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**FIGHTING FOR DEMOCRACY:
Our Dangerous Civic Illiteracy, A Conservative's
Conscience, and Rethinking American Citizenship**

By Thomas E. Brymer

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A CONSERVATIVE'S CONSCIENCE



FIGHTING FOR DEMOCRACY

OUR DANGEROUS CIVIC ILLITERACY
RETHINKING AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

THOMAS E. BRYMER

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FIGHTING FOR DEMOCRACY

Introduction- Being Gob Smacked

Another Day at the Office

It was a day at City Hall. A day much like any other day. There were problems to be addressed, projects to be worked on, municipal services to deliver, meetings to attend, emails to write and answer, and of course, citizens and businesses to deal with who had a complaint or concern about something their city government was, or was not, doing. For me, this was part of why we existed as municipal employees, to serve, deliver services, and, where possible, address legitimate concerns and complaints. After all, if it were not for the citizens we served, we would not be needed. Most of the many dedicated municipal employees I worked with over the years believed this as well. They went to work every day in local government to serve, and hopefully, make some small difference in the community they served. After all, this was their city too, a place where many of them lived. It often was their hometown, their birthplace. A place many of the city's employees had never left. Or, if they had left, they tried to "get back home" as soon as they could. They loved their community.

I had just hung up the phone. The call was from an irate citizen. They were unhappy with the condition of "their street", the street they lived on. The statements they made were familiar. Their question was: how come the city would not fix their street? It has needed repairs seemingly (to them) forever! They often would go on to ask, why the city would not go ahead and improve their street to curb and gutter standards from its present condition of having just an asphalt street with drainage ditches on each side? Often, I would agree with the citizen that, if they had already notified us about these potholes, we had taken too long to repair them. I would tell that citizen I would let the Street Department know about their complaint and I would call them back with a time frame in which they could expect the repairs to be finished. But, when I was forthright with them and explained that the city had no plans to tear out the street (it was still fully functional and the city did not have the funds to reconstruct the street) and completely rebuild it to curb and gutter standard, they were not happy at all.

The citizen I had just spoken to almost never understood why we would not make their street curb and gutter like the streets in the newer parts of the city. I could see that they had no knowledge or understanding as to how development in a city occurred. Those streets with curb and gutter were largely built by developers to city

standards and the cost of that curb and gutter was passed on to the home buyer in their home purchase price. Once the street and the other infrastructure in the subdivision was complete to city standards, the city would accept that street and the other infrastructure for maintenance at public (i.e., city) expense in perpetuity.

In municipal policy jargon, this is called “growth paying for growth,” something the citizen did not want to hear anything about. They just wanted what they wanted. It was easy to see that they did not understand their city’s form of government as well as what services the city did or did not provide. They had no idea how their city services were funded. Nor, did they care to understand it. They just knew they paid sales taxes, property taxes, and a water/sewer/garbage bill to the city. The city had, in their view, plenty of money. We just chose to spend it somewhere else. That “somewhere else” was almost always another part of the city that the citizen viewed as being treated preferentially and getting far more in city services than he or she was. This was never true, and I could prove it with facts and data, but they believed it vehemently. Nothing was going to change their mind about that.

I asked myself, how many phone calls had I received as a city manager or assistant city manager that were basically the same as this one? While I had not kept count, I knew that answer was simple- many. Frustrated, the famous quote attributed to physicist Albert Einstein came to mind- “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”.¹ While this phone call had not been about quantum physics, perhaps Einstein had a point?

Sure, I had done what I could to be invited to go into the public schools in the cities where I served in the city government and do what I called a one day “City Government 101” to teach children about their city government. Doing that was fun and satisfying and I really enjoyed the students, but I could tell as soon as I began speaking that they knew nothing about local government. I also knew that as soon as I was done teaching that day, it was likely that this was most, if not all, the local government these students would hear and learn about in school, perhaps ever. Yet, city government is the level of government closest to Americans and it is the fastest growing in most states due to increasing urbanization! What could we do to remedy this that had not already been done? My state’s city management association had a complete local government curriculum available for public schools’ use for free that they could use if they wished to do so. Other state city management associations had

¹ “Einstein’s Parable of Quantum Insanity”, by Fred Wilczek, Quanta Magazine, September 10, 2015, <https://www.quantamagazine.org/einsteins-parable-of-quantum-insanity-20150910>

done the same. Sadly though, efforts like this did not seem to be moving the dial in terms of increasing children's local government civic literacy.

I thought, with great certainty, that I knew the problem. While some local government curriculum may be taught by some dedicated teachers, they had a fixed amount of curriculum they had to deliver in a fixed amount of time. Then teachers must assess (test) their students on this curriculum both in terms of classroom tests as well as state prescribed standardized tests given at certain grades. It is exceedingly difficult for teachers to fit non-state prescribed curriculum into what is being already taught. There are only so many hours (literally they have it measured in minutes) in a teacher's day, and it is already difficult for a teacher to adequately cover the already prescribed curriculum. The result? No one is taught very much, if anything, about local government. The result? We graduate thousands of our future citizens from our schools, not equipping them with even a basic knowledge of how their local government is organized, funded, or how they can effectively engage civically with it.

I resolved that someday (emphasis on the "someday") after I retired, I was going to work on helping to increase young people's knowledge of local government so they could engage the governments in the cities they resided in constructively. In many ways, I felt convicted because the final city I worked for as town manager; I was also the superintendent of the town-owned charter school. We owned the school! Even then, looking at myself in the mirror and being honest with myself, I felt responsibility knowing that I had not been successful in making sure local government was taught effectively as a formal part of that school's curriculum. Plus, I knew that even though addressing the education of our youth about local government was important, I recognized that this would do nothing to address the gigantic lack of civic knowledge which an enormous part of our nation's population had- our adults.

A Water Shed Moment

Fast forward now almost two years. It was now Summer, 2020. Now retired, like most, if not all Americans, I was trying to weather the Covid pandemic as best I could. Social isolation had now become a part of my daily vocabulary when asked "how was I doing?"

Then it happened, a moment I will never forget. It happened while watching the evening news. I was witnessing something that I could not believe was happening. I was gob smacked! Beyond astonished! Adult men and women on the evening news

throwing what was effectively a temper tantrum about the requirement to wear a face mask to prevent the spread of the Virus. How would these same people feel if they learned that by not wearing a face mask, they had infected their spouse, parents, or children with Covid? What if they learned that by not wearing a face mask, they had not only made their family sick, but God forbid, that this illness they had brought home killed their loved ones? How would they feel about not wearing their mask then?

Media reports were everywhere stating the same message. Face masks had emerged as one of the most powerful weapons in the fight against the corona virus. The CDC was citing studies that showed use of face masks reduced rates of confirmed corona virus infections.² However, it was clear that this thought was not on their minds as they invoked their “right or rights” not to wear a face mask. Even if the county judge, mayor, or governor had issued an order according to State law requiring that all persons to wear masks in public, they clearly did not believe that they were subject to that authority. They questioned the government’s authority to mandate the wearing of face masks.

It became even worse than what I saw during that summer. As the pandemic steadily worsened, we were in the middle of the 2020 presidential election campaign. Great political polarization was clearly visible and the shrill tenor of the rhetoric from both sides of the campaign was reaching an intensity level of emotion I had never seen before during the previous presidential elections I had voted in beginning in the 1970’s. The things that were being said, especially by supporters of the incumbent president, displayed an amazing lack of understanding of our government, our political system, and our democracy. The wearing of face masks during this pandemic had morphed to become emblematic of one’s political views and the candidate they supported. It was both amazing and alarming to see this happen as even more Covid deaths occurred, the science continued to affirm that masks slowed the Virus’ spread, and we waited in desperate anticipation for the development of a vaccine.

It was then that I had a “light bulb moment”. Yes, the problem I had experienced for years as a city manager encountering citizens not having much, if any, knowledge of their city government was still there. It will continue to be a problem. And some might say that this “mask rebellion” behavior I had just witnessed during the pandemic is

² “Face Masks Really Do Matter. The Scientific Evidence is Growing.” The Wall Street Journal, by Caitlin McCabe, Updated August 13, 2020, 4:57 pm ET, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/face-masks-really-do-matter-the-scientific-evidence-is-growing--11595083298>

caused simply because we have had it too good for too long and now, we are an arrogant, pampered, and ungrateful people. That might be true, at least to some extent, but I will let the reader come to their conclusions about that. Also, we Americans had experienced government mandates before, such as use of seatbelts in motor vehicles. However, to be fair to those objecting to wearing face masks, this face mask mandate had occurred much faster than other Federal mandates like the requirement that all vehicles have seat belts and states' requirements that drivers and passengers must wear them.

However, now I could see that the problem was bigger and even more basic than lack of local government knowledge. It was deeper than pure selfishness, although certainly selfishness was evident. And for that reason, the problem was even more alarming. We Americans, taken as a whole, have no comprehensive knowledge about ANY of our government, beginning with our national (Federal) or our state government. Many Americans have no actual, correct knowledge of what authority their government has or does not have, nor do they know what rights they have or do not have as American citizens. They do not know what the source of the government's authority is, at least not in any depth. They may think they know, but they really do not. The evidence of this ignorance was right there on national television! This lack of civic literacy was significant! Now, "the chickens were coming home to roost" in the most serious way possible, as these apparently civically illiterate people were out spreading a deadly disease by refusing to wear a face mask and feeling very justified about it! And on top of that, they were being asked to vote in an election to choose their next Commander in Chief.

To be sure, those refusing or resisting wearing of a mask gave and still give every appearance that they genuinely believe they are in the right in their "unmasked" behavior, that somewhere in the U.S. Constitution or some other foundational document of our government, it is contained therein. Having perused these documents, I see nothing that could be interpreted to prevent a government in this country, at least at the state level, from mandating the use of face masks in a public safety emergency. Or, to regulate mass gathering events or business occupancy levels, openings, and closings. That does not mean that one could interpret some provision in the Constitution to support their argument that Americans could not be forced to wear a face mask in public or that business activity cannot be regulated in a public health crisis. But, to do so creates the counter argument that this interpretation contradicts a government's duty to protect the public's health, safety, and welfare. Meanwhile, Covid's death toll and its complications for those who survive a severe case of it, have continued to mount.

Certainly, my concern about citizens' lack of knowledge about their local government still needed to be addressed. Based on our nation's current circumstances in the midst of the worst pandemic in over a hundred years, that needed to go on the "back burner", at least for now. It must wait. To use an old phrase, "you have to crawl before you can walk". This pandemic clearly illustrates how much we need to "crawl" by first addressing Americans' overall civic illiteracy- first about their state and national government. All sides of the political spectrum, by the tenor of the debate and expression of opinions, clearly seems to display a consistently high degree of illiteracy about our government, our political system, the ideas, and principles behind it all, how it came to be, and how it is supposed to function in the real world.

I contend, and intend to prove up, that civic illiteracy in the United States is a fundamental societal problem. It is a high-risk threat to our form of government; one we must address now if we hope to sustain our representative democracy. It is a cornerstone on which our form of government rests. Our civic illiteracy did not just appear "overnight". It has been there for some time. This pandemic and the politics swirling around us now have brought it to light in ways we never foresaw. All the while, it was "hiding in plain sight". It was not until many Americans, while involved in voting for their next president, decided to reject wearing masks, resist government mandates on business closure, and refuse to accept all the changes this Virus has brought with it to our collective and individual daily lives. It has been then that our civic illiteracy was clear for the world to see.

While civic literacy is paramount for our democracy's success, we especially need civic literacy in times of national emergency like a national pandemic. To further use this analogy of crawling before walking, the "crawling" we must learn to do now before "we can walk" is to teach Americans in a very complete way the knowledge and skills they need to function daily as effective citizens. This is so we can make the country's government work effectively, and for it to be governed well. Without addressing it, our nation is in peril.

Others before me have identified this peril of Americans' lack of civic literacy and sounded an alarm. As an example, retired United States Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor writes:

"One poll from a few years ago tells us that less than half of Americans can name the three branches of government- yet three-quarters can name each of the Three Stooges. These days not many Americans are even inspired to take a closer look.

*In another poll 57% of Americans admit to having little to no confidence in Congress”.*³

If O’Connor’s remarks do not give you pause, they should. However, I suspect that if you are reading this, it is likely that you already sense something is deeply wrong here that must be addressed. You recognize what should be a clarion call to all of us to address America’s civic illiteracy. Sandra Day O’Connor and others who are concerned about Americans’ lack of civic literacy deserve our gratitude. As a point of comparison, adult reading literacy in the United States has long been identified as a major societal problem that must be addressed if we are going to have Americans that are successful in the 21st century economy.⁴ Why then is civic illiteracy not given equivalent emphasis?

However, based on the events just of the last four years (i.e., not even considering the many events involving our government before that period, many of which are equally significant), it seems clear that we as Americans have not yet heard the call to become more civically literate. Not only have we not heard it, but we have not “connected the dots” to see its importance and relevance to our individual and national lives. We seem to be adhering to Einstein’s definition of insanity, because what we have been doing repeatedly to address our civic literacy is clearly not working.⁵

The purpose here is to not only to continue sounding this alarm but to also point out why it is not heard, as well as embed critical messages that this alarm must contain that apparently are not being conveyed, or in the least, not being heard by most Americans. Finally, my intent is to examine how we can make this alarm as clear and piercing as it needs to be. More than that, we will examine how to make this alarm relevant and meaningful to Americans in a way that Americans want to be civically literate thus, impact this nation in a positive manner. No longer should many Americans view hearing about and discussing our nation’s government structure and democratic values as some boring exercise of a civics class that is viewed as time to take a nap, as opposed to a time to learn about something that has real value in daily

³ To Preserve and Protect” by Sandra Day O’Connor, Retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice (1981-2006) pg. 6, from: *The Constitution, The Essential Users Guide*, Copyright 2016 Time Inc. Books, Published by Liberty Street, an Imprint of Time Inc. Books, 225 Liberty Street New York, NY 10281

⁴ “Hiding in Plain Sight: The Adult Literacy Crisis”, by Valerie Strauss, *The Washington Post*, November 1, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp2016/11/01hiding-in-plain-sight-the-adult-literacy-crisis/>.

⁵ “Einstein’s Parable of Quantum Insanity”, *Quantum Magazine*, September 23, 2015, Ibid

life. We will also examine what components are missing that need to be included to make our civic literacy complete.

A Conservative Conscience Reawakened

We are now in a water shed moment in our nation's history. We have had water shed moments as a nation before. Examples from the previous century range from landing a man on the moon to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The Vietnam War ignited protests across the country. We also had race riots in major American cities in the 1960's. We had the severe economic recession of 2008-10. And, of course, there was the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet the pace of water shed events like these is accelerating, not slowing down, or going away. Today, events ranging from a global pandemic, trade wars, climate change, continuing too-long lasting wars, racial conflict, gun violence, trade wars, immigration, economic tumult, and our politics of the last four plus years are surging over the United States like a tsunami.

The most devastating part of this "tsunami of change" is how our lack of civic literacy has allowed it to shake the guardrails of our democracy, which impacts our ability to successfully weather these events and the uncertainty they create for us. As we will see later in Chapter Ten, this sea of uncertainty affects Americans' embrace of democracy, which appears increasingly tenuous. Even so, why are we not both astonished and outraged by the behavior of our former president? Why were we not only outraged and astonished, but repulsed, as he attempted to cling to power in late 2020 after an election he clearly lost, by assaulting every pillar that upholds our democracy? One reason is that it can be attributed to lack of civic literacy. This lack of citizen outrage is shocking in and of itself yet is symptomatic of a deeper problem. It has been widely reported, as of this writing, of the lame duck President holding meetings where he was, at the urging of certain advisors, entertaining the use of martial law to overturn the results of this election and disenfranchise the millions of Americans that voted for his successful opponent.⁶

Our government's ability to deal with and respond effectively to water shed events like those we are now experiencing is being tested as never before. A major component of a competent national ability to respond to these events is we must have

⁶ Trump's Actions Shows He's Still Only Out for Himself", by Maeve Reston, CNN, December 20, 2020, 7:19pm ET, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/20/politics/donald-trump-martial-law-election2020/index.html>

a civically grounded and educated electorate. We should be so civically literate that, even if we supported the politics and policies of the Trump administration, we would know that believing lies of election fraud and assaulting our Capitol are not how citizens are supposed to behave in American democracy. This is not how we Americans redress our grievances with our government.

The time to address our composite civic illiteracy is now, not later, as it affects future generations perhaps more than those of us alive today. It will not be easy, but we are up to the task. There are many things in this realm we need to not only identify as something we must do better, but if we do not improve them, our democracy is at risk. As the reader will see argued here, if do not address this now, our democracy may be at the brink of something from which it can never recover.

For that reason, much of this will seem critical. Critical and constructive analysis is imperative if we are going to maintain this experiment called the American democracy. We must be willing to be self-critical if we are going to make this a true democracy for “We the People”. We must be committed to “getting better” at this endeavor called self-government. That requires frankness with clarity. As *Bruce Springsteen*, “the Boss”, recently said in his plain-spoken way, “People got to recognize the country for what it is. Its faults, its blessings.”⁷ While my observations and assertions will at times appear to one of political advocacy, I can assure the reader they are not.

In fact, as one who for most of their life has leaned both conservative and voted Republican while being independent, my criticality has been at times quite painful for me. It is hard to be critical of political figures, philosophies, parties, and their platform that you once, for the most part, had been an advocate for up until the last four years. I came to the place when examining our nation’s civic literacy that, without viewing my own conservative views through a critical lens, I risked placing my loyalty in a certain leader or leaders rather than in my country. By doing that, I risked losing sight of what our country must stand for if it is to survive as a liberal democracy. I was resting my citizenship on a “bed of quicksand”, rather than on the solid rock of democracy.

More than that, this journey has caused me to grow and learn in so many ways, as well as to question what I have been taught (or not taught) about my country and its

⁷ CBS Sunday Morning, Interview by Anthony Mason of Barak Obama and Bruce Springsteen promoting their book *Renegades*, October 24, 2021

history. I have been forced to ask myself the question what does, and does not, constitute conservatism? It has caused me to come to grips with the reality that beyond my conservative views on government spending and the size and role of government, I must first accept democratic principles. That, before embracing political issues from a conservative perspective, genuine conservatism must first embrace our Constitution, as well as our democratic norms, values, and principles. If I do not do that, I end up not pursuing “first things first”. I am taking conservative principles and placing them as my priority over and above democratic principles. Everything I believe in must first rest on democratic ideals, not vice versa.

Another reason those of us that considered ourselves as conservative are experiencing a type of identity crisis is that the conservatism in the political realm which we were familiar with has, for all intents and purposes, disappeared. Conservative author and commentator *David Brooks* made note of conservatism’s disappearance from our public square in his article in *The Atlantic*, “*What Happened to American Conservatism?*” saying,

“What passes for ‘conservatism’ now, however, is nearly the opposite of the Burkean conservatism...Today, what passes for the worldview of ‘the right’ is a set of resentful animosities, a partisan attachment to Donald Trump or Tucker Carlson, a sort of mental brutalism. The rich philosophical perspective that dazzled me has been reduced to Fox News and voter suppression.”⁸ (emphasis mine)

David French, writing in *The Third Rail*, also notes conservatism’s evaporation from our political discourse:

“...the American right is in a state of profound ideological flux, with huge segments of the right explicitly rejecting the Reaganite model that shaped conservatism for decades. They reject commitments to more limited government and to free trade, they’re more skeptical of supporting civil liberties, and they are deeply suspicious of America’s global military alliances. The disparate elements of the new right are fundamentally united by a single, overriding purpose. They are anti-left. They’re rooted in deep and abiding animosity.

⁸ “What Happened to American Conservatism”, by David Brooks, *The Atlantic*, December 8, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/01/brooks-true-conservative-news-voter-suppression/620853>

These are the Americans who fly Trump flags not in spite of his manner but in large part because of his disposition. He fights.”⁹ (emphasis mine)

This form of what is now called conservatism would not even be recognizable by Reagan today. That is because it is no longer conservatism. Conservative principles have been replaced by an embrace of a form of authoritarianism that combines elements that include populism, autocracy, theocratic principles (when expedient), a disdain for liberal democratic ideals, self-serving interpretations of the Constitution, and a willingness to use the power of the state to pursue policies with political ends clearly intended to cater only to a party’s political base so it can retain political power.

One cannot help but believe that Ronald Reagan would be aghast at this current situation of the American political right’s political philosophy and approach to governing. Examples of this abandonment of conservatism are almost too numerous to recount. Some of the most egregious examples are recent, including Florida’s Governor demanding (and succeeding) in going after the Walt Disney Company’s for its opposition to his “sexual orientation and gender identity bill” in kindergarten through third grade.,¹⁰ Governor DeSantis has been successful in getting Disney’s special tax status rescinded, although it promises to cost Floridians in two counties billions of dollars. As French correctly notes:

“Granting the government carte blanche to extend or withhold benefits on the basis of politics or ideology would create a two-tier or multi-tier society, but with a caste system based on politics rather than, say, race. This strikes at the heart of an American social compact that protects the free-speech and free-association rights of every American, equally.”

This flies in the face not only of free speech and freedom of religion, but of many other constitutional principles historically observed by our political right, creating what is tantamount to a requiem for American conservatism. Therefore, French can say accurately that “...The American right has lost the plot on free speech”¹¹ which has, until now been at the foundation of conservatism. French goes on to explain what

⁹ “How the Right’s Rules of Rhetoric Create Racial Provocateurs”, The Third Rail, by David French, January 13, 2022, 10:08 AM, thethirdrail@atlantic.com

¹⁰ “Ron DeSantis Aims at Disney, Hits the First Amendment”, The Third Rail, by David French, April 22, 2022, 9:34 AM

¹¹ “Free Speech for Me but Not for Thee”, The Third Rail, by David French, April 22, 2022, 12:48 PM

amounts to a political party abandoning a major part of its conservative heritage this way:

*“As the Republican Party evolves from a party focused on individual liberty and limits on government power to a party that more fully embraces government control of the economy and morality, it is reversing many of its previous stances on free speech in public universities, in public education, and in private corporations. **Driven by a combination of partisan animosity and public fear, it is embracing the tactics it once opposed.**”¹² (emphasis mine)*

Little wonder that today’s American conservative is in a crisis of political ideology. Yet, while one’s conservative principles are important, they must first always be superseded in importance by democratic principles, or one’s conservatism is built on a faulty philosophic platform. If you view our government from a conservative perspective, it is my intention that you will join in this journey of democracy analysis in the pages that follow with the shared goal of building an even better democracy. It is my goal that in the pages that follow, the readers who consider themselves conservatives will come to the same crisis of belief I have (if they have not done so already)- that they cannot prioritize conservative principles over democratic principles. It is akin to building a house without first building a foundation. We must first choose democratic principles and its underpinning value of the common good. If we do not do so, as the reader will see, we sabotage democracy without, in many cases, even knowing or understanding what we have done.

Today, while I consider myself a center-right conservative independent, first and foremost I consider myself a “democratist”. I love my country and its democratic form of government above my political affiliations of its leaders. For that reason, I am committed to doing all I can do to preserve and advance representative democracy for the interests of all Americans, whatever their political leanings are. That is my only agenda. It is that simple. Hopefully that agenda will become apparent to the reader. For that agenda to be effectively pursued, we must be constructively critical of ourselves as a nation, regardless of who is in office or what party is in power. Being self-critical does not equivocate to being less patriotic. I would argue that being self-critical of one’s nation requires a very high degree of patriotism, one that allows a

¹² “Free Speech for Me but Not for Thee”, The Third Rail, by David French, Ibid

person to see objectively the flaws in the country they love so they can improve, build, and sustain the democracy they love.

Water Shed Moments Become Even More Serious

Since my first witness to American resistance to wearing face masks in a pandemic (for reasons they felt involved governmental protections that were being violated), this resistance has spiraled. It has become inveigled in even bigger issues related to Americans' rights and responsibilities as citizens during a pandemic, as well as how our nation should be governed vis a vis a presidential election. Our nation has become even more divided, this time on the issue of the role of science in a government's response to a pandemic versus freedom of choice and one's responsibility for their personal behavior.

For example, many states' governors, in reaction to the science of Covid and recommendations from their public health professionals, have enacted (on an on-again, off-again basis as new strains of the virus have mutated and spread) major restrictions on business activity and individual behavior to contain the pandemic. However, some Americans, as occurred in Michigan, staged a revolt against the public health stay-at-home order mandated by the governor by protesting at the state capitol building. Some of these protestors were heavily armed.¹³ There were even arrests made of those who felt this was such a heavy handed governmental public health regulation that it warranted kidnapping Michigan's governor and burning down the state capitol building!¹⁴

Perhaps the greatest example of the far-reaching impact of the increasing face mask controversy and other public health pandemic control measures has been the 2020 presidential election. A hallmark of the Trump administration was its "two sided" approach to the use of face masks. The Trump administration's public health officials had consistently supported the official use of face masks, public distancing, and other public health measures during the pandemic. That seemed to be the official Trump Administration position on them. However, senior Administration officials, including

¹³ "Heavily Armed Protestors Gather Again at Michigan Capital to Decry Stay-at-Home Order", by Abigail Censky, National Public Radio, May 14, 2020, 10:01am ET, <https://www.nr.org/2020/05/14/855918852/heavily-armed-protestors-gather-again-at-michigans-capitol-denouncing-home-order>

¹⁴ "Michigan AG Details Extremist Plot to Kidnap Gov. Whitmer, Including Plan to Burn Capitol Building", by Darcie Moran and Joe Guillen, Detroit free Press, November 13, 2020, 5:00 a.m. ET, Updated November 15, 2020, 6:20 p.m. ET by Darcie Moran

then President Trump, did not consistently echo this message or use face masks regularly. Instead, they expressed skepticism about them, and even hosted what have been characterized as “mass spreader” events (of Covid) at the White House and at political rallies across the country. This mixed-message approach fueled controversy concerning the use of face masks during the pandemic, especially during the months of campaign activity preceding the election.¹⁵

It has become such a point of debate that now, many of our nation’s leaders do not have a political consensus on this point. In turn, it has created difficulty in achieving a national consensus among Americans about how best to respond to the pandemic. Currently, with the 2020 presidential election at the point in the process where it is normally routine for Congress to approve the Electoral College’s certified vote results, the incumbent president attempted to get the Republican Secretary of State for the State of Georgia to find almost 12,000 votes for him!¹⁶ Even the clear abuse of the Constitution’s processes is not spurring as much citizen outrage as it should, further testimony to lack of civic knowledge. Are we now creating a “new” civic normalcy?

As if they were not enough, after losing the November 3, 2020 presidential election, then President Trump continually attacked, without producing any actual proof or evidence, the election results as being “rigged”, fraught with voter fraud, and illegitimate. Post-election, he had been litigating the election results with approximately sixty (60) court challenges, all but one of which he has lost. His Attorney General William Barr, who resigned not long after the election, publicly stated just before resigning, that he found no evidence of election fraud that would impact the election’s outcome. Yet, President Trump continued to urge his supporters to rally on January 6, 2021 in Washington, DC to protest the election results. Thousands of President Trump supporters, some (but not all) being part of extreme right-wing fringe groups like the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers and some adherents to the QAnon conspiracy. They gathered in our nation’s capital to protest the 2020

¹⁵ “The General Was Missing in Action, How Trump’s Denial and Mismanagement Led to the Pandemic’s Dark Winter”, by Yasmeen Abutaleb, Ashley Parker, Josh Dawsey and Philip Rucker, *The Washington Post*, December 19, 2020, at 2:03pm, <https://apple.news/A5dgy7U5TlaNay6hDkL-fA>

¹⁶ “I Just Want to Find 11,780 Votes’: In Extraordinary Hour-Long Call, Trump Pressures Georgia Secretary of State to Recalculate the Vote in His Favor”, by Amy Gardner, *The Washington Post*, January 3, 2021, 8:59 p.m. CST, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politiec/trump-raffensperger-call-georgia-vote/2021/01/03>

election results and stop certification by Congress of the election results, all in response to the Mr. Trump's encouragement.¹⁷

And, if I thought I was gob smacked when I watched people on television early in the pandemic invoke their "constitutional rights" so they would not have to wear a face mask, that was not even close to what I was feeling as I watched this protest unfold into an insurrectionist riot. To my horror, thousands of protestors converged on the Capitol Building at the encouragement of the outgoing president, to storm the building to stop Congress' certification of the official voting results from the Electoral College. Protestors had turned into a riotous mob that took over the Capitol and attempted to stop Congress' deliberations. Trump let this go on for hours before issuing a "weak video" request for the rioters to stop and go home. But even after causing considerable damage to the building and one mob member being shot and killed, this insurrection failed. The Congress ultimately reconvened later that day and certified the Electoral College's approved election results. Democracy prevailed, even after such a heavy assault.

As we watched as a nation this angry mob of rioters on television, it was apparent how angry they truly were. Their anger was seething. What were they furious about? First, they were rabid with anger that their candidate, Donald Trump, did not win the 2020 presidential election. Their anger was intensified by their belief that not only had their candidate won, but the election had been "stolen" from Mr. Trump through fraudulent voting practices in "swing states" that Trump did not carry post-election. This anger had been fomented by Mr. Trump's false claims. He did it via his two-month campaign (including \$50 million of false advertising and \$170 million in associated fund raising and spending), calling the election "rigged", refusing to concede his clear election loss to his opponent Joe Biden, and urging his supporters to "Stop the Steal".¹⁸ This does not even take into account Trump's numerous words

¹⁷ "Trump's Challenges to Election Results: What They Are and What Could Happen", by Ann Gerhart, January 5, 2021, The Washington Post, 3:50 PM

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/interactive/2020/election-integrity>

¹⁸ Trump Raises More Than \$170 Million Appealing on False Election Claims", by Josh Dawsey and Michelle Ye Hee Lee, The Washington Post, December 1, 2020, 4:27p.m. EST,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-raises-more-than-50-million-appealing-to-false-election-claims/2020/11/30/82e92e6-3347-11eb-afe6-e4dbec9689f8_story.html and "Trump Campaign Paid \$3.5 Million to Stop the Steal Organizers, Report Finds, by Sarah Hansen, Forbes, February 10, 2021, 4:03pm, EST, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarahhansen/2021/02/10/trump-campaign-paid-35-million-stop-the-steal-organizers-report-finds/?sh=498a189137ae>

before the election where he began planting “seeds of doubt” regarding the election’s integrity, saying the only way he could lose is if the election was fraudulent.

Second, they were angry with Vice President Pence, who under the Constitution, presides over a joint session of Congress where both houses certify the Electoral College’s approved election results. The mob entered the Capitol looking for Mr. Pence because of what they had been told- that the Vice President had the power to stop the Electoral College results from being accepted by this joint session of Congress. The Vice President, they believed, could not only effectively throw out the election results thus disenfranchising millions of voters, but then he and Congress would then select the president (who of course, would be Mr. Trump, they believed).

Finally, they were angry that this joint session of Congress was about to certify (even with some members of Congress objecting, although not enough to stop the approval) the Electoral College’s election results, results that had already been approved by the Electoral College as set out in the Constitution. Prior to the Electoral College certifying these results in early December 2020, Mr. Trump had challenged in approximately 60 lawsuits in states all over the country (in courts where many of the judges had been appointed by him), the 2020 presidential election results. Trump had no evidence of the election fraud he was alleging and, one by one, all but one of the courts to which he appealed rejected his legal pleadings.¹⁹

The problem with the mob’s anger was this- all that they had been told by Mr. Trump, and some of his key advisors, was false. All of it. Their insurrection was all based on lies, or what some are now calling the “big lie”- that Mr. Trump’s election victory had been “stolen” from him. None of it was true. These lies were made even worse by certain members of Congress who manipulated these lies to indicate that Congress, under our Constitution, had a legitimate role in objecting NOT accepting the approved Electoral College election results. They were legitimizing the lie. This, even though these same members of Congress openly admitted they did not have the votes to prevail in not accepting the Electoral College’s election results. For whatever reason, including for some of the senators who did this it is believed harbor presidential election ambitions themselves, they threw further “gasoline on the fire”. By the time the crowd gathered on January 6, 2021 to listen to President Trump and other speakers egg them on at a rally on the Ellipse, it is little wonder that the crowd moved from the

¹⁹ “Trump and His Allies Have Lost Nearly 60 Election Fights in Court (And counting), by Zoe Tillman, BuzzFeed News, December 14, 2020, 12:09 p.m. ET, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/zoetillman/trump-election-court-losses-electoral-college>

Ellipse to the Capitol and attempt to seize it while Congress was in joint session to certify the election results.

The rioters clearly believed all these lies, acted upon them, assaulted, as well as desecrated through vandalism, what certain members of Congress were calling our “temple of democracy”- our national Capitol building.²⁰ Not only that, but the mob also committed what many were calling domestic terrorism, sedition, and insurrection while this joint session of Congress was taking place! This raises the question- what level of civic literacy and education did these rioters have? What level of understanding did they have on which they based their conclusion that they were wronged? We all know that they had no basis in fact to believe what they did, but the frightening fact remains, that they did indeed believe it and acted upon it. This is a worse-case scenario for civic miseducation and civic illiteracy come to life.

Tragically, one of the rioters was shot and killed by Capitol security during this melee as these rioters stormed the Capitol’s chambers. Three other rioters died as well from apparent medical emergencies that occurred during the riot. Media reports about the woman shot and killed in this riot state that the political views she expressed on social media were rants against President Trump’s critics and some of his favorite topics, such as illegal immigration. These social media posts by her reflected strongly held right wing political sympathies, rife with conspiracy theories that she endorsed, as well as an encouragement to resist the government and its regulations. This resistance included seeing the wearing of face masks to prevent the spread of Covid as an encroachment upon her personal freedoms. This seemed more than a little ironic given that this author’s journey of examining our nation’s civic literacy starting with witnessing “face mask resistance” months before this siege of the Capitol.²¹ Now, someone had been shot dead. We had gone from resisting face masks to storming the Capitol, all based on lies, miseducation, lack of education, and misinformation.

Senators and House members of Congress were seen on national television being spirited out of their chambers by security officials to more secure locations in the Capitol as the mob penetrated the House and Senate Chambers, as well as their offices. Even more, the mob clearly had no understanding, or perhaps just did not

²⁰ Pelosi Remarks Upon Reconvening of the House of Representatives, House Newsrooms, January 6, 2021, <https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/1621-1>

²¹ “Woman Fatally Shot at Capitol Echoed Trump on Social Media”, by Elliott Spagat and Amy Taxin, The Associated Press, January 7, 2021, 6:13 p.m. ET, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/woman-fatally-shot-capitol-echoed-trump-social-media-75120559>

care, that the joint session of Congress they were interrupting was purely a procedural step required by the Constitution. The Congress has no authority under the Constitution to change voting results once they are approved by the Electoral College. Congress can only certify them, not throw them out. What they wanted to have happen could not occur constitutionally. That did not matter to them. They intended to stop Congress from acting with the result being that their candidate, the incumbent president Donald J. Trump, would remain in office.

How Could This Happen?

This was beyond belief, beyond the pale! It was far worse and even more serious than the face mask incidents I had witnessed the previous summer that had started my civic literacy journey. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called what happened “horrors that will forever stain our nation’s history”.²² The last time the Capitol had been assaulted was over 207 years ago on August 24, 1814, when British troops during the War of 1812 marched into Washington, DC and burned the Capitol Building, the President’s Mansion, and other local landmarks to the ground.²³ The event over two hundred years ago was an attack by a foreign power with whom we were at war. This time, the Capitol was attacked by us, by Americans. Who could have fathomed such a thing ever happening? But it did happen, and the fact that there were those who were more than willing to do it, while not questioning whether or not they should do it, plainly showed an ugly side to our civic literacy (or lack thereof). This was real, not some work of fiction, or a movie plot.

In the days since the Capitol riots of January 6, 2021, many questions are being asked, not the least of which is, how did law enforcement not see this coming? Daily there is more information coming to light, calls for further investigation, as well as demands are intensifying to hold the rioters and those that incited them to account. As that new information is coming to light (and certainly more will be found every day), the events of that day become even more concerning. Reports show a picture emerging that as bad as that day was for our country, it could have been even worse. A twelve-year member of the Capitol police and army veteran who was injured by the rioters has

²² Transcript of Pelosi Weekly Press Conference Today, January 7, 2021, Press Release, Newsroom, <https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/1721-1>

²³ “Burning of Washington, 1814”, United States Senate, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/common/generic/August_Washington.html.

died.²⁴ Two other police officers committed suicide. Many, many police officers were beaten, injured, and traumatized.

We have learned from *Reuters News* that their photographer *Jim Bourg*, who was photographing protesters trying to break down doors to the Capitol building, who:

*“...said he heard three older white men in red “Make America Great Again” caps talking about finding Vice President Mike Pence to hang him from a tree as a “traitor”. Bourg said shouts of “traitor” were common among the other demonstrators as well. Pence was presiding over the electoral vote count, a largely ceremonial duty to confirm Biden’s victory. Trump had falsely suggested to his followers that Pence could ignore the official count and hand Trump a second term. Security agents rushed Pence from the Senate chamber after protesters breached the Capitol building.”*²⁵

It is almost impossible to imagine, as well as exceedingly alarming, that this mob was not only storming and vandalizing the Capitol to stop Congress from meeting, but the rioters were also hunting the Capitol for the Vice President to apprehend him!

This can never happen again. Ever. Suffice it to say, if this incident does not speak to the need to address our country’s civic literacy, as well as address many other topics related to our nation’s challenges, nothing does. This riot and destruction of the nation’s Capital is proof positive that, while the problems that caused it are multi-faceted in their nature, one of its causes most certainly is civic illiteracy. If ever there was evidence needed that for our democracy to sustain itself and survive, the United States of America urgently needs to become more civically literate, this was it.

Looking Forward- The Stakes Could Not Be Higher

Looking forward from this disturbing incident, the *Eurasia Group*, a global political risk research and consulting firm, published its *“Top Risks for 2021”*. Given the

²⁴ “Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick Who Dies After Pro-Trump Riot Was Veteran and War Critic”, by Grace Hauck, Courtney Subramanian, Michael L. Diamond, Susan Loyer, and Paul Davidson, USA Today January 8, 2021, Updated 6:24 p.m. ET, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/01/08/capitol-police-officer-brian-sicknick-who-died-veteran-war-critic/6595549002/>

²⁵ “U.S. Capitol Siege Emboldens Motley Crew of Extremists”, by Ted Hesson, Ned Parker, Kristina Cooke, Juia Harte, January 8, 2021, 3:58 p.m., Reuters News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-extremists/u-s-capitol-siege-emboldens-motley-crew-of-extremists-idUSKBN2902ZY>

events at the Capitol of the first week of January 2021, and the fact that this report was issued prior to the Capitol riot, it now seems prophetic, even well past 2021. This report identifies what they see as the number one risk for 2021 for the United States. This report states, regarding the forty sixth president of the United States, Joseph R. Biden:

“...The #1 risk for 2021 is “46”- the opening of an era in which the occupant of the White House is viewed as illegitimate by roughly half the country. Donald Trump’s refusal to accept the outcome of an election that he declares was stolen is unique in American history, underscoring how divided America has become-will remain...”²⁶ (emphasis mine)

If the Eurasia Group’s forecast is accurate, the impact of such actions by our now former president on our democracy is not only unprecedented, but likely immeasurable in terms of its negative impact on citizens’ trust of their government. It will weaken the United States’ position on the world stage as an advocate of democracy. How can we weigh-in on the world stage as a leader of democracy regarding places like Belarus or Hong Kong when something like this happens in our own country? Already countries ruled by authoritarian regimes like Iran, China, and Russia are weighing in on what has happened, calling attention to this riot as an example of the inherent flaws with democratic governments like ours. Says *Matthew Harris, a Berlin-based senior research fellow at the think tank Royal United Services Institute:*

“This is an absolute gift for authoritarian leaders whose prime narrative is that democratic systems are weak and unstable.”

Harris goes on to say,

“...Someone like Xi Jinping can say: Look, these people can’t get a grip on Covid-19 and they can’t even protect their legislature,” he said, referring to China’s leader, whereas with the China Communist Party “you get stability and growth”.²⁷

²⁶ “Eurasia Group Publishes Top Risks for 2021” by Ian Bremmer and Chairman Cliff Kupchan, pp 1-2, Eurasia Group, January 4, 2021, <https://www.eurasiagroup.net/medic/eurasia-group-publicsh-top-risks-2021>

²⁷ “U.S. Foes Like China See Opportunity in the Chaos of Trump-Stoked Riot at Capitol”, by Alexander Smith and Saphora Smith, NBC News, January 8, 2021, 3:32 a.m. CST, <https://nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-foes-china-iran-see-opportunity-chaos-trump-stoked-n1253318>

Indeed, the stakes are quite high and very urgent. The events of the 2020 presidential election and especially those related to the election and its inauguration in January 2021, make this perhaps what should be of the highest national priority. It is not always that having all the right answers is the first step, but rather, knowing the right question or questions to ask is. The first question the events just described should cause one to ask is, if our nation's civic literacy was at a more proficient level, would this type of political strife in our democracy, especially in the midst of a pandemic, be occurring? Or, in the least, would it be occurring to this degree of severity whereby a riotous mob takes over the Capitol Building to prevent Congress certification of an election which their candidate lost?

While we will never actually know the answer to those questions. It does seem reasonable, however, to answer that question with a negative response. That is, if our civic literacy had been at the level that our democracy requires, the chances of this happening would have been reduced, maybe even greatly reduced. However, it can also be argued that increased civic literacy alone might not have reduced the chances of this riotous insurrection occurring. That is due to the evidence introduced at the former president's Senate second impeachment trial for inciting this riot.

This evidence showed explicitly Trump's long history and pattern of cultivating potential and actual violence with ultra-right wing extremist militant groups. In other words, those extremist group relationships, along with the former president's \$50 million dollar "stop the steal" advertising campaign and his frequent two-month use of the presidential bully pulpit to amplify and impugn the election's integrity (the "Big Lie"), one could argue that the Capitol insurrection could have occurred anyway, no matter what our civic literacy level is. There are also other factors that could have come into play that either diminished citizens' civic literacy or became a causal factor because civic literacy never existed in the first place. We will explore what some of those factors may be.

Again, we may never know the answer to those questions. However, it is hard to believe that such a large segment of a civically literate society would fall victim to such a nationally conducted con game, if they had known how their government really worked and, if they knew how to constructively engage with it. For certain, whether increased civic literacy would have made a difference or not, it "would not have hurt", and would have many other positive impacts.

These events, however, are making the point- that we are not civically literate. We are so civically illiterate that what are clearly lies, can be so easily feed dangerous

mob behavior at our Capitol. We are so civically illiterate that many Americans do not even question them in the face of overwhelming and easy to obtain evidence as to their falseness. Interestingly, *CBS News* picked up on the danger of civic illiteracy in a story for their early morning show in the days following this riot, just prior to the inauguration of Joseph R. Biden as president. The story's focus was Americans' lack of knowledge about the U.S. Constitution.

However, the story displayed for the world to see just how little Americans, stopped randomly on the street, knew not only about their Constitution, but about U.S. government in general when asked about it by *CBS This Morning's Tony Dokoupil*. In the same story, Dokoupil made note that the *National Constitution Center's* web site traffic is at an all-time high, "which may not be a good thing". *Jeffrey Rosen*, CBS constitutional law expert and president of the *National Constitution Center*, in response to Dokoupil's comment about so many Americans going to his Center's web site to refresh their memories about a document foundational to our country, said:

*"We are living in unprecedented times. There's no doubt that we are in a crisis of civic education...the framers knew that the consequences of constitutional ignorance and being guided by passion rather than reason were armed mobs. Well, we just saw that they were right about that. What worries me that most about constitutional ignorance is the same worry that the framers had. **That without constitutional education, the Republic will collapse.**"²⁸ (emphasis mine)*

In the same story, *Raj Vinnakota*, president of the *Institute for Citizens & Scholars* (formerly the Woodrow Wilson Foundation) remarked:

"You need to understand how government works in elections and so on. But you also need to understand why it was set up that way. And if don't understand both of those pieces, you are going to be in trouble. And you can't function effectively in our society."²⁹ (emphasis mine)

Yet, time and again it has been proven that Americans are at their best when faced with shared adversity, when we share a common threat and understand its criticality. It is then that we come together to address it. Americans now seem to sense that their democracy is at a critical juncture, and something is seriously amiss with it. While it

²⁸ "Most Americans Don't Know What's in the Constitution: A Crisis of Civic Education", CBS News, January 19, 2021, 12:19 p.m., <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/constitution-americans-civics-test/>

²⁹ "Most Americans Don't Know What's in the Constitution: A Crisis of Civic Education", CBS News, January 19, 2021, 12:19 p.m., *Ibid*

has undergone constant evolution and examination since its inception, our democracy more than ever needs that self-examination by civically informed citizens. Citizens, to address our democracy's challenges, must be equipped with civic literacy skills that emphasize the values we hold dear as a democratic republic. We can no longer ignore this requisite for democracy, and now must recognize civic literacy's important impact on our individual and collective American lives, as well as our future.

Asking the “Why” Question About Civic Literacy

A good question before we go much further delving into the subject of civic literacy is- why? Why, in the final analysis, is civic literacy important? After all, if one does not know the names and functions of the branches of the Federal government, why does it matter? If one cannot name the number of United States Supreme Court justices, or cannot explain the concept of judicial review, or name who is the Chief Justice of that court, why does it matter? The short answer- it matters a lot. It matters for the reasons mentioned, including that civic illiteracy can create a level of ignorance, misunderstanding, and frustration that foments and leads to civil unrest and violence. There is another important answer to this “why” question as to the importance of addressing our national substandard civic literacy. The answer to this “why” question is trust. Trust, more specifically citizens' trust, in a democracy, is paramount. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Ph.D. of the *Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania* says:

“...those bewildered by such basics as the branches of government and the concept of judicial review are less likely to express trust in the courts, and, as trust declines, more likely to say that courts are too powerful and, judges should be impeached or court jurisdiction stripped when unpopular rulings are issued and that, under some circumstances, it might simply be best to abolish the Supreme Court. Importantly, those who have taken a high school civics class are more likely to command key constitutional concepts...”³⁰

Trust could be likened to a kind of “bank”. With trust it takes a long time to build up “deposits”, but “withdrawals” can happen very quickly. An arena of life where one can witness firsthand how quickly trust can be eroded or completely lost is the

³⁰ Guardian of Democracy, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, pg. 4, 2011, Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools in partnership with the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, the National Conference on Citizenship, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, and the American Bar Association Division for Public Education.

relationship between citizens and their government, especially in a democracy. The longer we take to address our civic literacy, the more lack of knowledge and misunderstanding of one's government we have. And, as that knowledge deficiency and misunderstanding accumulates, citizens' trust in their democratic government is attacked.

Time is of the essence. Carpe diem! Our civic literacy journey begins...

Chapter One: **“We the People...”-What It Really Means for Each of Us**

“We the People, or so it says, in the Constitution, of the promised land...”

From “We the People” by Guitar Shorty, 2006, Alligator Records

A Revolutionary Concept

“We the people”.³¹ It is a phrase many Americans have heard and know of, although it would be interesting to see how many would know if it came from the Declaration of Independence or the United States Constitution, or the Bill of Rights. The phrase is even memorialized by blues musician Guitar Shorty in his song quoted above. But what does it mean? I mean, truly mean? What does “We the People” mean to most Americans? Many Americans, quoting the closing portion of *Abraham Lincoln’s famous Gettysburg Address*, would say it means “government of the people, by the people, for the people...”.³² This certainly is a viable, substantive answer to the question, but one can go back further in time to our founders to find the roots of what Lincoln was saying in his Gettysburg Address.

The framers of our Constitution chose these words very deliberately, having been strongly influenced by John Locke as well as other writers of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason who put their thoughts in writing during the 1600s and 1700s. Locke’s and others’ writings from the Enlightenment era so highly influenced American British colonists’ thinking about their existing government that they ultimately revolted against it. They revolted at great risk to their own lives, their family’s lives, and their property, against their sovereign ruler, King George, and his heavy-handed governance, to create the United States of America. Locke’s influential writings argued that government was an agreement, a social compact, put together to allow men to live together in peace and it rested solely on the consent of the governed.³³ Thus, our country’s founders made clear when writing the Constitution who it was that was deciding to create this country. It was not a religious leader, a noble, not an oligarch, or a prince or a king who chose to govern, but rather, the people

³¹ *The Constitution: The Essential Users Guide*, Preamble, pg. 67, Copyright 2016 Time Life Books, New York, New York

³² From Transcript of Cornell University’s Copy, *The Gettysburg Address*, by President Abraham Lincoln, Delivered November 19, 1863, Cornell University Library, Copyright 2013 Division of Rare & Manuscript Collections, rmc.library.cornell.edu

³³ *How the South Won the Civil War*, by Heather Cox Richardson, pg. 5, Copyright 2020 Oxford University Press, 198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

of the country. And by this concept, “We the People”, and only “We the People”, consent to be governed- a truly revolutionary idea!

For many Americans today, however, the phrase “We the People” too often means mostly, if not entirely, what government can do for us. This is certainly one dimension of the phrase “We the People”. Government is created to serve its citizens, not vice versa. As John Locke taught, government requires the consent of the governed. And, because government belongs to those it has given its consent to govern them, it does not create wealth. The funds government raises to finance government services belongs to “We the People”. Government only spends its citizens’ money, and, for that reason, government must have a strong sense of stewardship. Sadly though, today, the only dimension by which Americans view and evaluate their government is reflected in these questions: What is it doing for me? How is it serving me? Providing for me? Protecting me?

While these are all legitimate views and expectations that Americans should have of their government (and more), it fails to address another key component of “We the People”. That is- what does our government need and must have from its citizens for it to function properly? What do Americans need to be doing for their government? Specifically, in the context of the United States of America, what does this republic, this representative democracy, require and need of its citizens if is to succeed in the 21st century and beyond? What does our government need from and require of each of us for our democracy to be of the quality it needs to be?

There is likely more than one answer to this question. I would posit that one of the most basic things America needs most from its citizens today is for them to be knowledgeable about their government. What should this knowledge include? It should include at a minimum, but not be limited to:

- how their government is structured
- how it was birthed
- how it has historically evolved (“the good, the bad and the ugly”)
- how it is supposed to work
- the concepts, theories and norms underpinning it
- how it is funded
- how they can constructively “plug in to it” to influence its governance for the betterment of all (i.e., the common good)
- perhaps most importantly, how they can best serve their government.

Meet “John Q. Customer”

The emphasis on customer service in local government beginning in the 1990’s has had some positive impacts and outcomes. It certainly either got the attention of or affirmed the views of public employees about who exactly it is they are working for. That is, they work for the citizen or citizens, not the reverse. Public employees have a job, an essential job, that is needed to provide services to the public, that is the only reason public employees have a job. A public employee’s job is not something that they have a “right” to have. They have a job because they are needed to serve the public. From that standpoint, the impact of public employees being taught to consider the citizen as a “customer” is not in and of itself a negative thing.

However, sometimes initiatives with good goals and intentions have unintended consequences. Not all the emphasis on treating citizens as “customers” (i.e., consumers of government services) has been positive. One of the single worst outcomes of changing “John Q. Citizen’s” role to that of “John Q. Customer” has been reinforcing (perhaps implicitly) the idea for citizens that a citizen’s sole role is for them to sit “in their easy chairs” and treat their city government as a big vending machine (figuratively speaking). Simply pull on the handle, and voila, out of the “vending machine” of government comes great service. Not much else is required of the citizen as a customer. Just pay your taxes and fees; everything else will be done for you. You do not have to do anything. You do not have to think about your government or what it is doing. You do not have to vote. You do not have to provide it any input. You do not have to think about what the vision is for the future of the government. Best of all, you do not have to know anything about your government, except how to complain or demand something from it. This view of citizenship extends to many Americans’ view of their city, county, public school, and state government as well, not just their federal government.

This idea of the citizen as customer began to appear in the early 1990’s. At the time, I worked for a city that, perhaps, was at the vanguard of this movement. According to *Martin Tolcin of the New York Times*,

“There was a time in the history of our country when government bureaucracy was a welcome reform. Bosses like Washington Plunkitt and William Marcy Tweed ran American’s cities robbing the public as they cemented political control. As Plunkitt of (New York City’s) Tammany Hall put it, “I seen opportunities and I took ‘em”. To thwart these excesses and wrest government from the club houses, “reformers” introduced the merit system, devising criteria

for hiring and promoting government workers and for awarding government contract and grants. The reformers created Civil Service systems and strict procedures for the expenditure of public funds.”³⁴

Tolchin goes on to explain that in the eyes of authors like *David Osborne and Ted Gaebler*, who wrote books at the time such as *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming Public Service*, this government bureaucracy and its attendant reforms created some negative results. The largest negative impact of these reforms was government service became, in general, or at was least perceived to be- too slow, overly process driven, and not results oriented. The answer to this malaise offered up by authors like Osborne and Gaebler (and many others) was for government employees to begin to treat the citizen as a “customer”. A customer who, in concept, if he or she was not pleased with the quality of the service they received, could “take their business elsewhere”.³⁵ Although most government services are by necessity monopolistic in nature, this idea of thinking about providing government service this way was, at the time, considered by some, to be forward thinking.

This launched a plethora of books, consulting engagements, and employee training efforts for the public sector, that are still in place today, to treat the citizen as a customer. Multitudes of governmental entities at every level now have words pertaining to the importance of excellent customer service in their service plans as well as their vision, value, and mission statements. Simply go on the web site of many local and state governments and you will see mention of their excellent customer service, and their periodic surveys of the quality of service they offer their “customers”.

Please do not misunderstand. Government should be citizen focused and responsive to its citizens, and it should be expected to provide high quality service, at least of a quality commensurate to the financial resources its citizens are willing to provide it. The author was involved in huge organizational development initiatives within city governments to change city employees’ mindset from being “city centric” to being “citizen centric”. We did this by utilizing the concepts mentioned above encouraging our employees to think of our city’s citizens primarily as customers. While this customer focus is useful in helping city employees to focus on service quality from the service user’s (the citizen) viewpoint, it has the negative effect of turning attention

³⁴ “The Citizen as Customer”, by Martin Tolchin, The New York Times, March 8, 1992, Section 7, pg. 7, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/books/the-citizen-as-customer.html>

³⁵ Ibid, “The Citizen as Customer”, by Martin Tolchin, The New York Times, March 8, 1992, Section 7, pg. 7.

away from, as well as minimizing, diminishing, and even eliminating awareness of the important civic duties of citizenship that a democracy requires.

From Citizen to Customer to Consumer

Something else very serious has been going on beneath the surface for a long time with this effort by the government to provide “great customer service” to their “customers”, and it greatly affects our civic literacy. It is far more than the government treating citizens as customers. It is our identity. According to *Michael Tomasky* in his book *If We Can Keep It*, Americans have moved far beyond having as their primary personal identity being that of citizen. Once one begins to hear that they are a customer more than a citizen, it is a short journey to reinforcing a transformation that Tomasky says has been going on for some time now. To Tomasky, we now see ourselves more as consumers than any other role. A consumer of everything, not just government services.³⁶

Tomasky emphasizes the importance of this identity transformation because, in contrast to identifying primarily as a consumer, having one’s primary identity being that of a citizen carries with it thinking of other persons’ interest sometimes, or in the common interest. Tomasky calls this “*enlightened self-interest*”, which means we should understand that when we perform acts of seeming selflessness in our citizen role and identity, it is also in our own self-interest to do so.³⁷ An example Tomasky provides of enlightened self-interest is supporting one’s public schools, even when one has no children attending those schools. The enlightened self-interest view of citizenship would conclude that not having children in public schools still merits paying taxes for them. After all, an educated community with strong public schools benefits everyone, grows and maintains the business tax base, and maintains as well as hopefully, increases one’s home value. Citizens are also engaged, according to Tomasky, in public matters, regardless of whether or not “...we’re on the left or right or somewhere in between, our citizen-selves are regularly thinking and acting about politics and civic life.” Citizenship requires us to think of the common good (a key concept in democracy we will cover later).³⁸

³⁶ *If We Can Keep It, How the Republic Collapsed and How We Can Keep It*, by Michael Tomasky, Copyright 2019, pg. 125, Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W.W. Norton & Company, 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10110

³⁷ *If We Can Keep It*, by Michael Tomasky, Copyright 2019, pg. 125, *Ibid*

³⁸ *If We Can Keep It*, by Michael Tomasky, Copyright 2019, pg. 125, *Ibid*

However, the significance of us having as our primary identity being a consumer does not bode well for civic literacy and democracy because, according to Tomasky:

“In our other identity, our consumer identity, we don’t think about the common interest or enlightened self-interest. We mainly think about wants. The bigger TV, the newest phone, the latest version of that space-age device on the table that we can ask to play “Back in Black” or name the capital of Ontario...Over these past thirty years, we have been trained by the market to want, want, want...”³⁹

In our democracy there has always been, in Tomasky’s view, a dynamic tension between our identities as citizens and that as consumers. It was not until the 1970s to the present that our consumer identity has grown exponentially, totally eclipsing our citizen identity, and now dominates as our primary identity. Tomasky describes this transformation to seeing ourselves almost entirely as consumers rather than citizens as:

*“...something that has happened in an astonishingly short period of time, in historical terms. Think about...the 1930s, how few people owned radios, telephones, stoves, and other items. That was eighty years ago (and eighty years before that, in the 1850s, most people owned no consumer items at all). Today most people have all these things. Even families on the margins of poverty typically have a TV and two or three smart phones. It has changed us, dramatically. In the 1930s people barely had consumer identities. In the 1950s and ‘60s, they acquired such identities, a condition that was lamented by dozens of prominent sociologists and economists, perhaps the most notable being John Kenneth Galbraith in his famous book, *The Affluent Society*...”⁴⁰*

Tomasky asks the question, “We have given ourselves to our private pursuits. How did this happen?”⁴¹ For Tomasky, the causes have been:

“...a period of inflation like the modern United States had never seen; a massive expansion of credit to the middle class (i.e., credit card availability, author’s note), but extended at rates of 15 and 20 percent; banking deregulation that increased Americans savings but also led to the S&L crisis; explosions in

³⁹ If We Can Keep It, by Michael Tomasky, Copyright 2019, pg. 125, *Ibid*

⁴⁰ If We Can Keep It, by Michael Tomasky, Copyright 2019, pg. 126, *Ibid*

⁴¹ If We Can Keep It, by Michael Tomasky, Copyright 2019, pg. 127, *Ibid*

*compensation for the top 1 percent, in every walk of life, and finally, and age of unprecedented consumption...*⁴²

Our adopted primary self-identity as consumers appears complete and is a formidable obstacle to improving our civic literacy. As Tomasky puts it, "...Our consumer selves have lapped our citizen selves a few times over..."⁴³ But, all is not lost. A refocus on our roles as citizens is achievable if we begin to ask, what exactly are we as supposed to be doing as United States citizens?

So, Who, Exactly, is Serving Who?

This customer service emphasis has some limitations, as does a primary personal identity of being a consumer, which Tomasky argues, we have developed. Its chief limitation is one of being very one-dimensional. By one-dimensional it is meant that with the emphasis and constant bombardment of messages to citizens that they are primarily customers and consumers, it omits other vital dimensions and aspects of citizens' roles. These include being civically informed about, aware of, and involved in their government. Public employees receiving customer service training should not be expected to be teaching the same citizens they serve about this other dimension of citizenship- civic duty. In fairness, many city governments have instituted "citizens' universities" where they teach interested citizens about all the services their city provides, as well as how that city's government is organized and functions. In these programs, there is usually a segment in their citizens' university about city elections and how to run for city council or serve on a city advisory board.

To be certain, even though it can be argued we do not see ourselves today primarily as citizens, it is indeed someone's "job" to teach citizens their civic duties. Whose job is it to do that? Who is doing it? The answer to the first questions is that more than one part of our society should be teaching and reinforcing to citizens what their civic responsibilities are. Still, who is actually doing it? While someone or some group may be doing it, if it is happening, it is not happening effectively in a comprehensive, holistic, and coordinated manner. The reader will see plenty of proof of that fact later. At most, today we are focused on citizens as customers, not citizens as civic participants. Customer service's focus is not going to educate citizens about their civic

⁴² If We Can Keep It, by Michael Tomasky, Copyright 2019, pp 148-149, Ibid

⁴³ If We Can Keep It, by Michael Tomasky, Copyright 2019, pg. 149, Ibid

responsibilities. It is the wrong tool to address civic literacy. It is like taking a golf club to a bowling alley. All it does is emphasize a person's role as a consumer.

Our founding fathers understood very well this need for citizens to be civically literate and to see themselves more than simply consumers of government services. Government is more than a figurative vending machine. A representative democracy requires human interaction between the governed and those governing. On a daily basis, this requires citizens to be involved constructively in their government's daily affairs by providing input to shape its policy directions. It requires citizens to share ideas and concepts about their government which they hold in common. When we reinforce to citizens that their primary role is instead, to be customers, i.e., only to be recipients of government services, the wrong message is sent.

Instead, the message received is that it is acceptable, and indeed expected, for Americans to be passive and uninformed about their government. That message conveys both explicitly and implicitly that a citizen's main role is to receive government services, and not much more than that. Participating in one's government, whether voting or in some other role of providing input to one's elected officials, becomes a low priority, if it is even thought of at all. If one considers themselves as John Q. Customer, and not John Q. Citizen, it now becomes normative for them to think of their citizenship principally from the perspective of a consumer of governmental services. With that misguided perspective alone, we have been taught that all will be well with our democracy.

However, all is not well, nor will it be, because a limited, one-sided view of citizenship as that of a customer in a representative democracy creates a huge void that can be filled by no one other than its citizens. This void in the citizens' role of carrying out their civic responsibilities is sometimes called "civic duty". This void cannot be filled by just any kind of citizen. This void can only be filled by citizens that are adequately equipped to exercise those roles, rights, and responsibilities. Ask yourself this- do we legally allow adults to drive without taking a driver's test? How about pilots? Would you feel comfortable boarding a plane where the pilot learned to fly (or at least thinks they learned) by reading a few manuals and logging a few hours of flight time? Of course not.

Consider the implications if we did not require some prior knowledge and a test for a driver's license, a pilot's license, or licenses and preparation required for a host of professions. What would occur? Likely, it would be mayhem. It reminds me of the television commercials for a major hotel chain of a few years ago. In one of these

commercials, for example, one could sleep at one of these hotels and the next day be smart enough to stop by the local hospital and perform brain surgery. While this made for a humorous commercial, our approach to equipping our citizens to know about and engage in their government is almost as laughable, or sad, depending on your concerns about the importance of civic literacy and civic involvement.

The reader may feel that comparing being an educated citizen to that of being a trained driver or pilot as a false comparable. Yet, most Americans do not seem to be inclined to give a moment's thought to the impact of their being unequipped with little, if any, knowledge about their government or their role in making it effective. The alarming fact that many, if not most Americans, never become civically engaged, or feel a sense of obligation to do so in a constructive manner, rarely crosses their minds. When they do want to become civically engaged, it is because there is an issue that directly affects them (usually hitting their pocketbook). They are "mad as hell" and just want to do something about it! If all we have accomplished is create frustrated angry citizens who are interested only in issues that might impact their wallet or their children or their property, how can we expect them to more constructively and broadly engage in our democracy, if they are not equipped with the knowledge to do it?

Ironically, most Americans do not know, even in situations where they can see that they are being directly impacted by some action, law, or policy of their government, how they should contact and engage their government (be it their city, county, state, or the national government). If you doubt this, ask them who is on their city council, school board, county commission or who their congressman or senators are at the state or federal levels. They simply do not know who they are, much less how to contact them. This results in frustration for the citizen and can beget their belief that the government is not interested in them, as well reinforce their conclusion that the government is controlled by a small group of wealthy Americans or other special interests who could care less about them.

Consequently, many Americans' reaction is to disconnect even further from following the civic world around them. Most of the time, they do this because they do not see any direct connection of these issues to them personally, causing Americans to go about their daily lives not even giving a thought to their government or their role in it. Or, due to their lack of knowledge, they feel powerless to impact it. One of the favorite American perspectives on civic engagement is to dismiss it as simply "politics", and they will be quick to tell you how much they hate politics. Their apathy or cynicism towards as well as disconnection from their government sets in and becomes contagious, increasing even more. That is a potentially deadly self-fulfilling

prophecy for a democracy. President John F. Kennedy recognized the vital importance of the centrality of American citizens' role of positive involvement and service to their government, when he said in his famous January 1961 inauguration address:

*“And so, my fellow Americans; ask not what your country can do for you- ask what you can do for your country.”*⁴⁴

America's Clarion Call

If *civic engagement* is what a successful democracy requires its citizens to pursue, exactly what is it? More specifically, what does constructive, effective civic engagement look like? *Thomas Erlich* provides a solid definition of the term:

“Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.”⁴⁵ (*emphasis mine*)

There is a dilemma at work here. How can one be civically engaged if one is not *civically literate*? The short answer is, one cannot do it, at least not effectively. Just as with a pilot that is not properly trained and prepared with hours of flight time as a student, or a driver that has not adequately practiced their driving or studied for and taken a driver's license test, citizens cannot be expected to engage with their government at any level- local, state, or national, without first gaining knowledge about their government.

One could argue that without proper civic knowledge, any civic engagement that occurs is dangerous for a democracy because it may be civic engagement that is not based on democratic principles. Our citizens must be civically literate. So, then what is civic literacy? *Lori Morgan's* definition of *civic literacy* is:

“The knowledge and skills to participate effectively in civic life through knowing how to stay informed, understanding governmental processes, and

⁴⁴ John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 1961, Voices of Democracy, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/kennedy-inaugural-address-speech-text>

⁴⁵ Civic Responsibility and Higher Education, edited by Thomas Erlich, published by Oryx Press 2000, preface, pg. vi

knowing how to exercise the rights and obligation of citizenship at local, state, national, and global levels. Individuals also have an understanding of the local and global implications of civic decisions (Partnership for 21st Century Skills). ”⁴⁶ (emphasis mine)

Morgan goes on to define another term that must go hand in hand with “civic literacy” and “civic engagement”. That term is “*civic efficacy*” which she defines as “...The perceived belief someone has about their ability to participate in civic life, assume citizenship responsibilities, and make a difference”.⁴⁷

To be *civically literate* means one must know something about their government if they are to participate with *civic efficacy* (effectiveness). According to Morgan, *civic literacy* requires knowledge in three broad areas:

- How to stay informed about one’s government at all its levels.
- Understanding government processes, including understanding governments’ structure.
- Knowing how to exercise the rights of citizenship at all levels of government.

In order to interact with one’s government with efficacy, a citizen must be able to take that knowledge and apply it, which is *civic participation*. How is this done? By participating in civic life in way that makes a positive difference for their community, state, and nation. A representative democracy depends upon this type of citizen participation.

So, we have three key concepts- civic literacy, civic engagement (or civic participation), and civic efficacy. Each has its own meaning, but each has a close inter-relationship in terms of creating positive outcomes for the success of Americans and our democracy. They are “three legs” of the same stool. Without even one of the legs, the stool cannot be used. But it all starts with and rests upon civic literacy. *As Retired Supreme Court Justice O’Connor and Former Congressman Lee Hamilton contend,*

“...Those who blame our democratic shortfalls on a media failing its responsibilities, the proliferation of money in politics, and politicians serving

⁴⁶ Morgan, Lori A., Developing Civic Literacy and Efficacy: Insights Gleaned Through the Implementation of Project Citizen, pg. 2., i.e., inquiry in education: Vol. 8: Iss.1, Article 3. Retrieved from: <http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol8/iss1/3>

⁴⁷ Morgan, Lori A., Ibid, pg. 2

*narrow interests rather than the common good are not wrong- all these are very real threats to American democracy. **But all three of these threats, and others, would be ameliorated by a more knowledgeable and engaged citizenry...***⁴⁸
(emphasis mine)

Who Must “Fix” This Problem?

This causes the question to arise, how are we Americans doing in terms of our civic literacy, which in turns impacts both civic participation, and civic efficacy? By any measure (and a “sneak preview of the next chapter), we are doing poorly. Some might say that is a generous assessment. Retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor (mentioned earlier) has identified civic literacy as a major concern that should be at the forefront of this country’s national agenda. O’Connor has created a foundation, *iCivics.org*, to help address our nation’s civic literacy. As an example of her concern for civic literacy, the Justice commented on some people having questions about whether the U.S. Constitution lives up to the needs of citizens in modern times. In response, O’Connor says:

*“...I think a fairer question is whether modern citizens- We, the People- are living up to the needs of constitution. Our government relies on good citizens. To be a good citizen, you need to know how our government works. And to do that you need to know the Constitution. **We, the People have need to improve.**”*⁴⁹
(emphasis mine)

Civic Participation Requires Shared Commitment

The assessment that, for a democracy to succeed, there must be a shared commitment on the part of its citizen to uphold and commit to its principals and ideals, is not new. Historians argue over evidence as to where the earliest democracies existed. Nonetheless, it is generally agreed that ancient Athens, Greece in the fifth century BCE had among the earliest of democracies. According to *Dahl*, the word democracy came from ancient Greece meaning, “...literally ruled by the people, the term is derived from the Greek *demokratia*, which was coined from *demos* (“people”) and

⁴⁸ Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools, pg. 5, 2011, Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, Ibid

⁴⁹ “To Preserve and Protect”, Sandra Day O’Connor, pg. 6, Ibid

kratos (“rule”) to denote the political systems then existing in some Greek city-states, notably Athens.”⁵⁰

Ancient Athens democracy was a “direct democracy”, meaning Athenians voted directly on key decisions related to their government. This contrasts with American style democracy which is “representative democracy” whereby citizens vote for legislative representatives and their president who make decisions related to their governance on behalf of Americans. Granted, participation in ancient Athenian democracy was limited only to native born males over the age of 21. Athenians, however, did recognize the need for these young male citizens of Athens to understand the importance of what they were committing themselves to. Consequently, the Athenian (Ephobic) oath was administered as follows:

“We will never bring disgrace on this City by an act of dishonesty or cowardice.

We will fight for the ideals and Sacred Things of the City both alone and with the many.

We will revere and obey the City’s laws, and we will do our best to incite a reverence and respect in those above us who are prone to annul them or set them naught.

We will strive unceasingly to quicken the public’s sense of civic duty.

Thus, in all ways, we will transmit this City not only, not less, but greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.”⁵¹

While Athens’ oath was both a civic and military one, the sense of shared civic commitment it conveys is inspiring. It was this shared commitment that allowed Athens’ democracy, one of the world’s earliest, to sustain itself for a number of years. Sadly, in the end, it did not last, as disastrous wars and conquests by other rulers destroyed Athens’ democracy.⁵² Perhaps that is a warning we should take heed of. Even today, this oath has been adapted and utilized by local governments as well as public affairs schools at universities.⁵³ Like ancient Athens’ democracy, our

⁵⁰ Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2020 by Robert A. Dahl

⁵¹Strategic Government Resources, <https://www.governmentresource.com/about-us/servant-leadership/the-athenian-oath>

⁵² Athenian Democracy, Wikipedia, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian democracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athenian_democracy)

⁵³ Strategic Government Resources, <https://www.governmentresource.com/about-us/servant-leadership/the-athenian-oath>

American civic literacy must be built on a foundation of shared principals and ideals. Do most Americans even know about these are? We will see in more detail later how well we are conveying these democratic ideals, principals, values, and norms.

Shared Commitment Requires Shared Knowledge and Shared Beliefs

Today, while we have no requirement for a civic oath or test for native born Americans, the closest thing one could argue that we have to one, for most Americans, is the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. However, for immigrants to this country who wish to become citizens, there is a test called the U.S. Citizenship Test. Interestingly, when this test has been given to those who already were American citizens to determine their civic knowledge, it did not go well. In 2018, shortly before the Congressional mid-term elections, the then *Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation* (now the *Institute for Citizens and Scholars*) announced the results of a national survey it had conducted where Americans had been given a multiple-choice test consisting of items taken from the U.S. Citizenship Test. The *Wilson Foundation* reported that the results of this survey showed that only one in three Americans (36 percent) could pass the test they had administered. The U.S. Citizenship Test has a passing score of 60.⁵⁴

Can any country hold itself up to be a democratic republic, knowing that a democracy must have an informed citizenry so they can be an informed electorate and thus, hold their government accountable, do so with this low level of civic literacy? Keep in mind, this survey was conducted two years before the current corona virus pandemic struck. Is it any wonder then, given this low level of civic illiteracy, that the behavior I had witnessed regarding persons refusing to wear face masks during this deadly pandemic occurred? Furthermore, should we be puzzled that this behavior was based on these citizens' knowledge and understanding of what they fervently believe to be their "rights" as guaranteed to them as United States citizens? The answer is, of course, we should not be surprised. They believe it, but in fact, they never knew it at all, or understood it correctly- all to the detriment of our democracy.

Yet, an informed citizenry equipped with civic knowledge is not enough. They must believe in the moral rightness and authority of that knowledge. It must be part of who we are. For example, the phrase "We the People" is meaningless unless we have clear

⁵⁴ News Release dated October 3, 2018, Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, <https://woodrow.org/news/national-survey-finds-just-1-in-3-americans-would-pass-citizenship-test/>

understanding of what it does and does not mean. Following that understanding of what “We the People” means, something else important must happen- that correct understanding must be appropriated by each of us. It becomes part of who we are, what we believe. It is often said that how we act individually or collectively is driven by our beliefs. We act on what we believe. For a citizenry to reap the fruits of democracy, we need the intellectual knowledge of democratic concepts as well as an understanding of how our democracy works. Once we have learned and absorbed a belief in those concepts, we must act on them in a constructive manner. In a democratic republic, we call that civic engagement or civic participation.

Be Hopeful, but be Realistic- Our Challenges are Complex

Make no mistake, we cannot be naïve about our civic literacy situation. To make things even more difficult, our nation’s challenges are multi-causal and complex. Civic engagement is made even harder to achieve as we separate and choose to only live near and interact with people who share our views and political beliefs. The 2020 presidential election results indicate this demographic trend has been happening for decades with an increasing trend of Americans living in red (Republican) and blue (Democratic) “bubbles”.

After the 2020 presidential election, The *Wall Street Journal* reported on the results of a *Pew Research Center* survey that now indicates “ideological silos” are appearing on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. This survey found that both consistently conservative and liberal Americans are more likely than their ideologically mixed Americans to say that it is important for them to live in a place where most people share their political beliefs. The 2020 presidential election voting map bears this out.⁵⁵

The *Wall Street Journal* reported, based on their analysis of the 2020 presidential election map, the following findings:

- *“Urban, rural divide- Counties favoring Democrats are also increasingly more urban as those voters become concentrated in metropolitan areas. Conversely, Republican-leaning counties have become more numerous, with that expansion occurring in rural areas.”*

⁵⁵ “Election Reveals an America Drifting Apart”, by Joel Eastwood, Max Rust, Yan Wu, and Randy Yelp, *The Wall Street Journal*, pg. A5, Friday, November 13, 2020

- *Racial diversity- Populous Democratic-leaning counties with big cities have always been among the most racially diverse parts of the country. But as the political divide has grown, the share of minorities in blue counties has accelerated.*
- *Education levels- Importantly, counties where whites without college degrees are a large share of the population have become intensely Republican, a phenomenon that helped lift Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016.”⁵⁶*

This separation, or what is often called “polarization”, is not just occurring demographically, but also in Americans’ attitudes towards political beliefs of others. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, “...The views of each party have hardened ideologically. And views of their political counterparts are increasingly negative.” Since 1995 the views by Republicans and Democrats towards the other has increased to 75% to one of “mostly unfavorable.”⁵⁷

Amy Chua, in her book Political Tribes, confirms this polarization now underway saying, “Strong evidence suggests white anxiety, being displaced, being outnumbered, being discriminated against- has fueled conservative politics in America.” Chua cites a Wall Street Journal analysis “...which found that Donald Trump had especially strong support in counties ‘most unsettled by rapid demographic change’- i.e., by the recent influx of nonwhite immigrants into previously heavily white populations in small-town Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.”⁵⁸ Chua points out that this “white anxiety about antiwhite discrimination” cuts across party lines, pointing to facts that provide “...some justification for these feelings of white marginalization.” These facts include that poor and working-class whites have among the highest rates of unemployment and addiction, as well as declining life expectancy for whites without a high school diploma.⁵⁹

To further exacerbate this separation is the economic transformation our country has been undergoing for some time now. Author *Arthur C. Brooks*, in his book *Love Your Enemies*, contends that in the decade prior to the 2016 election Americans went through an economic crisis,

⁵⁶ The Wall Street Journal, pg. A5, Friday, November 13, 2020, Ibid

⁵⁷ The Wall Street Journal, pg. A5, Friday, November 13, 2020, Ibid

⁵⁸ *Political Tribes, Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*, by Amy Chua, pg. 170, Copyright 2018, Penguin Press, Random House LLC, 375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

⁵⁹ *Political Tribes*, by Amy Chua, pg. 171, Ibid

“...worse than anything since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Millions lost their homes or jobs or both. Huge swaths of people felt left behind by the economic recovery and forgotten by the political classes in Washington, who were offering them no solutions and didn’t seem to care much about their plight. Their despair didn’t register in public opinion surveys. Neither the conventional left nor the conventional right fully grasped it.”⁶⁰

According to Brooks, this despair resulting from loss of home and job created a loss of dignity. The group most impacted by this “dignity gap” as Brooks describes it? It is working class men, many of whom are without high school diplomas, eventually stop looking for work, and also socially isolated not only from the work force, but other social institutions as well.⁶¹ Impacts of groups like this, as well as others, are of enormous consequence in a number of societal arenas including, but not limited to, civic literacy and civic engagement.

This segment of our citizenry has withdrawn from the “marketplace of democratic ideas”. Resultingly, they are generally not engaged in American civil society in a manner that produces positive civic engagement, if any civic engagement at all. This is dangerous for a democracy. Their loss of dignity produces despair and then anger toward their government, an anger that causes attraction by them to follow toxic, demagogic, populist leadership (which we will examine in Chapter Four) and willingness to attack the governmental institutions of their country, all in the hopes of changing what for them are circumstances of despair. We are seeing this play out before our eyes as this is written.

Clearly, with political, economic, and social isolation occurring in our country, we have our work cut out for ourselves as a nation if we believe such divides impair civic literacy and civic engagement and thus, are harmful for the future of our democracy. While addressing civic literacy alone will not address these issues, it can be a foundation on which to build the shared understanding a democratic nation must have in order to confront them.

⁶⁰ Love Your Enemies, How Decent People Can Save America From the Culture of Contempt”, by Arthur C. Brooks, pg. 69, Copyright 2019, American Enterprise Institute, HarperCollins Publishers, 195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007.

⁶¹ Love Your Enemies, by Arthur C. Brooks, pp 69-70, Ibid

Yet, It Always Comes Back to “We the People”

Some readers may be old enough to remember the comic strip *Pogo* by *Walt Kelly*. Until his death in 1972, Kelly’s comic strip was one of the most popular in the country being syndicated from 1947-75 in newspapers nationwide.⁶² Pogo, the main character, was an unassuming opossum who lived with his animal friends in the Okefenokee Swamp. Kelly used his comic strip and its animal characters to satirize many of the events, situations, and political figures of the day including Senator Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy was infamous and for a time, also a very powerful U.S. Senator, who conducted the great anti-communist “red hunt” of the 1950’s. Kelly wrote and drew his satiric comic strip’s content, taking on controversial topics of the day like McCarthy, despite some conservative newspapers threatening to quit publishing his comic strip. Kelly never bowed to this pressure and was buoyed by the tremendous popularity of Pogo with its readers.

Perhaps Pogo is most remembered for the line “*We have met the enemy and he is us*”. This line is actually a parody of a War of 1812 message sent by US Navy Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry to Army General William Henry Harrison. The message was delivered after the Battle of Lake Erie, with Admiral Perry saying, “*We have met the enemy, and they are ours*”. Pogo’s parody of Commodore Perry’s 1813 message first appeared in a poster for the first Earth Day in 1970 with Pogo standing in his home, the Okefenokee Swamp amidst trash and garbage. There Pogo commented to one of his swamp animal friends about all this man-made pollution that we human beings were the problem as far as despoiling the earth was concerned.⁶³



⁶² http://en.wikipedia.org/Walt_Kelly

⁶³ <http://bytedaily.blogspot.com/2011/04/quote-walt-kelly-html>

What Pogo said, taking artistic license with Admiral Perry's quote, could not apply more now to the need to address our nation's poor civic literacy. What is the cause of the problem? We have seen the enemy and he is us! We as a people are civically illiterate. Who can solve this problem? Us! Must we solve it? I would answer that in the strongest affirmative possible! The stakes are too high for us not to address it. Without civic literacy, we do not have an informed electorate, and this puts our nation's form of government greatly at risk.

In the end, it truly does come full circle; back to "We the People", as it says in the Preamble to the United States Constitution. Founder Benjamin Franklin reportedly replied to the question of a Philadelphia resident, as the 1787 Constitutional Convention ended, "*Well, Doctor, what have we got?*" Franklin's famous answer was, "*A Republic, if you can keep it.*"⁶⁴ Franklin was exactly correct. If "We the People" want to keep what we believe is the greatest country in the world, it is up to us to take care of this representative democracy. "We the People" must do it. No one else can. If we do not deal with it, and deal with it effectively, then unknowingly we become the enemy Pogo refers to. "We the People", is US, the American people!

Our failure to learn how to effectively "drive this bus" called a democratic republic is no one's responsibility but ours. The irony of a democracy like ours is that, while there are many forces or "enemies" that would like to see our nation's form of government fail, arguably the greatest enemy of our democracy is our collective failure as Americans to be educated and informed about it. Further, it requires our commitment to ensure that this knowledge is given the priority it must have to be the "torch of freedom" we hand to our children, grandchildren, and all future generations of Americans. It can never be treated as "one and done" knowledge. It must be constantly at the forefront of our national civic consciousness. It must be taught in school and at home and seen as something that must be passed on to every future generation. Furthermore, this civic knowledge is not just "head knowledge", something to just know about and be aware of. It is knowledge which must be put to use which is called "civic duty" or "civic responsibility".

The good news is that, while this problem is not new and needs to be taken "head-on" now, it is not too late to deal with it. *Steve Corbin* writes for the *Des Moines (Iowa) Register* that most Americans are now politically exhausted from this season of a pandemic coupled with a volatile presidential election contest. Corbin goes on to

⁶⁴ Bartlett's Franklin Quotation by John Bartlett (1820-1903), Franklin Quotations, 10th ed. 1919, Bartleby.com, Number 1593

describe how the non-partisan and non-profit organization *More in Common* has conducted a major survey showing that only about a third of American voters are “irretrievably dogmatic” about their politics. The remainder they call the “*Exhausted Majority*”. While this group is “tired”, more importantly, this roughly 67% of voters are fed up with the polarized politics that has “infected” American government and society. According to the *More in Common* organization, Corbin reports that this largest segment of American voters is flexible in their views and is willing to support different policies rather than “kowtowing” to a single political party. They believe bipartisanship is necessary and expect their elected officials to govern that way.⁶⁵

This is significant. It signifies dissatisfaction with the status quo, the first step required to make significant change. It could bode well for a nation that decides to seriously tackle its civic illiteracy because it indicates an understanding that rededicating ourselves to improving our civic literacy is essential to maintaining a democratic republic.

There are other reasons for optimism. Good work has already been done identifying the extent of our problem and identifying ways to address and eliminate our civic illiteracy, and thus strengthen our nation’s democracy. As founder *John Adams* said,

*“Liberty cannot be preserved without general knowledge among the people, from the frame of nature, to knowledge, as their great Creator, who does nothing in vain, has given them understanding and a desire to know...”*⁶⁶

Fortunately, there are those in the last several years that have shared Adams’ commitment to an informed citizenry and have taken steps to address it. This work has not been in vain, but rather, can be built upon. As historian and author *Heather Cox Richardson* observes and exhorts,

“...Americans have finally woken up. Democracy is not a spectator sport, and people are now speaking up, demanding that our leaders listen to us, and insisting

⁶⁵ “Most Americans are Politically Exhausted. Here’s How They Can Change Things”, by Steve Corbin, Des Moines Register, February 20, 2020, 10:00am CT, <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/opinion/columnists/iowa-view/2020/02/20/politically-exhausted-americans-majority-bipartisanship>

⁶⁶ John Adams, Founding Father Quote #1425, from “Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law”, <https://www.foundingfatherquotes.com/quoter,1765,/1425>

that officials as well as ordinary Americans answer to the law. Let's approach the future with the clear eyes it demands. And now, let's get to work."⁶⁷

Indeed, it is time for us to get to work! First, let us see where we started as a nation with civic knowledge and literacy. Then we will examine the condition of civic education and literacy in the United States today. With that, we will see not only where our civic education and literacy stands today, but what needs to be addressed to improve it. We are going to take that work and see what, if any, additional knowledge, and skills are necessary to be added to it to make our citizens civically ready for the 21st century and beyond.

⁶⁷ Letters from an American, Heather Cox Richardson, January 5, 2021, Copyright 2021

Chapter 2: Our Civic Literacy Yesterday, Today, and What We Can Do About it

“Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government.”⁶⁸

Thomas Jefferson

Educating Citizens- From the Nation’s Early Days Until the Mid-Twentieth Century

With a democratic republic that is over two hundred years old, it is easy to make assumptions that it has always “just been there”. We tend to think of it as something that once the Declaration of Independence was signed, and once we had a version of what today we call our Constitution, our democracy was in place- that it was “just there”, in place, and we can now take it for granted. We do not ask the question; how did it take hold once the colonists had won their war for independence? Once we had a constitution, how was it fostered, nurtured, and grown? Keep in mind, in the context of world history, our country is young. And, although the events that led to the American Revolutionary War had much to do with shaping our collective, national democratic mindset (as did the Enlightenment writers mentioned earlier), we have had a relatively short time period in the scheme of history since the Revolution to develop the American democratic thinking about government. American democracy did not and does not just “happen”. Several forces, institutions, and efforts were in place that shaped our early civic literacy. What were they?

Civic Participation: A Force that Grew Our Civic Knowledge

Yoni Appelbaum identifies one of them most significant early shaping forces of Americans’ civic beliefs and literacy in an eye-opening piece in *The Atlantic*:

*“Democracy is a most unnatural act. People have no innate democratic instinct; we are not born yearning to set aside our own desires in favor of the majority’s. Democracy is, instead, an acquired habit. Like most habits, democratic behavior develops slowly over time, through constant repetition. **For two centuries, the***

⁶⁸ Historic & Contemporary Quotes, Ibid, the American Heritage Education Foundation, Inc., www.americanheritage.org

United States was distinguished by its mania for democracy...” (emphasis mine)⁶⁹

This still begs the question, how did American society develop an aptitude, a mindset, “bent”, predilection, and habit of thinking democratically and desire to practice it? Appelbaum answers that question by examining our history:

*“In the early years of the United States, Europeans made pilgrimages to the young republic to study its success. How could such a diverse and sprawling nation flourish under a system of government that originated in small, homogenous city-states? One after another, they seized upon the most unfamiliar aspect of American culture; its obsession with associations. **To almost every challenge in their lives, Americans applied a common solution. They voluntarily bound themselves together, adopting written rules, electing officers, and making decisions by majority vote.** This way of life started early. Children in their games are wont to submit to rules which they have themselves established, and to punish misdemeanors which they have themselves defined,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*. “The same spirit pervades every act of social life.”⁷⁰ (emphasis mine)*

Alexis de Tocqueville’s eye-witness account of the early days of United States democratic republic is perhaps one of the most often cited and authoritative works about our young democracy and society. Appelbaum goes on to describe that, “By the latter half of the 19th century, more and more associations mirrored the federal government in form: Local chapters elected to state-level gatherings, which sent delegates to national assemblies... These groups had their own systems of checks and balances. Executive officers were accountable to legislative assemblies; independent judiciaries ensured that both complied with the rules...”⁷¹

Appelbaum points out this model was very adaptable, being used in business with boards of directors via the corporation’s charter, trade associations, unions, fraternal organizations, and churches. These civic institutions were not being run by the

⁶⁹ “Americans Aren’t Practicing Democracy”, by Yoni Applebaum, The Atlantic, October 2018, pg. 2 of 10, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/losing-the-democratic-habit/568336>

⁷⁰ “Americans Aren’t Practicing Democracy”, by Yoni Applebaum, The Atlantic, October 2018, pg. 3 of 10, Ibid

⁷¹ “Americans Aren’t Practicing Democracy”, by Yoni Applebaum, The Atlantic, October 2018, pg. 3 of 10, Ibid

aristocratic elites, who had inherited their offices. Nor were they being run by centrally appointed administrators. Rather, democratically elected representatives were operating them.⁷²

Civic literacy via civic participation was, as Appelbaum describes, becoming "...the norm, not the exception...This nation of presidents- judges, representatives, and recording secretaries- obsessed over rules and procedures. Offices turned over at the end of fixed terms; new organizations were constantly formed. Ordinary Americans could expect to find themselves suddenly asked to join a committee or chair a meeting..." In 1892 Walter B. Hill, president of the University of Georgia noted a test case of a small town where almost every resident over ten years old held a place in office causing Hill to conclude that America was a "nation of presidents"⁷³

This extensive civic involvement required a framework to make these participative civic meetings productive for everyday Americans. Thus, was born the *Pocket Manual of Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies* written by an army engineer named Henry Roberts. What we know it today as *Roberts Rules of Order* became a best seller with more than 500,000 copies printed in four decades.⁷⁴

American democracy was growing and flourishing at every level, dependent on the involvement of its citizens at every level of society. And it was driven, in part, by Americans learning about democracy by practicing it a granular level through creation of "voluntary associations". If we were going to accomplish things, we had to join together. To join together, we needed a structure by which to organize our joint efforts. So, Americans replicated democratic civic structures right where they lived. But to do that, we had to learn about democracy in order to practice it in our daily lives. We had to become civically literate. Thus, now comes to center stage, the American education system.

⁷² "Americans Aren't Practicing Democracy", by Yoni Applebaum, The Atlantic, October 2018, pg. 4 of 10, Ibid

⁷³ "Americans Aren't Practicing Democracy", by Yoni Applebaum, The Atlantic, October 2018, pg. 4 of 10, Ibid

⁷⁴ "Americans Aren't Practicing Democracy", by Yoni Applebaum, The Atlantic, October 2018, pg. 4 of 10, Ibid

Creating Civic Literacy Through Shared, Common Knowledge

Other forces besides democratic civic participation were also at work from our country's founding that helped create and shape Americans' civic knowledge- the forces of shared language, beliefs, and understandings. The vehicles for achieving this shared commonality will perhaps seem unlikely to some, and for many, not well known at all. What were they? They were a speller, a dictionary, and the common school.

E.D. Hirsch, Jr. maintains that civic identity rests on an educational foundation that is "common to all". Says Hirsch, "...Along with our Constitution, it has been the school mistresses and school masters of our past starting with Noah Webster- who kept us thriving and unified."⁷⁵ According to *Noah Webster in his "On the Education of Youth in America" (1788)*:

"The Education of youth, is in all governments, an object of the first consequence. The impressions received in early life, usually for the characters of individuals; a union of which forms the general character of a nation".⁷⁶

As Hirsch sees it, "...**Schooling in a democracy is not just schooling. It's also citizen making...**"⁷⁷ (emphasis mine). Hirsch asserts that Noah Webster (1758-1843), our country's chief and earliest school master, is a major architect of United States' democracy, albeit not as well-known as many of our founding fathers like Washington, Hamilton, Madison, and Jefferson. In looking at Webster's contribution to creating this new country's civic literacy, perhaps that needs to be a perspective change. When one studies Webster's legacy, we all need to become far more cognizant of the importance of his impact on building the American nation. It is, indeed, no small thing that he helped us achieve.

Hirsch has delved into Webster's democratic legacy and found Webster's vision for American democracy began in the 1780s. Webster understood that the modern style of United States' democracy would need to be a "manufactured thing", built on a

⁷⁵ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 3, Copyright 2020, HarperCollins Publishers, 195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007

⁷⁶ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. i, Ibid

⁷⁷ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 9, Ibid

common system of laws, values, ethics, and a shared print language. We call this “culture”. Webster called it “manners” saying,

*“A fundamental mistake of the Americans has been that they considered the revolution completed when it was but just begun. Having raised the pillars of the building, they ceased to exert themselves and seemed to forget the whole superstructure was then to be erected. **This country is independent in government but totally dependent on manners.**”⁷⁸ (emphasis mine)*

Webster understood that the American Revolution was just the beginning, not the end of the effort it takes to build an American society that can sustain a democratic government. For Webster, this term “manners”, was the “...the civics and ethics and traditions and language wrapped together...” In the eighteenth century this word was the normal way to translate the Latin word “mores”. These “manners” encompassed “...the whole range of customs, values and ethical rules plus patriotic sentiments...” It was clear to Webster that not only language, but the beliefs of the people must be unified. However, it would only work if the nation’s citizens “...agreed to the universal founding principles, obeyed its laws, and spoke the same language...” Webster saw “...his effort to unify and level the United States culturally as a necessary element in creating a “people”.”⁷⁹

How did Webster go about his civic literacy nation building? He did it with a spelling book! As Hirsch recounts,

Webster’s Speller was probably the most important schoolbook in US history, to be rivaled only by the McGuffey’s grader reader. In the early nineteenth century, Webster’s blue-backed Speller found its way into almost every American classroom. By 1880, thirty-seven years after Webster’s death, William H. Appleton, whose firm also printed Webster’s dictionary, wrote that the Speller continued to command “the largest sale of any book in the world except the Bible”. It sold more than a million copies a year- in large cases delivered to distributors who placed them in every cross-roads store in the country.” A biographer of Webster, Harlow Unger states that by 1900, after being a bestseller for more than a century, the Speller had sold over one hundred million copies,

⁷⁸ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pp 9-10, Ibid

⁷⁹ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pp 9-10, Ibid

*with an accurate count made impossible by the great number of unauthorized pirated editions...*⁸⁰

As the spellings used in his *Speller*, as well as the definitions in his dictionary, gained traction, so did Webster's instructions and fables contained in his schoolbooks. As Hirsch points out, "...Webster made it clear to the teachers and students who used the *Speller* that unity of language in the nation ought to accompany high effort, honesty, and care for one's fellow citizens of all ranks and conditions."⁸¹ For example, Webster advocated those using his books to,

*"Be kind to all as far as you can; you know not how soon you may want their help; and be aware he that has the good will of all that know him shall not want a friend in time of need."*⁸²

Webster combined such philosophical and moral exhortations with stories that clearly had civic and moral importance such as "*The Boy that went to the Wood to look for Birds Nests When he should have gone to School*".⁸³ What were the outcomes of Webster's efforts? As Hirsch describes,

"So, it was Webster's schoolbooks plus his dictionary that bound the new nation together. With his schoolbooks he deliberately set about to create an American culture of equality, a prerequisite for political and social equality. Webster explicitly advocated a universal education for "all ranks of society". And he succeeded. By the early nineteenth century, only one nation of the world, the United States, had a fully standardized, universally intelligible oral and print language."⁸⁴ (*emphasis mine*)

Hirsch goes on to say, "...Ten years after Webster's death, a newspaper editorialist wrote the following in praise of his accomplishment:

⁸⁰ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 13, *Ibid*

⁸¹ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 12, *Ibid*

⁸² How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 12, *Ibid*

⁸³ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 12, *Ibid*

⁸⁴ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 13, *Ibid*

“The Yorkshireman cannot talk with a man from Cornwall. The peasant of the Ligurian (Italian) Apennines drives his goats home at evening over hills that look down over six provinces none of whose dialects he can speak. Here in America, five thousand miles change not the sound of a word. Around every fireside, and from every tribune, and in every field of labor, and every factory of toil, is heard the same tongue. We owe it to Webster.”⁸⁵

Hirsch makes it clear that Webster did encounter opposition to his efforts from two factions. Generally, according to Hirsch, these two factions have resisted the push for commonality throughout American history. The first faction is comprised of those who believe they have been left out of the dominant culture. The second faction are those who oppose commonality in principle because they view it as dull, unproductive uniformity. In the early nineteenth century some of the opponents of commonality were Catholic leaders concerned that what became the common school movement was dominantly Protestant. The more secular objectors considered uniformity lacking “innovation and vigor”.⁸⁶ Hirsch points out the flaws in that thinking with this statement:

“...commonality in the means of communication and in the valuation of liberty is consistent with high diversity in the use to which such commonality is put...”⁸⁷

Stated in everyday parlance, commonality of communication (speech) complements diversity because it facilitates, promotes, and elevates the value of liberty. As Hirsch says,

“...Alexander Hamilton was right to make the dollar the common national currency. Similarly, Webster was dead right that we also need a common intellectual currency.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pp 13-14, Ibid

⁸⁶ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 11, Ibid

⁸⁷ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 11, Ibid

⁸⁸ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 11, Ibid

Creating Civic Literacy Through the Common School

There was something else at work to develop Americans' civic literacy in the early history of the United States in conjunction with Webster's work to create shared language and ideas through his Speller and dictionary, as well as high levels of civic participation.

Thomas Jefferson is usually credited with the idea of the free, all-inclusive school to educate Americans. This would provide something to every American that, in Jefferson's time, was only available to the wealthy- education. However, little progress or success was made in Jefferson's era to establish such a school. That is, until *Horace Mann* and others in the early nineteenth century fostered the common school movement. It took hold first in northern and midwestern states. The common school was seen as, "...the chief instrument of national cohesion and unity for all ranks of society." Those proponents of the common school in Massachusetts and Rhode Island were egalitarian and deeply anti-slavery.⁸⁹ This is an important fact to know as it influenced the spread, or more precisely, the slower pace of the spread, of the common school in the South.

Mann was editor of the *Common School Journal*, a nationwide education journal and the most influential in U.S. history. This journal set forth the goals of the common school movement with its many contributors in agreement saying, "...that educating all ranks of society...with a shared allegiance to equality and fairness would be necessary of a prosperous, stable nation."⁹⁰ While the common school movement did not specify directly grade-by-grade subjects, it is the way it turned out. This was because Webster's *Speller* was gradually overtaken by what became to be known as the *McGuffey* reader. These "graded readers" were meant to be taught at the grade level specified in the title. Expanding on Webster's work, they were well-written books that by the time students began using them in Grade Five, were demanding for students both conceptually and linguistically. Hirsch describes the *McGuffey* reader as a "true citizen maker".⁹¹

⁸⁹ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 14, *Ibid*

⁹⁰ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 14, *Ibid*

⁹¹ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 14, *Ibid*

Nineteenth-century common school advocates saw commonality and universality of education as the only true "...guarantors of national unity, the only proper foundation for an admirable society..." Before and during the Civil War, the idea of the common school flourished in the North, while the South, with its wide embrace of and economic dependence on slavery, resisted it. The general education level in the South, by the time of the Civil War, was much less than the north (taken from lower school attendance percentages in the South). Southern ideology argued, ironically, that there was virtue in non-commonality, that it was more democratic than the despotic approach of the Union.⁹²

Lincoln reflected the view held by the North, the view that ultimately prevailed, that the South's treacherous disobedience to the Constitution put democracy at risk. When Lincoln made his famous *Gettysburg Address*, he made clear that what was at stake was to, "...determine whether this nation or any nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the equality of all people could long endure..." Lincoln was asking, is democracy viable? Hirsch's answer to that question is:

"The best thinking of the North was: "Yes, indeed it can be, if the American idea of embracing all people of all colors and ethnicities is accompanied by a common devotion to the national well-being-patriotism-and a common language..." (emphasis mine)⁹³

Hirsch points to the common school which, to those in the North by the mid-nineteenth century, became the vehicle by which Americans understood and celebrated their national unity. A key part of this understanding and celebration of national unity was that it embraced "the multitudes". American literature by authors like Melville and Whitman began to build their writing around and celebrate this "multitude" that today we would call American diversity. For example, Melville's classic *Moby Dick* had a multi-ethnic crew which operated a whaling ship that symbolized multiethnic America. Hirsch acknowledges the importance of this celebration of unity with diversity with this qualifier:

"...The idea was that you could be an assimilated American without forgoing your ancestry or individuality. But there was this proviso: You had to go to school. Your children had to go to school. They had to learn to read, write, and speak the

⁹² How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pp 15-16, Ibid

⁹³ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 14, Ibid

language, and gain a loyalty to the United States. You had to master McGuffey... ”⁹⁴

The common school played a central role in binding these multitudes together into one people. From Hirsch’s perspective, “...The common school created America”.⁹⁵ He goes on to say:

The United States was the first big modern democracy, along with Prussia, the first society with free public schooling nationwide. It was Noah Webster’s social aim from the start to create a “people” through schooling...In the first century and a half of our national existence, we succeeded in creating a united citizenry based on common language and common schooling.⁹⁶ (emphasis mine)

The common school’s emphasis on shared educational content was driven by our “urgent desire for national unity”, according to Hirsch. At our nation’s founding, the “watchword” of every American patriot was the word “union”. Hirsch points to evidence of the importance of the term and the idea of “union” being the theme of our federation of states, a central theme in our debates about the Constitution, and the Constitution’s first aim “to form a more perfect union”. It was even evidenced in our young history by the prevalence of incorporating the word union into the name of streets and places like Union Square, Union Park, Union Avenue, and so on. Daniel Webster used union as the theme of one his most significant public oratories in 1830 when he said, “Liberty and Union; now and forever: one and inseparable”.⁹⁷

Founders Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin from Pennsylvania, as well as Virginians Washington, Madison, and Jefferson, shared the belief that there was “mortal danger” to our nation’s union from internal conflicts. They were concerned about internal conflicts, such as those described by Hirsch- Germans versus English in Pennsylvania, state against state, region against region, local interests against national interests, party against party, poor against rich, personal ambition against

⁹⁴ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 16, Ibid

⁹⁵ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 146, Ibid

⁹⁶ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 146, Ibid

⁹⁷ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 146, Ibid

personal ambition, religion against religion, and uneducated versus educated. For that reason, these founders believed that,

*“...Unless controlled, these hostile “factions” would subvert the common good, breed demagogues, and finally turn a republic into a dictatorship, just as in ancient Rome”.*⁹⁸

From Hirsch’s perspective, to keep this disunity from subverting our country’s “nation building”, these founders saw the need to have “...far more than the checks and balances described in the Constitution”. They saw that we would also need:

*“...a special new brand of citizen, who unlike the citizens of Rome and other failed republics, would subordinate his interests to the common good. Unless we created this new and better kind of modern personality, we would not be able to preserve the republic.”*⁹⁹ (emphasis mine)

The Common School Teachers’ and Schoolbooks’ Role in National Unity by Creating Citizens

Critically, the common school’s teachers, as well as writers of schoolbooks, continued to envisage and “carried the torch” for many years for the common school to serve as an agent of civic unity. Teachers and schoolbook writers held to this vision, according to Hirsch, until well into the first half of the twentieth century. Educators Baker and Thorndike made note of the centrality of the common school in molding the thinking of American society about its democracy when they wrote in their education journal in the early to mid-1900s:

“We have chosen what is common, established, almost proverbial; what has become indisputably classic, what in every child in the land ought to know, because it is good and because other people know it. And it is well to remember what is old to us is new to the child...In an age when the need of socializing and unifying our people is keenly felt, the values of a common stock of knowledge, a common set of ideals is obvious. A people is best unified by being taught in childhood the best things in its intellectual and moral heritage...An

⁹⁸ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 147, Ibid

⁹⁹ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 147, Ibid

*introduction to the best of this is one of our ways of making good citizens. Not what we know only, but what we have felt and enjoyed, helps to determine what we are... (emphasis added)*¹⁰⁰

Educators in our early republic saw the school as the “...institution that would transform future citizens into loyal Americans.” Hirsch outlines that this was by teaching common knowledge, virtues, ideals, language, and commitments. One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, *Benjamin Rush*, authored one of most important early essays about American education. In it Rush advocated for a common elementary school curriculum for all. “...The paramount aim of the schools, he wrote, was to create “republican machines”. By “republican machines” he meant active, loyal, purposeful citizens of the republic.¹⁰¹

The concept of the common school, as a necessity, “animated” American thinkers far into the nineteenth century, says Hirsch. In 1812 New York State passed the Common School Act which provided the basis for a statewide public school system. In 1852 Massachusetts was the first state to make the common school compulsory for all children. Over the course of that century, other states followed suit. These schools were tax supported with a common statewide administration. The early grades were all to have a common core curriculum that would, as Hirsch accounts, “...foster patriotism and solidarity...” Hirsch adds:

*“...The aim was not just to assimilate the many immigrants then pouring into the nation but also to assimilate native born Americans from different regions and social strata into the common language and common American idea...” (emphasis mine)*¹⁰²

When in 1825 New York’s state legislature created a fund to purchase common textbooks for all the states’ elementary schools, their aim they said was *not* to:

“...make our children and youth either partisans in politics, or sectarians in religion, but to give them education, intelligence, sound principles, good moral

¹⁰⁰ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pp 16-17, *Ibid*

¹⁰¹ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 147, *Ibid*

¹⁰² How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pp 148-149, *Ibid*

habits, and a free and independent spirit: in short, to make them American free men and American citizens, and to qualify them to judge and choose for themselves in matters of politics, religion, and government... (By such means) education will nourish most and the peace and harmony of society be best preserved... ”¹⁰³

In Hirsch’s estimation, these educators met their aim. He points to evidence of this achievement from the 1835 account of French observer *Alexis de Tocqueville* who, according to Hirsch, when he observed first-hand and wrote in his famous *Democracy in America*, “...took special note of the aim of citizen making. How much more loyal to the common good Americans were than his quarrelsome fellow Europeans!...”¹⁰⁴

Providing further corroboration to the common school’s success in creating civically literate citizens, Hirsch concludes with de Tocqueville’s own words from his *Democracy in America*:

*“It cannot be doubted that in the United States the education of the people powerfully contributes to the maintenance of the democratic republic. That will always be so, in my view, **wherever education to enlighten the mind is not separated from the education of civic duty (Hirsch’s emphasis).** In the United States the general thrust of education is directed toward political life; in Europe its main aim is to fit men for private life. I concluded that both in America and in Europe men are liable to the same failings and exposed to the same evils as among ourselves in France. But upon examining the state of their society more attentively, I speedily discovered that the Americans had made great and successful efforts to counteract these imperfections of human nature and to correct the natural defects of democracy.”¹⁰⁵*

Summing Up Our Early Civic Literacy

These then, were the building blocks for our country’s civic literacy into the twentieth century:

¹⁰³ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 149, *Ibid*

¹⁰⁴ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pp 149-150, *Ibid*

¹⁰⁵ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 150, *Ibid*

- Participating in and practicing democracy at the local level in all phases of life.
- Developing on a national basis a commonality of language, curriculum, ideas, morals, and other shared knowledge through widely circulated schoolbooks and a dictionary.
- Educating all, regardless of societal ranking or economic status, at public schools with a common curriculum that promoted commonality of ideas and knowledge.
- Understanding and celebrating American unity based upon “the multitudes”.
- Common schools staffed with educators who held to the vision of the centrality of the common school role for building and developing future citizens of a United States of America.

So, How Are We Doing with Our Civic Literacy Today?

When one begins digging into the condition of Americans’ civic literacy more recently, unfortunately, the 2018 *Wilson Foundation* report mentioned in the last chapter, is the “tip of the iceberg”. Before examining some of the other evidence regarding the current state of our nation’s civic literacy (or lack thereof), it is worthwhile to take a closer look at some of the other findings contained in the *Wilson Foundation Report*. This is in addition to the fact that their survey showed that only about a third of the Americans they surveyed could pass the questions given which were taken directly from the U.S. Citizenship test for naturalized citizens.¹⁰⁶

As mentioned in the last chapter, only a low percentage (36 percent) received a passing score of 60 or higher. Only 13 percent of those surveyed by the *Woodrow Wilson Foundation* knew when the United States Constitution was ratified. Most respondents thought the Constitution’s ratification occurred in 1776. Sixty percent of those responding did not know which countries the United States fought in World War II. And even with all the media attention in recent years on the U.S. Supreme Court, 57 percent of those surveyed did not know how many justices serve on the nation’s highest court. Said *Stephen Dinan of The Washington Times* commenting on these results, “...It’s probably lucky that most Americans are granted citizenship at

¹⁰⁶ News Release dated October 3, 2018, Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, [//woodrow.org/news/national-survey-finds-just-1-in-3-americans-would-pass-citizenship-test/](http://woodrow.org/news/national-survey-finds-just-1-in-3-americans-would-pass-citizenship-test/)

birth- a new study suggested that they wouldn't be able to pass the citizenship test if they had to..."¹⁰⁷

Keeping in mind that this survey was conducted only a few months before the 2018 Congressional mid-term elections, the *Wilson Foundation's* then *President Arthur Levine* commented:

*"Unfortunately, this study found the average American citizen woefully uninformed regarding American's history and incapable of passing the U.S. Citizenship Test. It would be an error to view these findings merely an embarrassment. **Knowledge of the history is fundamental to maintaining a democratic society, which is imperiled today.**"¹⁰⁸ (emphasis mine)*

The poll was conducted by a nationally recognized full-service analytic research firm. This survey also revealed an enormous lack of knowledge about facts related to their country's founding¹⁰⁹:

- that 72 percent of respondents either incorrectly identified or were not sure which states were part of the original 13 states.
- that only 24 percent could identify correctly one thing that Benjamin Franklin was famous for, and 37 percent believed Franklin had invented the light bulb.
- that only 24 percent knew the correct answer to the question as to why the colonists fought the British.
- that two percent responded that climate change was the cause of the Cold War.

Perhaps most alarming were the age gaps in knowledge this survey's results revealed. Respondents 65 years of age and older did the best. They had a 74 percent score answering at least six in ten questions correctly. Those under age 45 did exceptionally poorly with only 19 percent passing the exam and with 81 percent scoring a 59 percent

¹⁰⁷ "Most Americans Would Fail U.S. Citizenship Test, Study Finds", by Stephen Dinan, The Washington Times, October 3, 2018, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/oct/3/most-americans-would-fail-citizenship-test-study/>

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, [//woodrow.org/news/national-survey-finds-just-1-in-3-americans-would-pass-citizenship-test/](http://woodrow.org/news/national-survey-finds-just-1-in-3-americans-would-pass-citizenship-test/)

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, [//woodrow.org/news/national-survey-finds-just-1-in-3-americans-would-pass-citizenship-test/](http://woodrow.org/news/national-survey-finds-just-1-in-3-americans-would-pass-citizenship-test/)

or lower. Certainly, this gives one pause and gives rise to the question- what is going on today with civic education in our schools?

Stressing the importance of this civic knowledge and the history it is based upon, Levine stated that knowledge of American history is not an academic exercise, but something essential for our future. As Levine puts it:

“Americans need to understand the past in order to make sense of a chaotic present and an inchoate future. History is both an anchor in a time when change assails us and a laboratory for studying the changes that are occurring. It offers the promise of providing a common bond among Americans in an era which our divisions are profound and our differences threaten to overshadow our commonalities.”¹¹⁰

The importance of effective history education as an important component of civic education and is something we will dive into later in this journey to overcome civic illiteracy. Likely for many Americans, the *Woodrow Wilson Foundation’s* survey findings are embarrassing, or in the least, they should be. More importantly, they are both disconcerting and demand our attention. Unfortunately, earlier studies in this century were a harbinger of what the Wilson Foundation found in 2018.

The News Does Not Get Better

Lest the reader thinks the 2018 *Wilson Foundation’s* survey results were an anomaly or some type of survey outlier event, they only reinforced the study findings from a year earlier by the Annenberg Foundation. The Annenberg Foundation’s Annual Constitution Day survey that year found¹¹¹:

- More than half of Americans (53 percent) incorrectly think it is accurate to say that immigrants who are here illegally do not have any rights under the U.S. Constitution.
- More than a third of those surveyed (37 percent) cannot name any of the rights guaranteed under the First Amendment.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, //woodrow.org/news/national-survey-finds-just-1-in-3-americans-would-pass-citizenship-test/

¹¹¹ “Americans Are Poorly Informed About Basic Constitutional Provisions”, Posted September 12, 2017, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org>

- Only a quarter of Americans (26 percent) can name all three branches of government.

The fact is that immigrants in the U.S. illegally share some constitutional protections with U.S. citizens as ruled in an 1886 case (*Wu v. Hopkins*) case involving a Chinese immigrant. There the U.S. Supreme Court determined that non-citizens were entitled to due process rights under the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause. Other cases since then have expanded upon those rights. Regarding the second point, nearly half of the respondents (48 percent) could say that freedom of speech is a right protected by the First Amendment. However, far fewer could name the other rights protected by the First Amendment (i.e., free exercise of religion, freedom of the press, and the rights of the people to assemble peaceably). As to the third point, the 26 percent of respondents who could name all three branches of government was down considerably from the first time this survey was conducted in 2011 (38 percent).¹¹² Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Director of the *Annenberg Public Policy Center*, said, "Protecting the rights guaranteed by the Constitution presupposes that we know what they are. The fact that many don't is worrisome."¹¹³

Cable News Network's Editor-at-Large Chris Cillizza commented that this survey, "...reveals how shockingly little people know about the most basic elements of our government and the Constitution that formed it."¹¹⁴ Cillizza goes on to say:

"What we don't know about government- executive, legislative, and judicial branches- it's appalling, it's funny- until you realize that lots and lots of people whose lives are directly impacted by what the federal government does and doesn't do have absolutely no idea about even the most basic principles of how this all works. The level of civil ignorance in the country allows our politicians...to make the most common denominator appeals about what they will do (or won't do) in office. It also leads to huge amounts of discontent from the

¹¹² Ibid, "Americans Are Poorly Informed About Basic Constitutional Provisions", Posted September 12, 2017, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org>

¹¹³ Ibid, "Americans Are Poorly Informed About Basic Constitutional Provisions", Posted September 12, 2017, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org>

¹¹⁴"Americans Know Literally Nothing About the Constitution", by Chris Cillizza, CNN Editor-at-Large, updated September 17, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/13/politics/poll-constituion/index.html>

*public when they realize that no politician can make good on the various and sundry promises they make on the campaign trail”.*¹¹⁵

As it relates to young peoples’ lack of civic knowledge, the results of this and the Wilson Foundation study mentioned above prompted *Thomas Lindsay, Ph.D. of the Texas Policy Institute* to say,

*“At a time when both the Left and the Right in this country are decrying “fake news” and voter manipulation generally, there is no better antidote to these ills than to ensure that our future voters, now in high school, emerge not only with a diploma, but also armed with the civic knowledge that is indispensable to their becoming more informed and effective citizens.”*¹¹⁶

To Lindsay’s credit, he recognizes a major part of the solution lies in the future, with our children. This problem of civic illiteracy did not occur over night, and it will take a generational, long-term perspective and approach to address it. It requires a focus on our schools, just as Noah Webster and Horace Mann had earlier in the history of our republic. *Yoni Appelbaum*, in *Atlantic’s* piece “*Americans Aren’t Practicing Democracy*” reinforces this finding commenting:

“Such a revival will need to begin where the erosion of the democratic impulse has been most pronounced- among the youngest generations. Happily, youth is when new things are most easily learned. The best place to locate new schools of self-government, then, is schools...”¹¹⁷ (*emphasis mine*)

According to *Rebecca Winthrop* of the *Brookings Institution*, “...to date...civic education experts argue that civic learning is on the margins of young people’s school experience.”¹¹⁸ Winthrop noted that:

¹¹⁵ Ibid, “Americans Know Literally Nothing About the Constitution”, by Chris Cillizza, CNN Editor-at-Large, updated September 17, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/13/politics/poll-constituion/index.html>.

¹¹⁶ “Tackling Civic Illiteracy in America”, by Thomas Lindsay, Ph.D., November 30, 2018, <https://www.texaspolicy.com/states-tacking-civic-illiteracy-in-america/>, and in *Forbes Magazine*, November 30, 2018

¹¹⁷ “Americans Aren’t Practicing Democracy”, by Yoni Applebaum, *The Atlantic*, October 2018, pg. 8 of 10, Ibid.

¹¹⁸ “The Need for Civic Education in 21st-Century Schools”, by Rebecca Winthrop, June 2020, Policy 2020 Brookings Institution, <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020>

“...The 2018 Brown Center for American Education examined the status of civic education and found that while reading and math scores have improved in recent years, **there has not been a commensurate increase in eighth grade civics knowledge...**”¹¹⁹ (*emphasis mine*)

What Has Happened? The Systemic Roots of Our Civic Literacy Crisis

How did we decline so far from the level of civic literacy Noah and Mann (and many others) committed their lives to and helped this country achieve?

As outlined in the report entitled “*Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*,” prepared by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools” (herein after referred to as the *Civic Mission of Schools Report*), America was then, and still is, a relatively new nation. We are also unique as a nation. We were not created out of devotion to a motherland, a tribe, a royal family, or a national religion. Instead, Americans are defined by our fidelity to ideals expressed in our founding documents—the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, as well as the Bill of Rights and their subsequent amendments.

While Americans formally acquire citizenship by either birth or naturalization, regardless of how American citizenship is attained, one must still learn to be an American. We are united by a shared commitment to a set of core civic ideals. As described in the *Civic Mission of Schools Report*, “...Our vision of pluralism, of E Pluribus Unum, is only possible with civic learning to imbue all citizens with shared knowledge of and commitment to American democratic ideals.”¹²⁰ As this *Report* points out,

“...The Founders understood this. Many state constitutions, including several that predated our national constitution, put the diffusion of knowledge and the civic mission of schools at the center of public education...”¹²¹

¹¹⁹ “The Need for Civic Education in 21st-Century Schools”, by Rebecca Winthrop, June 2020, Policy 2020 Brookings Institution, Ibid

¹²⁰ “The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools”, 2011, pg. 13, Ibid

¹²¹ “The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools”, 2011, pp 10-11, Ibid

Our Education Approach and Practices Changed

Corroborating the earlier statements of Hirsch about the importance in our nation's early years of the common school in creating through education a civically literate citizen, the *Civic Mission of Schools Report* recounts that "...By 1890, nearly every American child between the ages of five and 13 attended school regularly, with the vast majority in schools funded and administered by newly emergent school districts. Civic education was integral to curricula nationwide..." This report adds that even though rote memorization was used in the classroom of that day far more than today, "...public schools of a century ago provide a model for placing civic learning at the center of American education..."¹²²

Up until the 1960s, there were three courses commonly offered in U.S. high schools. The first was civics which focused on citizens' roles, especially at the state and local levels. Second was a course of "problems in democracy". This course encouraged students to "discuss current issues and events". Finally, the third course, on the subject of the U.S. government itself, taught the structures and functions of the national government.¹²³

By the time of the 2011 *Civic Mission of Schools Report*, the most recent *National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Assessment* (NAEP) results were alarming, showing two-thirds of all American students scoring below proficient. The same NAEP test showed less than one-third of eighth graders could identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence. Less than a fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.¹²⁴

In Summer 2018, Educators *Shapiro and Brown* noted on the *American Federation of Teachers* web site that today, our states have very different requirements as far as minimum course requirements for our children's civic education saying, "...Only nine states and the District of Columbia require one year of U.S. government or civics, while 30 states require a half year, and the other 11 states have no civics requirement..."¹²⁵ Shapiro and Brown go on to say:

¹²² "The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools", 2011, pg. 12, Ibid

¹²³ "The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools", 2011, pg. 12, Ibid

¹²⁴ "The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools", 2011, pg. 14, Ibid

¹²⁵ "A Look at Civics Education in the United States", by Sarah Shapiro and Catherine Brown, American Educator, Summer 2018, https://www.aft.org/aesummer2018/shapiro_brown.

*“While federal policy has focused on improving academic achievement in reading and math, this comes at the expense of a broader curriculum. **Most states have dedicated insufficient class time to understanding the basic functions of government.** State civics curricula are heavy on knowledge but light on building skills and agency for civic engagement.”¹²⁶ (emphasis mine)*

Hirsch contends that U.S. educators in the 1920s through the 1940s were still “civic center” in their educational approach. But, in the 1950s, as older textbooks began to be replaced as well as teachers retired, a new educational theory began to be used in the classroom. To Hirsch, this single change had more to do with deteriorating our public schools’ ability to educate children to be effective citizens than anything else. What was this change? It was the replacement of the common school. The common school, which utilized a structured common curriculum that, in Hirsch’s view, created a shared knowledge community that included civic concepts, ideals, and expectations of citizenship. With the advent of the child-centered school, Hirsch advocates a view that this all fell to the wayside.

This child-centered educational approach became the bedrock of universities and college’s teacher preparation programs today. At the risk of turning this work on civic literacy into an educational journal, this child-centered educational approach has at its center the philosophy that a child needs to “construct” their own learning. The child themselves needs to determine their own learning, as opposed to the teacher presenting the knowledge (i.e., content) the child is to absorb and learn. Hirsch presents many scientific, neurological-psychological arguments that he believes disproves the soundness of the child-centered school of thought. He argues the child-centered approach is not based on true science regarding how a child’s brain develops. The brain we are born with is an empty slate. We do not know what we do not know, so how can a child identify what it is they need to learn? This is also called by some educators as the “constructivist approach” to learning. That is, the child identifies and builds their own learning, the teacher is there as a guide, not to present knowledge and information.

Without getting into all the pros and cons, and well as the psychological and neurological arguments for and against the child-centered educational approach,

¹²⁶ “A Look at Civics Education in the United States”, by Sarah Shapiro and Catherine Brown, *American Educator*, Ibid

Hirsch, who is an obvious critic of this child-centered/constructivist educational approach, says:

*“Since the 1960s, our schools have been relying on a “progressive” approach called “child centered learning” promoted and promulgated by our graduate schools of education. Education officials indoctrinated by those ideas set school standards that are unspecific with regard to content. Teachers similarly indoctrinated, have gradually abandoned teaching knowledge coherently in favor of teaching mush on the scientifically incorrect premise that they are imparting general reading skills and general thinking skills. **But by neglecting their citizen making duties, they are in fact diminishing our national unity and competence.**” (emphasis mine)¹²⁷*

For Hirsch, the deleterious impacts of moving away from a shared, common knowledge-based education approach to our nation’s “citizen building” efforts have been devastating. Hirsch points to several data points to prove up his argument regarding his conclusions. By the 1960s, verbal scores in our middle school and high school graduates began to decline. This is vital according to Hirsch because, “...language mastery depends not on diversity but on commonality of knowledge. With the child-centered philosophy of education “...we began to see a reduction of knowledge generally, and of shared knowledge in particular. Later, we began to see a drop in reading and social communication across the nation...”¹²⁸

The 1983 report issued during Ronald Reagan’s presidency, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, drew attention to these declines in reading and caused alarm bells to go off, but only for a time. Efforts to improve American education came from that report. But the child-centered educational approach continued in its prevalence. As Hirsch points out, our scores continued to decline as show in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) verbal scores from 1952-2012. Those scores went even lower in 2018 than they were in 2012. Additionally, comparing United States’ children’s reading scores against children of other countries using the Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) test, we fell from fifteenth in 2002 to twenty-fourth in 2015. In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s American students had

¹²⁷ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pp 4-5, Ibid

¹²⁸ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 21, Ibid

ranked among the top ranked performers in the world in reading and writing.¹²⁹ Ironically, later other western European countries (Germany, France, and Sweden) went down this same path with their education systems moving from a shared knowledge common curriculum to one based on child-centered learning, with disastrous results. Fortunately, two of these three countries recognized their mistake and moved back to a shared knowledge, common curriculum education system.¹³⁰ Why is reading and verbal communication so important when looking at the decline in our country's civic literacy? Hirsch underscores their importance:

“...A nation’s reading scores are highly predictive not only of its competence but also of its cohesion, for they indicate whether communication among adults in a nation is effective and widespread. The lower scores reflect a decline in our social, economic, and political competence. We need to make a comeback...”¹³¹ (emphasis mine)

Hirsch goes on regarding the criticality of reading and communication ability to a nation's ability to come together:

“...Here’s what we know: For successful communication to take place between an author and a reader, they must share background knowledge. When the people of a nation start sharing more background knowledge, their reading scores improve. So do other verbal communications beyond the written word. A nation’s reading scores thus indicate how generally effective verbal communications are within the nation. When people communicate well, they can work together effectively, learn new things, and gain a sense of community.”¹³² (emphasis mine)

¹²⁹ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pp 21-23, Ibid

¹³⁰ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pp 129-141, Ibid

¹³¹ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 24, Ibid

¹³² How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pp 24-25, Ibid

The child-centered educational approach, instead of a shared knowledge approach, having been used in our nation's schools for the last sixty years has, according to Hirsch, taken its toll on our civic culture and literacy:

*“History, geography, science, civics, and other essential knowledge that is the hallmark of an educated citizen have been dumbed down by vacuous learning “techniques” and “values based” curricula. The results have been devastating. It’s not simply a matter of ignorance (71 percent of Americans believe that Alexander Hamilton was president of the United States). **The result is also the loss of a shared knowledge base across the nation that would otherwise enable us to work together, understand one another, and make coherent, informed decisions at the local level.**”¹³³ (emphasis mine)*

What has been the impact on American society? Hirsch's answer to that question is that the impacts are far reaching:

*“The costs of a broken approach to schooling (i.e., moving away from the shared knowledge common school education approach) leave our children underprepared and erode the American Dream. But there’s an even deeper cost. **Without schooling that teaches shared knowledge, the spiritual bonds that hold society together are loosened.**”¹³⁴ (emphasis mine)*

Public education, in Hirsch's view, should endeavor not to weaken (what he calls “loosen”) society's bonds, but instead, strengthen them. For Hirsch, the result of this weakening is to create what he calls, quoting *Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s Disuniting America*,

“...separation tendencies’ which, ‘...if go unchecked, the result can only be fragmentation, re-segregation, and tribalization of American life...” (emphasis mine)¹³⁵ The reader may be beginning to think to themselves as they read this, that this certainly feels familiar to what they are seeing going on in American society today. Hirsch goes on to point to the product of this approach,

¹³³ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 5, Ibid

¹³⁴ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 5, Ibid

¹³⁵ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 5, Ibid

*“...Public discourse becomes increasingly uninformed and vitriolic, belief in political leadership dramatically declines, and disagreement over policy is translated into demonization of the other.”¹³⁶ Hirsch adds that “...**In the nation as a whole there is now a knowledge gap, a communications gap, and an allegiance gap. We don’t understand one another; we don’t trust one another; we don’t like one another...**”¹³⁷ (emphasis mine)*

Need more be said? Mistrust of political leadership, misinformation, and “vitriolic” speech run rampant in our public square today. Hirsch argues a strong case as to its cause. Whether you attribute it to the child-centered educational approach in vogue in many schools today or not, there is direct causality pointing to an educational system that, for several reasons, produces civically illiterate citizens charged with functioning in a democracy for which they are ill-equipped.

We recently witnessed a presidential inauguration happen with Washington, DC looking like an armed camp in response to the post-election Capitol riot. Further, we just saw the former president of the United States recently tried for impeachment for a second time. This time his impeachment was for allegedly inciting insurrection that caused the Capitol riot on January 6, 2021. Trump was acquitted by the Senate by a vote of 57-43 because the constitutionally required two-thirds vote necessary for conviction of impeachment was not attained. It was, however, of the three previous impeachment trials in U.S. history, the one that had the most “guilty” votes on a bi-partisan basis. This bi-partisan vote included seven “in favor” (guilty) of impeachment votes from members of the former president’s own party.¹³⁸ Based on these events alone, Hirsch’s prediction that, unless we address our approach to educating our youth to positively impact our civic literacy, sounds especially dire, prophetic, and ominous:

“...Without the anchor of commonality in schooling that we largely had until the 1940s, our ship of state is heading for a crash it may not survive. There is

¹³⁶ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 5, Ibid

¹³⁷ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 6, Ibid

¹³⁸ “Donald Trump Acquitted in Second Impeachment Trial”, by Meg Wagner, Melissa Mahtani, Melissa Macaya, and Veronica Rocha, CNN, February 13, 2021, Updated 6:06 PM ET, <https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/trump-impeachment-trial-02-13-2121/index.html>

*already talk of secession.*¹³⁹ (Note: Hirsch documents this by saying in 2017 in California one-third of polled voters said they would support secession, in 2016 over a quarter of Texans polled said the same thing). (**emphasis mine**)

Civic Participation Declines

Finally, along with the forces shaping the poor performance of the United States' public education system to "build citizens", the civic participation referenced earlier which contributed to our civic literacy, has declined. Appelbaum quotes historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. who said in 1944, "...Voluntary associations have "provided the people with their greatest school of self-government..." But, as Appelbaum goes on to describe, things have changed:

*"...the United States is no longer a nation of joiners. As the political scientist Robert Putnam famously demonstrated in his Bowling Alone¹⁴⁰, participation in civic groups and organizations of all kinds declined precipitously in the last decades of the 20th century. The trend has, if anything, accelerated since then; one study found that from 1994 to 2004, membership in such groups fell by 21 percent. And even that likely understates the real decline, as slight uptick in passive memberships has masked a steeper fall in attendance and participation. The United States is no longer a nation of presidents, either. In 2010 census survey, just 11 percent of respondents said that they had served as an officer or been on a committee of any group or organization in the previous year."*¹⁴¹

Putnam connected this decline of civic participation to a *decline in "social capital"* which he defines as the "norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement".¹⁴² Without social capital, the constructive interaction of Americans' interpersonal networks and their reciprocal relationships, the lifeblood of a democracy, goes missing. This decline in civic participation that negatively impacts what Putnam terms "social capital" is created by what is called in a report by the *National Conference on*

¹³⁹ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 6, Ibid

¹⁴⁰ Bowling Alone, The Collapse and Revival of American Community, by Robert D. Putman, pp 541, Copyright 2000, Simon & Schuster, Rockefeller Center, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New NY 10020

¹⁴¹ "Americans Aren't Practicing Democracy", by Yoni Applebaum, The Atlantic, October 2018, pg. 5 of 10, Ibid

¹⁴² "Americans Aren't Practicing Democracy", by Yoni Applebaum, The Atlantic, October 2018, pg. 5 of 10, Ibid

Citizenship, a “civics desert”. According to the report’s authors, “...civic deserts” describe places without adequate opportunities for civic engagement- places for discussing issues, addressing problems together, and forming relationships of mutual support...”¹⁴³ In short, no personal interaction opportunities means no opportunity to civically participate, to civically engage with others. This creates many other problems we will discuss including social isolation, misunderstanding, and lack of trust.

This has major impacts causing a democracy to work in a dysfunctional fashion, rather than positive one. As we participate less and less in democratically run organizations, our faith in democracy itself lessens. The toxicity of this withdrawal from democratic civic interactions between Americans is often showing up in ugly ways. We then become vulnerable to those in the public square who begin to question the value of our democratic practices and institutions, calling them “rigged” or run by the “elites”. The “efficiency” of living in the 21st century has isolated us Americans, and unknowingly or knowingly, has impeded our democracy’s ability to work at a high-performance level. It demonstrates, yet again, that democracy is a team sport, not a spectator sport. For our form of government to work, we must interact with one another constructively and positively, forging consensus out of disagreement based on shared democratic knowledge and shared democratic knowledge.

Delving Further into the Civic Mission of Schools Report

Understanding now the historical systemic roots of our civic literacy crisis, as well as having a clear picture how far short we are falling, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the *Civic Mission of Schools Report*. It is one of the most thorough evaluations of not only assessing where we are today with schools’ role with our civic literacy, but how our schools can improve their civic literacy efforts.

To be accurate, alarms were sounding before the Wilson Foundation and Annenberg Foundation reports in 2017-18 about this country’s poor track record pertaining to civic education. Those earlier alarm bells were calling attention to the importance of our nation’s schools in creating a civically literate citizenry, beginning with our children. However, one of the most, if not the most, thorough analysis performed in this century of the state of our country’s civic education efforts, as well as recommendations on how to improve them, emanates from this document called The

¹⁴³ “Civic Deserts: America’s Civic Health Challenge”, by Matthew N. Atwell, John Bridgewell, and Peter Levine, National Conference on Citizenship, 2017

Civic Mission of Schools report. This 2011 report, built on their 2003 report, examines how to improve American schools' civic education efforts.

What Kind of Citizens Are We Seeking to Create?

Perhaps one of most significant contributions of *The Civic Mission Schools Report* is it answers the question, what type of citizen should we trying to “build” in the United States? What kind of behaviors and outcomes should our civically equipped citizens be pursuing? What does a civically literate and equipped American citizen look like? What are the common traits of a democratic citizen, these “republican machines” as Rushing referred to them, should we be trying to create? There are four:¹⁴⁴

- Informed and thoughtful
- Participate in their communities
- Act politically
- Moral and civic virtues

Citizens that are *informed and thoughtful* have an understanding and appreciation of history and the fundamental processes of American democracy. There is an understanding and awareness of public and community issues. It is the ability to obtain information when needed and to think critically. It includes being able to dialogue with others that have diverse perspectives and consider viewpoints different than one's own. Being able to resist simplistic answers to complex questions and being tolerant of ambiguity also characterize an informed and thoughtful citizen.¹⁴⁵

Citizens that *participate in their communities* belong to groups in civil society that offer a place for Americans to participate in public service. These groups work together to overcome problems and pursue cultural, social, political, religious interests and beliefs.¹⁴⁶

Those citizens that *act politically* have skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes. This can take various forms, but can include, for example, organizing people to accomplish social issues and solve problems in groups. It also can include speaking in public as well as petitioning and protesting to influence public policy and voting.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ “The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools”, 2011, pg. 11, Ibid

¹⁴⁵ “The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools”, 2011, pg. 11, Ibid

¹⁴⁶ “The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools”, 2011, pg. 11, Ibid

¹⁴⁷ “The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools”, 2011, pg. 11, Ibid

Finally, citizens must have and act with *moral and civic virtues*. This means there is a concern reflected for the rights and welfare of others, they are socially responsible, and willing to listen to alternative perspectives. They have confidence in their capacity to make a difference and contribute personally to civic and political action. Perhaps most importantly, they can strike a balance between their own personal interests and those of the common good. They also give priority to exercising their civic duties such as voting and respect for the rule of law.¹⁴⁸

Citizens that are equipped with these skills, knowledge, behaviors, and perspectives are the bedrock upon which American democracy depends.

The Important Impacts of Civic Literacy on Democratic Shortfalls

If one has any understanding of democracy, while they likely would advocate it as the best form of government, they will also likely acknowledge that it is not without its shortcomings. American democracy has always been an evolutionary “work in progress”. It has had stunning successes, but also deep flaws that have required hard work, blood, sweat, and even civil strife to address and correct.

The Civic Mission Schools Report advocates ways that “civic learning” can address many of our democratic shortfalls. Specifically, civic learning helps shore up democratic short falls in seven ways:¹⁴⁹

- First, it increases the democratic accountability of elected officials. Only informed and engaged citizens will ask inciteful questions for their leaders.
- Second, it improves public discourse as citizens that are interested and knowledgeable will demand more from the media.
- Third, civic learning fulfills our ideal of civic equality by providing every citizen, regardless of background, the tools for full participation.
- Fourth, civic learning promotes civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions enhancing the ability to understand public issues and view political engagement as a means to address communal challenges.
- Fifth, civic learning has been shown to promote civic equality. Poor, minority, urban, or rural students that receive quality civic learning perform much higher than their counterparts.

¹⁴⁸ “The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools”, 2011, pg. 11, Ibid

¹⁴⁹ “The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools”, 2011, pg. 6, Ibid

- Sixth, “twenty first century competencies” that employers seek, and value are generated by civic learning.
- Seventh, civic learning can contribute to a better school climate which includes lower dropout rates.

What Can Our Schools Do to Improve Civic Learning and Civic Literacy?

It appears that one of the challenges of motivating a nation to come together to address our civic literacy is that, until one sees a riotous mob, driven by lies, misinformation and miseducation, attack and desecrate our Capitol, it is difficult for us to see the real costs of civic illiteracy. These costs can be fiscal and physical, but can also be emotional and psychological, damaging the collective national psyche of the American nation.

As Michael Tomasky, in his book *If We Can Keep It, How the Republic Collapsed and How It Might be Saved*, explains: “Right now...nearly every American schoolchild takes civics. But they mostly take just one year, and it’s very basic. Civic education has decreased over the last quarter century.”¹⁵⁰ Education scholars Richard D. Kahlenberg and Clifford Janey emphasize this point when they wrote in a 2016 report for The Century Foundation entitled “Putting Democracy Back into Public Education”:

“Throughout U.S. history, Americans have pivoted between whether the central priority of public education should be to create skilled workers for the economy or to educate young people for responsible citizenship.”¹⁵¹

Tomasky emphasizes Kahlenberg’s and Janey’s report when he quotes them in his book:

*“Ever since the end of the Cold War and the ascendance of the global economy in the 1990s, “...the emphasis has shifted away from preparing citizens and toward serving the needs of the marketplace”.*¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ *If We Can Keep It*, by Michael Tomasky, Copyright 2019, Pg 225, Ibid

¹⁵¹ “Putting Democracy Back into Public Education”, by Richard D. Kahlenberg and Clifford Janey, November 10, 2016, The Century Foundation, <https://tcf.org/content/report/putting-democracy-back-public-education/?agree=1>

¹⁵² *If We Can Keep It*, by Michael Tomasky, Copyright 2019, Pg 225, Ibid

Contrast that with math, computers, technology, where the impact on the job market and education is more tangible and more in the limelight as our economy becomes ever more technology and science driven. If you do not accept that statement, simply watch parents of middle and high school students that decide their child's math or science education is not adequate, or that their child is not "keeping up" in those two subjects. They will rise-up quickly if they see a connection to their child's math and science curriculum having a negative impact on their child's post-high school graduation success in life. One reason, it appears, that this happens more quickly with mathematics is the sequential, step-by-step building block basis through which one acquires math and science knowledge. Another reason is that parents understand the criticality of a strong science and math background in their child's post-graduation world. The *Brown Center for American Education Report* that the Brookings Institution cited provides confirmation of this view saying:

*"...even as politics increasingly penetrate American classrooms, U.S. education policy—as implemented in state accountability systems, for example—continues to emphasize students' performance in mathematics and reading as the dominant focus of K-12 schooling. **To the extent this emphasis has crowded out a focus on students' civic development, we should ask whether today's schools are, in fact, responsive to the needs of our time.**"¹⁵³ (emphasis mine)*

Now, compare that type of parent response for math and science to their response to their child's civic education. If there is any reaction at all from parents about their child's civics education, it is the exception and not the rule. The "what" of civic education starts with curriculum content. Civic education is, by its very nature, interdisciplinary. While some of it is sequential in nature, much of it is not, or at least is not to the same extent as with math and science. With more than one subject interacting (history, government, social studies, and economics), it is far more difficult for a parent to see how these subjects are working together effectively and in a complementary fashion. It is hard to see how just one of a child's civic education courses is affecting the other subjects being taught because they are often taught by different teachers, and at the high school level are taught at different grades. How is it even possible for parents to see how well their child's history class is meshing with their government class or their social studies class, especially if they are taught in

¹⁵³ "The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well Are Students Learning? By Michael Hansen, Elizabeth Levesque, Jon Valant, and Diana Quintero, Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings, pg. 2, June 27, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/the-2018-brown-center-report-on-public-education/>

different grades? Have you ever heard a parent raise a concern that their child's history, civics, or social studies learning topics were not in proper sequence? Have you ever heard parents raise concerns that their child was being taught first about the Civil War before hearing about the Mexican American War and the interrelationship of the two was not being explained? Or, how about their child learning about basic American government without learning first about the Enlightenment? It is doubtful.

Unfortunately, when there is a "hue and cry" from parents, or the public in general, about the content of our schools' civic education curriculum, it rears its head due to political debate, often by members of Congress or our state legislatures. Most recently such debate has surfaced over the content of American history courses in our schools. Two days before Trump left office, his Administration had released "The 1776 Report". According to Richardson, "The 1776 Report" was written by right-wing activists and politicians, not historians and in the report "...highlighted the nation's founding documents, especially the Declaration of Independence."¹⁵⁴ It said that the principles written in the declaration "show how the American people have ever pursued freedom and justice." The 1776 Report goes on to say, "...our history is...one of self-sacrifice, courage, and nobility." No other nation, it said, had worked harder or done more to bring to life "the universal truths of equality, liberty, justice, and government by consent."¹⁵⁵ In Chapter Nine we will delve into how history is taught in our schools, but suffice it to say that, as superlative as the documents forged by our founders have been, historically we have been challenged in our pursuit of freedom and justice (to say the least).

Meanwhile, Richardson points out that Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and thirty-six Republicans sent a letter to the Secretary of Education with accusations related to that department's attempt to "...advance a 'politicized and divisive agenda' in the teaching of American history".¹⁵⁶ What McConnell's letter has reference to is the Department of Education's (DOE) call for public comments for two priorities related to structuring America history and civics educations programs. The DOE is proposing two priorities to reach low-income students and underserved populations with education projects submitted that would incorporate racial, ethnic, and linguistically diverse perspectives in teaching and learning. At the fore front of this controversy is the 1619 Project spearheaded by the New York Times and the Smithsonian's new National Museum of African American History. The 1619 Project

¹⁵⁴ Letters from an American, by Heather Cox Richardson, May 2, 2021, Copyright 2021

¹⁵⁵ Letters from an American, by Heather Cox Richardson, May 2, 2021, Ibid

¹⁵⁶ Letters from an American, by Heather Cox Richardson, May 2, 2021, Ibid

argues that the landing of the first Black Slaves in America marks the country's very origins as it started a "barbaric system of chattel slavery that lasted for the next 250 years".¹⁵⁷ The 1619 Project also argues (incorrectly) that a key reason the American Revolution was fought was to preserve slavery.¹⁵⁸

Despite what position one might take about these two most recent and seemingly controversial American history teaching approaches, for the most part, one likely will not hear any concerns about course content, course sequencing, or the subject matter itself, when it comes to civic education. Parents do not seem as focused on it. Perhaps this is because it is not seen as having a direct impact on their child's adult life, especially their child graduating and attending a good college, or going to work in a high paying field. At most, one may see parents react to their child's history, civics, or social studies curriculum by voicing concerns about how it is being presented by the teacher or the content of the course textbooks. Parents may argue that the content of these courses or their course books is "too liberal", "too conservative", or "revisionist". It is rare to hear parents talk about those courses within the context of whether they are adequately preparing their child to be civically literate. Parents generally are just not focused on it and, in general, do not care about it. Is this because they too are likely to be civically illiterate themselves? Could it be that they "don't know what they don't know"? It would appear that civic literacy is not viewed by many parents as an essential skill for a successful adulthood, a major mistaken notion.

When civic education does become a topic of conversation, too often that occurs because a political party decides to politicize it as a part of what some call "culture wars". A recent example of this is Critical Race Theory (CRT) for which some Republican-led state legislatures have banned being taught in those states' public schools. *Marisa Lati of the Washington Post describes CRT*, whose origins can be traced to the 1970s, as "...an academic framework centered on the idea that racism is systemic, and not just demonstrated by individual people with prejudices. The theory holds that racial inequality is woven into legal systems and negatively affects people of color in their schools...criminal justice system and countless other parts of life."¹⁵⁹ Interestingly, a debate is underway about whether CRT is being taught at all in public

¹⁵⁷ Letters from an American, by Heather Cox Richardson, May 2, 2021, Ibid

¹⁵⁸ "I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project. The Times Ignored Me.", by Leslie M. Harris, Politico, March 6, 2020 5:10 AM EST, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/06/1619-project-new-york-times-mistake-122248>

¹⁵⁹ "What is Critical Race Theory, and Why Do Republicans Want to Ban It in Schools", by Marisa Lati, The Washington Post, May 20, 2021, 7:00 a.m. CDT, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/05/29/critical-race-theory-bans-schools/>

schools. As noted by *CBS News*, "...In a speech this week, Randi Weingarten, the head of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), said critical race theory it is not even taught in elementary schools — and she vowed to fight "culture warriors" who are "bullying teachers."¹⁶⁰

Nonetheless, the Texas Legislature, as one example, has passed S.B. 3 that went into effect in late 2021, specifying exactly how social studies is to be taught to Texas students. According to Richardson, this law sets the guidance and vision for how Texas students should “perceive their nation”. It does this by specifying exactly where social studies course content will be taken from for Texas students to obtain “an understanding of the fundamental moral, political and intellectual foundations of the American experiment in self-government; the history, qualities, traditions, and features of civic engagement in the United States; the structure, function and processes of government institutions of the federal, state, and local levels.”¹⁶¹ While this may sound fine on its face, the bill eliminates large portions of material that can be used to create a robust, complete, and thus, accurate idea of our history and how our democracy has evolved, both in a positive way, and when it has fallen short. S.B. 3 does this by setting out specifically what cannot be taught, including unsurprisingly, CRT (which as stated earlier, is not even taught in schools in the first place). All this attention to preventing our history from being taught accurately obscures a fundamental truth about history itself that we must come to terms with. As historian James W. Loewen describes it:

“Textbooks should show that neither morality nor immorality can be simply conferred upon us by history. Merely being part of the United States, without regard to our own acts and ideas, does not make us moral or immoral beings. History is more complicated than that.”¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ “Head of Teachers Union Says Critical Race Theory Isn’t Taught in Schools, Vows to Defend ‘Honest History’”, by Caitlan O’Kane, July 8, 2021, 12:07 PM, CBS News, <https://www.cbsnews/news/critical-race-theory-teachers-union-honest-history/>

¹⁶¹ Letters from an American, by Heather Cox Richardson, October 16, 2021, Legislatively Mandating how History is Taught, Copyright 2021

¹⁶² Lies My Teacher told Me, Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong, by James W. Loewen, pg. 64 Lies My Teacher told Me, Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong, by James W. Loewen, pp 13-15, Copyright 1995, 2007, 2018, The New Press, 120 Wall Street, 31st Floor, New York, NY 10005

, Copyright 1995, 2007, 2018, The New Press, 120 Wall Street, 31st Floor, New York, NY 10005

All this energy devoted to legislating civic education in the context of culture wars has led to unintended consequences of confusion for our educators, like those in Southlake, Texas. Teachers there began raising questions about what books they could have in their classrooms after a fourth-grade teacher was reprimanded for having an anti-racism book in her classroom. This confusion led to these teachers being told by school administrators to be sure to present both sides (for and against) of topics being taught, including amazingly, the Holocaust.¹⁶³ Regardless of its merits or demerits, if controversial historical teaching frameworks like CRT, or those of Texas S.B. 3, are generally the only time parents pay attention to their child's civic education, civic literacy is not getting the type of constructive parental attention it deserves. Other states (many with Republican majority legislatures) have rushed to enact laws like Texas directing how race can be taught in schools. This has had what some describe as a "chilling effect", leading to some teachers in these other states being "scared, confused, and self-censoring" about how to teach American history and related civics subjects.¹⁶⁴

In addition to political conflicts over how civic education (especially history) is taught, another challenge for civic education is that it is arguably less tangible, less sequential, and more conceptual in nature than subjects like mathematics, science, or a foreign language. That does not mean, however, that it is any less real or impactful on a child's future. The testimony of our founders, educators, and leaders up to the present day all testify to the necessity of civic education for a democracy to function successfully. This requires us to focus on the "what"- the actual course content of civic education. Course content forms the "*civic construct*" we wish to build for our children. One's civic construct are those concepts conveyed to the child about their democratic government structure, operation, ideals, norms, and functions that create a child's "*civic reality*". Their civic reality is what they believe to be factual and true about their government. It is the lens through which they understand and operate as citizens within their country's government and civil society.

¹⁶³ Letters from an American, by Heather Cox Richardson, October 16, 2021, Ibid and "Southlake School Leader Tells Teachers to Balance Holocaust Books with 'Opposing' Views, by Mike Hixenbaugh and Antonio Hylton, NBC News, October 15, 2021, 2:00PM CDT, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/southlake-texas-holocaust-books-schools-rcna2965>

¹⁶⁴ "New Critical Race Theory Laws Have Teachers Scared, Confused and Self-Censoring", by Laura Meckler and Hannah Natanson, February 14, 2022, 6:00 am EST, The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/02/02/14/critical-race-theory-teachers-fear-laws>

Creating curriculums deliberately based on the seven-part learner profile identified in the *Civic Missions Schools Report* would be a strong place to start for re-fortifying our schools' role in their civic mission of citizen creation. Also, another major improvement would be both increasing and making more uniform the actual civics class time and course requirements required in all states to graduate from high school. Hirsch argues in favor of this, but points how difficult it is to achieve that because "...Trying to get nationwide or statewide or even district or schoolwide agreement about specific grade-by-grade subject matter in history, literature, or the arts is like touching some poisonous object." But Hirsch goes on to ask, what is the consequence of not doing this? His answer: "...by noncommonality poor children become ever more disadvantaged and one's country performs at a mediocre level..."¹⁶⁵

State governments, which have strong control on both the minimum requirements for the content of public education curriculum, as well as the amount of time teachers have during a school year to cover it, must increase the amount of time allowed for civics education. A half-year of civics education as required in some states is simply not enough. As example, the State of Texas, while offering several courses that build civic literacy, requires only one half-semester course for graduation to high school students on the actual structure and operation of the United States government.¹⁶⁶ The amount of curriculum content listed for this course is voluminous and cannot be covered in a one-semester course, at least not with adequate knowledge retention by students. *The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education* (referenced by the Brookings Institution) earlier confirms this point from a student's point of view:

*"Student experience reinforces this view that civic learning is not a central concern of schools. Seventy percent of 12th graders say they have never written a letter to give an opinion or solve a problem and 30 percent say they have never taken part in a debate- all important parts of civic learning..."*¹⁶⁷

An emphasis relying solely on civics education via community service will not accomplish civic literacy either. While community service is a wonderful and useful thing for both the community and the student, it is, in and of itself, not the answer.

¹⁶⁵ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 155, Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies, Subchapter C, High School, 113.44, United States Government, Adopted 2018, one-half credit, ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter113/ch113c.pdf

¹⁶⁷ "The Need for Civic Education in 21st-Century Schools", by Rebecca Winthrop, June 2020, Policy 2020 Brookings Institution, Ibid

Community service is one supplemental part of achieving civic literacy, but if it is made the only or primary focus of civic education, civic literacy will not be achieved. One still must know the structure of our government. One must know how our government is supposed to work. One must know our history which generated the ideals, concepts, and norms our democracy is based upon. Further, one must know how to use that knowledge to navigate our government as a citizen. Hirsch's advocacy of a knowledge-based education that comes from shared knowledge in a shared knowledge school could be a part of the answer. Without that shared knowledge, we have no common societal language, no common nomenclature, and no common ideas and values. We Americans end up "talking at and past each other", instead of "talking with each other".

Further, we cannot rely solely on students to identify what it is they are interested in learning about when it comes to civic education. There is simply too much to learn and to know. As said earlier, a student is "not going to know what they do not know", so how can they be expected to effectively construct their own civic education? Only a trained civics educator can develop the subject matter and curricula that will provide students with the knowledge base they must have to be effective citizens. Additionally, training and encouragement of our students to participate in their school, community, and in civic groups is essential to return us to our country's heritage of civic participation and involvement.

Civic literacy, and the civic education it relies upon is not just on one thing, but all these things. They are not "either-or" but are "both-and". Our civic learning approach to improve civic literacy must include the "what, how, and why" of civic learning. The "what" is the content including the concepts that a child needs to build their civic reality. This is done through the *shared* knowledge Hirsch says is missing in our schools nationwide today. As Hirsch insightfully and succinctly points out: "...Knowledge is not functional until it is shared".¹⁶⁸

We must make sure we have correctly identified a strong, intra-disciplinary course content of history, political philosophy, constitutional law, government structure, economics, and political science which are well blended, span curriculum, and are connected to paint an accurate, cogent, compelling portrait of our government's democratic structure. It should be a portrait that energizes, motivates, and excites students to not only want to learn the basics of civics, but want to learn more about it,

¹⁶⁸ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 155, *Ibid*

and to become involved in their government. It should be a portrait that creates a learning community in every school in the country- schools grounded on this shared knowledge school concept.

The “how” is the method by which civic education is presented and delivered to the student. While some curriculum content must be, by necessity, delivered by lecture (“drill and grill” as some call it), much of it can be presented in a multi-faceted fashion. Certainly, it can be in the form of some community service. But it can also be through hands-on learning experiences with students visiting their local, state, and federal governments in-person for real life learning. This is more than field trips to tour state capitol buildings, but instead spending time with government officials on the job to and learn what, why and how they perform their jobs. These can be, for example, “youth-in-government” days where students shadow government appointed and elected officials at every level of government and later describe what they have learned based on that shadowing experience. These can be local summer internships. There are many, many other ways this type of learning can be delivered in a relevant, interactive fashion to move us away from the stereotype of civics as being dry and boring.

An important part of the “how” of civic education is, as Appelbaum describes, teaching children how to “self-govern” in our schools. Appelbaum believes that reviving civic participation, an important part of a child’s civic curriculum:

“...will need to begin where the democratic erosion of the democratic impulse has been most pronounced- among the youngest generations. Happily, youth is when new things are most easily learned. The best place to locate new schools of self-government, then, is schools. That does not mean adding civics classes to the already onerous requirements imposed on students; habits like these cannot be picked up from textbooks. It means carving out time, space, and resources for students to govern themselves. One recent study found that, holding all else equal, greater knowledge of civics among high-school seniors correlated with a 2 percent greater likelihood of voting in a presidential election eight years later. Active participation in extracurricular activities, however, correlated with a 141 percent increase.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ “Americans Aren’t Practicing Democracy”, by Yoni Applebaum, The Atlantic, October 2018, pg. 8 of 10, Ibid

All civics curriculums must assess and measure student content proficiency through, not only end-of-course examinations, but also for a student to move from certain grade levels, especially to graduate from high school. Professional development for teachers of this interdisciplinary curriculum must be given the resources needed to keep teaching methods fresh and state-of-the-art. *The 2018 Brown Center Report* found “...that high school teachers are some of the least supported teachers in schools and report teaching larger number of students and taking on more teaching responsibilities like coaching school sports...”¹⁷⁰ Colleges and universities too must require, for all undergraduate students regardless of major, at least one civics learning course to ensure basic civics knowledge.¹⁷¹

The “why” is quite simple, but often overlooked, which seems odd because it is so powerful. It is the single most important part of a person’s civic education. If they understand the why and act on it, a powerful force for democracy is then “under construction”. We will be, as Hirsch describes, “citizen building”. This focus on “why” one must be civically educated is what we have been focusing on through this discourse on civic literacy. From the beginning of a child’s education, beginning at a young age, they must hear *why* they are learning about their government. They must hear that “why”. It is not to fill their heads with empty, meaningless facts and dates that, without the “why”, would seem to a student to have no bearing on life today. The “why” is the plain fact that their democracy’s success depends on and requires their participation. For them to participate in it, they must learn about it. We must be plain and clear about the fact that without their proper participation in their democracy, it will fail. And, children should be taught that once a democracy vanishes, any number of other forms of government can take its place, including governments that are authoritarian in nature.

Children can be taught to understand that freedom is not free and requires their commitment. This is the power of “why” that *Simon Sinek* talks about in his book, *Start With Why*. As Sinek explains, starting with the “why” is starting from the inside out. Starting with the “what” or the “how” is starting from the outside in and is not nearly as powerful as the “why”. It is “why” we do something that will motivate

¹⁷⁰ “The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well Are Students Learning? By Michael Hansen, Elizabeth Levesque, Jon Valant, and Diana Quintero, Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings, June 27, 2018, Ibid

¹⁷¹ “The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools”, 2011, pp 7-8, Ibid

somebody, not the “what” or the “how”.¹⁷² But, once the power of the “why” is understood, accepted, and appropriated, magic can happen, especially with students. Harnessing the excitement of the “why” in learning about one’s civic environment and civic responsibilities, as well as how it will affect their lives and their children’s lives for years to come, now that will create exciting civic education!

As said earlier, we would not let someone drive a car without learning how to drive and taking a driving test. The same simple approach must take place with teaching young citizens. This “why” message must start early in grammar school and go far beyond learning units called “community helpers” that teaches young children about police and firemen. Who their community helpers are and what they do is helpful for them to know but is not content that is deep and interesting enough, even for elementary school students.

The Civic Mission Schools Report offers what it characterizes as “six proven practices” that comprise a well-rounded and high-quality civic learning experience. They are:

1. “Classroom Instruction: Schools should provide instruction in government, history, economics, law, and democracy.
2. Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues: Schools should incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.
3. Service Learning: Schools should design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.
4. Extracurricular Activities: Schools should offer opportunity for young people to get involved in their schools or communities outside of the classroom.
5. School Governance: Schools should encourage student participation and school governance.
6. Simulations of Democratic Processes: Schools should encourage students to participate in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.”¹⁷³

¹⁷² Start With Why, How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action, by Simon Sinek, pp 37-42, Copyright 2009, Penguin Group, 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014

¹⁷³ “The Guardian of Democracy, The Civic Mission of Schools”, 2011, pp 6-7, Ibid

This is a road map that, if followed, would do much to overhaul our nation's civic literacy. With it, we will create not only civic literacy, but the lasting civic outcome that our democracy relies upon- patriotism and nationalism. These are terms which Hirsch contends are "not dirty words". In fact, they both have the same root meaning: loyalty to one's birthland (natio), and loyalty to one's fatherland (patria).¹⁷⁴ To be clear, this is not the toxic extreme nationalism that teaches, and breeds hate of other nations, races, and various people groups. Instead, this is the nationalism, combined with patriotism, that creates kindness, a feeling of relationship with others, in this case one's fellow Americans.

And it is compatible with globalism because it is difficult to love persons in other countries without first loving your fellow American. The power in the Pledge of Allegiance we recite at sports, civic events, and in many schools is the "liberty and justice for all" we promise and commit to when we say the Pledge. It espouses this for each individual American, all our fellow citizens. We wish liberty and justice for everyone. No exceptions. We do not just wish it for certain people. We wish liberty and justice for everyone because we are bound together by our shared knowledge, language, and civic ideals. That is the power of civic literacy to bind us together as one while, at the same time, retaining our individual and ethnic uniqueness. As Hirsch wisely observes:

*"If we do not want to fragment ourselves, if we want America to be unified and productive, we will ensure that our inherent diversity is embraced by a genuine diversity of knowledge and sentiment. The two realities do not exclude each other, they did not during much of the past, and we must not let intellectual and emotional confusion to fragment us now"*¹⁷⁵

One More Thing We Should Do with Our Civic Education- A More Exciting Framework

In looking at the civic education requirements for the secondary grades in the author's state, it stands out just how uninspiring the framework in which all the content areas are placed into, is. It is called the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for

¹⁷⁴ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 178, Ibid

¹⁷⁵ How to Educate a Citizen, The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., pg. 156, Ibid

social studies for high school.¹⁷⁶ Without question the teacher is what makes these topics interesting. And the topics do appear fairly complete and comprehensive. Still, something seems to be missing. What might that be?

At least in part, it is the current framework in which all this course content is organized and presented. It is not exciting or inspiring. When, for example, one looks at the TEKS for Texas high school social studies, unless you are a teacher who loves pedagogy frameworks, it will not get you “jazzed up” much about studying high school social studies. It certainly will not answer a student’s “why” as to why they should be studying this subject at all. It is simply a list.

The *Democracy Fund*, an “independent, non-partisan private foundation founded to confront deep-rooted challenges in American Democracy while defending against its threats”¹⁷⁷, has a “systems” framework they call the *Health Democracy Framework*. This framework could truly inspire students with a powerful “why” as to why they should want to study civics. They explain it best:

“Our vision and core beliefs are built, in part, upon an analysis of what factors matter most to an effective political system. In developing our healthy democracy framework, we identified six elements that comprise a healthy democracy: energized civic participation, vibrant news and media, independent civil society, effective governing institutions, free and fair elections, and impartial rule of law and equal civil rights.

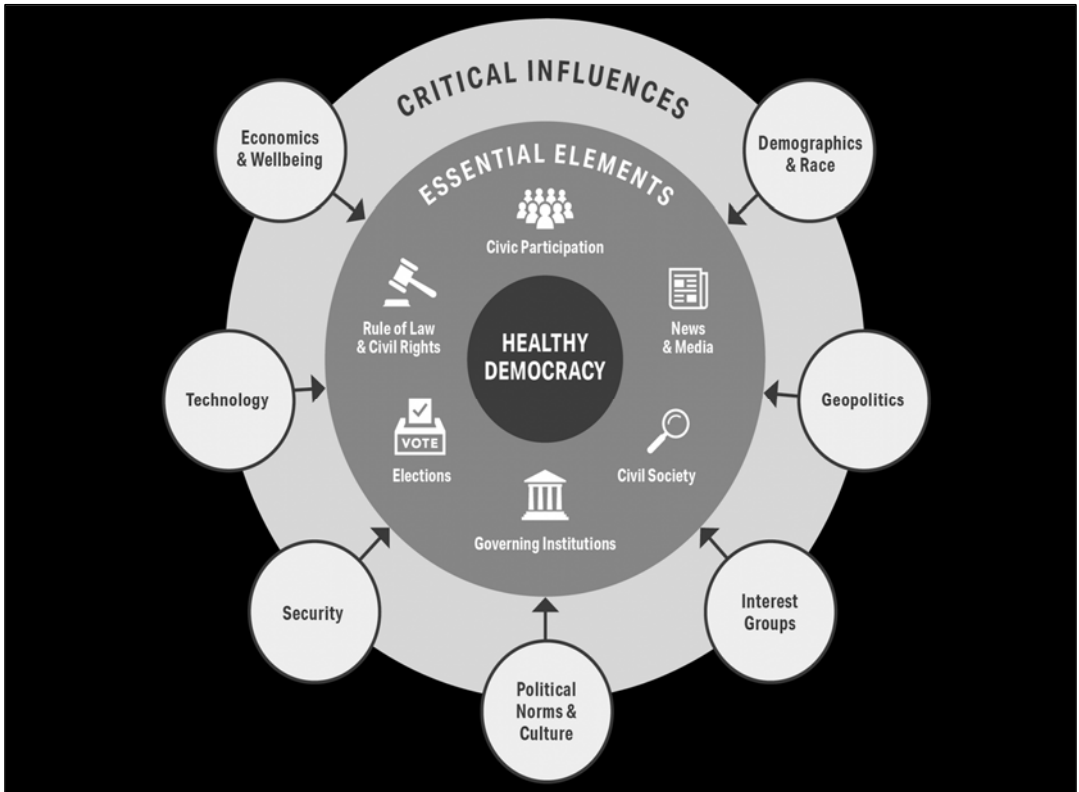
Democracy Fund employs a systems approach, which means we believe that the people, institutions, and organizations that make up our democracy are deeply interconnected and influenced by countless external factors. Given this approach, our process also included the identification of critical influences that affect a democracy’s essential elements and shape the degree to which any or all of them are able to function. We believe the following critical influences are particularly salient to the pursuit of a healthy, responsive democracy that delivers on its promise to the American people: Economics and Wellbeing, Demographics and Race, Geopolitics, Interest Groups, Political Norms and Culture, Security, and Technology. Progress toward a healthy democracy relies, in part, on

¹⁷⁶ Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills or Social Studies, Chapter C. High School, August 2020, pp 1-65, ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter113/ch113c.pdf

¹⁷⁷ Democracy Fund, www.democracyfund.org/who-we-are

*understanding and tracking how these forces drive and constrain change.”¹⁷⁸
(emphasis mine)*

The Democracy Fund visually illustrates their systems approach to teaching democracy this way:¹⁷⁹



Think of it- take that dry sixty-five-page TEKS civics education content framework and replace it with one that emphasizes these six systemic elements that the Democracy Fund has identified as comprising a healthy democracy: energized civic participation, vibrant news and media, independent civil society, effective governing institutions, free and fair elections, and impartial rule of law and equal civil rights. Then, “hang” all the many, many topics the TEKS correctly identifies must be covered on the “bones” of this framework of six elements. Suddenly, one has a much clearer, more concise, and exciting way of presenting civics that shows the “why”

¹⁷⁸ Democracy Fund, www.democracyfund.org/who-we-are/healthy-democracy-framework/

¹⁷⁹ Democracy Fund, www.democracyfund.org/who-we-are/healthy-democracy-framework/

while covering the “what” and the “how”! This is so much more energizing and useful for “citizen making”.

Is There More That We Should Be Teaching?

Even if we do all these things, would this be enough to “move the needle” to improve our civic literacy? It would help “move the needle, but is there more that should be done? Is there more that we should be teaching to make our citizens completely civically literate?

Yes, there is much more we should be teaching! In the following chapters we will cover a wide range of additional topics, ranging from democratic norms to leadership as well as many other subjects that the author argues should be taught as part of this country’s civic education. These may be topics some may say, especially educators, that we are already teaching. However, the premise here is that, if we are supposedly already teaching them, we are not giving them the emphases they deserve. Or, we are not teaching them from an accurate current or historically complete perspective.

We will include not only taking an in-depth look at civic skills such as civic awareness, but we will examine how that awareness is impacted by an array of social and psychological forces and concepts. Further, we will cover skills and concepts, such as our views about public service, freedom, trust, the news media, and the separation of church and state, as well as Christian nationalism. We will also look at recent events in our democracy to see what we can learn from them. Further, we will dive into how we do or do not think critically. In turn, we will examine the impact of our thinking on how we individually process the portrayal of our nation’s history, as well as our collective national thinking. This will include our attraction to conspiracies. Many of these topics are interrelated, but to the extent practical, and to give them the focus they deserve, we will deal with them separately.

There may be other topics not covered here that should be, and if there are (which is likely), they should be welcomed. The best civic education for accomplishing civic literacy is a complete civic education. Placing too many limitations on the amount material we teach, which is always growing and evolving in our increasingly complex society, will only produce partially civically educated citizens. From the author’s perspective, when it comes to civic education, more is better, regardless of who identifies the topic. That is how discernment is developed.

In the pages that follow, it is the author's fervent hope that the topics identified can be incorporated into a civic literacy program that retools how we create American citizens that can engage in democratic self-government the way our founders knew to be the only way we can sustain American democracy. It is the only way, in the author's view, that we can pull ourselves back from the brink of potential disaster that our democracy nearly experienced on January 6, 2021. And in this process of self-examination so we can make our democracy even stronger, it is also my hope that the reader will feel the bonds of their affection for our American democracy grow deeper—bonds that prioritize democracy over political philosophy and political parties.

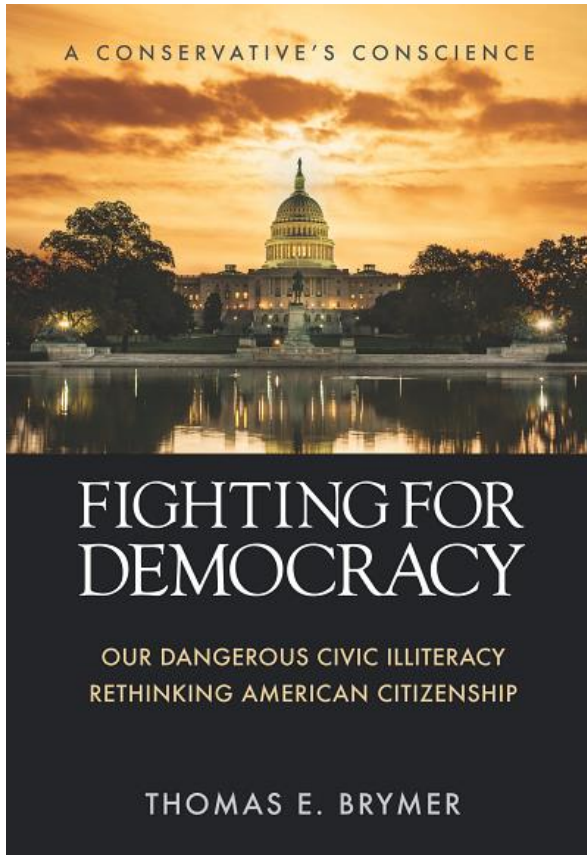
The need for an educated electorate is as high today as it was when our nation was founded. Founder Benjamin Rush saw this need clearly, saying "...If the common people are ignorant and vicious, a republican nation can never be free."¹⁸⁰ Rush added:

*"We have changed our forms of government, but it remains yet to effect a revolution in our principles, opinions, and manners so as to accommodate them to the forms of government that we have adopted."*¹⁸¹

And so it is today—only the need is greater and even more urgent for an educated, civically literate citizenry that knows and understands the additional topics we should be teaching and emphasizing. Those topics will unfold in the pages that follow.

¹⁸⁰ "The Virtue of an Educated Voter", by Alan Taylor, *The American Scholar*, September 6, 2016, <https://theamericanscholar.org/the-virtue-of-an-educated-voter>

¹⁸¹ "The Virtue of an Educated Voter", by Alan Taylor, *The American Scholar*, September 6, 2016, *Ibid*



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