



## **Schools Teach Less Civics When Civics Becomes Controversial, Sandra Day O'Connor Institute Reports**

*New policy brief examines when and why America stopped teaching civics*

[Phoenix, AZ - September 24, 2024] - A new policy brief from the Sandra Day O'Connor Institute finds that when civic education becomes too controversial, schools respond by teaching less civics.

The brief, [\*When and Why Did America Stop Teaching Civics?\*](#), looked at the history of American civic education and found that public schools began teaching less civics in the 1960s, when the subject became controversial. School leaders and teachers sought to avoid altercation by backing away from robust civics instruction. Unfortunately, a similar situation may be occurring today in some schools, given the current polarized political climate.

“The Department of Education reports approximately 140 million adult Americans, Generation X and younger, may not have received civics education,” Institute Board Co-Chair Phil Francis said. “For these individuals, civics education became part of social studies, government, and history curricula - however, the stats show that many adults cannot name the three branches of government, much less the role of each of these branches.”

The brief also determined that civic education in schools has declined as federal or state governments have prioritized other subjects. For example, in the several years after passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2002—that is, the law that tied school funding to test scores in math and reading—public schools slashed instructional time for subjects that were not math and reading. In some cases, instructional time for social studies, which includes civics, was cut by more than half.

Other findings in the brief include:

- Educators in K-12 schools feel unprepared to teach civics.
- Younger Americans are less knowledgeable about civics than previous generations.

While there is cause for concern, the brief finds reason for hope. With the support of educational leaders, state legislatures have started passing legislation to enhance civic education. Colleges nationwide are creating programs and entire schools devoted to the study of and future of civics. Nonprofit organizations like the O'Connor Institute are dedicated to supporting civic education and engagement at every level.

“The Institute has taken on this challenge through Civics 101, a program of our Civics for Life initiative,” Institute Board Co-Chair Gay Wray said. “We are proud to continue the work and legacy of Justice O'Connor through efforts like this policy brief and the continued programs of the Institute.”

[Civics 101](#) provides easy-to-understand, free micro-lessons that individuals can use at their own pace. Since the program's launch in the fall of 2023, the Institute has continued expanding the available lessons via two series: The Fundamentals of American Democracy and Elections and How They Work.

“This policy brief and the ongoing interest in the Civics 101 program continue to provide us hope,” Institute President & CEO Sarah Suggs said. “We are inspired by educators, leaders, and non-profit partners across the country recognizing the importance of a civically engaged population. We look forward to the continued positive momentum of this movement.”

Those interested in this research and other work of the Institute can learn more at [OConnorInstitute.org](https://OConnorInstitute.org).

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**About The Sandra Day O’Connor Institute for American Democracy**

Founded in 2009 by retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, the O’Connor Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan 501(c)(3), continues her distinguished legacy and lifetime work to advance American democracy through multigenerational civil discourse, civic engagement, and civics education. Visit [OConnorInstitute.org](https://OConnorInstitute.org) to learn more.

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