

# For More Civics in Schools, Dial Down the Controversy

COMMENTARY

By [Liam Julian](#)

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It's election season. Too bad a study this year from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce found that more than 70% of respondents failed a basic U.S. civic literacy quiz, with over 30% not knowing that there are three branches of government, much less what those branches are and what they do.

Other studies and tests continue to reveal this same sad truth: We Americans don't know civics. This is especially the case for younger Americans, who research has shown to be less informed about civics than their older counterparts.

Obviously, there is a need for more and better civic education in schools, a proposition that consistently receives strong bipartisan support. Yet American public schools are not, as a rule, prioritizing civic education. In fact, surveys suggest schools may be teaching even *less* civics than they were just a few years ago.

Why is this so? When and why did American schools stop teaching civics? And how can we reverse the trend?

It's important to understand that civics was a foundational part of American public education. George Washington believed that the "assimilation of the principles, opinions, and manners of our countrymen" was the most important objective of public schooling, a crucial goal for a new nation founded not on race or religion but on ideas and ideals.

It wasn't until the 1960s that this notion of assimilative civic education in America incurred truly sustained opposition. Continuing to teach civics in this way was inappropriate, critics said, given the variety of experiences and backgrounds that students brought to the classroom. The word "assimilation," once trumpeted as civic education's purpose, became objectionable, and disagreements over civics became personal. As the controversy over civics increased, many schools understandably responded by simply teaching it less.

Thus, whereas until the 1960s, American public high-school students were typically required to take three courses in civics – Civics, Problems of Democracy, and U.S. Government – today most are lucky to get by with a single semester-long class. And even when civics is taught, many teachers avoid teaching it robustly. A 2023 survey found that 65% of teachers answered "yes" to the question, "Have you ever decided on your own, without being directed by school or district leaders, to limit discussions about political and social issues in class?" And when this 65% was asked why they had made such a decision, the most common first-choice response was, "I am not sure that my school or district leaders would support me if parents expressed concerns."

The problem may be worsening. An Education Week survey from 2024 found that 30% of principals said the idea that civics is too political or controversial was a "challenging" or "very challenging" barrier to teaching it, whereas, in a 2018 survey, 19% of school leaders had said the same.

Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor once wrote that "civic education must be understood, at its root, as education for informed participation in government and society." She continued: "The goal is for students to have the knowledge to understand the political history of our nation, appreciate different perspectives, craft their own informed opinions, and gain the skills to persuasively advocate their views in the public sphere."

Her prescription of learning to "appreciate different perspectives" is sound advice not only for students but also for adults – which *ipso facto* includes the policymakers, school leaders, teachers, and parents who are directly involved in civic education in American schools. These adults should work to ratchet down rancor where it exists and invite compromise around the teaching of civics. Doing so will entail identifying, appreciating, and enhancing that which was best about earlier flavors of American civic education while also taking seriously the valid present-day critiques.

To be sure, there are other impediments to robust civic education in American public schools – a lack of funding and adequate teacher training among them. But if we cannot work together to find common ground on civic education, then all the money and training in the world may not much matter.

"At times," Justice O'Connor said, "we have to give up some of our individual interests so we don't compromise our collective future. The resulting 'common ground' should be treated as 'some kind of sacred ground,' because that's where we're going to find the promised land."

*Liam Julian is director of public policy at the Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy. The Institute's new report, "When and Why Did Americans Stop Teaching Civics?" will be available 9/24 at [oconnorinstitute.org/research](https://oconnorinstitute.org/research).*

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