

FROM CLASSROOM TO POLLING BOOTH: AN ANALYSIS OF MANDATORY CIVIC EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS ON YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The SPRING Group

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1. Executive Summary

In the United States of America, civic education has been at an all-time low. Only nine states and the District of Columbia require civic education for graduation, whereas ten states have no civic education requirements. States with civic requirements show an increase in youth volunteer rates and higher scores on the AP Government and Politics exam.¹ Civic education is taught by social studies teachers who are greatly unappreciated. High school social studies teachers are the least supported and take on other jobs outside of teaching.² In 2021 the Department of Education allocated only \$2.15 million for civic funding whereas in 2020 the Department of Education allocated \$546 million for STEM subjects.³

Teaching civics in schools is invaluable because the youth are much more malleable and easily influenced, making it possible to instill the value of civic engagement into students. Civic education in schools will focus on teaching democratic ideals, the foundations of the political system, and how the government abides by the Constitution in establishing a democracy. Students shall learn the importance of citizens in the government and what role they play.⁴ Students will be prepared to participate in the government and will be educated about our democracy. People must learn the value of self-governance in a democratic society whereas the government is thus by the people and for the people. Observations show that civic education increases political participation, expands one's political knowledge, promotes good governance, and grows youth activism and participation.⁵ Furthermore, taking a civics course has shown a 3-6% increase in a person's chance of voting.⁶

Political participation is important in a democracy as it ensures that the government is in regulation by the people. The United States is a democratic republic where citizens vote for elected officials in the government. Voting is a popular form of political participation where someone must have the right foundations and understanding of the government before deciding on who will be the leader of the country.⁷

We have included a brief synopsis of the patterns of civic education in the primary regions of the United States.

¹ [Shapiro & Brown, 2018](#)

² [Winthrop, 2020](#)

³ [Ward, 2022](#)

⁴ [Branson, 1998](#)

⁵ [Jeffrey & Sargrad, 2019](#)

⁶ [Ward, 2022](#)

⁷ [Participating in a Democracy, 2017](#)

The Midwest states require students to take a civics education course during their academic career before high school graduation. Studies conducted proved that a change in youth political participation relies on the student's prior experience of civic education in schools.

Western states have shown that civic engagement improves political participation and civic involvement. In states like California and Washington, students take direct involvement with the governmental system by running voter registration drives or getting involved directly with public policy.

The states in the Northeast have made direct efforts to improve civic education. Many states have taken individual initiatives to improve civic involvement through various programs and procedures. Several states have implemented a mandatory requirement for students to take civic education courses.

In the South and Southeastern states of the country, high poverty levels and limited funding make it difficult to start any initiatives. Although many states have started their own implementations of policy changes when it comes to civic education for students in school. It is important to recognize the impact of civic education in America and how it influences the youth of today.

2. Key Findings

2.1 Northeast

States across the US have different requirements for mandatory civic education. The United States Census Bureau defines the Northeastern region of the States as including the following: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont.⁸ Of these states as of 2018, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Pennsylvania require students to take a civics course, and only New Hampshire and Vermont require

⁸ [US Census Bureau, 2021](#)

students to take a civics test in high school.⁹ In the last few years, states have implemented different methods.

2.1.1 Background Context

The U.S. Census Bureau defines the Northeastern region of the United States as including Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

In recent years, there has been a serious concern about the declining levels of civic literacy, which made many states in the Northeast enhance their civic education programs (Galston, 2001). Connecticut, for example, received a \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to strengthen its civic education with many innovative programs, including things like museum-based learning (Journell, 2013). Additionally, initiatives like Connecticut's Red, White, and Blue Schools program and Pennsylvania's Governor's Civic Engagement Award use competition to encourage student engagement. These programs proved to be effective. (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

The nation has been struggling with civic education challenges, but the Northeast keeps being able to lead by example. With so many positive initiatives, the Northeast has been able to position itself as a potential model for nationwide civic engagement efforts.

According to the World Population Review, the Northeastern region in the United States includes Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont.¹⁰

While many schools and education departments conclude that civic education in schools is essential since it increases civic engagement in the community and a higher likelihood of developing necessary college skills, the expectation falls far below. According to the Institute of Education Sciences, the research into civic education has just begun and many education curriculums are experiencing a dearth of the program.¹¹ They hinted that civic education isn't taught at a level of meaningful efficiency, in which the students would apply their learning in a practical way. Additionally, the schools in the Northeastern region do not direct most of their funding into civic education. A light

⁹ [Shapiro and Brown, 2018](#)

³ [Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2024](#)

⁴ [Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2019](#)

⁵ [Facing History & Ourselves, 2018](#)

⁶ [New York State Education Department, 2024](#)

¹⁰ [World Population Review, 2024](#)

¹¹ [Northeast & Islands, 2021](#)

strand from the bleakness, a few states are starting to reserve funding to enhance civic engagement in schools. For example, Massachusetts enacted a History and Social Science Framework in 2018 to require 8th-grade civic courses about the United States and the state of Massachusetts.¹² Surprisingly, the Northeastern region had 36.4% of the civic education course instructors and programs while there's 18.5% in the West, 3.2% in central, etc.¹³

This progress indicates that although civic education's main point is falling beyond expectation, the Northeastern region is currently putting tremendous support in enhancing it.

2.1.2 Historical and Political Context

The Northeast of the United States has long valued civic engagement and education. Assimilation and promoting citizenship were the foremost focus of civic education in the early 20th century.¹⁴ However, more recent times have shown a prioritization of understanding government processes, active civic participation, and most importantly critical thinking skills. The Northeast also noticeably focuses not only on civic education in high school but also in middle and even elementary schools, which is valuable in teaching children the importance of being a civically active community member.

2.1.3 Educational Approaches

Northeastern states have taken a variety of approaches regarding civic education, each with a varying level of success. One state that is at the forefront of civic education programs is Connecticut. Like many other US states, Connecticut ensures that public schools teach social studies, which means students are taught about basic terms regarding the government, citizenship, and voting.

Not too long ago, the US Department of Education awarded Connecticut institutions a \$1 million grant to enable them to fund programs to educate Connecticut youth on the intersection of civic topics such as voting, community, and history.¹⁵ One very unique aspect of this specific approach is that Connecticut took that money and specifically

¹² [Hayat, N. et al., 2020](#)

¹³ [Wagner, 2020](#)

¹⁴ [Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, 1999](#)

¹⁵ [Fairfield Museum, 2024](#)

used museums to teach civics; this is an approach that has several benefits, as it gives control to an organization that has experience working with kids, can effectively convey information, and knows where to prioritize funding.

Another program relatively unique to Connecticut is the Red, White, and Blue (RWB) Schools initiative, which encourages schools to design a civic education curriculum based on RWB designated rubrics, with the highest-scoring schools being recognized at the end of the competition season.¹⁶ This program is also quite effective, because it relies on competition, meaning that after the initial hurdle of getting schools to participate is passed, competition in and between schools can play a critical role in increasing engagement, success, and civic education.

New York has had similar success in the promotion of civic education. New York has taken less of an active stance on civic education, but it could also be considered more effective. Instead of making schools teach curriculum, New York offers a vast expanse of resources available to any school if they do wish to teach civic education.¹⁷ This is effective in the sense that it gives schools more autonomy, but that can also be undesirable if it ends up moving schools away from civics.

Regarding specific resources, New York does in fact have many opportunities. While not directly initiated by the New York state government, the organization Facing History and Ourselves partnered with Civics for All to create an entire curriculum on civic education for kids from 6th to 12th grade.¹⁸ This is a critical step forward, as one of the primary blockers to civic education is having the time to develop a curriculum that is actually effective.

Overall, states in the Northeast have taken approaches that can be thought of as effective, but it is only the first step. Given nationwide stagnancy in civic education, and the general trend of Northeast states having slightly better civic education than the rest of the US, with states like Massachusetts pioneering education by being the first entity to make it a statewide goal, it can be said that the Northeast has the potential to become a very effective model for nationwide civic education.¹⁹ Whether that will actually happen, however, is only for time to tell.

¹⁶ [RWB Schools, 2023](#)

¹⁷ [Facing History and Ourselves, 2024](#)

¹⁸ [Facing History and Ourselves, 2024](#)

¹⁹ [Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2014](#)

2.1.4 Example Initiatives

Pennsylvania's system of promoting civic readiness, the Governor's Civic Engagement Award (GCEA), is a uniquely localized program that takes advantage of requirements in Pennsylvania's state constitution ordering public high schools to prominently display voter registration materials to students. The program incentivizes schools to register students to vote by awarding recognition in two tiers: Gold (85% of students registered) and Silver (65% of students registered). Additionally, the state also provides official recognition to students who serve as poll workers by awarding them with a Student Poll Worker Award at an official regional award ceremony.³

This program incentivizes student participation in the political process by eliminating the monotony of the first, most crucial step: voter registration. By turning the procedure into a team competition, the state has been able to increase its number of high schools achieving an 85% voter registration rate by 20% (15 schools in 2018 vs. 18 schools in 2024) and their number of high schools achieving at least a 65% voter registration rate by 125% (16 schools in 2018 vs. 36 schools in 2024). These results indicate that competition and the recognition that comes with receiving awards are very effective incentives for increasing student participation in politics at the high school level.

Another step Pennsylvania enacted simultaneously to GCEA was the addition of mandatory civics courses in public high schools in 2020.⁴ While it is impossible to determine exactly how these classes impacted the overall results of GCEA, it can be safely assumed that the decision provided a net benefit to the registration outcomes by increasing awareness of civic duty among public high school students. Other states and municipalities, including, most notably, New York and New York City, have begun to adopt similar requirements and programs, with varying levels of success.^{5, 6}

In 2018, Massachusetts introduced the History and Social Science Framework (HSSF), a plan to teach students about our democracy, including, "increased emphasis on civics at all grade levels, including a new grade 8 course on civics."²⁰ The framework's teaching objectives for 8th graders include discussion about the philosophical roots of the US political system, the development, and institutions of our government, information about the three branches and how individuals are nominated and confirmed for the judicial and executive branches, the Constitution, Amendments, Supreme Court decisions, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and more. The framework also outlines a plan for a high school United States Government and Politics elective. This elective aims for students to be able to critically analyze and apply theories, concepts,

²⁰ [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018](#)

and facts relevant to the US government and political proceedings. Research shows that the implementation of the framework needs to be more consistent across Massachusetts. 2020 surveys showed that of the 96% of surveyed educators who were aware of the HSSF, only 44% knew how it would impact their instruction.²¹

Connecticut has two notable programs that are meant to boost civic engagement, the Red, White, and Blue Schools program and the It's Your Right -- Why Voting Matters program. The Red, White, and Blue Schools program, which is partnered with Connecticut's Secretary of State, the State Department of Education, and the Connecticut Democracy Center in residence at Connecticut's Old State House, recognizes schools that can get their students to be active and engaged members of their communities with civic engagement projects.²²

The It's Your Right -- Why Voting Matters Program, which focuses primarily on the history of United States voting rights and their protection, is designed as a unit in the required high school civics curriculum in Connecticut. This unit covers the history and stages of voting rights, primary and general elections, court cases that have changed voting systems, media literacy, identifying reliable sources, voting trends over time, and the controversy of voter identification laws. At the end of this unit, there is a voter registration activity for students, which is great for them because it puts students in a position to understand the responsibilities of voting.²³

2.2 Southeast and the South

The Southern U.S. is identified by Britannica as encompassing the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Within the large region, civic engagement education is a complicated topic that has been both neglected and supported in a variety of ways.

2.2.1 Current Policies

Presently, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas all require that students take a civics course in order to graduate. However, only Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Tennessee require a civics exam to graduate², meaning there is currently no system used widely throughout the South to accurately assess how much students in this region have

²¹ [CIRCLE @ Tufts, 2020](#)

²² [Connecticut's Old State House, 2024,](#)

²³ [Connecticut Secretary of the State, 2024](#)

actually retained from their civic courses. Furthermore, due to the unstandardized nature of exams, the validity of some of these exams could be questioned without regional entities ensuring that all students are civically educated and assessed in similar ways.

Many schools in the South and Southeast that currently do not have civic engagement or political education would like to, but funding inequities, particularly for public schools, can make it difficult to start such initiatives. According to the Southern Poverty and Law Center report 'Inequity in School Funding', using their funding effort index, Florida, Louisiana, Tennessee and Texas make a lower-than-average effort to fund schools; Alabama and Georgia make average effort; and Arkansas and Mississippi make above-average effort. Additionally, the report's Figure 2 includes a funding distribution chart that shows every one of the aforementioned states besides Georgia, Mississippi, and Arkansas fund their higher poverty districts less than their lower-poverty districts. Essentially, the severe issue with funding education not always being a priority of Southern states means that civic education is simply in impossibility for many schools.

Examining a singular facet of the issue, this is problematic for its lack of preparing young Southerners to be active, well-informed civic participants. Particularly because of these funding inequities, however, lower-income families are disproportionately affected. Not only will these children raised in lower-income areas not receive the political education they deserve, but going forward, this could also lead to the underrepresentation of individuals from these areas in Southern local and state political systems. Therefore, inequities in funding truly affect not only the political participation of our youth but also prevent them from being legislative and political advocates of the issues in their area if Southern schools are funded in a way that allows them to civically empower their students.

While funding inequities are arguably the biggest issue blocking the road to civic education today, many states still do make an effort to promote civic education specifically instead of reformulating funding. For example, Florida began a program called the Civics Seal of Excellence Program, a 40-hour course that has been launched as a part of the state's Civic Literacy Excellence Initiative. Teachers who complete the course receive a \$3,000 bonus, with 20,000 enrolled and 14,000 on the waiting list so far.

Many individual states have also launched their own civics-focused initiatives. In 2021, the Georgia General Assembly filed to create the Georgia Commission focused on civic

education. Ultimately approved by the state governor in 2022, the commission, composed of 15 members, is a bipartisan group dedicated to promoting governmental education, working with local entities to promote political education, and educating students about civic involvement. With its 15 members of diverse backgrounds and professions, the commission remains presently a strong advocate for civic engagement and a powerful force in rallying community support for political education.

2.2.2 Historical and Political Context

In recent years, the Southeast and South of the United States have made significant strides in implementing mandatory civic education, recognizing its potential impact on youth voting and civic engagement. Florida, for example, passed legislation in 2021 requiring high school students pursuing public post-secondary education to complete a civic literacy course and assessment as a graduation requirement.²⁴ This move reflects a growing awareness of the importance of civic education in fostering informed and engaged citizens.

However, challenges persist in presenting a comprehensive and balanced view of significant historical events in civic education curricula. Some educational materials struggle to address complex historical narratives, particularly regarding racial issues. This has led to varying understandings of American history and civic responsibilities among students in the region, highlighting the need for curricula that promote inclusivity and accuracy.²⁵ Despite these historical challenges, there's evidence of positive outcomes where civic education has been implemented, with studies showing increased political knowledge and likeliness of voting intentions among students who participate in such programs.

2.2.3 Educational Approaches

In the Southern and Southeastern U.S., states have a multitude of methods to implement civics into their educational curriculum.

One example is Teaching Tolerance, a program through the Southern Poverty Law Center. The organization's aim to convert tolerance into "a basic American Value" utilizes materials with deep civic contexts. The initiative has reached 500,000 educators

²⁴ [University of Florida, n.d.](#)

²⁵ [Georgia State University, n.d.](#)

with classroom resources, and funds projects that captivate youth with civics in action at a district, school, and classroom level.²⁶

In multiple states, including Georgia, students can earn a diploma seal to indicate their civic engagement. Four criteria must be met for students to qualify for the seal in Georgia. First, they must complete pre-approved civic engagement electives or pathways. They must pass the American Government Civic and Basic Skills test, an assessment similar to the U.S. Citizenship exam. Students must also complete fifty hours of community service, with at least fifteen of those hours being civic engagement activities. Finally, students should complete a capstone portfolio presentation of what they've learned in social studies, civics, or government classes.²⁷ Throughout all of this, Georgia ensures that students aiming to receive the Civic Engagement Diploma Seal have the ability to fulfill their civic duties in their communities.

Assessing students' aptitude for civics is important to gauge the learning outcomes of social studies and civics courses. Tennessee was one of the first states to leverage Local Education Agencies (LEAs), which states can require civics learning plans from, to track and assess students' knowledge in civics. LEA assessments are formulated to measure the civics learning objective within the state's social studies curriculum.²⁸

Civic engagement doesn't happen just in a classroom setting. Delaware House Bill 175 allows students from sixth to twelfth-grade one excused absence to civic engagements including political sites, such as the United States Capitol or Legislative Hall, and locations of cultural significance, allowing for students' attendance at rallies, marches, protests, or walkouts.²⁹ At events like these, students will get the opportunity to engage in civics in a different way that can't be experienced with pen and paper or in a classroom.

2.2.4 Example Initiatives

While these are the most notable of recent public proceedings regarding bolstering civic education, many Southern and Southeastern states have made many strides towards supporting civic education and must continue to do so in order to equip future voters with the foundational knowledge and resources they need to remain involved in our country's democratic proceedings. Moving forward, there are a multitude of initiatives Southern states can undertake to promote civic education.

²⁶ [Shapiro and Brown, 2018](#)

²⁷ [Thompson, 2023](#)

²⁸ [The Council of State Governments, n.d.](#)

²⁹ [Delaware General Assembly, 2021](#)

The creation of programs such as Florida's Civic Excellence Initiative are certainly impactful efforts to promote civic education. However, if underlying funding efforts are not addressed, it is a temporary fix to a larger problem that can only be fixed with a reassessment of funding allocation and budget revision to increase funding for education as a whole. This revision, if needed, can also include funding specifically for political education to ensure that at least some funds are definitively being directed to civic education.

For those who have been able to receive civic education, many question what comes next or how exactly to put the political information that they have learned into practice. To address this, schools and local community centers should promote and establish programs that allow for opportunities for students to hone these civic skills. Potential activities could include voter registration work, poll working, replication of programs like Georgia's Secretary of State Ambassador Initiative⁶, etc.

Many states in the Southern and Southeastern United States are heavily politically polarized. Civic education, however, should be a non-partisan endeavor with bi-partisan support. Regardless of party, to raise engaged citizens, legislators have the obligation to support initiatives focusing on political education and should establish individual commissions/focus groups to address this topic. Particularly if these groups have bipartisan members, they can be incredibly impactful throughout the legislative process in ensuring that civic education is defended and promoted.

2.3 Midwest

2.3.1 Background Context for Midwestern States

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics defines the Midwest region of the United States as follows:³⁰ Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

As of 2024, Nebraska³¹ is the only midwestern state that doesn't require mandatory civic education in schools. Both Illinois,³² Michigan,³³ and South Dakota require all high

³⁰ [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)

³¹ [Kario Yorio, 2020](#)

³² [Illinois Social Science Standards, 2015,](#)

³³ [The Michigan Coalition on Civic Education, 2006](#)

school students to take a civics course,³⁴ while Indiana requires the civics course to be taken in sixth grade.³⁵ Just this past April, the Iowa Senate passed a bill mandating all schools implement more rigorous standards of civic education by covering U.S. historic events more in detail³⁶. In Minnesota,³⁷ juniors and seniors in high school must study civic education to complete their social studies credits; the state repealed their mandatory civics test in 2023.³⁸ Ohio students must earn a Citizenship Seal to graduate high school, which can be done by passing a civics or American government class.³⁹ Finally, Indiana, North Dakota, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin require high schoolers to pass a standardized civics test to graduate.⁴⁰

2.3.2 Historical and Political Context

Throughout history, the Midwest has neglected to incorporate civic education in schools as states like Indiana and Illinois just recently added a semester-long mandatory civic education class for middle schoolers. Indiana would be the 2nd state in the midwest region to enact the policy, which is H.B.1384.⁴¹ They have faced many problems with past implementations like tight budgets, inadequate curriculum, and inadequate teacher training. Especially, in the state of Illinois, they are inputting a curriculum that is pedagogical into the civics legislation.⁴² Midwestern states are putting improved efforts into mandating civic education programs as social trends and data show that civic education is crucial to diversifying the historical lens and increasing historical knowledge.

2.3.3 Educational Approaches

The Midwest has taken a variety of approaches to enhance civic education for the youth. More specifically, the Midwest tends to approach civic education in such a way that they mix both formal and informal educational approaches to attempt to get a balance of an effective way to teach students civics concepts from several different angles.

³⁴ [SDBP Staff, 2023](#)

³⁵ [Appleton, 2024](#)

³⁶ [Opsahl, 2024](#)

³⁷ [Larson, 2023](#)

³⁸ [Teaching Civics, 2023](#)

³⁹ [Circle TUFTS, 2012](#)

⁴⁰ [Jeffrey & Sargrad, 2019](#)

⁴¹ [Anderson, 2021](#)

⁴² [CIRCLE @ Tufts, 2020](#)

Illinois approaches education in a way that follows that trend. While they do have formal education that is typical of states in the US, such as history and economics education, they also mix in informal processes as well. This involves things like “democratic simulations” in which students take a hands-on approach to understanding how various democratic procedures take place in the real world. Enacted in 2022, Illinois also has a requirement in which schools must teach media literacy, which is one way in which Illinois is adapting to changing times outside of their informal methods of civics education.⁴³

Michigan also demonstrates the aforementioned trend, but noticeably, Michigan tends to take more of an informal community approach. For example, one of their premier programs is Project Community which asks students to work together to identify an issue in their local community and then proceed to research and understand more about that issue. This makes students research and work together, both of which are critical to effective civics education.⁴⁴ That, paired with formal education, which most states tend to have, gives Michigan relative success in terms of effectively teaching their students essential civics concepts.

2.3.4 Example Initiatives

A research study from the American Education Research Journal studied 52 high schools with predominantly low-income students of color in Chicago, with the focus on answering whether classroom civic learning opportunities impacted students’ commitment to civic participation.⁴⁵ Kahne and Sporte found that while high school civic learning opportunities were beneficial, there was no substantial evidence to suggest that general academic requirements (state civic tests) in civic education significantly increased political participation. Instead, the type of curriculum that was most effective in political participation in Chicago was experiential learning opportunities like open dialogue and community service. Their results proposed that mainstream civic education programs were inadequate in extensively promoting civic development for youth. Rather, students were more likely to engage civically and politically when they grew up in a neighborhood that supported their voices.

Another research study done on college students residing in a Midwestern University pointed to a different conclusion.⁴⁶ Krings, Autistic, Gutierrez, and Dirksen assessed 653

⁴³ [ICH, n.d.](#)

⁴⁴ [Michigan Center for Civics Education, n.d.](#)

⁴⁵ [Kahne & Sporte, 2008](#)

⁴⁶ [Krings et al., 2015](#)

college students' change in "political participation, civic engagement, and multicultural activism" after taking a social justice education course. These courses were taught with three different methods: "service learning, intergroup dialogue, and lecture-based diversity classes". While each type of social justice course had different results on students, one finding was clear: after taking any one of these courses, there was an increase in participation in politics and activism.

These two contrasting results demonstrate the inconsistency in the impact of mandatory civic education. These two research studies suggest that change in youth political participation largely depends on student environment, curriculum type, and level of education.

2.4 West

Mandatory civic education across Western states has proven to be instrumental in boosting youth political participation by equipping and preparing young people with the knowledge and skills needed to engage effectively in the political process. Giving students the resources and political/civic education in school ensures that they will have the confidence to participate and make informed decisions. Detailed examples and trends below from western states such as California, Washington, Colorado, Nevada, Oregon, and Arizona highlight the multifaceted impact of civic education on youth political engagement: Higher voter turnout, increased activism and advocacy, greater involvement in political and community life, etc.

2.4.1 Background Context for Western States

Mandatory civic education in Western states is part of a broader national effort to increase political engagement among young people. These states, characterized by diverse demographics and political landscapes, have implemented various civic education programs to address the growing concern of political disengagement among youth. Historically, Western states have faced unique challenges, such as large rural populations and varying levels of educational access, which influence how civic education is delivered and its effectiveness in fostering political participation. States within the West like Colorado and Idaho have vast civic engagement programs within their schools. These states both have year-long civic and government classes required to graduate⁴⁷. These programs allow students to understand basic civic concepts. The Western state's civic engagement programs vary by state and by state educational laws.

⁴⁷ [Center for American Progress, 2018](#)

Unfortunately, challenges still persist with civic education due to political issues, ongoing racial issues as it pertains to indigenous communities, and state variation of civic programs. For instance, integrating Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum remains a significant hurdle. A 2019 study revealed that of the 3,717 children's books received from U.S. publishers, only 43, which amounts to only 1.2 percent, were about Indigenous people. This shows the severe lack of representation in educational materials.⁴⁸ The Western States Civics Coalition has been working to address these disparities, in particular by putting on workshops for educators to give them a stronger foundation about civic education.⁴⁹ These efforts showcase how there have been efforts to improve civic education within Western states, even though issues continue to persist.

2.4.2 Historical and Political Context

The West has faced many issues, regarding education, that impact how well civic programs are able to work. Disparities in resources for teaching, differences in state policies for civic education, and needs for culturally responsible methods of teaching are some of the challenges. The region is characterized by variations in educational resources, with low income schools frequently lacking the resources to deliver comprehensive civic education. The resource gap may result in unequal opportunities for students to take part in civic learning and acquire the required skills for active citizenship.⁵⁰ The implementation of civic education differs widely throughout the Western United States because of state policies which differ widely. Various states have varying graduation requirements for specific civics courses, leading to variations in civic knowledge and engagement among students⁵¹. The Western United States features a diversified student population that demands culturally sensitive teaching techniques. Curricula must reflect the cultural backgrounds of students and teaching techniques must be engaging and inclusive, requiring educators to create such curricula. This method will help bridge the gap between students' lived experiences and the civic ideas being taught⁵². The answer to the educational issues in the Western United States is a complex one involving fair distribution of resources, uniform state policies on civic education and culturally responsive teaching strategies.

⁴⁸ [New America, 2022](#)

⁴⁹ [pdEnroller, 2022](#)

⁵⁰ [MIT Press Direct, 2013](#)

⁵¹ [Brookings, 2018](#)

⁵² [Kavadias, 2020](#)

2.4.3 Educational Approaches

Civic education programs in the Western United States have frequently integrated experiential learning techniques that involve students in democratic processes. Voter registration drives, simulated elections and community service projects are among the methods used to boost awareness of civic responsibilities. For example, the "We the People" program, put into action in states like California as well as Oregon, emphasizes constitutional awareness through simulated congressional hearings, enabling students to apply their learning in practical settings⁵³. Generation Citizen along with other civic education groups have collaborated with school districts throughout Washington and California to supply project - based, community focused education. Their curriculum challenges students to address local problems, promoting active participation in community problem solving⁵⁴. The educational strategies are designed to focus on the varied needs of urban centres, rural towns and indigenous populations in the Western states, leading to comprehensive and relevant civic education for all students.

2.4.4 Example Initiatives

The California Student Mock Election, an initiative organized by the California Secretary of State, has played a significant role in increasing youth voter registration and participation⁵⁵. In schools across the state, mock elections provide students with hands-on experience in voting, simulating the actual electoral process. These activities have led to increased interest in civic engagement among students, many of whom have gone on to participate in real voter registration drives. For instance, the 2018 midterm elections saw a substantial increase in voter turnout among young Californians⁵⁶, which was partly attributed to youth-led voter engagement efforts that were inspired by their participation in mock elections

In Washington State, mandatory civic education has inspired students to take an active role in environmental advocacy. One prominent example is the participation of high school students in the Global Climate Strike in 2019. These students, many of whom had received civic education that emphasized environmental issues and the importance of civic responsibility, organized and led local strikes and advocacy efforts. Their actions contributed to a bigger youth movement that pushed for stronger environmental policies at the state level⁵⁷.

⁵³ [Civic Education, 2024](#)

⁵⁴ [Generation Citizen, 2024](#)

⁵⁵ [California Secretary of State, 2024](#)

⁵⁶ [James Irvine Institute, 2019](#)

⁵⁷ [Youth.gov, 2020](#)

In Colorado, civic education programs that combine service-learning projects have encouraged students to engage in community-focused political action. For instance, students in Denver Public Schools have worked on projects addressing local issues like homelessness⁵⁸, which often culminate in presentations to local government officials. This hands-on approach has led to increased youth participation in local governance, with many students continuing to engage in political activism beyond their school projects. The idea is to take control of it earlier so that the problem decreases later on for the political sake

Moreover, due to effective civic education programs, Nevada has seen an increase in youth voter turnout, particularly in urban areas like Las Vegas. These programs often include voter education workshops as part of the curriculum, which have led to higher rates of voter registration among high school students⁵⁹. For example, the 2020 election saw a significant increase in youth voter participation, largely due to the groundwork laid by these civic education initiatives

In Oregon, students who have participated in civic education have taken the lead in political advocacy, particularly in supporting ballot measures. A notable instance was during the 2020 election cycle, where students played a key role in advocating for Measure 109⁶⁰ (which legalized psilocybin therapy)⁶¹. Their involvement included organizing rallies, educating voters, and even providing testimony, demonstrating a direct impact of civic education on political participation .

Civic education has fostered a new generation of politically active youth in Arizona, especially in smaller communities. Programs in Tucson have led to high school students joining local youth advisory councils⁶², where they influence decisions on important issues like public transportation and youth employment. This engagement is a direct result of comprehensive civic education that emphasizes the importance of local governance⁶³.

Hawaii's civic education includes participation in the "We the People" competition, where students engage in simulated congressional hearings⁶⁴. This experience has motivated students to engage in civic activities and discussions about local and national policies.

⁵⁸ [Clasen & Davis, 2021](#)

⁵⁹ [Murray, 2023](#)

⁶⁰ [Turner, 2020](#)

⁶¹ [Ballotpedia, 2020](#)

⁶² [Tucson Mayor's Youth Council, n.d.](#)

⁶³ [Government of Maricopa County, 2024](#)

⁶⁴ [Hawaii Business Magazine, 2019](#)

3. Policy Options

Policy Proposal 1: Mandatory Civic Education Course Requirements

Mandatory civics courses at the state level are a key component of enhancing civic education. In order to ensure students keep up to pace with the ever-changing political landscape, all 50 states need at least one full-year civics or U.S. government course for high school graduation. This requirement would build on existing policies in 9 states⁶⁵ —Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia—, ensuring that all students receive a comprehensive civics education before they are eligible to vote. The middle school mandate is strategically timed to provide students with civic knowledge and skills before they can pre-register to vote at age 16 in many states. Starting civic learning is crucial for building a strong foundation and fostering a lifelong sense of civic responsibility.⁶⁶ It is also crucial for elections, as research from Tufts University shows high schoolers who were both encouraged to vote and taught how to register in high school voted at a rate 7 percentage points higher in the 2016 and 2018 elections compared to students who didn't receive either type of support.⁶⁷ Implementation of this policy would involve working closely with state legislatures and boards of education to pass these mandates. A model legislation could be drafted at the federal level to guide states in crafting their own requirements. To support implementation, the federal government could provide grants to states and districts for curriculum development and teacher training. Setting a 5-year timeline for all states to have these requirements in place would create a sense of urgency while allowing sufficient time for thorough implementation.

Policy Proposal 2: Develop National Civic Education Standards

To promote consistent, high-quality civic education across all states, this proposal suggests creating comprehensive K-12 civic education standards akin to the Common Core State Standards for math and English language arts (ELA). These standards would

⁶⁵ [Godsay et al., 2012](#)

⁶⁶ [Winthrop, 2020](#)

⁶⁷ [CIRCLE @ Tufts, 2020](#)

specify the basic civic information, skills, and dispositions that children should acquire at each grade level. The standards would include important issues including the Constitution, branches of government, civil rights, media literacy, and civic involvement. Crucially, they would stress practical learning and real-world application of civic information, rather than rote memorization, in order to cultivate actual civic competency.

Policy Proposal 3: Civic Education Teacher Training and Certification

The success of any civic education project is ultimately dependent on well-prepared teachers. This policy proposal proposes requiring all social studies instructors to complete extensive civics and government training as part of their certification requirements. It also proposes developing a specialist civic education teaching credential for educators who desire to focus solely on this topic. The proposal also requires all social studies instructors to receive ongoing professional development in civics to ensure they are up to date on best practices and developing civic issues. To encourage more people to work in civic education, scholarships and loan forgiveness programs would be provided for teachers who commit to teaching civics.

Implementation would entail collaborating closely with teacher training programs at colleges and universities to improve civic education courses. State education agencies would be required to set new certification requirements and exams for civic education specialists. Existing instructors could benefit from a series of online training modules designed to help them obtain additional civics certifications. Funding for these efforts could come from both federal and state sources. The federal government could establish a separate funding stream for civic education teacher preparation, while states could designate a portion of their teacher professional development budgets for civics training.

Policy Proposal 4: Project-Based Civic Learning Experiences

Research continually reveals that hands-on, real-world activities are the most effective way for children to learn civics. This policy proposal suggests incorporating project-based learning components into civic education curricula across the country. Specifically, the policy would require all high school students to complete a significant civic action project as part of their civics education. This could include identifying a community issue, researching viable solutions, and taking action to address it. The proposal also calls for an appropriate amount of service learning hours related to civics classes, allowing students to interact directly with community organizations and government institutions.

Implementing this policy would entail creating a menu of approved civic engagement project ideas for schools to pick from or use as models. To ensure that teachers consistently evaluate these projects, assessment rubrics would need to be developed. Schools would be encouraged to form collaborations with local governments, non-profit organizations, and corporations to give students with a variety of civic involvement options. To assist instructors in conducting these projects, professional development programs in civic education will emphasize project-based learning methodologies. This might include workshops, online courses, and the establishment of a nationwide network of civic education teachers to share best practices.

Policy Proposal 5: Civic Education Funding Streams

Providing high-quality civic education nationwide will necessitate committed funding. This policy proposal suggests establishing numerous new financing streams exclusively for civic education programs. First, it proposes establishing a federal Civic Education Block Grant program for states. This will allow states to use flexible funds to establish civic education programs suited to their specific needs. The grant scheme may be structured after existing federal education block grants, with the condition that states match a portion of the funding and report on results. Second, the proposal calls for increasing the eligible uses of existing federal education money, such as Title I and Title II grants, to include civic education activities. This would allow school districts to devote more resources to civic education without requiring more financing. Third, the program suggests creating a national endowment for civic education, akin to the National Endowment for the Arts or the Humanities. This endowment would provide a steady stream of funds for civic education research, program creation, and implementation. Finally, the proposal suggests providing tax breaks for private contributions to civic education programs. This could increase philanthropic and business sponsorships, supplementing governmental money. Implementing these funding options will necessitate government legislation to establish new programs and amend existing ones. In addition, the Department of Education would be responsible for managing new grant programs and offering guidelines on how to use monies for civic education.

Policy Proposal 6: Civic Education Technology and Resources

The establishment of a national online repository for civic education resources is a key component of this idea. This comprehensive database would contain lesson plans, interactive exercises, primary source documents, and assessment tools that are all consistent with national civic education requirements. Teachers around the country might have free access to these tools, which would help to assure consistent, high-quality civic education regardless of a school's location or resources. The policy

also calls for major funding to develop interactive civics applications and games for classroom usage. These digital tools would engage pupils by simulating government procedures, interactively exploring historical events, and gamifying civic principles. These resources, when combined with technology, can make civic education more engaging and relevant to digital-native children. To stimulate civic education innovation, the plan calls for the establishment of a national civic education technology innovation fund. This fund will provide grants to educators, researchers, and technology developers to develop innovative civic learning tools and methodologies. The implementation of this strategy would begin with the formation of a team of education technology specialists, civic educators, and instructional designers to identify critical needs in civic education technology. Partnerships with top education technology businesses could be developed to speed up the development of high-quality resources. The Department of Education might take the lead in developing and maintaining the national resource repository, ensuring that it complies with all criteria. A competitive grant mechanism for app and game development might be developed, with bids evaluated on their potential effect and scalability. To guarantee that these resources reach schools, the policy calls for incorporating civic tech tools into teacher training programs and offering professional development on how to use them effectively. This would help to guarantee that teachers are comfortable and proficient with these new technologies and that they can effortlessly integrate them into their lessons.

Policy Proposal 7: Civic Education Assessment and Accountability

Expanding the administration of the NAEP Civics Assessment to all states is an important step. Currently, this evaluation provides the most comprehensive national statistics on students' civic awareness, although it is not widely administered. By requiring all states to participate, policymakers and educators would have a consistent national benchmark for civic learning. The plan also advocates including civics measures into state accountability systems under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This could entail adding civics assessment results into school performance indicators in the same way that math and reading scores are now used. By including civics into school accountability, this approach would increase its relevance in the curriculum. To go beyond standard testing, the idea suggests building performance-based assessments of civic abilities and dispositions. These tests would examine students' capacity to apply civic knowledge in real-world circumstances, evaluate information sources, engage in civil discourse, and display other important civic skills. This approach is consistent with the emphasis on experience learning in previous approaches. Finally, the policy would compel schools to include civic learning opportunities and outcomes in their regular reports to state and federal education

organizations. This data could include information on civic course offers, student participation in service learning, and civic assessment outcomes. Implementing this program would necessitate extensive collaboration between federal and state education agencies. The National Assessment Governing Board, which governs the NAEP, would need to collaborate with states to broaden the Civics Assessment. Under ESSA, the Department of Education would be responsible for providing recommendations on adding civics into state accountability systems. To create new performance-based tests, a group of assessment professionals, civic educators, and researchers would need to be assembled. These assessments would need to be piloted and polished before being used on a large basis. Educators would also benefit from training on how to administer and understand these new exams. To support reporting on civic learning opportunities and outcomes, existing education data systems at the state and federal levels must be adapted to include appropriate civic education measures. Schools and districts would need clear criteria for what data to collect and how to disclose it.

Policy Proposal 8: Youth Civic Engagement Incentives

This policy proposal seeks to encourage youth civic engagement outside of the classroom, acknowledging that civic learning and participation frequently extend into the larger society. A daring proposal is to reduce the voting age to 16 for local elections. This would allow young people to start participating in the political process while still in high school, where they might get help and education on voting. Several localities in the United States have already implemented this move, serving as models for widespread adoption [add citation about cities that have lowered voting age]. The proposal also calls for automatically registering students to vote when they obtain a driver's license or state ID. This "motor voter" technique for adolescents would greatly improve voter registration rates, eliminating a major barrier to participation. To better connect civic education to real-world action, the policy advice gives students course credit for volunteering on political campaigns or in government offices. This will encourage students to obtain practical experience with the political process and government operations. Finally, the plan suggests establishing a nationwide youth civic participation fellowship program. This initiative would choose high school and college students from across the country to work on civic projects in their areas, with the assistance and supervision of civic leaders. Implementing these policies would necessitate a combination of state and federal action. Lowering the voting age in local elections is normally a state or municipal decision, but federal incentives may encourage adoption. Automatic voter registration could be accomplished by coordinating with state motor vehicle authorities and election offices. Federal rules for course credit and fellowship programs could be set, with implementation taking place at the state and municipal

level. The Department of Education might take the lead in developing the fellowship program, collaborating with civic organizations to give placements and supervision to fellows.

4. Conclusion

Civic education policy reforms are comprehensive, educational, and effective for students living in the United States. Civic education allows for knowledge of the government and the ability for citizens' involvement within it. Expansive civic education has the potential to increase political participation by young people, but its current status is nonstandard and varies widely from state to state. Mandating civic education through set and specific guidelines will allow for increased political knowledge and help ensure youth involvement in politics. This will develop skills applicable to citizenship, career, and future. Specifically, civic knowledge is at a low throughout the country. With less than 1 in 5 eighth-grade students proficient in civics and political polarization reported at all-time highs, civic education is clearly needed. Currently, only 9 states require one full year of civic education. 10 states have no civic education requirement at all. Despite its limited reach, civic education is shown to have many positive effects. These include but are not limited to an increase in knowledge about government, a higher likelihood of voting, and the ability to better understand and protect democratic norms and values. There are many policies that would prove beneficial to increasing civic education. Expanding civic education to a nationwide requirement would expand the benefits of civic education to more students. As well as incentivizing schools to require civics, national standards would allow for measurable benchmarks in improved civic education. Furthermore, lowering the mandatory voting age would increase the ability of young adults to better engage in, and hence understand, the voting system, setting them up for future elections, and making sure civic learning is thriving in present and future generations. This is crucial for the maintenance of not only the political system but the country as a whole.