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# Examining Civic Education Policy in the United States

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# Abstract

This paper seeks to explore issues of civic education in American schools and make recommendations based on best practices on civic education to encourage 21st century democratic skills, competencies, and behaviors. The authors explain how we know civic education is lacking due to our country's civic anemic health and low democratic participation. The author shares what solutions lead to effective civic education as well as what barriers stand in the way. The author concludes by making policy recommendations with an emphasis on national standardization, assessment, resource support, and experiential community-based learning.

**Problem Statement**

For the past half century, cross-generational youth between the ages of 18 - 29 eligible to vote have consistently and notoriously produced lower voter turnout rates, hovering around or below 50% since the Baby Boomers voted in their first election in 1972 (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2020). "This highlights that lower youth voting rates are not a sign of generational apathy, but of systemic barriers and issues with the culture of political engagement that have plagued young people of various generations for decades" (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2020).

## Millennials, Gen Xers, and Boomers Have Voted at Similar Rates When They Were The Same Age

The voter turnout in presidential elections of each generation (defined by birth years below) in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc. elections in which the entire age cohort (ages 18-24) was eligible to vote.

— Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964)  — Gen X (born 1965-1981)  — Millennials (born 1982-1994)
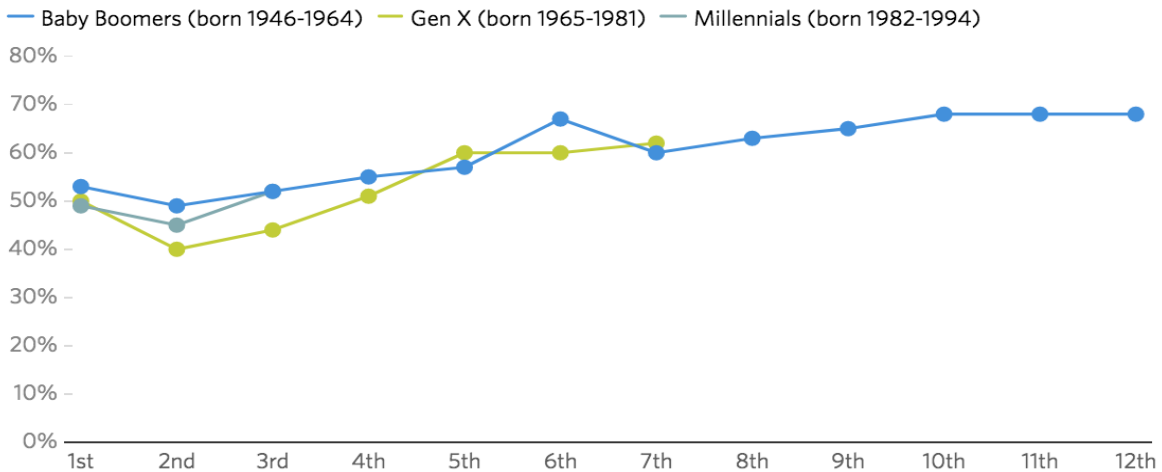


Note: For Boomers, the first presidential election was 1972, for Gen X it was 1992, and for Millennials it was 2008. We cannot yet produce the same analysis for Gen Z because some members of that generation are still ineligible to vote.

CIRCLE Tufts University Tisch College · CIRCLE
Source: CIRCLE's analysis of the Census Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement, 1972-2016

Over the years, CIRCLE researchers have found many reasons that might explain why youth are less likely to vote and be otherwise civically engaged. Findings suggest that youth feel disconnected from society and politics and do not feel confident enough in their civic literacy to

be engaged (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2020).

Youth need to be given opportunities for increased social capital as defined by Putnam to ensure

they feel a connection through relationships to their community and feel an increased sense of

investment in them. Youth need to develop a sense of belonging as defined by McMillan and

Chavis to increase the connection they feel to community. Power should be redistributed to youth

as it should be for members of all marginalized identities as discussed in Arnstein's Ladder of

Participation so that they feel more empowered to participate in the democratic process. To

become empowered, youth must have understanding of their own social identities and social

consciousness as described by Freire to increase real social issue salience and thus, bring

historical and theoretical civics lessons to life. Introducing critical service learning to civics

curriculum through policy may be a way to accomplish these goals. "Critical service-learning

practitioners interrogate systems and structures of inequality, question the distribution of power,

and seek to develop authentic relationships among students, faculty, and community partners"

(Mitchell 2008). Nevertheless, our country needs a national policy that centralizes a new kind of

holistic civic education that emphasizes community connection as well as youth social and

political consciousness for the sake of the integrity of our democracy.

As evidenced through decreased social capital and rates of civic engagement, our country

is failing to effectively provide a holistic civic education in schools across the country. Governor

Baker recently signed a new bill into law in 2018 that is meant to improve civics education by

mandating all eight graders complete a civics project (Moss, 2018). In a press release on the new

law, they announced,

> "These projects can be individual, small group, or class wide and they must be designed
>
> to promote student abilities related to the analysis of complex issues; consideration of

different perspectives; logical reasoning with supportive evidence; engagement in civil

discourse, and understanding of the connections between federal, state, and local policies,

including those that may impact the student's school or community" (Mass.gov).

In addition, Education Secretary James Peyser said,

"Civics education is about both learning and doing, and effective civic engagement is not

simply about advocacy or action, it's about listening, questioning, respectful dialogue,

and compromise,"said Education Secretary James Peyser. "In the end, civics should help

our young people develop a love of our Commonwealth and our country and the

democratic values they embody."

On the surface, it would appear as though education policy is heading in the right direction to

match learning with doing, a concept important in service-learning. However, this policy does

not mandate that projects help students build social capital, a sense of belonging, or build their

social or critical consciousness. We also know that there are structural barriers preventing youth

from engaging in the community in meaningful ways to build social capital and a sense of

belonging, as outlined in Arnstein's Ladder of Participation. Additionally, this policy exists only

in the state of Massachusetts. As of 2018, no states have adopted curriculum that include

experiential learning or community-engaged problem solving, two strategies that are known for

building skills and agency for civic engagement. (National Center for Education Statistics,

2020).  Furthermore, students tend to perform poorly on the AP U.S. Government test compared

with the majority of other AP tests (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

In regards to political consciousness, there is a lack of institutional support for K-12

educators to teach about basic government systems, due in part to larger biases against youth

participation in politics due to its sometimes inherently partisan nature. The Center for Research

for Civic Learning and Engagement, or CIRCLE is a nonpartisan, independent research organization based out of the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University. "CIRCLE research has found that "only 38% of social studies teachers believe they would get strong support from their district to teach about elections" (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2013, p. 11).

In addition, when it comes to civic education, "young people are special targets of suspicion. Commissioners are struck by the controversy about whether youth voting is desirable, and whether promoting it can be a nonpartisan goal" (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2013, p. 14). Furthermore, some institutions of higher education assume that students have had adequate basic civic education, but according to a 2013 report, "The educational reform movements of the last 20 years have generally overlooked civics, thereby allowing disparities to persist and grow. As the United States Department of Education acknowledged in 2012, 'unfortunately, civic learning and democratic engagement are add-ons rather than essential parts of the core academic mission in too many schools and on too many college campuses today'"(Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2013, p.16). A comprehensive holistic civics and political education is missing in our national education system, and where it has occurred, they are lacking in their ability to engage youth in deep and meaningful ways that build necessary civic competencies, values, and community connections.

To increase youth voter turnout rates and general civic participation, we need to develop a national civic education policy that centers educational pedagogy such as service learning that increases social capital, sense of belonging, critical consciousness as priorities in our education system without prioritizing concern for nonpartisanship. For example, Generation Citizen is an

organization that provides educational services around these holistic civic education principles.

A scholar criticized the program by saying it, "smuggles propaganda and vocational training for

progressive activism into K-12 schools and calls it 'action civics'" (Curran & Warren, 2020).

Part of the problem is that education cannot be fully apolitical due to the fact so many political

issues and beliefs are tied to human rights issues.

Without taking national action soon, our country will continue to be divided. We will fail

to build civic knowledge, skills, and appreciation for our democracy. "Strong civics education

and integrated voter engagement programs can help to address widespread alienation by

connecting voting to the issues that affect people's lives, by demystifying government, and by

educating people on the electoral process and inviting them to participate. If properly

implemented, these policies and practices have the potential to expand the electorate and to elect

representatives that are more reflective of and responsive to the American population" (Root &

Kennedy, 2018, para. 18).

"Studies suggest that robust community-integrated civics education programs that require

young people and their families to play an active role in learning about the electoral process,

developing issue salience, and building skills in debate and opinion expression can increase voter

participation among young people as well as other household members. According to CAP

research, the 10 states with the highest youth volunteer rates have a civics course requirement for

graduation" (Root & Kennedy, 2018, para. 93). Although people in positions of power tout the

importance of civic education and political consciousness, it is rare for them to discuss the

importance of social and critical consciousness or identity development in order to encourage

students to see themselves as members of society in the political process. In the civics section of

the National Assessment of Educational Progress, there is no mention of identity development or

inclusive practice. Instead, the Nation's report card instead emphasizes the importance of "shared

American values" to uphold democracy (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Research shows that students are best able to understand social problems if they see how they fit

into the social fabric of society and the ways in which issues might affect them. Deeply

understanding social problems requires individual social identity development to raise levels of

social and critical consciousness. The frequently cited benefits youth receive from engaging in

community service do not automatically translate into civic engagement on its own; it takes

carefully selected and strategically designed, mutually beneficial partnerships between

institutions of learning and the service sites to reap those benefits. Moreover, the process of

reflecting or debriefing must carefully facilitate the process of students' understanding of the

self, the community, and then society.

In addition to The National Movement for Community Service, the Association for

American Colleges and Universities acknowledges in their framework for more advanced levels

of civic learning and democratic engagement that, "Civic learning also asks students to reflect on

their own social identity and location as well as those of others" (National Task Force on Civic

Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012, p. 43). Tufts created a coalition coordinated by

Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) called

Teaching for Democracy Alliance (TFDA) for teachers to have access to the many organizations

with a mission to support them in meeting and exceeding civic learning goals for their students

(CIRCLE, 2020). In response to movements like the Movement for National Service and

programs under AmeriCorps, Institutions of Higher Education are teaching more service learning

courses to improve identity development, social consciousness, and political consciousness

(Donahue & Mitchell, 2010). The National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement created a

guidebook, that outlines how all schools could improve civic outcomes, including political

simulations, service learning, and community-based, extra-curricular activities in partnership

with community organizations (Guilfoile & Delander, 2014). While a guide has been written,

wide-sweeping action has yet to be taken.

As previously noted, The Department of Education said in 2012 that they are not doing

enough for youth to provide effective civic education (CIRCLE, 2020). Schools and

policymakers have not yet realized the importance of social and critical consciousness as a form

of political consciousness that therefore increases civic action and participation, and they are not

acting quickly enough. There are countless resources to involve teachers and faculty in effective

service learning practices (CIRCLE, 2020). Perhaps not enough people are advocating for

critical, social, and political consciousness development or the positive impacts of service

learning on identity development needed for effective democratic engagement. At this point,

something may need to be done at the policy level to require this of K-12 schools. In addition,

there may be an opportunity for college students to engage in critical service learning by

designing courses, workshops, or activities that empower K-12 youth to engage in identity

development and organize for social change to build these critical skills in everyone and to

increase democratic engagement. Hart and colleagues (2011) states, "Concerning relations

between social identity and civic engagement, the absence of a sense of belonging to a

community can lead to the avoidance of any civic behavior (as cited in Lannegrand-Willems et

al., 2018). Lack of identity development through service learning is decreasing the youth voter's

sense of connectedness and responsibility to their community as seen through low youth voter

turnout rates, a symptom of declining civic health.

This problem might appeal to education policymakers and experts in service learning. Stakeholders in the process of gaining support might include organizations doing work related to youth civic engagement such as CIRCLE, Campus Compact, ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, Governor Baker, and people in power from states that mandate community service at some point during k-12.

**Literature Review**

**Introduction**

On January 6, 2021, the President of the United States stood by as his supporters stormed the Capitol Building in an effort to protest and overturn what they believed was an unfair election (Vigdor, 2021). Trump used popular social media platforms to feed his supporters false information about the election, leading them to believe that it had been rigged. Hundreds of his supporters conspired with police to break into the Capitol Building where they injured or threatened to injure our country's leaders as well as damaged and stole private property. The Proud Boys' actions were defended with "boys will be boys." The country became further polarized than it already had been before with those lacking trust in government and information literacy skills banned together to attack the very people and processes meant to serve and represent them. As a result, our democracy is under threat and the only solution must begin with greater civic awareness and critical consciousness.

The education system has failed to adequately prepare our country's citizens for democracy. The people are plagued with doubt, fear, mistrust, misinformation, and failed logic and critical thinking. We need to improve youth civic education by increasing youth's sense of belonging and identity development and awareness. Over the years, researchers have found many reasons that might explain why youth are less likely to vote. Findings suggest that youth feel disconnected from society and politics, lacking social consciousness and identity development, and do not feel confident enough in their civic abilities to be engaged (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, n.d.). If citizens were provided a better civic education, the world would be a better place not only because we would all have improved civic literacy and understanding of social issues, but also because more people would get out to vote to

make change. This would have a trickle down effect on other social issues, such as immigration, racism, sexism, heterosexism, poverty, etc. By changing education policy that encourages community-based learning and participation and identity development early on in a child's life, we can improve civic participation in the U.S. (Sequeira et al., 2017). This literature review will explain how civic learning has declined and been insufficient, list theoretical underpinnings to the benefits of democratic education and critical service learning outcomes, explain how civic learning is measured, and review effective methods of civic education.

**A Review of Civic Education: Past and Present**

      **Evidence of Current Insufficient Civic Education in Schools**

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement has found that voter turnout rates amongst our country's youth have consistently wavered at just 50% (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2020). CIRCLE also consistently finds that young people are simply inadequately prepared to vote in elections, leading to issues of inequities in terms of voter turnout rates and participation among the marginalized in our society. CIRCLE also convened a nonpartisan commission to assess youth voting and civic knowledge; in their primary recommendations, they suggest a new focus on implementing state standards civic skills beyond civic knowledge such as deliberation and collaboration, ensuring teachers have the freedom to discuss controversial political issues in the classroom, making national and community service programs available to all youth, better supporting youth community engagement, and improving standards around curricula for digital media literacy (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, n.d.).

Civic learning is difficult to measure and assess. Campbell and Niemi (2016) found that although citizens and political scientists all agree that civic education policy in the U.S. requires change, policymakers were unlikely to address it due to the partisan nature of civic education. Civic education policy has been left out of national education policies including "No Child Left Behind" and most states lack comprehensive civic education requirements (Campbell & Niemi, 2016). As a result, it is challenging to measure the efficacy of civic education given the variation of how it looks, state by state. Truly effective and comprehensive civic education includes outcomes that are partisan and therefore, controversial, such as tolerance or inclusion, values identification, and identity awareness. Furthermore, in their research, Campbell and Niemi (2016) found that state-level exams meant to increase youth civic knowledge and impact through rote memorization of knowledge actually have minimal effect when they learned that youth who live in states that mandate consequential civics exams do not have higher civic knowledge for students tested in the 12th grade, when incentive to graduate would have theoretically been strongest.

Dubnick (2003) explores why civic education has declined and how different educational theories have contributed to this decline. Dubnick takes an historical approach to understanding how civic engagement and civic education function in the American school system, focusing on the shift from a "traditionalist" educational philosophy that focused on rote educational methods to encourage blind patriotism, or indoctrination, to a "developmentalist" philosophy that focuses more on developing the necessary moral and civic dispositions. Dubnick (2003) explains that civic education was more highly valued in a traditionalist philosophy and the rise of developmentalism within education has led to questions around indoctrination and critique of "curriculum content that smacked of xenophobic and racist doctrine" (p. 253). This criticism led

to the exclusion of civics courses in many K-12 curriculums. Dubnick (2003) points towards a revitalization of civics in schools that stems from a (yet-to-be-created) developmental model of youth civic engagement. Dubnick (2003) points to a pedagogical path to increased civic engagement. Dubnick highlights the potential dangers of traditional civic education while recognizing the need for early intervention to increase civic engagement in adulthood. Dubnick's call for a developmental model of youth civic development "distinct from (but as fertile as) Kohlberg's model of moral development" (p. 255) is helpful in thinking about what pedagogical strategies could be implemented to increase civic literacy and participation in the United States. Dubnick also encourages policymakers to consider Dewey's philosophy to teach children how to think rather than what to think.

**What is Currently Being Done to Improve Civic Education: Policies and Practices**

In the absence of national policy, state policymakers and school districts recognize the lack of youth civic engagement as a problem and introduce innovative policies and practices in an attempt to rectify it. In addition, colleges and universities with more freedom, resources, and bandwidth to tackle this issue experiment with and assess the efficacy of various student civic engagement practices such as service-learning courses, club/organization participation, and other co-curricular activities that boost civic knowledge and engagement. While they are addressing this issue with the older population, it could be argued that students should undergo civics education earlier on in their education.

Shapiro and Brown (2018) found evidence of increasing civic decline in our country, including a decline in rudimentary civic knowledge, decrease in public trust in government, and continuing decline in civic participation. In terms of testing, only 23 percent of eighth graders

perform at or above the proficient level on the National Assessment of Education Progress

(NAEP) civics exam and 17 states have begun to mandate the high school students pass the U.S.

citizenship exam before graduation (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). If we are to ensure our nation

develops participatory democratic citizens, we must enhance civics education nationally. The

National Assessment of Educational Progress seeks to assess student civic education to discern

what is working, what needs improvement, and what current or current trends might work in

policymakers favor in progressing civics education policy. According to NAEP, civics education

efficacy is measured by civic knowledge (or rote fact-based memorization as Freire would

discuss it), intellectual skills (such as identifying, analyzing, and evaluating), and civic

dispositions (including becoming a member of society, participating thoughtfully and

intentionally in government affairs, and respecting individual worth and need) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). Between 1998 and 2018, eighth grade students who took the NAEP civics assessment consistently scored around 160, hovering between basic and proficient (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020).



FIGURE | Trend in eighth-grade NAEP civics average scores

DISPLAY AS **GRAPH** | TABLE
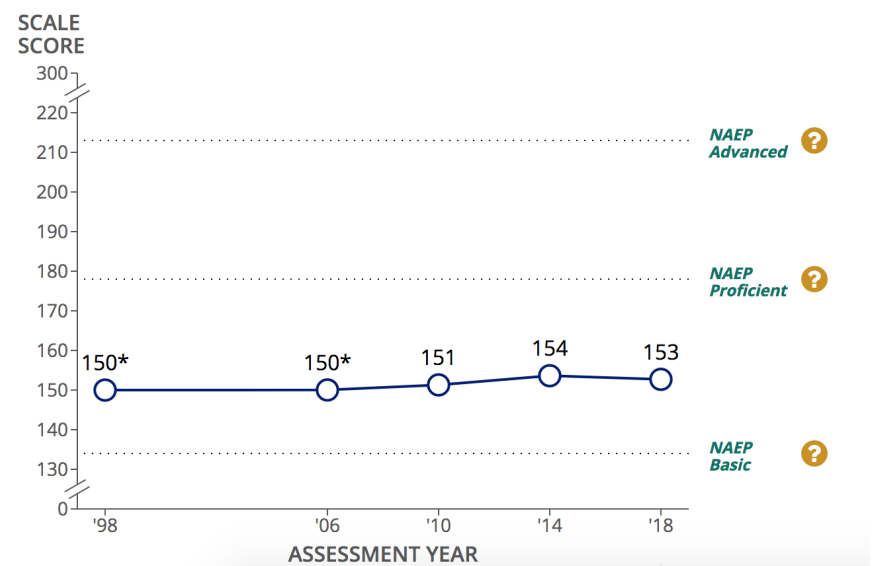
In the assessment measures at the eighth grade level, many of the NAEP civic dispositions are not included in the descriptions at the basic or proficient level, setting them behind in a critical learning goal in effective, civics education. If our nation's civic education continues to fail to instill these competencies in our students, students will continue to lack confidence in their knowledge of civics to participate confidently, meaningfully, and intentionally as evidenced by low voter turnout rates. Furthermore, "fewer than 25% of states require secondary students to complete at least one semester course in civics or government," which means that the majority of students who take the NAEP civics assessment likely will not ever develop NAEP civic dispositions through public education, a problem that contributes further to the civics gap (The Council of Chief State School Officers, 2018, p. 7). Traditionally taught civics and government classes are more likely to promote intellectual skills and civic knowledge. Given the gap in students' opportunity to acquire civic dispositions specifically through their education, some of the following recommendations for k-12 education policy will focus on solutions to increase civic dispositions.

In terms of coursework requirements, some states have adopted civics as a requirement for high school graduation, implemented detailed civics curricula, encouraged community service as a graduation requirement, and increased the number of AP U.S. Government courses (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). "While many states have implemented civics exams or civics courses as graduation requirements, these requirements often are not accompanied by critical resources to ensure that they are effectively implemented. Few states provide service learning opportunities or engage students in relevant project-based learning" (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Even with the proper resources,

these requirements are only as good as how they are taught. Service learning must go

beyond an act of service to teach students to systematically address issues in their

communities; civics exams must address critical thinking, in addition to comprehension

of materials; and civics and government courses should prepare every student with the

tools to become engaged and effective citizens. (Shapiro & Brown, 2018)

Some states are changing requirements to be more inclusive of these effective tactics. Some

states that are considered to have rigorous civics curricula are Colorado and Idaho because of

their innovative approaches, including bringing in community-based government leaders for the

Judicial Speaking Program as well as early introduction to key deomcratic values and other

civics topics respectively, leading to higher than average test scores and thus, civic and voter

participation rates in those states (Shapiro & Brown, 2018).

In 2018, Massachusetts legislators enacted Bill MAS 2631, which mandates

community-based learning projects for all eighth grade students (Education Commission of the

United States). Interestingly, the bill is specific in requiring the student-led projects to be

non-partisan, which seems to be a common problem for policymakers in determining which civic

education practices are deemed appropriate. Generally, policymakers are limited to policies that

reflect traditional democratic values but not ones that could interfere with development without

bias. Institutions of higher learning also strive to develop more effective civics education.

However, instead of acting as many states in implementing civics course requirements, they

strive to develop a stronger overall civic ethos on their campuses by integrating civic literacy

into all subjects and courses as well as developing local and global community partnerships to

reinvigorate the public purpose of higher education (Matto et al., 2017). Matto et al. explain that

a large number of teachers report feeling uncomfortable having class discussion regarding

current issues for fear of what parents or other adults would think. "The key here is not to avoid controversial subjects but to make sure presentations on controversial subjects are balanced and that teachers are not ideologues who sway the conversation" (p. 69). Furthermore, Matto et al. also emphasize the importance of ensuring that schools teach about local politics rather than just national politics and providing higher quality professional development for their teachers. Freire (2000) did not believe in nonpartisan education:

> There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. The development of an educational methodology that facilitates this process will inevitably lead to tension and conflict within our society (Freire, p. 34).

Freire acknowledges the political divide when it comes to education policy. However, he takes a controversial stance that educators must take a side to be effective change agents and to turn their students into effective change agents. It is challenging to consider how education policy would address this issue.

## Operationalizing Key Terms and Theoretical Underpinnings of How to Improve Civic Education

### Operationalizing Terms

Adler and Goggin (2005) review the many definitions of the term "civic engagement" and analyze trends in how different forms of civic engagement are carried out in the U.S. Their goals were to increase civic engagement rates of older adults by understanding how to increase

civic engagement and specific programs that have worked or could work in increasing civic

engagement. They found that older adults tended to engage in political behaviors, such as voting,

while younger adults tended to engage more in prosocial behaviors, such as volunteering. When

discussing civic engagement education, I see civic engagement as an umbrella term to include

both political and prosocial practices. Throughout this literature review, prosocial behavior is

used as a means to increase political behaviors later in life.

### Civic/Political Identity Development: Why Emerging Adulthood

Arnett (2000) argues that emerging adulthood is a distinct period in the life cycle separate

from childhood that is characterized by key developmental changes related to change and

exploration that only happen then. Arnett harkens on developmental and social psychological

concepts and frameworks to justify the distinction of this period of development in industrialized

societies. The researcher draws on developmental theories of development conducted by

researchers Erik Erikson in the 1950s, Daniel Levinson in 1978, and Kennith Keniston in 1971.

The researcher explores the demographic variability of emerging adulthood based on many

factors related to geography and social identity. Finally, the researcher includes data from a

survey that was administered to emerging adults to understand their perceptions of their

development. Arnett finds that in industrialized societies, emerging adulthood should be

considered its own distinct period in the life cycle. It is characterized by a period of moratorium,

or the ability to examine oneself and one's own life. Emerging adults perceive themselves not to

fit in as children nor adults during age 18 - 25. Privileges, such as the ability to go to college,

play a role in people's ability to reap the benefits of personal exploration that Arnett (2000)

argues characterizes emerging adulthood. Since identity exploration is so prevalent during this

age, it is critical they develop their political identities during this time. Arnett describes how

emerging adulthood is a distinct time for identity exploration, proving it to be a critical time to develop values, beliefs, and habits that contribute to increased civic engagement levels. The findings imply that identity exploration and development, which leads to increased levels of civic engagement later in life  may only be capitalized on if people are given the space and structure to explore it. This study provides rationale for the benefits of increasing civic education policy to provide students the time and space to develop.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

Putnam (2000) proposes that the work and socializing done through informal small groups and organizations within society is what builds social capital and thus, trust in society/government. Putnam (2000) discusses the dangers of more folks choosing to bowl alone: "The broader social significance, however, lies in the social interaction and even occasionally civic conversations over beer and pizza that solo bowlers forgo. Whether or not bowling beats balloting in the eyes of most Americans, bowling teams illustrate yet another vanishing form of social capital" (Putnam, 2000, p. 7). Students need opportunities to experience the building of social capital so they develop an appreciation for it early on in life.

> We begin with familiar evidence on changing patterns of political participation, not least because it is immediately relevant to issues of democracy in the narrow sense. Consider the well-known decline in turnout in national elections over the last three decades. From a relative high point in the early 1960s, voter turnout had by 1990 declined by nearly a quarter; tens of millions of Americans had forsaken their parents' habitual readiness to engage in the simplest act of citizenship. Broadly similar trends also characterize participation in state and local elections (Putnam, p.4).

Putnam wisely looks at voter turnout rates among all Americans and realizes there is an overall

decline in voting, defining it as one of the most basic forms of citizenship. While voting is not the only sign of civic health, it can be used as one indicator of civic health as well as trust in government. Yet in his book, Putnam finds it's not just voting rates that are dropping. Putnam explains that there are reasons for people to distrust the government since the '60s, but believes there is more reason why people are not engaging. He finds that church-going, labor union membership, PTA membership, and general engagement in civic organizations have dropped, including Women's groups, like the Women's League of Voters. Finally, people are bowling more alone. If group membership is so important in trust building, we must ensure these values are instilled in youth to increase their levels of civic engagement. Putnam's findings on the importance of informal community gatherings and trust can inform curriculum and policy so that we can begin to revitalize civic engagement.

Similarly, McMillan and Chavis (1986) examine and break down the factors involved in creating community as presented in previous studies and then present their own theory for how communities engage (both geographical and relational). In their framework, McMillan and Chavis assert four criteria that contribute to a sense of community; membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection. These criteria are further broken down using data from several studies before McMillan and Chavis examine the relationship between the criteria and apply their theories to actual communities. McMillan and Chavis propose that their framework can be applied in many situations including local and national policy decisions and city and neighbourhood planning. They assert that if there is a better understanding of what builds community, groups who do community work can better achieve their goals. Education policymakers should look to this theory to understand how to use education policy and curriculum as a tool to encourage youth to feel a sense of community

within the many communities they are a part of. Students should be encouraged or required to engage in communities and asked to reflect on elements of what builds a sense of community such as trust, kinds of shared traditions, shared values, and so on so they themselves feel a deeper sense of belonging to local and larger communities.

In "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," Sherry Arnstein (1969) uses a ladder as a metaphor to outline levels of citizen participation in relation to those in positions of power, primarily in government systems. In her theory, the higher one moves up on the ladder, the more power is being redistributed to citizens, or the "have-nots." Without the redistribution of power, Arnstein claims that "power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the power-holders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit. It maintains the status quo" (p. 217). Low levels of the Ladder of Participation include strategies like manipulation and therapy which give citizens the false illusion that they have power by being placed on rubber stamp advisory boards or being led to believe they are the problem. Middle levels are when power holders limit interactions to informing people, resort to placating people, or tokenize people. The middle rungs are where citizens are informed but it doesn't lead to them receiving or taking genuine power. In the "partnership" stage, citizens take power and have the opportunity to provide input, but those in power can make changes after the initial planning process. Higher rungs of the ladder denote shared power and citizen control. Shared or delegated power is when those in power purposefully give up some of their control to citizens to manage or oversee a program or decision-making process. Citizen control is when citizens are given complete power to control a program or community organization. Students in K-12 and higher education settings are often asked to participate in lower levels of the ladder and the institution may not know what it looks

like for students to engage at higher rungs of the ladder, or to have true "citizen power," as

Arnstein describes it. Without community-based learning or other intentional pedagogy in civics

education, students are not given practice to explore what it means to participate at higher rungs

of Arnstein's Ladder, limiting their growth and exposure to civic participation.

Paulo Freire (1972) believed that the only way for everyone to achieve true liberation is

for everyone, especially the oppressed, to develop a critical consciousness to fight to free both

themselves and their oppressors through liberatory education. By encouraging Freire's idea of

democratic or liberatory education, we are empowering students to no longer be passive

recipients of the banking model of education and redistribute power to them in the classroom to

prepare them to practice these skills as lifelong democratic citizens who have developed a

collective critical consciousness and know how to affect positive social change around issues

impacting them and others who are oppressed. Liberatory education is a way to empower people

to believe in true citizen power and enact it. "Authentic liberation—the process of

humanization—is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis: the action and

reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (Friere, p.79). It should

be adopted to remove power structures within the teacher-student relationship so all are

co-creators and co-learners, solving real world problems that help students understand

themselves and their roles in achieving true liberation. Freire (1972) believed that through

dialogue, "A deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation

as an historical reality susceptible of transformation" (p. 85). If students were given the

opportunity to dialogue with their professors through intentional reflection, we could train

citizens to become more habitual practitioners of democracy where they believed that their

actions, such as voting, mattered.

hooks (2013) discusses the difference between democratic education and authoritarian education, making a call for society to develop more democratic educators. hooks calls on democratic educations to help students achieve Friere's idea of critical consciousness so that people begin to understand their personal lives are directly related to politics. "By making the personal political, many individuals have experienced major transformations in thought that have led to changing their lives: the white people who worked to become anti-racist, the men who worked to challenge sexism and patriarchy, heterosexists who begin to truly champion sexual freedom" (hooks, 2013, p. xiii). hooks is making a similar argument as Dewey and Mchugh, that we must personalize the political in order to overcome systems of oppression.

Butin (2006) argues that the purpose of service-learning as a postmodern pedagogy is effective because it allows students to use service as a text to critically analyze and raise some of life's big questions around pluralism, multiculturalism, morality, values, and integrity. Butin lays out four conceptual frameworks for service learning and argues that cultural and political conceptualizations of service learning are foundational for service learning. However, he claims the goal is not to use service-learning as a "*trojan horse*" to indoctrinate students into a liberal way of thinking, but rather, to expose them to multiple perspectives and facilitate dialogue and reflection around questions about society and systems. "To pick and choose which beliefs one is going to legitimate, with the added caveat being that one legitimates only those beliefs that one is already comfortable with, is actually the exact opposite of being multiculturalist; it is being a uniculturalist in multiculturalist clothing" (Butin, p. 93). Here, Butin is describing how it could actually be hypocritical for one to claim they are multiculturalists if they are going into a community and projecting their beliefs onto them. If we were all systematically taught to engage with social issues and questions in this way, we might be less polarized and more likely to

engage politically in productive ways cross-culturally. Butin also gives an example of reactions and realizations had by some of his undergraduate students enrolled in a service learning class and their taking away that the world does not exist in this easy to discern binary. Thus, introducing service learning to K-12 schools could reduce the education and achievement gap. Service learning could be the house in which Freire's idea of liberatory education lives because of its ability to provide context and allow for collaborative and non-hierarchical meaning-searching and making.

The fabric of our democracy relies on the equitable inner-workings of our communities. When designing civic education policy, we must consider the role community plays in civic participation as Putnam points out, as well as how to build a sense of community, as McMillan and Chavis substantiate. If we are to build lifelong habits of being civically engaged, we must have our youth engaging in their communities through community and project-based learning through civic education policy. However, it's not enough to have people engaging in their communities. Students must be made aware of the systemic inequities in our society and empowered to correct them as hooks and Freire discuss in their arguments for liberatory and democratic education. As Butin suggests, with reflection, service or community-based learning can be used as a text to analyze some of life's and society's biggest questions to prepare students to address complex issues through democratic engagement in later adulthood. Policymakers should also draw on Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation as an aspirational goal in designing the kind of society where citizens feel empowered to participate so that our democracy remains engaged and intact.

**Effective Strategies to Increase Civic Engagement in Youth**

**Effective Practices**

Although most states do not have comprehensive civic education policy and practices, K-12 policy makers would benefit from learning what colleges and universities do to increase civic participation and citizenship in college-aged students to build skills beyond rote memorization of civic and historical facts.

Sax (2004) reviewed surveys of college students such as the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Education Research Institute to determine student civic values and behaviors in order to better understand what colleges and universities currently are and should be doing better to improve citizenship. Overall, the chapter focuses on the development of citizenship in college aged students. Sax (2004) analyzed the relationship between sociodemographic information, values and beliefs, the relationship between volunteerism and levels of civic engagement, students levels of civic engagement during and after college, and "ways that college promotes students' sense of civic responsibility after college" (p.77). Sax (2004) found that ultimately, there is a correlation between increased levels of civic responsibility and the degree of student involvement during college, particularly in both curricular and co-curricular engagement between faculty and student. The researcher also found that the effect of performing volunteer work during college years does enhance students' commitment to community engagement post-graduation. Finally, the researcher found that engaging with people different from yourself also increases community engagement post-graduation so long as there is reflection. Policymakers should consider the results in these findings as evidence that rote civics education is not enough to increase civic participation on its own, but rather, that civic education policy should focus more on introducing curriculum that

requires building participatory habits through community service and engagement as Friere

would suggest.

Beyond rote memorization, there are other proven engaging tactics to teach civics skills.

Guilfoile and Delander (2014) outline the history of civic learning in the U.S., the current

challenges of civic education. They offer real-world examples of how schools, projects, and

organizations align with each of the six "proven practices" to foster civic learning: 1. "Classroom

instruction"; 2. "Discussion of current events and controversial issues";  3."Service-learning";

4."Extracurricular activities"; 5. "School governance"; and 6. "Simulations of democratic

processes." These examples include instances where school districts make changes to their

mandated curriculum. For example, the Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act was enacted

in Florida, "requiring students entering 6th grade to successfully complete a one semester civics

education course." Guilfoile and Delander (2014) contend that "high-quality, school-based civic

learning fosters civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes; promotes civic equality; builds 21st

century skills; improves school climate; and lowers school drop-out rates." Specifically,

Guilfoile and Delander explain the effects that result from each of their six "proven practices."

For example, "young people who know more about government are more likely to vote."

Classroom instruction, which many would consider to be rote memorization, is only one one of

the six proven practices. Although classroom instruction is essential in building basic knowledge

and confidence in one's knowledge of government to be consider oneself to be an informed

voter, all of the other six effective practices of civic education should be incorporated into more

state curriculum or even a national civics curriculum to ensure students are also developing the

skills and practices of effective citizenship. Unfortunately, as can be seen by data conducted by

the Brookings Institute, the experiential practices that are highly recommended for effective civic

education are not always reflected in the curriculum:

**Figure 1: 12th-grade students' reported participation in civics-oriented activities**
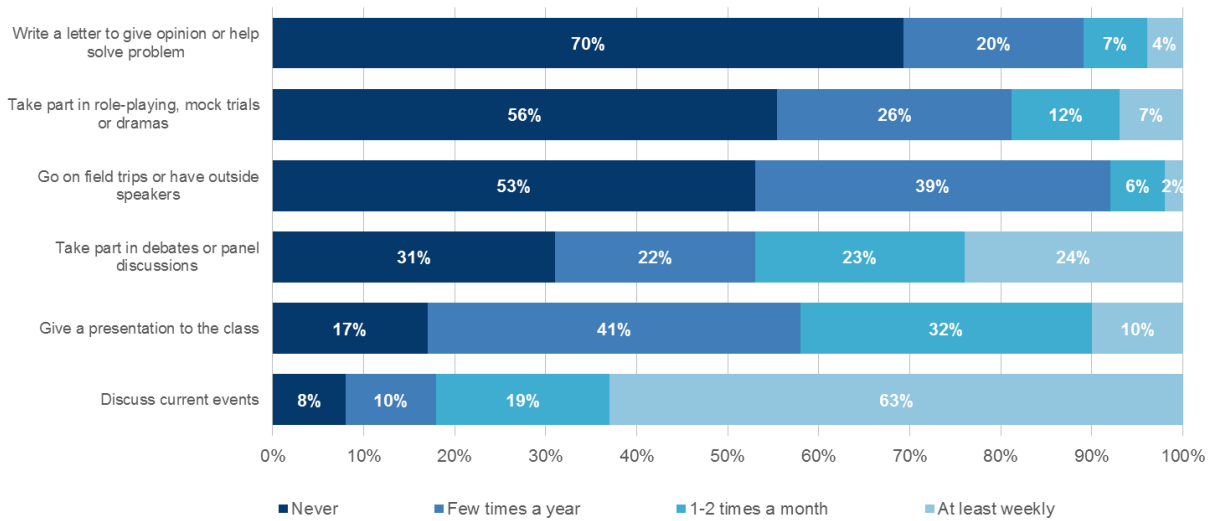


Source: 2010 NAEP civics student survey, weighted national averages, 12th-grade students.

BROOKINGS

Public Achievement Programs are one of the six abovementioned practices in civic

education. Nicotera et al. (2013) examined how youth civic attitudes and skills change based on

their involvement in youth designed and led community action through the Public Achievement

(PA) program. Nicotera et al. (2013) research questions were "What civic skills and attitudes

arise for youth who participate in PA?" and "How do youth describe the skills attitudes they

develop in the process of developing public projects?" Nicotera et al. found that overall, both

their quantitative and qualitative data supported their findings that youth participation in PA in

just one academic year increases students' sense of civic responsibility, academic development,

critical thinking, and life skills. Notably, students felt their participation in PA increased their

sense of belonging in their school community, making McMillan and Chaivs proud. Once

students understand the value of belonging to one community, they will be more inclined to want

to belong and participate in other larger communities. The study's limitations include its lack of control group to be certain other factors did not contribute to the results, small focus group sizes, and no follow-up assessments. Regardless, their study provides support for community-based learning to increase civic competency beyond knowledge.

It is not enough to develop the rote knowledge or skills to be an effective citizen; one must also understand one's own identities to fully participate democratically - especially to vote responsibly for critical social justice issues of today. Donahue and Mitchell (2010) emphasize the importance of examining one's own social identity in a service-learning opportunity, making it a "critical service learning" model. As opposed to simply helping others, critical service learning opportunities let students understand themselves. Donahue and Mitchell propose various methods for practicing "critical service learning" for both students and instructors. These include introspective/self-reflective activities for both students and instructors such as small-group conversations, and autobiographical or reflective writing, etc. intertwined in the curriculum.  The practices that Donahue and Mitchell propose are meant not to invert the linearity of service learning (student serving others), but rather to complete the circle of its effect: instead of the work ending in the service learning site, Donahue and Mitchell contest that a "critical service learning" model would result in students and faculty allowing the service to be "the spark for examining [their own] identities."

**Effective practices for marginalized youth**

The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) gives an overview of youth voting, and includes four areas of research which this encompasses: "youth voting in recent elections," "disparities in youth voting," "barriers to voting, and "election

laws, outreach, and other solutions" (CIRCLE, n.d.). CIRCLE's quantitative data deduces several findings: one, that "lower youth voting rates are not a sign of generational apathy, but of systemic barriers and issues with the culture of political engagement." Also, CIRCLE discusses how demographic background interacts with voting patterns: "some communities of color and youth from other historically oppressed groups are more likely to face barriers to voting and other forms of civic participation." Thirdly, CIRCLE makes the case for the complications of voting that young people face ("Young people are passionate about issues and often want to engage in the political process, but they frequently face barriers to participation").

Rubin (2007) studied civic identity development in a diverse pool of youth. The purpose of this study was to collect youth perceptions of their civic identity development to help determine best practices for civic education in schools. Rubin employed a qualitative study that draws upon group discussion about the Pledge of Allegiance and Bill of Rights in a natural setting  and individual interviews with a subset of that diverse pool of youth - though especially historically underrepresented youth - in four different school settings. Their study was rooted in a critical research paradigm which allowed the researcher to analyze the findings in the context of how larger social inequities impact perceptions of individuals who hold the least power.  Rubin found that youth from historically underrepresented backgrounds were more likely to express discongruence between the ideals in key civic texts such as the Pledge of Allegiance and the Bill of Rights and their lives because of structural issues that impact their daily life. More privileged students tended to find more congruence between these ideals and their lives. As such, White students were more complacent. The researcher points out that this likely means that research on the topic of political apathy in youth might be inflated due to failure to account for the effect of social inequities to inspire a desire for social action. While much of the research on civic habits

and behaviors in college-aged youth are collected from undergraduate institutions with predominantly white privileged participants, it is important to consider the challenges unique to historically underrepresented students in the context of our inequitably structured society. Additionally, since one of their findings showed that white privileged students tended to show a civic complacency in matters of change because they are not required to concern themselves with matters of injustice due to their privilege, I am interested in whether there are unique ways to engage white students to look beyond themselves, their privilege, and white saviorism. This study also encourages teachers and folks developing civic education curriculum design and pedagogy to build in ways to bring in individual experiences to motivate youth.

Kelly (2008) examines CIRCLE's youth survey to examine whether Social Trust is needed and is important for racial minorities to engage in service projects and other civic engagement projects. The regression analysis reveals that minorities were generally more likely to have social trust if engaged in a service project within the last 12 months compared to their peers who did not. Those who exhibit more social trust are more likely to engage in political volunteering. The author indicates there isn't a significant amount of trust in the government, despite the increase in social trust via service projects and thus an examination of the government is needed to better understand how racial minorities are to engage.

Ginwright (2003) addressed three questions related to the role of youth in an equitable democratic society, how adults can support the sociopolitical development of youth, and how youth organizing promotes youth development. Ultimately, researchers wanted to know how content impacts youth development in youth of color. Researchers utilized a social-ecological approach to provide political, economic, and cultural context for youth development and political participation particularly in urban youth of color. Researchers also examined how youth

participation in political organization impacts the individual, community, and institutions. The researcher wanted to understand the contextual societal barriers for students of color. Researchers found that urban youth of color historically face disproportionate political, economic, and social barriers due to racism that make it difficult or impossible to get their basic needs met, let alone engage with systems that oppress them to make the world a more equitable place. And yet, young people of color seem only to be more energized by the serious need for change. Researchers share examples of youth organizing in recent decades to fight for youth rights, LQBTQ rights, more inclusive and less censored curriculums, and environmental sustainability. Researchers concluded that the Social Justice Youth Development model is one of the most effective in building civic skills and motivations in youth. This research is relevant to my study because it offers conceptual frameworks to think about youth of color being civically engaged. Researchers reference a social-psychological framework about the sociopolitical development of youth and role role of social oppression as well as the ecological understanding of youth development and a theory called "Social Justice Youth Development," which emphasizes analyzing power in social relationships, makes identity central, promotes systemic social change, encourages collective action, and embraces youth culture as a tool for empowerment. SJYD is said to be one of the best ways to foster critical consciousness in youth, a term that I've used in early research and would consider revisiting over social consciousness Researchers also include a fantastic list of sociopolitical competencies that SJYD teaches.

**Assessment**

Sequira et al. (2017) examined the effects of a service-learning course on civic-mindedness, using the AAC&U definition, in undergraduate students and the extent to

which there are common findings between quantitative self-reported civic-mindedness results and qualitative focus groups (p.7). Sequeira et al. found a discrepancy between results found in the civic-mindedness quantitative scale and the results in the qualitative focus groups. According to the quantitative Civic Mindedness Scale, all subscale scores increased significantly in the pre-post test. However, in the qualitative focus groups, nuances in participant responses revealed more mixed attitudes about civic-mindedness and their overall service-learning experience.. This may be in part because questions on the civic-mindedness scale were positively phrased whereas they were more neutrally phrased in the focus groups. This study provides an example of a pre-post survey tool to help me operationalize civic-mindedness, the Civic Mindedness Scale, as well as highlights some of its potential shortcomings. However, it's important to note some of the potential shortcomings are that items are positively phrased and lack the ability for students to provide context and nuance, potentially making it an invalid tool to measure civic mindedness as students responses are colored by biases related to social desirability. Furthermore, it raises the question about why service-learning appears to increase civic mindedness in students from service participation and others don't.

**Conclusion**

As Dewey (2008) said, democracy is a mindset and a practice, not a guarantee. The commonality of all of these theories is the idea that democratic values and ideals are more of a practice than a standalone concept. Democracy as a practice takes work. We must join organizations - especially civic and informal organizations. We must integrate democracy and liberatory education into our schools to ensure the citizenry is systematically prepared to

recognize oppression and combat it. We must ensure people understand the complexity of pluralism and promote postmodernism as a critical mindset to deconstruct rigid, binary ideas to empower one another to affect positive social change. We should strongly consider integrating service learning practices into the K-12 education system because of its ability to engage students in the community organizations that Putnam discusses in a structured way that creates pluralistic and postmodern dialogue that both Butin and Freire would appreciate.

Low voting rates in the United States are a sign that we are not preparing nor empowering our citizenry for democracy. K-12 education is the most systematic way to ensure these values and practices are encouraged. We must find a way to overcome the barrier of seeing liberatory education as "liberal" and instead, celebrate it as a postmodern perspective that encourages pluralistic thinking and inclusiveness or multiculturalism. To deny this idea would mean for our country to continue censoring current issues and history in ways that are being shamefully brought to light today with the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement. We must not be afraid to call oppression what it is because we cannot fix the problem if it is not even named.

**Recommendations**

Civics education must involve as many of the proven practices that support effective, holistic civic education. These practices must not only be implemented in the curriculum, but they must also be assessed, schools must allocate the appropriate resources, and teachers must be trained to carry out the practices. If we hope students will be more democratically engaged, we must provide opportunities - especially experiential learning opportunities - that allow them to practice the skills, competencies, and dispositions needed to be engaged democratic citizens.

**Standardize civics education nationally and assess regularly.** Civics education policy varies drastically across the United States. It is challenging to properly assess civics education given the discrepancy in requirements by state and even district. Policymakers should engage in a cost-benefit analysis to assess which states have highest scores and use their civic education policies as a model for national curriculum. If service learning or community based project learning is seen as one of the viable solutions, schools should be given budgets for community engagement specialists to help forge and maintain relationships with community partners. Policymakers should also make a point of reviewing civics education advice from organizations that have been gathering data on best practices. For example, Guilfoile and Delander (2014) make recommendations beyond what classroom instruction should look like or service learning; They also make suggestions that policymakers might consider infusing into the curriculum since traditionally they are not. For example, students should be engaging in "simulations of democratic governance" as well as "discussions of current events and democratic issues in order to develop skills and dispositions outlined by NAEP. Once civics education is more standardized based on established best practices, we will have a better understanding of which practices are truly most effective in increasing the skills and dispositions needed for active citizenship.

**Increase opportunities and requirements to encourage prosocial behavior nationally through the curriculum.** Adler and Goggin (2005) discovered that adults that were more likely to engage both on a voluntary and political basis later in life were also more likely to engage in prosocial activities at a younger age. Guilfoile and Delander (2014) also recommend introducing service learning into civics curriculum, which pairs academic content with community service as a way to help students develop civic dispositions. Butin (2006) describes community service through service learning as a text that students can bring to class to discuss and analyze. Service learning also makes students and teachers "co-creators and co-learners" which helps to remove power structures to maximize learning as Freire (1972) discusses. The transfer or power and removal of power structures helps citizens to become more habitual practitioners of democracy that are more likely to make them consistently participatory democratic citizens. Furthermore, service learning helps personalize the political by introducing political and structural issues to students in real life, essentially creating case studies and narratives that they might otherwise might not have exposure to. Some states, such as Massachusetts, have implemented project-based learning or service learning as a requirement, and it would be a step in the right direction to mandate service or project-based learning nationally. Mandating service learning will especially be helpful since according to Levesque (2018), 92% of students report going on field trips or having outside speakers through school, suggesting there is minimal opportunity for the majority of students to engage in and with the community as effective postmodern pedagogy.

**Train teachers to facilitate conversations around community-based learning, social identity, and social justice.** According to Sax (2004), a mere 11.9% of education majors report feeling comfortable discussing politics compared to other majors during their first year of college. Because of concerns around appearing partisan, teachers report shying away from
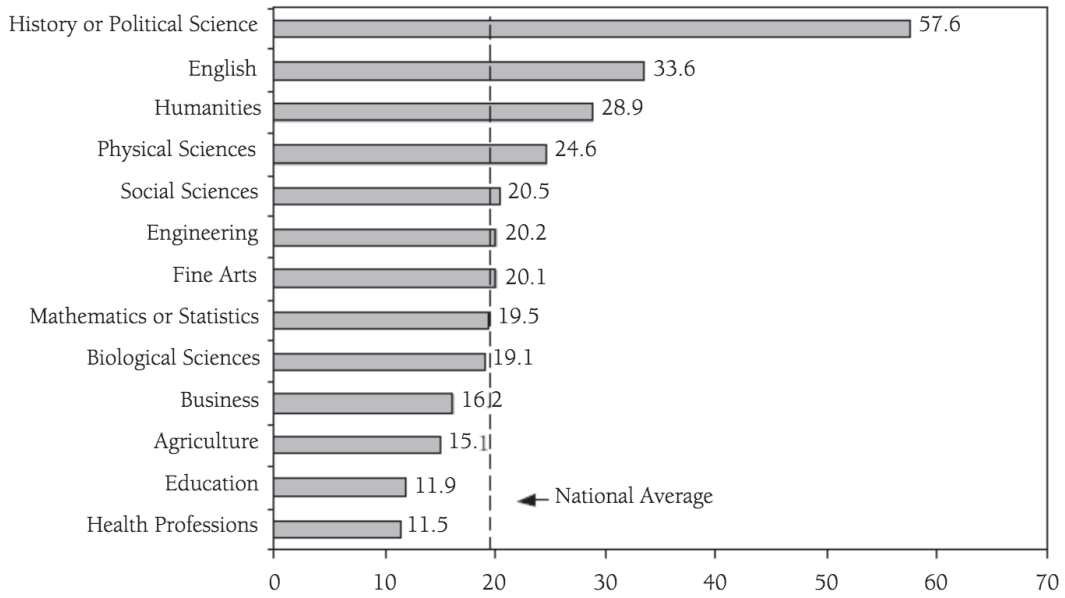
discussing politics in the classroom or having dialogue across differences (CIRCLE, n.d.). The lack of teacher comfortability having these conversations with developing youth is concerning given the importance of identity development during adolescence. Fortunately, Donahue and Mitchell (2010) discuss how critical service learning provides opportunities for students to engage in identity exploration. However, this requires the instructor to have had adequate training around pedagogical strategies and skills needed to engage in this kind of discussion and teaching. Teachers should receive additional training in how to have dialogue across differences, social justice, social identity, and cultural competency to ensure they are prepared to teach critical service learning courses. Teachers should be required to take courses on social justice, social issues, community engagement, and/or social identity and inclusion to ensure they are prepared to facilitate the critical reflection that comes with critical service learning. If teachers do not feel comfortable discussing politics or social issues with each other while in college, it will be even more challenging to ensure they can engage and be a model for their students once they begin to teach.

In conclusion, policymakers must consider best practices in civic education, standardize those practices nationally to ensure consistency, and ensure adequate and proper resources are provided to support new civics education curriculum. With these changes will come a more

engaged, community-oriented, empathetic citizenry.

## Figure 6.5.  Percentage of Freshmen Who Frequently Discuss Politics, by Major

| Major | Percentage |
|---|---|
| History or Political Science | 57.6 |
| English | 33.6 |
| Humanities | 28.9 |
| Physical Sciences | 24.6 |
| Social Sciences | 20.5 |
| Engineering | 20.2 |
| Fine Arts | 20.1 |
| Mathematics or Statistics | 19.5 |
| Biological Sciences | 19.1 |
| Business | 16.2 |
| Agriculture | 15.1 |
| Education | 11.9 |
| Health Professions | 11.5 |

National Average

(Sax, 2004).

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