

# Will U.S. Education Remedy A Half-Century Of Neglecting Civics Education?

Tom Lindsay Contributor

Civics education in the United States is in a state of crisis, which, if not addressed, will doom our constitutional democracy.

If the above assertion sounds unduly apocalyptic, consider these facts: Recent polling of Americans' civic literacy, conducted by the [Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation](#), should shame all of us involved in education: While 90% of immigrants to this country pass the USCIS Citizenship Test (passage of which requires answering correctly six of ten multiple-choice questions), *only a third of native-born Americans* can pass the test.

Digging deeper into the numbers reveals even more alarming news. Seventy-four percent of senior citizens can pass the test, *but only 19% of Americans under the age of 45* can answer even six of the ten questions correctly.

Our country's Founders knew that our citizens cannot be expected to uphold and defend what they barely understand. What can be done to reverse this toxic trend?

Last year, a bipartisan group of eight U.S. senators introduced the [USA Civics Act of 2019](#), which would amend the American History for Freedom program. As I [wrote here](#), it has been 12 years since the Federal Higher Education Act was last reauthorized. Its latest reauthorization (2008) added a new provision—"American History for Freedom" (AHF)—which would award government funds to academic programs that focus on the political, philosophic, moral, and economic conditions of democratic freedom. The initiative included funding to hire philosophically unorthodox faculty—meaning those professors who believe the American experiment in self-government is still worth studying and defending.

It has been 18 years (2002) since the nonpartisan higher-education organization, the [National Association of Scholars](#) (NAS) launched the idea for this federal program. NAS hoped to start a movement to restore intellectual pluralism in higher education through supporting programs that focused on free institutions, Western civilization, the American Founding, and constitutional history (i.e., *genuine* American history). Six years later, this concept was concretized into congressional law.

Though passed in 2008, AHF still lacked any congressional funding. Moreover, all efforts to obtain funding were put on hold after Barack Obama's election in 2008, for fear that the intentions behind the legislation would be dashed and/or distorted if initial implementation was left in the hands of his administration.

This fear was well founded. The Obama White House would come to endorse *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*. According to *A Crucible Moment*, the chief ends of American civic education at the postsecondary level ought to be the promotion of sweeping egalitarianism, progressive activism, and citizenship of the world. This is what Obama's promised "fundamental transformation of America" meant regarding civics education—sweeping away our Founders and their devotion to limited government and individual liberty, and ushering in a post-American regime, where government's purposes and powers grow exponentially, and where individual liberty shrinks proportionally. As a result, AHF remained on the statute books as an unfunded program.

Pressing for adoption this year of the USA Civics Act is the Bipartisan Policy Center's (BPC) [Campus Free Expression Project](#), which champions intellectual diversity and free speech on college campuses. BPC's director, Jacqueline Pfeffer Merrill, was recently [interviewed about her efforts by Shannon Watkins](#) of the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal. Asked for more specifics about the true extent of our civic literacy crisis, Pfeffer Merrill responded, "A [survey](#) by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni found that less than 40 percent of respondents—and only a little more than half of college graduates—could correctly answer a multiple-choice question about the length of terms for members of Congress. More than half of respondents—and a third of college graduates—did not know that the Bill of Rights is the name given to a group of Constitutional amendments."

These statistics should convince all fair-minded individuals that our civic literacy crisis is real. Nonetheless, some still worry whether taxpayer dollars should be spent on an effort to resuscitate serious civics education.

I earlier responded [to this question here](#), where I asked readers to recall Abraham Lincoln's 1838 speech to Young Men's Lyceum. There, Lincoln urges his countrymen to practice as well as teach their children "reverence for the Constitution and its laws," lest American democracy degenerate into what he called "mobocratic" rule. Note that Lincoln counsels teaching not simply the Constitution and its laws, but also *reverence* for them. President Ronald Reagan's Farewell Address (1989) echoed Lincoln in its call for "informed patriotism."

Unfortunately, such notions as constitutional reverence and informed patriotism are viewed as anathema by too many colleges and universities, despite the fact that these schools' very existence depends on the protections provided by the Constitution. As a result, too many of our campuses have become among the least tolerant places in the country.

In an effort to do the job that our schools used to do, and should still be doing, the USA Civics Act [amends the AHF](#) to "authorize grants to colleges or university-nonprofit partnerships that promote knowledge of American political thought and history, free institutions, democracy, or means of participation in political and civic life." Funds provided under the Act are to be "used to support centers or programs pursuing that work, teacher preparation initiatives aligned to those topics, and other outreach activities."

Moreover, the Act seeks to ensure that those instructors funded through the grant enjoy “the academic freedom necessary to the robust study of American history and political life.” Given the oppressive atmosphere on too many campuses, such protection is, sad to say, very much needed.

Although the Act has received a degree of bipartisan support, there is in reality but a slim chance that it will pass in this highly partisan congressional session. Nevertheless, the fact that there is growing bipartisan support is a positive development, for it reflects rising national awareness that something is broken in civics education today.

This admission, long overdue in coming, could prove to be the first, indispensable step in reclaiming our history—and with it, our freedom.

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### **Tom Lindsay**

I am a former college professor of political science and political philosophy and former college administrator whose on-campus experience taught me that American universities are in a three-fold crisis: (1) declining affordability; (2) declining education quality; and (3) anemic board governance (which serves to enable the first two). During President George W. Bush’s second term, I was appointed Deputy Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, where I saw firsthand the too-often harmful, unintended consequences of otherwise well-intentioned federal intervention into higher education. I recently published an American government textbook, *Investigating American Democracy: Readings on Core Questions* (with Gary D. Glenn, published by Oxford University Press). I am Editor-in-Chief of the higher-education website, [SeeThruEdu.com](http://SeeThruEdu.com). Since 2011, I have served as director of the Center for Higher Education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation in Austin, Texas