

Public Attitudes About Civic Education

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Paper prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, August 29-September 1, 2013.

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Civic education in the United States seeks to impart the knowledge and skills necessary for people to take part in democracy. While civic training can be acquired through a variety of agents, among them the family, social groups, labor organizations, religious institutions, the military, and the media, schools can offer effective mechanisms for preparing young people to be engaged citizens (Carnegie Corporation and CIRCLE, 2003; Crittenden and Levine, 2013). The American public strongly believes that civic education is an important element of the precollege curriculum (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2004; Owen and Soule, 2012). However, the question of what aspects of democratic citizenship should be emphasized in civic education remains contested (Shafir, 1998; Lagemann and Lewis, 2013). Scholars have noted that citizenship training should convey specific types of knowledge, character, and competencies that are consistent with democratic principles. But democracy is not simple, and as Galston argues, striking the right balance “between representation and direct democracy; between self-interest and public spirit; between rights and responsibilities; between liberty and equality; between reasoned deliberation and passionate mobilization; between secular and faith-bases of civic discourse and action; between unity and diversity; between civic loyalty and civic dissent” (2001: 1) can be a challenge.

Discussion about the objectives of civic education has taken place largely at the philosophical level among scholars and at the practical level among political leaders and educators. However, the public’s views about the goals of civic education matter, and should be taken into account when devising curricula along with those of the state and educational experts to maintain the legitimacy of the process (Guttman, 1987). This paper will explore public

attitudes about civic education in the current era. It addresses the following questions: How supportive is the public of civic education in the nation's schools? What goals of civic education in American junior high and high schools do the public feel are most important? Are there differences in public attitudes about civic education based on people's civic education experience, demographic background, and orientations toward politics? And, what is the public's overall assessment of civic education in the nation's schools?

Attitudes about the goals and content of civic education shift in light of historical circumstances, educational philosophies, and political sentiments. This study begins with an overview of the philosophies underpinning civic education in America over time, and identifies civic education goals that are currently in play. The analysis starts with an assessment of the public's general level of support for civic education. It then explores specific priorities that the public assigns to various aspects of civic education specifically developing civic skills, civic knowledge, and civic dispositions related to cultural understanding. The research concludes with an account of the public's assessment of the quality of precollege civics training.

The Goals of Civic Education

“Education is a social process which derives its meaning and purposes from the culture of a people whether organized as a community or a nation” (Kandel, 1948: 3). The American public school system was established to teach young people skills that would facilitate their becoming contributing members of society and to pass on generationally an appreciation of democratic values and common civic understandings (Kahlenberg, 2012: online). Yet there hardly has been consensus about what form of democracy is ideal or what constitutes a good American citizen (Galston, 2001; Owen, 2004).

The primary objective of civic education early in the American republic was to make good citizens who would preserve self-rule (O'Connor, 2011). For the ruling class, an emphasis was placed on educating for civic virtue with the goal of developing leaders whose actions would benefit society (Crittenden and Levine, 2013). Students were educated in rhetoric as a means of fostering republican citizens who engaged one another in public argument (Longaker, 2007). Some of the Founders, including Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Noah Webster, and Benjamin Rush, promoted public education as a mechanism for maintaining the fledgling government. They emphasized that young people should be taught to fulfill “the new class of duties” required of citizens in a republic (O'Connor, 2011; Lagemann and Lewis, 2012). However, public education did not become widespread for several decades after the Founding (Kaestle, 1983).

The belief that public schools catering to an expanded citizenry had the moral responsibility educate strong democratic leaders and to develop supportive citizens took hold in the wake of the Civil War as the country attempted to recover from upheaval and the role of the state expanded (Leonard, 1995). As the nation's immigrant population increased, civic education was viewed as a mechanism for exercising social control (Ball, 1995). Leaders, including President Woodrow Wilson, advocated for civic instruction in the schools to institute what has been called “American civil religion” (Mirel in O'Connor, 2011: 5). At the same time, they expressed concern that average citizens were incapable of playing more than a marginal role in democratic governance. Textbooks were aimed at assimilating newcomers rather than involving them in the political process. Civic education downplayed active participation in favor of stressing positive cultural myths, such as the American dream, that fostered diffuse support for the prevailing system (Dubnick, 1998). An additional goal of civic education was to produce a cadre of loyal civil servants. In 1939, as the United States was sunk in the depths of the Great

Depression and on the precipice of war, Presidential Franklin Roosevelt endorsed goals of civic education aimed at perpetuating democracy by buttressing the actions of government institutions. He sought support for military interventions, and emphasized the role of schools in this process. In a statement read at the Congress on Education for Democracy at Teachers College at Columbia University, Roosevelt argued, “Education for democracy can not [sic] merely be taken for granted. . . . That the schools make worthy citizens is the most important responsibility placed upon them” (cited in Kandel 1948: 13).

Merriam’s landmark investigation into the development, control, and implications of civic training in eight nations¹ in the 1920s and 1930s identified the specific qualities of citizenship that were being taught across democracies. These citizenship traits confirm that the primary goal of civic education was to instill uncritical support for the political system. The qualities included patriotism and loyalty, obedience to the law, respect for government and public officials, individuals’ recognition of their political obligations, a minimum degree of self-control, responsiveness to community needs in stressful times, knowledge of and agreement with the legitimating national ideology, and a recognition of the special qualities of people within one’s country compared to those of other nations (Merriam, 1931). Missing from this itemization is the notion that good citizens must be able to exercise judgment about political problems, policies, and ideas, or that they should take action if they believe it to be necessary. Merriam, reflecting the position of John Dewey, considered critical thinking to be an essential characteristic of a good American citizen, and was concerned that civic education was not developing such skills (Dubnick, 1995). His work promoted the importance of systematically educating democratic citizens through the schools. However, the widespread implementation of

Merriam's ideas both in terms of establishing a vital research agenda and instituting civic education programs in the classroom was not realized in his day (Almond, 1995).

Civic education with the goal of inculcating in students notions of system support thrived at the onset of the Cold War, as junior high and high school civics instruction sought to promote a common culture and build on democratic values. However, civic education began to fall out of favor during the Vietnam War and Watergate eras as the public lost faith in government, political institutions, and leaders. Further, Americans increasingly considered the foundational ideals about a common culture and the superiority of Americans compared to citizens of other nations that underpinned civic education unsuitable for a diverse student body (Owen, 2004). Minority and immigrant populations were concerned that civic education was contributing to educational inequality. As the content of civic education became more controversial, schools began to drop civics from the curriculum (O'Connor, 2011). At the same time, scholarly interest in the education of citizens subsided as the behavioral revolution in political science took hold. In the 1960s and 1970s, the scientific study of politics was considered to be at odds with issues of practical pedagogy that had concerned scholars like Merriam and Wilson (Owen, 2004).

However, a spate of studies beginning in the 1980s indicated the declining civic engagement of young Americans, and sparked a resurgence of interest in civic education within the academic community. Research findings showed that people under the age of thirty-five paid less attention to politics, had lower levels of political knowledge, were less likely to register and vote, and were less likely to participate in politics than older people (see Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Dennis and Owen, 1997; Delli Carpini, 2002; DePledge and Bustos, 2002). Young people distrusted politicians and had limited faith in government institutions to act in the best interest of citizens (Owen, 1999; Keeter, et al, 2002). Researchers and practitioners

concerned by these trends initiated endeavors to increase civic competence and activation which included generating public awareness and working with schools to develop civics materials, courses, and programs (Owen, 2004). The Center for Civic Education, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, and the National Conference on Citizenship are examples of these efforts.

The shift in emphasis from creating compliant citizens to preparing young people to become active in politics and their community promotes “enlightened political engagement” as an essential component of citizenship (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry, 1996). This perspective is consistent with the notion of “civic republicanism” which holds that active citizen participation in the polity is essential for good government and productive community life (Wolin, 1989; Barber, 1992; Crittenden and Levine, 2013). This view was evident in the nation’s early years; however, it pertained to a limited citizenry and was associated with a strong preference for representative rather than participatory democracy (Longaker, 2007). The enlightened citizen focus requires young people to acquire knowledge about how the political system works, to develop the skills needed to take part in the process, and to become critical evaluators of government policies and actions (CIRCLE, 2004).

The contested history of civic education in the United States sets the stage for the articulation of curricular goals in the current era. While there has been movement toward consensus (Galston, 2001), differences in defining the mission of civic education remain. Debates continue about what types of civic knowledge should be conveyed, what values should be imparted, and what type of participation should be encouraged. In addition, there is great variation in the approach to incorporating civic education into the curriculum. Approaches range from including a section on civics in a required history class to active learning experiences that

promote real-world engagement. Differences in perspective and approach to civic education are linked to a variety of factors including the demographic makeup, economic health, and political culture of the school district as well as the type of school—public or private, religious or secular (Campbell, 2001).

Political leaders, educators, and advocates who believe that civic education can strengthen democracy back a primary focus on the development of civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions (Carnegie Corporation and CIRCLE, 2003; Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011). Civic knowledge consists of information about the history of American democracy, the Constitution, the structure and function of government, and political processes. Knowledge presupposes a focus on concepts basic to the American system, such as federalism, separation of powers, individual rights, and the rule of law. A strong grounding in civic knowledge provides young people with a foundation in democratic principles that can serve as a source of political empowerment (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Civic skills are the proficiencies that enable people to participate actively and responsibly as democratic citizens. Included among civic skills are the ability to gather and process information, to think critically about societal issues, and to become involved in the community. Preparing young people to fulfill their responsibilities as citizens, vote, express opinions, and become active political participants are goals associated with civic skills. Civic dispositions are orientations related to democratic character formation. Educators seek to instill tolerance, a concern for the rights and welfare of others, and a sense of public duty. Civic dispositions include support for and trust in political institutions and leaders tempered by reasoned critical evaluation. Goals associated with civic dispositions recognize America's diverse population. Civic education should impart cultural understanding and knowledge about the United States' relationship to other nations. A

secondary set of objectives that are byproducts of civic education includes acquiring basic academic skills, such as reading and writing proficiency, and instilling twenty-first century competencies that will prepare students to function competitively in the economic environment (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011).

An Exploratory Study

Few studies document the general public's views about the goals of civic education, as most analyses and commentary privilege the views of elites in government, academia, educational administration, and the non-profit sector. The public opinion research that exists has found strong support for civic education in the public schools, but dissatisfaction with the job schools are doing in providing citizenship training. The public is especially favorable towards citizenship education goals associated with civic skills and civic knowledge. Less consensus exists around goals associated with civic dispositions (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011). This study will provide additional empirical support for these findings, and elaborate upon them.

The section of this study that examines the extent to which public views about civic education vary based on civic education experience, demographic factors, and political orientations is largely exploratory. I offer some tentative hypotheses that will be tested empirically. First, I expect that people who have been exposed to junior high or high school civics, especially those who consider the experience to be beneficial, may be more inclined to view civic education as a legitimate enterprise for the nation's schools than those who lack exposure to classroom civics. The higher the quality of an individual's civic education, the more supportive s/he will be of civic education in schools.

Next, I examine people's views of specific civic education goals, and posit that they will be influenced by their political orientations and demographic factors. The political variables should be more robust predictors of people's opinions about incorporating civic skills, civic knowledge, and civic dispositions into the curriculum than the demographic indicators. I expect that people who are more interested in and attentive to politics and more politically active will be more supportive of civic education goals that prepare students to become engaged citizens those who are less participatory. Political ideology is likely to have a more complex relationship to civic education goals. Historically differences of opinion about the content of civics instruction have been related to opposing views about democracy, including the role of citizens and government. I expect that liberals and conservatives generally will agree about the more established goals of civic skills and civic knowledge, and more likely to disagree about goals associated with cultural understanding. Conservatives may be less inclined to support these types of civic disposition goals dealing with diversity and social issues than liberals. I also anticipate that there will be differences in levels of support of goals related to civic skills, civic knowledge, and civic dispositions related to cultural understanding based on demographic factors. The demographic differences will be sorted out in the empirical analysis.

Data

This research employs data from the Civic Education and Political Engagement Study (CEPES), an original survey that contain extensive batteries of questions related to respondents' civic education experiences, political values and attitudes, and political and civic engagement. The CEPES is designed to examine the influence of civic training on the development of political orientations and citizenship skills. This study is unique in that it takes into account the dynamics of respondents' classroom civics instruction as well as their participation in service

learning programs and extracurricular activities. The online survey was conducted by Knowledge Networks (KN) between May 14 and 28, 2010, and employs a national probability sample (n=1,228) drawn from KN's nationwide online panel.²

Measures

The CEPES included questions that tapped into the public's support for civic education in general, their assessment of specific goals of the nation's schools, and their evaluation of civics instruction. Respondents were asked the basic question: Do you believe that all students should be required to take a civic education, social studies, or government course in junior high or high school? The participants also were asked to rate the importance of thirteen goals of the nation's schools on a four-point scale ranging from very important (4) to not at all important (1). These goals were organized into five categories, three of which pertained directly to civic education—citizenship preparation and civic skills, civic knowledge, and cultural understanding which is an aspect of civic dispositions. The category of citizenship preparation/skills includes goals of preparing people to become responsible citizens, to exercise their right to vote, and to use 21st century technology and media to engage with politics. Civic knowledge consists of goals of educating people about government and how it works, educating people about core democratic principles as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, and teaching people about how early American history influenced the development of the U.S. government. The goals encompassing cultural understanding take into account promoting understanding of cultural diversity, educating people about the relationship of the United States to other nations and world affairs, and improving social conditions. Two items encompassing academic skills—teaching people to read, write, and do math and preparing students to take standardized tests—are included in the study. These basic academic goals have been compared to civic goals in prior research. The final category consists of goals related to life skills which have been considered

byproducts of civic education—helping people become economically self-sufficient and providing students with marketable skills for future employment. Finally, respondents were asked what grade (A through F) they would give the nation’s schools in preparing people to be good citizens. They also graded their own personal civic education experience.

A civic education typology was constructed for the CEPES data that classifies respondents based on the amount and quality of their precollege civics instruction administered through schools. The survey asked if respondents had taken a government, social studies, or civics class in junior high or high school.³ Participants also indicated whether or not they had taken part in a civic education program that went beyond the basic government, social studies, or civics curriculum and incorporated active and innovative learning features, such as field trips, interviews with civic leaders, debates, mock trials, hearings, and simulated elections. Respondents affirmed participation in approximately 35 different civic education programs. These programs differ in specific goals and instructional methods, but all involve some type of curriculum innovation.⁴ Some students who participate in these programs can be predisposed to high achievement and strong civic attitudes. They may self-select into the program or are encouraged to enroll by teachers and parents. Others may come to participate in the program as a regular part of the curriculum or because it is a required course.⁵ The civic education typology consists of three categories: 1) people who had no civic education at all (26% of the sample); 2) people who took a civics/social studies course only (41% of the sample); and 3) people who took a civics/social studies course and participated in a civic education program (33% of the sample). The 26% of the CEPES sample with no civic education is

consistent with findings of other studies where between 24% and 30% of respondents recall having no civics training (see Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2004).

An objective of this study is to determine if there are differences in people's attitudes about civic education based on demographic characteristics and political orientations. To this end, OLS regression models were estimated with the goals variables as dependent and the demographic and political indicators as predictors. The demographic variables included in the analysis are sex (1=male; 2=female), age in years, education as measured by highest degree earned (no formal education to doctoral or professional degree), household income, and race. Race dummy variables were created for white, black, and Hispanic respondents, with other races as the omitted category. Political variables measuring a respondent's political ideology, interest in and attention to politics, and political activity are used in the study. Dummy variables were created for liberal and conservative political ideology, with moderate as the omitted category. Political interest/attention is an additive scale based on three variables that gauge how interested respondents are in politics and public affairs, how often they follow government and politics, and how much attention they pay to media coverage of politics (0=low; 9=high; Cronbach's $\alpha=.827$). Political activity is an additive scale that takes into account whether or not respondents have contacted a public official by letter, phone, or email, signed or circulated a petition, participated in a boycott or boycott, participated in a community association, run for elected office, volunteered in their community, protested or marched for a cause, participated in an event like a run, bike ride, swim or triathlon for a cause, or done something to protect the environment. This variable ranges from 0, indicating that the respondent did none of these things, to 9 (Cronbach's $\alpha=.756$).

Public Perceptions of Educational Priorities

There is very strong public support for civic education in American schools at the present time. In 2004, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (CCMS) conducted a national survey where they asked respondents their opinions about citizenship education in American public schools.⁶ The study concluded that, “[t]he American public believes that educating young people about democracy should be a central mission of schools” (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2004: 1). This sentiment was echoed in the present study. An overwhelming 93% of respondents to the CEPES feel that all students should be required to take a civic education, social studies, or government course in junior high and high school.

The CEPES participants’ rated the importance of five categories of goals of the nation’s schools. As Table 1 indicates, civic education-related goals are considered a priority by a high percentage of respondents. Goals associated with traditional civic skills receive the strongest support. A substantial majority of the public believes that preparing people to be responsible citizens (76% very important) and to exercise their right to vote (65% very important) are vital objectives of the nation’s schools. These long-held aspects of citizenship preparation have substantially more support than training students to use 21st century technology and media to engage with politics (40% very important). The public also believes that imparting civic knowledge to junior high and high school students is a valuable educational objective. Over 60% of CEPES respondents assign high importance to educating people about government and how it works and core democratic principles as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. A smaller percentage designates teaching people about how early American history influenced the development of the U.S. government (51%) as a very important goal. There is less support for the cultural understanding category of goals than for the citizenship preparation and civic knowledge objectives. Still, a majority of people feel that

educating students about the relationship of the United States to other nations and world affairs, promoting understanding of cultural diversity, and improving social conditions are very or somewhat important goals.

Of the goals that are ancillary to civic education, teaching students the basics of learning to read, write, and do math is deemed “very important” by 89% of respondents, and is the highest rated goal in the study. (See Table 1.) This finding replicates the results of prior research (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2004). Preparing students to take standardized tests, the other academic skill included in the survey, is considered the least important of the goals in the survey. The public strongly supports the schools’ role in imparting life skills, such as providing students with marketable skills for future employment (71% very important) and helping people become economically self-sufficient (67% very important).

[Table 1 about here]

The public’s views about the priorities of the nation’s schools differ based on an individual’s civic education experience. Table 2 shows the percentage of respondents to the CEPES who ranked goals as “very important” broken down by the civic education typology. People who had no civic education in junior high and high school are less likely to rate citizenship preparation and civic knowledge as very important goals than are those who took a civics class or participated in a civics program. The differences are most notable for preparing people to become responsible citizens and to exercise their right to vote as well as for educating people about government and core democratic principles. The distinctions are less pronounced for preparing people to engage in politics using new technologies and teaching people about early American history. The findings for the cultural understanding goals are less straightforward. The percentage of people who rate educating people about the relationship of

the U.S. to other nations as a very important goal of the nation's schools is consistent across the categories of the civic education typology, with a slight uptick for those who took part in a civics program. People who had no civics instruction are the least supportive of the goal of promoting cultural diversity. Respondents who participated in a civics program were more likely to consider improving social conditions to be a very important educational goal. Many civics programs include elements that heighten awareness of societal issues or service learning components that may dispose participants to prioritize this goal.

People also prioritized academic and life skill goals differently based on their civic education experience. A smaller percentage of people with no civic education (77%) considered teaching people to read, write, and do math a very important goal than those who had taken a civics class (95%) or participated in a civics program (90%). The opposite was the case for training students to take standardized tests. Forty-five percent of those with no civic education strongly supported this goal compared to 33% of those who had a class (33%) or a program (36%). The rankings across categories of the civic education typology were more similar for life skills than for other goals. People who had taken a civics course were somewhat more likely than others to strongly believe that schools should impart marketable employment skills. A slightly higher percentage of people with civics training expressed strong support for the goals of helping people become economically self-sufficient than those with no civic education.

[Table 2 about here]

I performed a series of OLS regression analyses to examine the relationship between the public's views about the goals of the nation's schools and sets of demographic and political variables. Separate analyses were performed with the thirteen goals that comprise the five goal categories as the dependent variables. The demographic variables include sex, age, education⁷,

household income, and race.⁸ The political indicators are ideology, interest in and attention to politics, and political activity. Party identification initially was included in the model; however, it is collinear with ideology. The relationship patterns are similar for Democrats and liberals as well as for Republicans and conservatives. The findings were substantially stronger for ideology than for party identification, so party is not included in the final model.

The regression analyses for the citizenship preparation goals reveal somewhat similar trends for the two traditional goals—preparing responsible citizens and voters. (See Table 3.) Not surprisingly, people who are interested and active in politics are the most inclined to support these civic education objectives. The coefficients for both liberals and conservatives for the goal of making responsible citizens are negative and statistically significant. This finding suggests that people who place themselves on either end of the ideological spectrum are not supportive of the nation's schools taking the lead in citizenship development. It may be the case that conservatives and liberals are skeptical because they are concerned that schools may inculcate studies with political values that are inconsistent with their own beliefs. However, there is no significant relationship between ideology and the goal of preparing students to vote.

The demographic variables are weak predictors of preparing responsible citizens and voters as indicated by the low R^2 values for the block. Women are slightly more supportive of both of these goals than are men. Older people are more inclined to consider preparing people to vote to be an important objective of schools than younger people. Income is a statistically significant predictor of the vote variable, as people from lower income households are more supportive of this goal than those with higher incomes. Whites are less enthusiastic about the goal of creating responsible citizens than blacks or Hispanics. Otherwise, race is not a factor in predicting these two dimensions of citizenship preparation.

The findings for preparing people to use 21st century technology to engage with politics differ in meaningful ways from the results for the traditional goals of citizenship training. The demographic variables are slightly better predictors than the political indicators. Women and young people are significantly more inclined to support this goal for this nation's schools than men and older people. People from lower income households are slightly more likely to believe that preparing students to engage through new technologies is important than those with higher incomes. The coefficient for Hispanics is positive and statistically significant, while there is no relationship for whites or blacks. The negative coefficient for conservatives is the strongest in the equation; there is no relationship for liberals. This finding may reflect the fact that liberals are more likely to use technologies for politics than conservatives, especially during election campaigns (Smith, 2013). While there is a statistically significant relationship between political interest and the 21st century technology goal, the coefficient is weaker than for the responsible citizen and voter variables. Political activity is not related to this goal.

[Table 3 about here]

Table 4 depicts the results of the OLS regression analyses for the civic knowledge goals—teaching students about how government works, democratic principles, and how American history influenced the development of the U.S. government. The political variables are the strongest predictors of people's attitudes about imparting civic knowledge as a goal of the nation's schools. The political interest and attention indicator has the highest regression coefficient in each of the three civic knowledge equations. Political activity also is a statistically significant predictor of support for educating about the workings of government and democratic principles, but not American history. People who are interested, attentive, and active in politics are significantly more inclined to agree that imparting civic knowledge is an important

educational goal than those who are not politically attuned. Both the liberal and conservative dummy variables have a positive, statistically significant relationship with the goal of teaching how government works. However, ideology is not significant in the other two equations.

Of the demographic variables, women are significantly more likely than men to believe that educating about how government works and American history are important goals. Sex is not a statistically significant predictor of the democratic principles indicator. People who come from lower income households are slightly more inclined to support civic knowledge goals than those from higher income families. The relationship is consistent across the three equations, and approaches statistical significance at $p \leq .10$. Age and education are not statistically significant predictors of any of the three civic knowledge goals. The coefficient for Hispanics in the American history equation is positive and approaches statistical significance. Otherwise, the race/ethnicity dummy variables are not significant.

[Table 4 about here]

The results of the regression analyses for the cultural understanding goals appear in Table 5. The demographic variables do a slightly better job of predicting the cultural understanding goals than they did the civic skills and civic knowledge variables. Women are more inclined than men to consider the cultural understanding goals to be important. Sex is statistically significant in all three equations; the coefficients are strongest for cultural diversity ($b=.147$) and social conditions ($b=.122$). Income has a negative, statistically significant relationship in all three equations indicating that people with lower household incomes give more weight to cultural understanding goals than individuals who are financially better off. Hispanics are more likely to consider educating people about the relationship of the United States to other nations and world affairs to be an important curricular goal than are other racial/ethnic groups. The

dummy variables for whites, blacks, and Hispanics are positive and statistically significant for promoting understanding of cultural diversity. The coefficient for Hispanics is the largest among the race/ethnic group variables. Race is not a significant predictor of schools educating students about improving social conditions. Age and education are not significant predictors in any of the equations, although the relationship between lower levels of education and support for educating students about social conditions approaches statistical significance.

The predictive patterns for the political variables differ across equations for the three cultural understanding goals. Political interest/attention is the strongest predictor of support for the goal of teaching about the United States' relationship to other nations ($b=.126$; $p\leq.01$). People who are politically active also are likely to concur with this curricular objective ($b=.110$; $p\leq.01$). There is a negative relationship between conservatives and educating about the U.S. role in world affairs that approaches statistical significance; there is no relationship for liberals. However, liberal ideology ($b=.164$; $p\leq.01$) is the only statistically significant political variable in the cultural diversity equation, while the coefficient for conservatives is near zero. Liberals are strongly supportive of educating students about cultural diversity. Ideology also is the only political variable of consequence in the social conditions equations. Conservatives are not inclined to believe that educating students about improving social conditions ($-.244$; $p\leq.01$) should be an important goal of the nation's schools. The coefficient for liberals is small and nonsignificant.

[Table 5 about here]

OLS regression analyses were performed for the academic and life skills goals, and offer an interesting comparison to the civic education goals. (See Table 6.) The strongest predictors of support for reading, writing, and math as educational priorities are political interest/attention

($\beta=.103$; $p\leq.01$) and political activity ($\beta=.188$; $p\leq.01$). Ideology is not significantly related to this goal. Older people and those with higher levels of education also believe that teaching the basic is an important goal. None of the other demographic variables are significant predictors in this equation. However, demographic variables are the best predictors of whether or not a person believes that preparing students to take standardized tests should be a goal of the nation's schools. Women are more likely than men to support this goal. Education and income have an inverse relationship to the standardized test variable. People with lower levels of education ($\beta=-.124$; $p\leq.01$) and who are less affluent ($\beta=-.102$; $p\leq.01$) are more inclined to consider preparing students to take standardized tests is an important goal of the nation's schools. Older people are slightly more positive about standardized tests than young people; the coefficient for age approaches statistical significance. Hispanics are supportive of standardized test preparation, while none of the other racial/ethnic group variables are significant.

The demographic characteristics as a block are slightly better predictors of the life skills variables than are the political indicators. Women are more likely than men to favor including the two life skills goals in the curriculum. The race/ethnicity variables are all positive and significant predictors of the goal of imparting marketable skills. The coefficients are stronger for whites ($b=.177$; $p\leq.01$) and Latinos ($b=.144$; $p\leq.01$) than for blacks ($b=.108$; $p\leq.05$). Income is negatively related to self-sufficiency, and is the only significant demographic variable other than sex in this equation.

Political activity is the only predictor that is significant across all four equations for academic and life skills. Politically active people favor teaching the basics, imparting marketable skills, and encouraging economic self-sufficiency, but they are not likely to support preparing students to take standardized tests as a goal of the nation's schools. The coefficient for

political interest/attention and the self-sufficiency goal is positive and approaches statistical significance. There is a significant negative relationship between liberals and marketable skills.

[Table 6 about here]

The Public Grades Civic Education

The public gives subpar marks to schools' ability to prepare students to be responsible citizens. CCMS and CEPES studies included similar questions with slightly different referents. The CCMS survey asked respondents about public schools while the CEPES requested ratings of the nation's schools. As Table 7 indicates, the findings are highly comparable. Only 19% of the Civic Mission of Schools respondents gave public schools high grades of A (3%) or B (16%), while 54% ranked them as fair, and 27% gave low marks of D (22%) or F (5%). Similarly, 16% of CEPES respondents awarded schools grades of A (2%) or B (14%), 41% gave a middling grade of C, and one third graded schools as low (24%) or failing (9%). Ten percent of the CEPES participants answered "don't know" to the question. The grade point averages for the CEPES ($\bar{x}=1.73$) and the CCMS ($\bar{x}=1.89$) respondents translate to a low C or C-.⁹

[Table 7 about here]

The CEPES also contained an item that asked respondents, "What grade would you give to the instruction in government and civics you received in junior high and high school?" People's evaluation of their own civic education experience is notably more positive than their ranking of civics instruction in the nation's schools generally. This finding is similar to the long-standing trend that people tend to be critical of Congress, but like their own representative (Ornstein, et al., 2013). Forty-nine percent of the public awarded an A (15%) or a B (34%) to their own civics instruction, while only 7% gave bad marks of D (6%) or F (1%). It is worth noting that 20% of the sample did not know how they would evaluate their civic education experience. The grade point average for the respondents' own civic education is 2.70, which

corresponds roughly to a B-/C+. The mean difference between respondents ranking of their own civic education and their views of the nation's schools is .97, or almost a full letter grade. The relationship is statistically significant ($t, 24.69; df=858; p \leq .00$).

Conclusion

This study confirms the public's support for a robust civic education in the nation's schools. Americans almost unanimously believe that civic education should be a curriculum requirement. However, there are differences in public opinion about the goals and content of civics instruction. This finding is not surprising given the contentious history of civic education in the United States.

The traditional educational objectives of citizenship preparation and imparting civic knowledge have more public support than goals associated with developing social and cultural empathy. There is greater variation in public opinion about particular civic dispositions, such as being tolerant toward diverse groups, than with the concepts of having an informed and engaged citizenry. It may take time for more recent civic education goals, such as those associated with generating cultural understanding, to gain recognition and favor with the public. Among the civic skills goals examined in this study, support for preparing people to use 21st century technology and media to engage with politics is far lower than for the long-established objectives of training responsible citizens and voters. This finding is especially relevant as schools consider ways of incorporating new media into the civics curriculum.

The present analysis provides evidence that Americans have different civic education priorities based on their classroom civics experience, political orientations, and to a lesser extent, demographic background. Political factors are stronger predictors of civic education goals than are demographic indicators. Overall, interested in and attentive to politics is the best predictor of attitudes toward civics goals. People who are politically interested are significantly more

supportive of all of the civics goals studied here with the exception of promoting understanding of cultural diversity and improving social conditions. Political activity is a strong positive predictor of preparing responsible citizens, readying students to vote, imparting knowledge about how government works, and teaching about other nations and the United States' place in the world. As expected, liberals and conservatives disagree on some, but not all, of the civic education goals. The points of contestation occur on goals where those anchoring either end of the ideological spectrum may perceive that it is possible for political bias to impinge on instruction.

This study highlights some differences in public opinion about civics instruction; but at the same time it provides evidence of the convergence of opinion that Galston (2001) predicted. The gaps in views about civic skills and civic knowledge, in particular, are not huge gulfs, but instead represent variations in levels of positive support. The more recently articulated goals of civic education may gain in popularity over time, as they appear more prominently in the curriculum and their implications are more fully recognized.

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Notes

¹The eight nations in Merriam's work are Austria-Hungary, England, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Switzerland, and the United States.

² The CEPES was sponsored by the Center for Civic Education and was conducted at Georgetown University, where Diana Owen was the principal investigator. Please address inquiries to: owend@georgetown.edu.

³The fact that respondents relied on recall of their civic education experience is a potential limitation of this study. We sought to mitigate this pitfall by subjecting the instrument to rigorous pretesting of the items. The Georgetown University research team conducted an extensive survey and interview pretest on 288 subjects. A subsample of the survey respondents was interviewed to determine if they had difficulty answering any of the questions. The interview subjects ranged from young people to octogenarians and included members of a senior citizens community in Florida. The subjects generally had little difficulty recalling their civics experience in some detail. A small number of items where recall was sketchy, such as whether their high school civics course had been required or was an elective class, were eliminated from the study. The survey instrument was pretested further by Knowledge Networks on 50 subjects before the final version went into the field.

⁴ More than twice as many CEPES respondents participated in We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution, a program of the Center for Civic Education, (75 cases or 6% of the sample) than in any other program. Additional programs include Kids Voting USA, Model Congress/Model United Nations, Street Law, Close Up, and Project Citizen.

⁵ Pretesting of the survey revealed that respondents could not recall whether their civics instruction was required or elective, and so we excluded this variable from the study and cannot make a determination about how a student came to participate in a civic education program.

⁶ The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools survey was administered by Knowledge Networks (KN) to a nationally representative sample based on their panel. The same methodology was used by KN for the CEPES study.

⁷ I ran an OLS model that included dummy variables for the civic education typology. The typology was collinear with the education variable, so I removed the typology from the model.

⁸ Region of the country was initially included in the analysis, but was not a statistically significant variable in any of the equations.

⁹ The mean scores were computed for a scale where A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, and F=0. The DK/Refused categories were not included in the computation of the means.

Table 1
How important is each of the following as a goal of the nation's schools?

	Very	Somewhat	Not Very/ Not at all
Citizenship Preparation			
*Preparing people to become responsible citizens	76%	18%	6%
*Preparing people to exercise their right to vote	65%	27%	8%
*Preparing people to use 21 st century technology and media to engage with politics	40%	43%	17%
Civic Knowledge			
*Educating people about government and how it works	62%	32%	6%
*Educating people about core democratic principles as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution	61%	31%	8%
*Teaching people about how early American history influenced the development of the U.S. government	51%	39%	10%
Cultural Understanding			
*Educating people about the relationship of the United States to other nations and world affairs	49%	42%	9%
*Promoting understanding of cultural diversity	46%	36%	18%
*Improving social conditions	47%	35%	17%
Academic Skills			
*Teaching people to read, write, and do math	89%	7%	4%
*Preparing students to take standardized tests	37%	34%	29%
Life Skills			
*Providing students with marketable skills for future employment	71%	23%	7%
*Helping people become economically self-sufficient	67%	27%	6%

Table 2
“Very Important” Goal of the Nation’s Schools by Civic Education Typology

	No Civics	Civics Class	Class + Program	Sign. χ^2
Citizenship Preparation				
*Preparing people to become responsible citizens	69%	79%	77%	.00
*Preparing people to exercise their right to vote	57%	65%	71%	.00
*Preparing people to use 21 st century technology and media to engage with politics	37%	41%	42%	.00
Civic Knowledge				
*Educating people about government and how it works	56%	65%	64%	.00
*Educating people about core democratic principles as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution	47%	66%	64%	.00
*Teaching people about how early American history influenced the development of the U.S. government	48%	52%	52%	.00
Cultural Understanding				
*Educating people about the relationship of the United States to other nations and world affairs	48%	48%	51%	n.s.
*Promoting understanding of cultural diversity	40%	49%	47%	.06
*Improving social conditions	45%	44%	53%	.00
Academic Skills				
*Teaching people to read, write, and do math	77%	95%	90%	.00
*Preparing students to take standardized tests	45%	33%	36%	.00
Life Skills				
*Providing students with marketable skills for future employment	69%	75%	68%	.00
*Helping people become economically self-sufficient	63%	68%	67%	.00

Table 3
OLS Regression of Demographic and Political Variables on Citizenship Preparation Goals

Standardized Solution (beta coefficients)	Responsible Citizens	Right to Vote	21 st Century Technology
<i>Demographic Variables</i>			
Sex	.070 ^b	.048 ^c	.101 ^a
Age	.030	.069 ^b	-.100 ^a
Education	.003	-.007	.014
Income	-.039	-.080 ^b	-.062 ^c
White	-.110 ^c	.033	.072
Black	-.074	.027	.053
Hispanic	-.037	.073	.122 ^b
<i>Political Variables</i>			
Liberal	-.091 ^a	.015	-.017
Conservative	-.061 ^c	-.029	-.142 ^a
Interest and Attention	.161 ^a	.163 ^a	.088 ^b
Activity	.126 ^a	.145 ^a	.011
<i>R²</i>			
For Demographic Variables	.025 ^a	.036 ^a	.027 ^a
For Political Variables	.047 ^a	.055 ^a	.022 ^a
For Equation	.073 ^a	.091 ^a	.049 ^a
n	1135	1134	1129

a p≤.01; b p≤.05; c p≤.10

Table 4
OLS Regression of Demographic and Political Variables on Civic Knowledge Goals

Standardized Solution (beta coefficients)	Government Works	Democratic Principles	American History
<i>Demographic Variables</i>			
Sex	.065 ^b	.044	.061 ^b
Age	.034	.042	.040
Education	-.019	.013	.010
Income	-.052 ^c	-.056 ^c	-.062 ^c
White	-.039	.010	.086
Black	-.001	-.050	.053
Hispanic	-.046	.037	.095 ^c
<i>Political Variables</i>			
Liberal	.062 ^b	.028	.033
Conservative	.078 ^a	.039	.051
Interest and Attention	.186 ^a	.232 ^a	.188 ^a
Activity	.140 ^a	.147 ^a	.025
<i>R²</i>			
For Demographic Variables	.030 ^a	.046 ^a	.023 ^a
For Political Variables	.072 ^a	.087 ^a	.036 ^a
For Equation	.102 ^a	.132 ^a	.059 ^a
n	1131	1134	1130

a p≤.01; b p≤.05; c p≤.10

Table 5
OLS Regression of Demographic and Political Variables on Cultural Understanding Goals

Standardized Solution (beta coefficients)	US/Other Nations	Cultural Diversity	Social Conditions
<i>Demographic Variables</i>			
Sex	.074 ^a	.147 ^a	.122 ^a
Age	.003	-.045	-.045
Education	-.037	-.028	.065 ^c
Income	-.073 ^b	-.068 ^b	-.067 ^b
White	-.002	.112 ^b	-.044
Black	-.025	.095 ^b	.019
Hispanic	.111 ^a	.164 ^a	.049
<i>Political Variables</i>			
Liberal	.011	.164 ^a	-.029
Conservative	-.063 ^c	.005	-.244 ^a
Interest and Attention Activity	.126 ^a	.011	.040
	.110 ^a	.047	.054
<i>R²</i>			
For Demographic Variables	.026 ^a	.055 ^a	.051 ^a
For Political Variables	.035 ^a	.069 ^a	.054 ^a
For Equation	.061 ^a	.124 ^a	.105 ^a
n	1126	1129	1132

a p≤.01; b p≤.05; c p≤.10

Table 6
OLS Regression of Demographic and Political Variables on Academic and Life Skills Goals

Standardized Solution (beta coefficients)	Read, Write, Math	Standardized Tests	Marketable Skills	Self- Sufficient
<i>Demographic Variables</i>				
Sex	.040	.113 ^a	.081 ^a	.061 ^b
Age	.063 ^b	.057 ^c	.040	.039
Education	.060 ^c	-.124 ^a	-.019	.041
Income	.041	-.102 ^a	-.045	-.076 ^b
White	.059	-.009	.177 ^a	.019
Black	.014	.075	.108 ^b	.032
Hispanic	.051	.096 ^b	.144 ^a	.068
<i>Political Variables</i>				
Liberal	-.055	.005	-.075 ^b	-.044
Conservative	-.049	-.013	-.047	-.033
Interest and Attention Activity	.103 ^a	-.002	.046	.063 ^c
	.188 ^a	-.150 ^a	.074 ^b	.100 ^a
<i>R²</i>				
For Demographic Variables	.045 ^a	.116 ^a	.024 ^a	.020 ^a
For Political Variables	.048 ^a	.017 ^a	.011 ^b	.015 ^a
For Equation	.093 ^a	.133 ^a	.035 ^a	.035 ^a
n	1126	1129	1131	1132

a p≤.01; b p≤.05; c p≤.10

Table 7
What grade would you give to schools
in preparing students to be responsible citizens?

	CCMS Public Schools	CEPES Nation's Schools	CEPES Own School
A	3%	2%	15%
B	16%	14%	34%
C	54%	41%	24%
D	22%	24%	6%
F	5%	9%	1%
Don't Know	--	10%	20%
Total	100%	100%	100%