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America 101

How we let civic education slide—and why we need a crash course in the Constitution today.

Starting this October, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service will administer a new test for immigrants seeking American citizenship. The test is intended to be harder and more relevant than its predecessors. Replacing many of the more easily learned (and senseless) fact questions—"What are the colors of the flag?" "What colors are the stars on our flag?"—is a more meaningful series of questions about America's constitutional democracy. Heralded as a real measure of "what makes an American citizen," this new test asks, for example, "What is the supreme law of the land?" "What does the Constitution do?" "The idea of self- government is in the first three words of the Constitution. What are these words?" and "What is the rule of law?"

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From the Framers onward, Americans have always considered civic literacy critical for a thriving democracy. "[A] well-instructed people alone can be permanently a free people," noted James Madison, the father of the Constitution and fourth president, in 1810. Americans continue to agree. A 1997 survey by the National Constitution Center (NCC) found that 84 percent of Americans believed that for the government to work as intended, citizens needed to be informed and active. Three-quarters of those polled claimed that the Constitution mattered in their daily lives, and almost as many people thought the Constitution impacted events in America today.

Yet, despite this nod to civic literacy, too few Americans could answer the questions on the citizenship test or similar questions. Forty-one percent of respondents to the NCC national survey were not aware that there were three branches of government, and 62 percent couldn't name them; 33 percent couldn't even name one. Over half of all those answering the NCC survey did not know the length of a term for a member of the Senate or House of Representatives. And another NCC study found that while 71 percent of teens knew that "www" starts an online web address, only 35 percent knew that "We the People" are the opening words of the Constitution. A study by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute found that "the average college senior knows astoundingly little about America's history, government, international relations and market economy, earning an 'F' on the American civic literacy exam with a score of 54.2 percent."

Things weren't always this way; civics and current events courses were once common, even required, in American schools. But since the late 1960s, civic education in the country has declined. The main culprit in this sad tale is our educational system. "Civic education in the public schools has been almost totally eclipsed by a preoccupation with preparing the workforce of a global economy," writes former Harvard University President Derek Bok. "Most universities no longer treat the preparation of citizens as an explicit goal of their curriculum." The congressionally required National Assessments of Educational Progress confirms Bok's point. A 1988 report found significant drops in civic knowledge since 1976; another in 2002 found "that the nation's citizenry is woefully undereducated about the fundamentals of our American Democracy." And while some have questioned the continuousness of the decline, there is little dispute with the troubling, perhaps ironic, conclusion: As the role of government has enormously expanded over the last 80 years, and as our voting rolls have opened to more and more groups of people, efforts to prepare our citizens for their civic responsibilities have fallen precipitously.

And this only addresses our basic civic literacy. Citizens still need a deeper understanding of the Constitution, an advanced set of knowledge to evaluate

the operation of our government and weigh its successes and failures. A more advanced set of questions might ask: What is the vision of human nature that underlies the Constitution? What is the primary task of American government? Does the Constitution favor process over product and, if so, why? What is a special interest group? How does the Constitution define the common good?

Our civic ignorance is putting our constitutional democracy at risk. It is a significant part of the willingness of Congress and the public to defer to executive claims of authority since 9/11, with little understanding of its negative constitutional consequences. More generally, as the government continues to expand into our daily lives, our very freedom depends upon every citizen's ability to understand and respond to it. Civic education, retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor recently noted, is our only hope for "preserving a robust constitutional democracy . . . The better educated our citizens are, the better equipped they will be to preserve the system of government we have." The only answer, then, is to reinject civic literacy into our educational system.

The ABCs of Civic Literacy

Preserving "a robust democracy," as Justice O'Connor called for, requires citizens to know and understand the Constitution, both its content and its context. At a minimum, every American should be able to answer every question asked of naturalized citizens in the new test, and they should know what their answers mean. For example, in this presidential election season, Americans should know that they vote for electors and not directly for the president, and why the Framers chose this method. Americans must also know the different branches of government, their respective governing roles, and why they have them.

But Americans must understand much more about the Constitution. What the Framers sent out from Philadelphia for ratification was more than just a description of the institutions and processes of a new government. It was a set of ideas and principles about government and democracy, the ones that have come to form our constitutional conscience.

The first is liberty. Initially, the idea of "liberty" held that Americans had a unique capacity to suppress self-interest for the public good in the conduct of public affairs. Through such "public virtue," Americans could live together harmoniously. Simple government was all they needed to protect their society from external threats and to regulate the behavior of those few miscreants who could not see the common need through the lens of their own self-interest. This attitude informed the Articles of Confederation, effectively depriving the Continental Congress of the power to unify or defend the country.

But by the Convention in 1787, that notion of liberty had proven unrealizable, even utopian. "We have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation," George Washington wrote in 1786, reflecting the chaos and oppression that had arisen from post independence experiment in simple majoritarian self-government. So the Framers recast the idea as a right to advocacy. This required that all of the nation's broad array of interests (as the Framers narrowly saw them) had to be represented in the nation's political processes. But it also demanded that for an interest to become law, it had to survive a complicated political process marked by a bicameral legislative body, separation of powers, and checks and balances. All of this required participation and debate, activities predicated on a robust civic literacy. The goal of the system was to protect liberty by thwarting majority impulses to dominate minorities.

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The Constitution, as first ratified, had no bill of rights; the Framers originally thought individual liberty could be protected through limiting federal powers and the complicated lawmaking processes the Constitution established. They also thought a bill of rights would offer little protection from a government intent on its violation (an observation often proven right by American history). But, during the ratification campaign, the Framers became convinced that a bill of rights was necessary both to further protect the liberty of Americans from majority politics and to assure ratification.

Liberty through representation also led to several other critical ideas captured by what one scholar has called "conflict within consensus." Self or group interests would be pursued within Congress, but within a consensus that we are bound to one another by our shared belief in our Constitution and its principles, that the realization of our self-interest cannot be the only measure of our government's legitimacy. From this flowed two other crucial ideas: compromise and tolerance. The Constitution itself was a set of compromises, and it assumed the vital need for compromise for the new government to function.

Through these principles—liberty, representation, compromise, tolerance—and their historical evolution, we formed our constitutional conscience. Madison described this as the "fundamental maxims of free Government," which become part of the "national sentiment" and "counteract the impulses of interest and passion." As with our own personal conscience, these principles must be first learned. And then they must be continuously relearned to resist the intense

impulses of self-interest. That is why President Franklin Roosevelt thought that the Constitution is "like the Bible, it ought to be read again and again." It is also why upon his departure from office in 1989, Ronald Reagan cautioned Americans, "If we forget what we did, we won't know who we are." This all-encompassing vision of civic literacy is demanding. But the fragility of our democracy requires no less.

Throughout American history, citizens have been able to constantly reinvigorate and expand freedom, but only through an understanding and appreciation of our Constitutional processes and values. That is how a Constitution that did not free the slaves or provide the vote to women could be used as an argument for abolition and universal suffrage. And this is how Martin Luther King, Jr. could come to Washington to collect on the promise of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution for civil rights for all Americans.

A Failing Grade

Was there ever a Golden Age of civic literacy? Probably not, at least in absolute terms. But whatever grades Americans got in civic literacy prior to the mid- 1960s, the last several decades have been clearly seen these grades fall. In the past, university presidents considered ways in which the college experience could train students as civic leaders, argues Bok. Indeed, civic literacy was promoted at every level of educational instruction, partially fueled by an obligation to help the waves of immigrants then entering the country become Americans. But over the last several decades there has been far less educational focus on citizenship.

Since the late 1960s, fewer and fewer schools require civics courses, and fewer include civic components in their American history courses. This is particularly true in schools with less-privileged student bodies. A Mills College study by Professors Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh points out that students in these schools are half as likely as students in wealthy school districts "to learn," for example, "how laws are made and how Congress works."

Several reasons account for this dangerous departure from past practices. One was a concern, beginning in the 1970s, that civic education equaled indoctrination and that civic pedagogy somehow conflicted with individual rights. Teaching about our constitutional democracy was seen, unfortunately, as imposing values on students. This was particularly true in the late 1960s, after the breakup of the grand postwar consensus and during the struggles of many groups to find their own group identities. Another reason was the view of political scientists that civics was "a low level subject matter" and that "students learned nothing from civics courses," according to Professors Richard Niemi and Julia Smith.

The same goes for current events classes. Those of us near or over 60 might remember the weekly classroom sessions in which the teacher led a discussion of what was going on in the world. These courses provided the opportunity to engage students in the larger world that they would soon enter and for which they would bear responsibility. They also provided students with the opportunity for critical thinking via the exploration of current events through a constitutional lens. After the 1960s, their abandonment is self-explanatory: Talking about current events became risky as the shared views of Americans became tattered. Heightened group self-involvement made reflection less possible and tension and anger inevitable. A discussion on topics such as the war in Vietnam, black power, women's rights, affirmative action, and even presidential politics was likely, at least in educators' eyes, to create disruptions rather than understanding.

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At the same time, we stopped engaging with one another in civil society. We withdrew from a broader vision of what makes us American and started focusing more on what makes us different. We became more and more isolated and more and more disconnected from our constitutional conscience.

Concern over the decline in civic literacy has prompted some school systems to reintroduce civics-like courses over the last 10 years. But these efforts have been sporadic, uneven, and obstructed by other priorities. That was Bok's point about civic education being eclipsed by workforce preparation. O'Connor makes a similar point: The current emphasis on science and math "has effectively squeezed out civics education because there is no testing for that anymore and no funding for that." And this is unrelated to the cracking of the American consensus; in this era of No Child Left Behind, everyone is left behind when it comes to the unquantifiable learning necessary for civic literacy.

Complacency is now the main problem. Despite Benjamin Franklin's oft-repeated response to a woman's question concerning the nature of the new government—"a republic, madame, if you can keep it"—most Americans have absolutely no concern about its endurance. "Of course the Republic will survive, how can it be otherwise? We have always been free, and we will always be free," I have heard more than a few people—educated, politically conscious people—say. I recently tested this issue with a class of mine. Almost all of these students thought we were experiencing a decline in civil liberties and growing challenges to our constitutional system. But when asked how many thought it

was even possible that today's democracy would be dramatically different 50 years hence, none said yes. They all thought that while there might be some reduced liberties and increased presidential power, none saw a democratic crisis ahead. Such complacency forecloses serious reform efforts. No crisis, no reform.

The Vices of Civic Ignorance

For most Americans, the connection between civic literacy and a healthy democracy is only rhetorical. If pressed, they would not know or appreciate what it means, nor would they concede that what they don't know does hurt them and all of us. But it does.

Two scholars, Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, detail this point in their 1996 study *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. They find that civic literacy provides meaningful understanding and support for a number of constitutional values, including compromise and tolerance, and promotes meaningful political participation. They also argue that "a better-informed citizenry places important limitations on the ability of public officials, interest groups, and other elites to manipulate public opinion and act in ways contrary to the public interest."

The opposite is also true: Civic ignorance denies us the context through which to understand and measure the conduct of our elected officials. It unleashes our natural instincts to measure governmental processes and decisions, in the present tense alone, through the screens of our own self-interests. It curtails our ability to consider what might be good for a larger community or for the country. This is the path to democratic decline—and we are on it.

Take, for example, the war on terrorism and the Iraq War. After 9/11, Americans became appropriately worried about more attacks, and in turn they have, as they did in the past, looked to the President for protection. And President George W. Bush, as have earlier Presidents, responded. But his response has been based on a unique claim of unprecedented constitutional powers to engage our troops, wiretap our citizens, and torture our prisoners. "Monarchial prerogatives," the Administration has labeled them. While the excessiveness of this view has roiled some of the Administration's own loyalists, there has been no retreat from its assertion. There has been no need to. Congress has not asserted itself against this claim, in part because they would not take such a confrontational step without broad public support. And Americans have not been forceful in demanding that Congress protect our constitutional system. While there are various reasons for the public's acquiescence, it is hard to posit that civic ignorance doesn't rank high among them.

The drop-off in civic literacy has also helped fuel the erosion of the national political consensus that drove the soaring successes of post-war America. During that period the federal government grew from a distant star in a far-off galaxy to the daily light of our political life. As Richard Nixon noted in his 1970 State of the Union address, "Ours has become—as it continues to be, and should remain a society of large expectations. Government helped to generate these expectations. It undertook to meet them." It undertook to meet them through responding to the consensus demands for a number of economic, civil, and environmental rights established through, for example, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and a broad expansion of environmental protections.

But by 1970, this grand consensus was only a memory. Its dissolution came about for many reasons, but it is no accident that it coincided with the decline in civic education and civic literacy. In fact, the two have driven each other—political dissolution made it harder to speak about American civics, but the lack of such discussion guaranteed that Americans, particularly students, would enter the world with a dimmer conception of American life and a shakier commitment to a community beyond their narrow self-interests. In this disharmony, the spirit of "we" was replaced by a culture of "me" (or, sometimes, "us," as groups vied for advantage). We were (and are) living through "the growth of a politics based upon narrow concerns, rooted in the exploitative divisions of class, cash, gender, region, ethnicity, morality and ideology—a give no quarter and take no prisoners activism that demands satisfaction and accepts no compromise," as David Frohnmayer, the President of the University of Oregon, put it.

The result is a culture and government that can make only halting progress. Lacking a deep sense of civic life, we demand things for ourselves and our group without an appreciation of the give-and-take inherent in American politics. The expectation the Framers had of "mutual concessions and sacrifices . . . mutual forbearance and conciliation" became replaced by a civically illiterate nation, unappreciative and unforgiving of a government that was not fulfilling their demands.

Reviving Civic Literacy

The goal of civic literacy is to continuously reinvigorate our democracy through the promotion of meaningful civic engagement. It requires knowledge of the Constitution, its history, and its values, as they have evolved. We have to understand the fragility of our democracy and our obligation to maintain it. The only place to start is with the public schools. Public schools have an obligation to teach children about our history and civic institutions including the Constitution.

This obligation trumps even math and science education: After all, what is the value of either math or science, if we don't have our democracy? Or as Amy Gutmann, the President of the University of Pennsylvania, asserted, "'political preparation'—the cultivation of virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for political participation—has moral primacy over other purposes of public education in a democratic society."

What would an effective civic literacy program look like? This is not a road untraveled. Many groups have spent considerable time exploring the question and have offered a variety of very good proposals. One area of agreement in all the studies is that civic education must start early. Many of the lessons we need to learn from the Constitution—participation, compromise, tolerance—must become part of our attitudes and conscience to have real impact. And the sooner the effort begins and the more often it is repeated, the better it works.

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Accordingly, sometime in fourth or fifth grade students should take their first civics-oriented course. This course should also include some basics of American history; call it the American Constitution I. It should introduce the structural details of the Constitution and their significance, as well as the basics of the Declaration of Independence. Students should start to learn about the various visions that inspired them and how they changed. Certainly students at this age can appreciate the important story about how addressing self-interest and passion became the focus of the Constitution. And they can follow why compromise and consensus is so important. After all, they are exploring these very same conflicts within themselves, a platform that could be used for these lessons. The course should also reference relevant current events to capture students' attention (for example, if it is in a presidential year, a lesson could start by a teacher asking whether the students know what the president does and what an election is and work from that into the Constitution).

More sophisticated versions of this same course, which would also be required, should be offered again in middle school and high school—American Constitution II and III. The essential goal is a deep understanding and appreciation of our Constitution, but the courses should also provide students with capacity for the critical examination of the system. A line of discussion might be the value of the electoral college today, or the relationship between the First Amendment and campaign finance reform.

Starting in middle school and continuing through high school, students should also be required to take classes in current events, at least four semesters over this six-year period. Here the goal is not just (or merely) a discussion of today's events, but to use current events as a means of giving life to the Constitution. A discussion of the Iraq War could be used to talk about war powers, executive powers, legislative powers, separation of powers, decision-making processes, and the role of the courts. Schools should also encourage and aid student participation in extracurricular campus or outside organizations, such as internships and service clubs. We need far greater emphasis throughout our society on community and national service. The vigor of our democracy requires this understanding of appreciation of our constitutional values, and while they must be taught in the class room, they can be experienced better outside it. Moreover, these classes should not be limited to the academically gifted. As professors Constance Flanagan, Peter Levine, and Richard Settersten demonstrate in a forthcoming work, the non-college-bound have the highest unemployment rates and the lowest voting rates among our population, and their departure from school marks the onset of their adulthood, diminishing their potential for civic engagement.

A Presidential Opportunity

The implementation of this or any such program will take hard work. Complacency about our democracy is its greatest enemy and, ironically, overcoming this complacency requires the very commitment to civic literacy that our complacency obstructs. This presidential election provides a great opportunity. Both candidates have demonstrated in their service and in their commitment to public service a unique understanding of the demands (bipartisan compromises, respect for the ideas of others, respect for our governing institutions) of our democracy. And both can translate their own learning and experience in these matters into a national discussion on civic literacy. If they don't, things probably will get worse. By all accounts, turnout among young voters is expected to be high, particularly for Barack Obama.

That said, high participation as a result of the appeal of a particular candidate can provide a platform for change, but is not change itself. In fact, it can have a negative effect. The candidate can lose, or he can win and then have to govern, making all the compromises necessary for an effective presidency. From either of these results, new voters will become disillusioned. Civic literacy pushes back against this response. A good civic education teaches that losing an election is not an excuse to disengage from the political system, that compromise is the currency of the system, that you have an obligation to remain involved, that you

have to keep pushing to succeed, and that you have to accept a decision resulting from a legitimate process, even if you don't like it.

America, unlike most of world's nations, is not a country defined by blood or belief. Rather, it is an idea, or a set of ideas, about freedom and opportunity. It is this set of ideas that binds us together as Americans. That's why these ideas have to be taught. Our understanding and appreciation of them is how we grade our civic literacy. We are now failing, and heading toward what the philosopher Michael Sandel has called a "story-less condition," in which "there is no continuity between present and past, and therefore no responsibility, and therefore no possibility for acting together to govern ourselves." We need civic education to reverse this course. **D**