Research Summary

KNOWLEDGE AND COGNITIVE SKILLS

Authored by the Center for Educational Equity, Teachers College, Columbia University

Definitions

Civic knowledge starts with an understanding of the structure of government and the processes of lawmaking and policy-making, but a broader, deeper knowledge of history, politics, economics, and other disciplines is necessary to comprehend the wide range of issues that citizens face. The National Assessment Governing Board has delineated five major areas of civic knowledge focused on America’s political institutions, political values, and role in international politics. Research has shown that students with more years of education tend to vote more often and take a more active role in civic affairs, although a clear causal link between taking civics or other specific courses and greater civic involvement has not been clearly established.

Scholars note that the development of civic knowledge and subsequent participation in civic life depends heavily on the instructional practices used and the skills developed to support this learning. They emphasize that effective political participation requires well-developed verbal and cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, effective communication, and self-directed learning beyond basic content. Beginning in 1996, Niemi, Junn

1 With edits from Dr. Peter Levine, Tufts University
4 Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, “Civic Education and Deeper Learning,” Jobs for the Future, 2015,
and Stehlik-Barry argued that verbal cognitive skills were perhaps the most relevant to democratic citizenship, noting that politics relies heavily on language utilization and debate. In 2011, a group of 33 scholars, civic leaders, and federal officials developed and endorsed the following list of skills, which are critical to preparing students to be capable citizens:

- Speaking and listening
- Collaborating, organizing fellow citizens
- Understanding formal politics
- Advocacy

Information gathering and processing
Technology
Verbal empowerment

### Civic Knowledge and Skills: Research Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Niemi and Junn examined NAEP civic exam scores and found that civics coursework only had a modest effect on political knowledge.</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>Mierick and Wackman showed that some program evaluations have provided more evidence of the effectiveness of curriculum-specific civic programs on political knowledge than standard civics or social studies courses.</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>McDevitt and Kiousis found positive effects from the Kids Voting USA curriculum on political knowledge, discussion, and propensity to vote.</td>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>Hart et al. concluded that the number of high school civics courses taken by students had only a weak, positive relationship with adolescent civic knowledge, and the number of social studies courses had a weak, positive association with civic engagement in early adulthood.</td>
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5 Niemi, Junn & Stehlik-Barry, note 2, supra, pp. 41–42.


7 Danielle Allen emphasizes that participatory readiness demands verbal empowerment—reading, writing, and interpreting the world around us. Allen, Education and Equality, p. 40.


2008 Campbell found that classrooms that encourage open discussion of political issues promote civic learning and engagement.\textsuperscript{12}

2010 Through randomized experiments, Sondheimer and Green concluded that education attainment had a positive relationship with voter turnout.\textsuperscript{13}

2011 Green et al. collaborated with the Bill of Rights Institute to create a civics curriculum that they randomly assigned to 1,000 high school students. They found that: 1) In classrooms that made use of the curriculum, knowledge of civil liberties was significantly higher, but the knowledge dissipated one year and two years; 2) The curriculum had no effect, positive or negative on general knowledge about politics; 3) The curriculum had no effect on support for civil liberties, as measured in three post-treatment surveys.\textsuperscript{14}

2016 Campbell and Niemi found that civics testing requirements lead to more civic knowledge, with particularly strong effects for Latinos and recent immigrants.\textsuperscript{15}

2017 Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg found that pedagogical practices mattered in the teaching of civics: “Students who take [courses on civics, government, law, and related topics] are better informed and more likely to vote, so long as the courses use recommended pedagogies.”\textsuperscript{16}

**Assessment of Civic Knowledge and Skills**

- **NAEP Civics Test**

  Educational testing in the last few decades has emphasized scores from standardized testing in English Language Arts and mathematics, while assessment in social studies, civics and other disciplines have received substantially less attention.\textsuperscript{17}


The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics test assesses understanding of a narrow set of civic knowledge, and it has not been consistently implemented—in 2013, the NAEP Civics Assessment was canceled because of budget cuts, while other NAEP assessments were maintained.18

Despite the limitations of the NAEP test, results have provided some data for researchers who study the impact of state policies and classroom practices on learning. Using results from the 2006 and 2010 NAEP civics test and a large national survey of 18-24 year-olds, Campbell and Niemi found that simply adding a statewide high-stakes civics requirement had a relatively low impact on NAEP civic exam scores, but that it most improved the scores of Latinos and immigrants.19

Kawashima-Ginsberg examined the use of promising practices such as discussion, debate and simulation in classrooms and their effects on NAEP test scores, and found that as an overall trend, 12th graders were likely to benefit from these practices, while findings were mixed, in some cases negative, for 4th graders.20

- **State Standards**

  State standards vary widely across the country. Many only include a one-course requirement for civics, and others include civics themes in their general social studies standards. Those states that provide assessments in this area tend to test a very narrow understanding of civic knowledge, often just a multiple choice test of basic facts.21 In order to encourage states to emphasize higher-order thinking skills and critical analytic approaches to civics and social studies, 15 national professional organizations collaborated on the College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for

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Social Studies State Standards. Most states, however, have not adopted these standards. Many state social studies standards still largely reflect an approach to civic knowledge that emphasizes the structure and functions of government rather than critical analysis and active civic participation. Research on specific areas of civic knowledge has shown that state standards very rarely go into enough depth in areas such as the study of political parties and ideology.

Twenty-seven states now require high school students to pass some version of the hundred-question multiple-choice test administered to individuals applying to become naturalized citizens, a policy that has been promoted by the Joe Foss Institute. Some leaders in the field have questioned whether this test is sufficient for the task, noting the limitations of such a standardized test in providing a full measure of preparation for participation in civic life.

**Recommendations for Assessing Civic Knowledge and Skills**

Assessment measures should reflect a broader understanding of knowledge and skills and incorporate the importance of civic experiences. In 2013, CIRCLE published the following recommendations for assessment in civics:

- “Experiment with assessments of civic skills that use portfolios of students’ work instead of standardized tests;”
- “Implement high school course requirements with valid assessments that measure higher-order skills and the application of knowledge. Courses should specifically instruct students in registration and voting processes and engage students in following the news and deliberating about issues.”

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• Recommendations for Research

The literature on the impact of civic education on civic engagement is mixed, but some scholars have argued that these findings may reflect methodological limitations rather than the reality of the results that stem from students gaining knowledge in this area.27 Supporting research that uses long-range longitudinal studies and randomized experiments can provide more accurate results.


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