



What Is Civic Education and Why Is It Important?

by: Benjamin Hammer

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In the United States, civic education is often focused on knowledge of government. Students are taught the many structures of government and the procedures within those structures. Their understanding of civics is evaluated based on whether they can name the three branches of government, their representatives in Congress, and their state governor. By these measurements, the current state of civic education is lacking.

Only 56% of Americans can name all three branches of government, according to the [2021 Annenberg Civics Knowledge Survey](#), and that's up from a mere 26% in 2016. A [2018 Johns Hopkins survey](#) found that a third of Americans couldn't name their governor and that 80% couldn't name their state legislator, among other information about state government. It's tempting to say the meaning of civic education is to teach information about government. Students must be informed about the structures of their government to understand it. If they don't know who their leaders are, it seems natural that they also don't know what those leaders are doing.

Yet knowledge of government structures, while important, doesn't really tell the whole story. One should empathize with the student – the federal government alone is built from countless structures and procedures, each one more complicated than the last. Factor in state and local governments and that's a lot to remember. Knowing the three branches is basic stuff, but it makes some sense why people who don't use that information daily wouldn't have it off hand. Besides – most information can be found through a search engine. It's trivially easy for anyone to look up the three branches of government if they can't remember. They can just do that when they need it. So the important question isn't "Why don't they know?"

It's "Why don't they need it?"

The Gap Between Policy and Government

Ask Americans to name the three branches of government and [20% won't be able to name a single one](#). Ask them if they approve or disapprove of Congress and only [3% won't have an opinion](#). How can you disapprove of Congress without being aware of the legislative branch?

The answer is that Americans still care about policy. Ask them what they think is the most important problem facing their country, and only [3% say they have no opinion](#). 97% of Americans do have an opinion, but somehow that doesn't always translate into learning procedure. There's a disconnect somewhere between caring about policy and understanding the government that decides it.

Therein lies the importance of civic education. A civically minded person must be able to relate their opinions about policy with the actual procedures by which policy is decided. They should

know the three branches of government not because they have them memorized, but because they understand that any policy that becomes law needs to be written, executed, and evaluated separately. Bridging the gap between individual policy preference and the government that enacts policy is a critical first step towards quality civic engagement, and the first step towards that is to recognize what civic engagement is – participating as a member of a collective. Government structures exist because they allow for collective decision-making. The reason to work within those structures, especially in a democracy, is as an effective method of elevating one’s own voice while respecting the voices of others. When those structures no longer feel connected to participating in the national conversation, when policymaking begins to feel out of reach for everyday citizens and trust in government [sinks close to all-time lows](#), that’s when people stop caring to remember the three branches. Why bother?

Teaching Civic Engagement

For civic education to have meaning, one must teach students to feel empowered to make a difference in their government. That means demonstrating respect. Good civic programs work to teach students that they are valued by the social structures they live in, and that if they aren’t being valued then something needs to change. Working outside the structure of government through civil disobedience is still a form of civic engagement.

For young people that respect is lacking. Young people often are raised without a say in the structures of their lives, starting with public schooling systems that, from the student’s perspective, can be near authoritarian. For them to be told that they can participate in the federal government while also not being trusted to use the bathroom without a permission slip is a contradiction. It breaks the connection between their social structure and their own interests. If they don’t feel empowered in the classroom where they are learning civics, how can they possibly feel empowered in their greater society and government?

That cycle of disempowerment can continue throughout life. If those youth never start feeling respected by their social structures, they stay civically disengaged into adulthood. Civic education must break that cycle.

[New Hampshire Listens](#), a civic engagement initiative by the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire, works to engage citizens by demonstrating that respect and relating citizen’s policy concerns to their local governments. It’s challenging work – oft en involving working past many years of perceived neglect by communities. But the results are rewarding. As more members of the community begin to feel valued by the system they live in, they become engaged citizens.

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