaining how a government should function. In addition to asking the question itself, the teacher's guide encourages the teacher to ask students how they came to their definition. Expecting students to articulate the process they used to arrive at their answer can help them with other questions in the future. The teacher's guide directs the teacher to the aforementioned online resource center for some biographies that can be useful to help students understand the men who helped fight the American Revolution and write the US Constitution. Knowing the backgrounds and philosophies of these men can help students to understand one of the objectives of this lesson, which is to "explain what the Founders learned about government from history and their firsthand experiences." This lesson also includes information about ancient philosophy and ideas, including Aristotle's views on government and the organization of the Roman Republic. Since these were sources the Founders themselves drew on, studying this information is beneficial to understanding the founding of this country.

Lesson 2 of the first unit is all about the ideas of civic life that influenced the founding generation. This lesson includes information on natural rights philosophy and classical republicanism, which are essential ideas in the founding of the United States. Civic virtue is also a focus of this lesson, and students are asked to take and defend positions on the importance of civic virtue today.

The third lesson of Unit 1 is about the historical developments that influenced the modern ideas of individual rights. The lesson explores the differences between classical Republicanism and the Judeo-Christian ideas about the importance of the individual, and asks students to distinguish between a nation and a state. While it is necessary to evaluate the Judeo-Christian

roots of American constitutionalism, some people may get upset at the idea of infusing this study of religious morality into a public school text about government. This opposition would neglect the very real influence of Protestant Christianity on the founding generation, including the influence of the Church of England and the dual role of the British monarch as head of state and head of church. It is possible to examine these Judeo-Christian philosophies without running afoul of the 1st Amendment's prohibition against religious establishment. Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas have written an excellent work addressing how to do just that, known as *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools*.⁸

Moving on, the fourth lesson of Unit 1 is about the British origins of American Constitutionalism. Elements of this lesson include British theories about natural rights, the origins of trial by jury, and the British bill of rights that was created in 1689. Learning about these topics can help students to understand that while, as a whole, the United States Constitution is unique, it is also a blend of ideas that existed previously. Students do not need an exhaustive, comprehensive study of British history to understand American Constitutionalism, but having a grounding in the basic ideas that were derived from the British can be instructive. It can also be useful to study the differences between the modern British Parliamentary system and the American democratic system.

Lesson 5 asks students to identify basic ideas that American colonists had about rights and government. This is a fantastic lesson that includes reading from the Mayflower Compact among other colonial charters. Some critics may argue that *We The People* does not address the struggles and plights of marginalized people throughout American history, but those are a focus of this lesson. One of the discussion questions listed for this lesson is to ask students if all

⁸ Charles C. Haynes and Oliver S. Thomas, *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools* (Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center, 2007).

Americans enjoyed the rights and protections that are being discussed. Enslaved Africans, Native Americans, and even colonial women can all be included in the discussion of people who did not enjoy the benefits of the rights that colonists were willing to wage war for. There is also an exercise in this chapter where the teacher will divide the class into groups of four, with each group having two students arguing for abolition and two students arguing for the continuation of the institution of slavery. This requires students to think about not only the fact that slavery was morally wrong and economically harmful, but *how* and *why* those facts are true. A critical thinking exercise like this can help students formulate and express cogent, articulate arguments when faced with polarizing issues in the modern world. *We The People* can also not be categorized as being clearly authoritarian, as some critics might claim, as this lesson emphasizes the importance of the right to dissent.

Lesson 6 of the first unit has students think about the reasons the colonists sought separation from Great Britain. There is an excellent critical thinking exercise in this lesson that helps students identify violations of rights. Classes are to be divided into five groups, with each group assigned a scenario from the text. The group is then to decide which rights are being violated by the government in the given scenario, and share the information with the class. A suggestion is given to have students review the Bill of Rights that is included at the back of their textbooks to see how these rights were eventually protected under the American Constitution. This lesson also encourages teachers to hold a Town Meeting with their class, similar to meetings that were held in the Colonies during the period immediately leading up to the Revolution.

Finally, Lesson 7 of Unit 1 is an examination of the constitutions of the original 13 States and their ideas about government and rights. This is a fantastic opportunity for students to learn

about the State documents that had profound impacts on the US Constitution, including the Massachusetts constitution and the Virginia Declaration of Rights. Lesson 7 has students reading from both of these documents, and points out that some State constitutions allowed free black men to vote (according to the text book, these included Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut).

We The People is a comprehensive civics curriculum that any teacher of history or government should be able to pick up and use in their classroom with little preparation required. Having students participate in the state level competitions can require some additional training, but is not necessary to use the textbook on its own. This program was created by a diverse group of people and does not fall into the all too common trap of overlooking those who were not white Christian men, as has been demonstrated above. A careful review of the textbook along with the American Government learning standards for the state of Missouri will show that this textbook hits all of the Government standards, meaning this book could be adopted by any school in the state of Missouri. While it is outside the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to see how many states could adopt this program without any modifications and have it fit their learning standards.

The third program to address is newer than the previous two. Educating for American Democracy was launched publicly in March of 2021 by a diverse group that is referred to as the “Implementation Consortium.” This group consists of a variety of people including college professors, a school superintendent, and a current candidate for governor of Massachusetts. The goal of Educating for American Democracy is “Excellence in History and Civics for all Learners.”⁹ EAD is designed to provide tools for educators to improve their educational practice

⁹ “Our Vision,” Educating for American Democracy (Educating for American Democracy, January 26, 2022), <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/our-vision/>.

to help close the gap in understanding American government. This is accomplished through a “roadmap” that includes seven themes: Civic Participation, Our Changing Landscapes, We the People, A New Government & Constitution, Institutional and Social Transformation, A People in the World, and Contemporary Debates and Possibilities.¹⁰ Each Theme includes Key Concepts, Driving Questions, and Resources that can be explored, and they are separated into grade levels. The grade level options are K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. This acknowledges the differences that exist in ability levels between the different grades and the necessity of teaching different grades in different ways, and should make it easier for teachers at all levels to include this vital civics education in their curriculum.

The following paragraphs will explain each of the seven themes of the EAD roadmap. Each Theme has some “Overarching Thematic Questions” that are grouped into History and Civics. The first theme, Civic Participation, is designed to encourage a sense of responsibility in students of civics. It emphasizes engagement and participation in the processes of government. For the high school level, it includes questions such as “What are the responsibilities and opportunities of citizenship and civic agency in America’s constitutional democracy?” This question requires students to think critically about how rights create responsibilities, which should lead to those students being motivated to become involved in civic life. Critics of EAD might say, however, that this type of question is so open ended as to be useless; a better question might offer some areas of responsibility and opportunity to get students thinking about which options are available. The question might be phrased as “Think about how citizens of the United States have the ability to vote on representatives. What responsibilities does this create?”

¹⁰ “The Seven Themes,” Educating for American Democracy (Educating for American Democracy, October 7, 2021), <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/the-roadmap/7themes/>.

Another option could be “In the United States, people have a right to a trial by a jury of their peers when they are accused of a crime. What protections does this offer for citizens, and what opportunities does this create?” Framing these questions in this way can get students thinking about specific opportunities and responsibilities, rather than requiring students to create these connections on their own. The program also lists a question “How can I participate?” This is an excellent question to ask, as it will get students thinking about what they can do, how they can be involved in these processes. Expected student answers could vary from simply voting to participating in campaigns, writing letters to representatives, or even running for office themselves. In contrast to the previous question, it is the open ended nature of this question that makes it so valuable.

“Our Changing Landscapes” is the second theme, and focuses on the history of how the United States came to have its current geographic, political, and demographic landscapes and boundaries. This theme could be highly controversial, as it explicitly intends to explore “complex experiences of harm and benefit which that history has delivered to different portions of the American population...” With the current controversy over Critical Race Theory and the idea held by some that educators are teaching students to hate America, there is a portion of the population that will dislike this theme. That is a shame, as the theme itself is critical to understanding not only how the political system in the United States operates today, but how to continue to improve political processes to make them more accessible for everybody. The thematic questions address this issue; the first civics thematic question is about the different perspectives on these changes. Students will need to acknowledge that there are different perspectives of these historical events, which is an important step in being able to discuss those different perspectives rationally and with an open mind. The follow up question for this theme is

“What principles and values do Americans invoke in our debates about these issues?” This will force students to think about not only what other people believe, but why they believe that way. With a growing issue in the United States of people being unable to disagree in civil, reasonable ways, questions like this can help future generations to close that gap.

Educating for American Democracy uses the theme “We the People” to examine the American people as a political concept, rather than conceptualizing “we the people” as what it initially sounds like...a group of people bound by political ideas. This theme is intended to help students think about how the political landscape was shaped into what it currently is, as well as how decisions can be made to benefit all people given the conditions and constraints of the political system we have. Again, this is a fantastic idea, and the guiding questions are designed to get students thinking about how to participate, contribute, and improve the country they live in. One of the guiding questions asks students who “we the people” are and how this view has changed over time. Students will have to think both historically and civically in order to answer this question, which has the potential to get them thinking about how voting rights have expanded and how the concept of citizenship has changed over time. This is a theme where having one set of questions geared towards history and another set of questions geared towards civics is a brilliant design. While the first words of the United States Constitution are “We, the people,” how often do “we the people” actually take time to consider the significance of those words? The guiding questions of the “we the people” theme set a good standard for students to follow throughout their lives.

We the People is followed as a theme by “A New Government and Constitution.” The focus of this theme is the history of the United States, especially (but not limited to) the development of the Constitution. This theme is where students will be exposed to and learn about

the philosophical and intellectual roots of the US Constitution. This would be a fantastic theme in which to include primary sources such as James Madison's notes on the convention, the Federalist Papers, and writings of prominent anti-Federalists, such as those who used the pen names "Brutus," "Centinel," and "The Federal Farmer." Students can be taught in this theme about Enlightenment philosophy, limited government, separation of powers, and checks and balances. Students can be taught how the writers of the Constitution feared direct democracy, and so instituted the electoral college and established the selection of US Senators by state legislatures rather than direct election. While the overarching thematic questions on the civics side are somewhat limited and not completely useful to a full understanding of these topics, the American History question is broad enough to allow teachers to cover all of these concepts. The American History question is "How did the U.S. government form and how have civic participants changed its shape over time?" The first half of the question should be used to introduce the sources mentioned above. The civics questions are not nearly as open ended, and that is their shortcoming. The first civics question for this theme is "what is a constitution and what is its purpose?" While that is a great question in and of itself, it does not allow much room for students to interpret or expand on information learned; it is much more of a rote memorization question. The balance of the questions in this theme are not much better, asking about what rights are, what power and law are, and what "constitutional democracy" is. These questions seem to be geared towards eliciting specific, "acceptable" answers from students, rather than allowing students to think about the significance of rights, the shared values and morality that law should reflect, and the legitimate shortcomings of pure or direct democracy. Instead, these questions would be a great starting point, especially for elementary school students who are just beginning to learn about civics and the history of the United States, but they need to

be expanded to be useful to students at the secondary level. While an increased focus on civics education is self-evidently necessary, students (especially at the secondary level) should be encouraged to go beyond rote memorization of the facts of the founding of this country, and this theme of EAD does not appear to allow for that.

The next theme is “Institutional & Social Transformation – A Series of Refoundings?” This has the potential to be the most controversial theme in the entire program, even more so than “Our Changing Landscapes.” While the phrase “social justice” is not used in the overarching questions, it is clear that a focus of the theme is the current Social Justice movement in the United States. The first Civics question is “What is a just society?” While that is a valid, and important, question to address, teachers should be careful to avoid a shallow discourse of mere “social” justice and focus instead on how the United States has become a more just country over time. Once again, the balance of the civics questions are designed to elicit memorized, procedural answers rather than in depth, evaluative answers, while the history questions are much more likely to engage students in higher level thinking. The civics questions ask students how laws are made and how the Constitution (or state constitutions) can be formally amended. The first history question, however, asks students to determine if the American Revolution is ongoing. This is a great question, as students will have to think critically about the meaning and intentions of revolutions in general, not just the American Revolution, and decide whether or not American society is still undergoing revolutionary changes.

Moving along, the next theme is “A People in the World.” This theme is designed to make students think about their place in the world and how American citizens can have an impact on a vastly connected world. This is a focus of civics education that has been neglected in the past, and may be more important than ever as increases in technology and global economic

interdependence continue unabated. It is becoming more and more difficult to justify isolationism as technology (both for communication and transportation) essentially make the world a smaller place, and so teaching students to think globally can be of significant importance. The overarching questions in this theme are much better than those in the preceding two themes as well, as students will have to consider how the American constitution and the President of the United States impact world events. In this theme, a teacher could take a current event like the Russian invasion of Ukraine and ask students to consider both what involvement the United States should have in this event and what impact this involvement could have on the conflict itself and the world in general. These exercises can help prepare students for their role as adult citizens in a world that is constantly changing.

The last of the seven themes is “A People with Contemporary Debates and Possibilities.” Perhaps the best part of this theme is the focus on how historical change has shaped the United States today and how understanding this history can help to make informed decisions about what should happen in the future. This, after all, is the point of civics education; how can we help to make the country and the world a better place? Students in this theme will be asked to think in a civically minded way about current events, societal values and principles, and evaluating the veracity and usefulness of information, as well as how to discern valid information from misinformation. Teaching students to recognize, understand, and avoid misinformation is an important role of civics educators, and it is appropriate that Educating for American Democracy includes room for this instruction.

As has been pointed out throughout these seven themes, one of the biggest drawbacks to the Educating for American Democracy program is the lack of higher order questioning in the “Overarching Thematic Questions.” This shortcoming is somewhat mitigated by the inclusion in

each theme of “guiding questions” that are broken down by grade level. There are questions for the lower and upper elementary levels, as well as middle school and high school grade levels. Not only are there more of these than the “overarching” questions, but they provide much more depth as well. Each Theme also includes sample lesson plans and a resource library for educators that includes both primary and secondary sources on the material for each Theme.

One of the Frequently Asked Questions on the EAD website is why the program has a “Roadmap” rather than curriculum. The answer the website gives is

The Roadmap is an advisory document, intended to support a diversity of curricula, materials, lessons, and assessments and to work across a variety of state social studies standards. It will break new ground by presenting an integrated framework for what, why, and how to teach history and civics. As such, it is meant to inspire and inform the authors of state standards, curricula, textbooks, and other materials, as well as teachers themselves to rethink and reprioritize civics and American history education.

In other words, Educating for American Democracy anticipates that the program will allow flexibility for educators to determine the best way to teach their students. It is also intended to shape those who create state level standards and those who are writing textbooks. The creators of Educating for American Democracy have a lofty goal of influencing not only how civics gets taught in the United States, but what civics education consists of. EAD, at this point, does not prescribe a specific instructional method or set of materials to aid civics education. This is both a good thing and a bad thing; it is a good thing because it allows pedagogical and methodological decisions to be made by those who know students best (their teachers). It is a bad thing because this lack of specific direction can be seen as not helpful to

teachers in deciding what and how to teach. The biggest difference between We the People and Educating for American Democracy is clearly articulated curriculum material. We the People provides it and Educating for American Democracy does not.

Conclusion

- Civic knowledge is low in the United States
- High quality civics education is needed to correct low democratic competence
- Multiple programs exist to improve civics education
- The James Madison Memorial Fellowship and We the People are excellent ways to improve civics education
- Educating for American Democracy has potential to improve civics education, but needs some improvement
- Students need to be taught not just about the Constitution, but about the Constitutional Convention, the ratification debates, and the differences between Federalists and Anti-Federalists

There is no question that democratic competence in the United States is typically low. Few Americans seem to know the basics of how the government operates or what is in the United States Constitution. The clear and obvious solution to this major problem is higher quality civics education. There is information available detailing exactly what the shortcomings and successes of civics education today are, and there are programs available to assist with teaching civics. The James Madison Memorial Fellowship program is an excellent path for

educators of American History and civics to gain knowledge in their profession, despite the numerical limitations. The curriculum provided by We the People is the most useful, in depth civics curriculum reviewed for this paper, and can provide a great deal of support for teachers interested in elevating the quality of their civics offering. Civics educators have a duty and a responsibility to ensure quality civics education for their students to ensure the best possible future for this country.

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