



CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research on
Civic Learning & Engagement

U.S. Civics¹ Instruction: Content and Teaching Strategies

By Mark Hugo Lopez and Emily Hoban Kirby²
August 2007

Numerous research studies show that classroom instruction in civics increases students' civic and political knowledge and skills as well as their political participation.³ A recent policy scan conducted by the ECS National Center for Learning and Citizenship (2006) found that all 50 states and the District of Columbia have a civics or government teaching or course requirement. Requirements for studying civics or government have strengthened substantially since 2003, but accountability has remained relatively constant. As of June 2006, only 21 states had accountability measures (such as examinations) for civics and/or social studies. Service-learning is available in about half of high schools.

However, most students still lack a rich array of opportunities for learning and practicing citizenship. High-quality *assessments* of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions and professional development opportunities for teachers are also still too rare.⁴

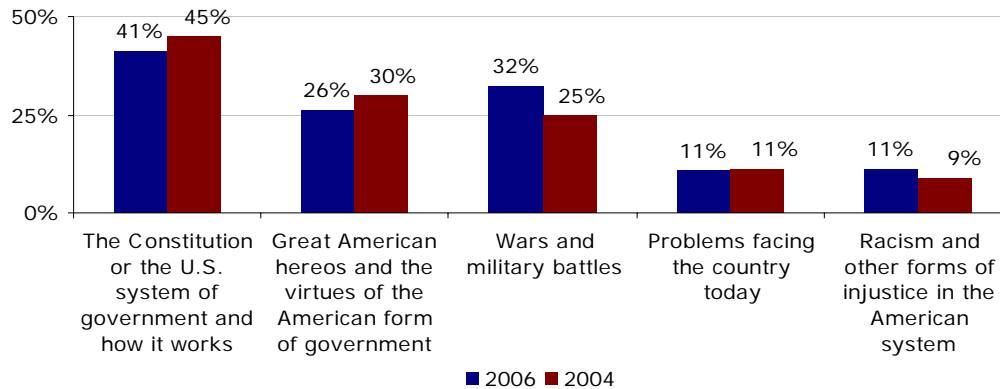
In 2006, CIRCLE conducted the *Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey* (CPHS) which asked young people about their experiences in classes where civics instruction was included. This fact sheet presents previously unreleased evidence from the 2006 CPHS survey about the themes emphasized in civics classes as well as the teaching strategies teachers employ in civics instruction. Furthermore, it confirms previous research that has found that there are differences in the type and extent of content and instructional methods that different demographic groups receive.⁵

Most Civics Courses Emphasize Traditional Themes

The 2006 CPHS asked all respondents to recall up to two themes that were most emphasized in their middle and high school civics courses.⁶ Choices ranged from positive and traditional themes such as "the Constitution" and "great American heroes" to critical themes, such as "current social and political problems" and "racism and other forms of injustice." Most students recalled an emphasis on the traditional themes with 41 percent saying they recalled an emphasis on the Constitution. The same question has also been asked in the 2004 CIRCLE National Youth Survey. For the most part, there was little change in the reported themes emphasized in civics

courses between 2004 and 2006. However, there was a seven point rise in the proportion of students who reported that their civics classes emphasized the theme of “wars and military battles.” This may be the result of the continued U.S.-led war in Iraq.

Figure 1: Participation in Civics Courses by Topic Covered, 2006 & 2004



Source: Authors' tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CIRCLE) & 2004 CIRCLE National Youth Survey

The 2006 NAEP Civics Assessment also asked questions about the topics emphasized in civics or social studies classes. This assessment differs from the 2006 CPHS in that it assessed current 4th, 8th, and 12th graders and it included a different list of topics. The results from the NAEP exam, while not completely comparable to the 2006 CPHS results, provide additional information about civics instruction. Below is a table that shows the percentage of 8th and 12th grade students who reported studying various civics topics in 1998 and 2006. Between 1998 and 2006, there was a significant increase in the percentage of 8th grade students who reported that they studied “political parties, elections and voting” and “the court system.” During the same period, there was a significant decrease in the percent of 8th graders who reported studying “international organizations.”

Table 1: Percentage of Students Who Studied Various Civics Topics, 1998 and 2006

Civics Topic	8 th grade		12 th grade	
	1998	2006	1998	2006
The United States Constitution	79	82	71	72
Congress	75	78	71	69
Political parties, elections and voting	69*	74	70	70
How laws are made	67	69	64	64
State and local government	67	68	69	69
The court system	60*	64	64	63
The President and his cabinet	55	60	63	61
Other countries' governments	40	39	48	46
International organizations (such as the United Nations)	33*	29	45	43

*Significantly different from 2006

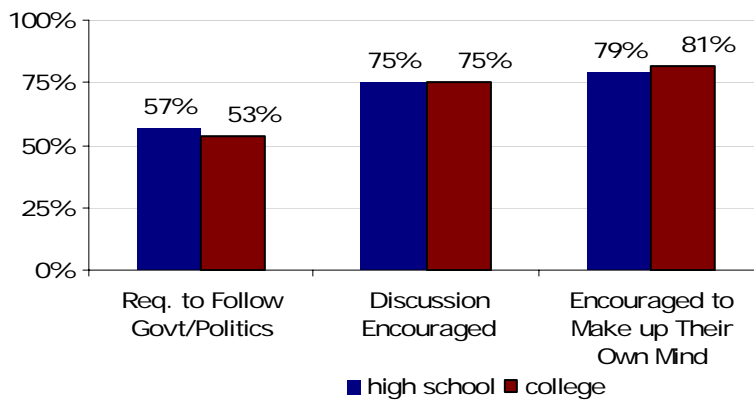
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Progress (NAEP), 1998 and 2006 Civics Assessments.

Discussion of Current Social and Politics Issues⁷

Research suggests that students who have the opportunity to discuss current events in their classrooms show a greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communication skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school.⁸ The 2006 CPHS asked questions to assess whether or not most students have the opportunity to discuss current events in their classrooms.

According to the 2006 CPHS, three-quarters of current students ages 15 to 25 reported that they had the opportunity to discuss current political and social issues in their civics classes. Moreover, the vast majority of students (80%) reported that they were encouraged to form their own opinions regarding these issues. Slightly more than one-half reported that their classes required them to keep up with politics or government by reading the newspaper, watching television, or going to the Internet. College students were slightly more likely than high school students to be encouraged to make up their own minds regarding political and social issues, and were less likely than high school students to be required to follow government and politics.

≡ **Figure 2: Classroom Discussion of Political and Social Issues by High School and College Students**



Source: Authors' tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CIRCLE)

Like the 2006 CPHS, the 2006 NAEP Civics Assessment includes questions about the teaching strategies and activities that are employed in social studies classes (classes that often include civics content). The 2006 NAEP Civics Assessment shows that teaching strategies have changed between 1998 and 2006. Since 1998, there has been a significant decrease in the percentage of 8th and 12th grade students who had community members come to their social studies classes to discuss important events and ideas. There has also been a drop in the percentage of 8th graders who read extra material beyond the textbook (such as newspapers, magazines, maps, charts, or cartoons) and a drop in the percentage of 12th graders who watch television shows, videos, or filmstrips in class.

Recent research by Kahne and Middaugh (2006)⁹ tests the civic outcomes of several of the activities listed in Table 2. Their research shows that simulations and interactive teaching methods like role-playing, mock trials, or dramas are associated with the following desirable civic outcomes: (1) increased informed voting, (2) improved civic skills, and (3) greater political interest. Moreover, they find that opportunities to practice civic skills are associated with enhanced civic skills and political interest.¹⁰

Table 2: Percentage of Students Reporting Exposure to Various Classroom Activities in Social Studies, 1998 and 2006

Activity	8 th grade		12 th grade	
	1998	2006	1998	2006
Watch television shows, videos, or filmstrips in class	83	81	84*	81
Discuss current events	78	76	88	87
Memorize material you have read	70	72	71	71
Read extra material not in your textbox (such as newspapers, magazines, maps, charts, or cartoons)	63*	57	67	65
Take part in debates or panel discussions	39	37	56	57
Take part in role-playing, mock trials, or dramas	32	30	34	34
Have visits from people in your community to learn more about important events and ideas	23*	18	32*	27
Write a letter to give your opinion or help solve a community problem	20	18	24	25

*Significantly different from 2006

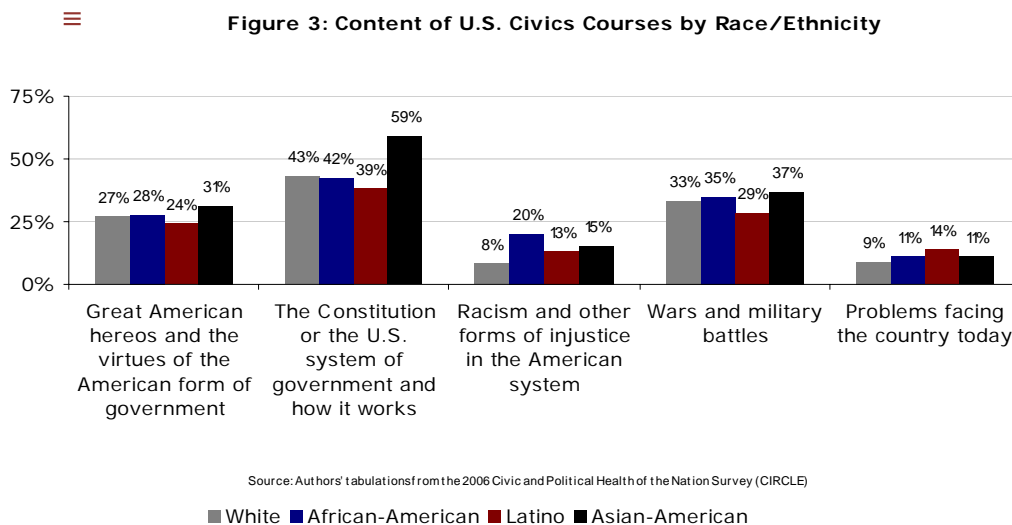
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Progress (NAEP), 1998 and 2006 Civics Assessments.

Gaps in Instruction

In a recent CIRCLE Working Paper (#51) "The Civic Achievement Gap," Meira Levinson identifies a gap in civic achievement between students of different races and socio-economic and immigration status. Her research finds that poor, non-white students demonstrate lower levels of civic and political knowledge, skills, positive attitudes toward the state, and participation than their wealthier and white counterparts. Furthermore, a study by Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh of over 2,000 California high school students finds that access to school-based opportunities to develop civic commitments and capacities are unevenly distributed: college-bound students have significantly more access to these opportunities than students not planning to attend college.¹¹

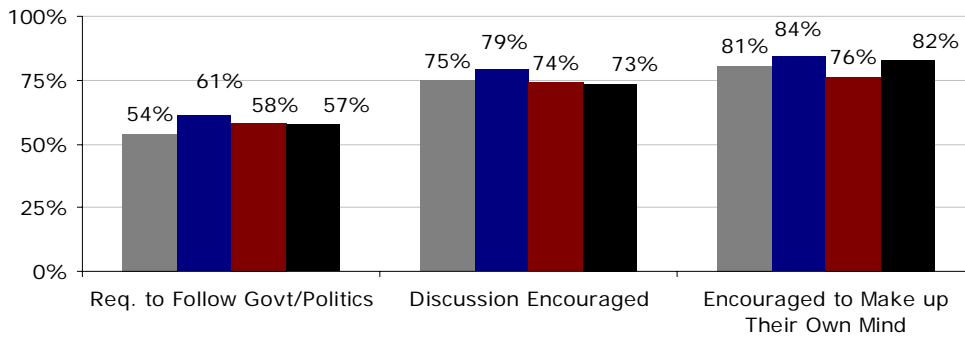
Race/Ethnicity

Similarly, the 2006 CPHS shows differences in civic instruction among different demographic groups. Asian-American and White 15-to-25-year-olds were most likely to report traditional themes in their civics classes. On the other hand, Latino and African-American youth were most likely to report courses that covered less traditional topics. For example, nearly 20 percent of African-American young people reported taking a civics class that covered “racism and other injustices,” while only eight percent of White young people recalled taking such a course.¹²



The 2006 CPHS asked current students (ages 15 to 25) about the types of teaching strategies used in their civics courses. For the most part, students of different races/ethnicities reported exposure to similar teaching strategies. However, Latino students were the racial/ethnic group least likely to attend civics classes that encouraged them to make up their own minds about different political and social issues (see Figure 4).

≡ **Figure 4: Classroom Discussion of Political and Social Issues by Race/Ethnicity**



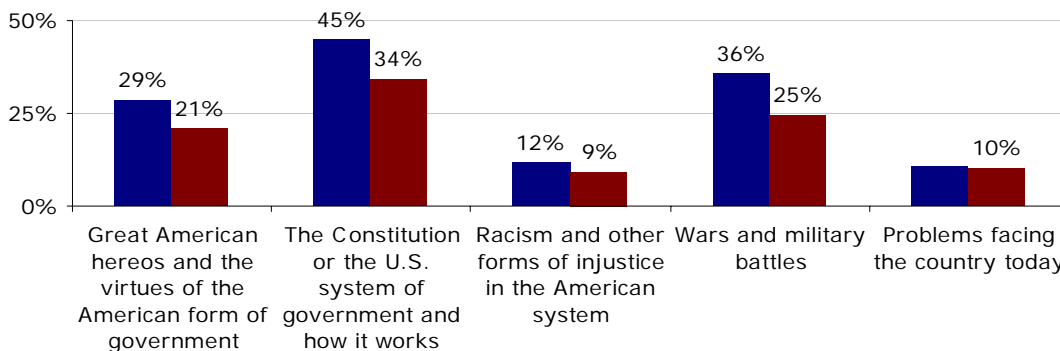
Source: Authors' tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CIRCLE)

■ White ■ African-American ■ Latino ■ Asian-American

College Aspirations

Finally, young people ages 15 to 25 with college experience or the aspirations to attend college recalled being taught different civics topics in high school than young people who do not attend college or do not have plans to attend college. For example, college and college-bound students were about 10 points more likely to recall an emphasis on traditional civics topics (Constitution, great American heroes, and wars & military battles) than their non-college counterparts.

≡ **Figure 5: Participation in Civics Courses by College Experience and Aspiration**

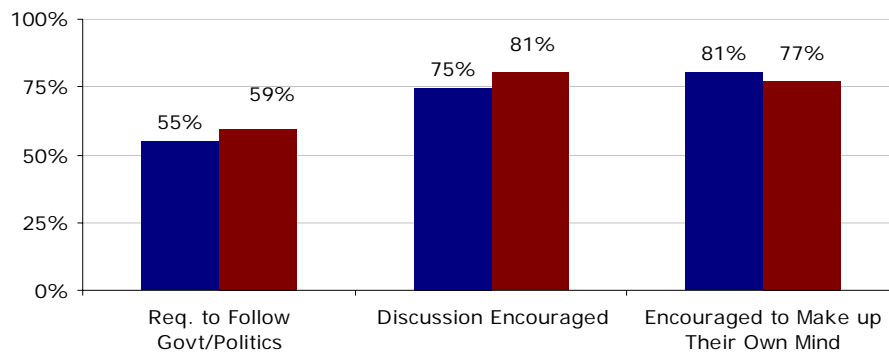


Source: Authors' tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CIRCLE)

■ college ■ non-college

Young people ages 15 to 25 who are in college or plan to attend college were more likely to be encouraged to make up their minds on political and social issues than their non-college counterparts.

≡ **Figure 6: Classroom Discussion of Political and Social Issues by College Experience and Aspiration**



Source: Authors' tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CIRCLE)

■ College ■ Non-College

Notes

¹ For the purposes of this fact sheet “civics courses” is a broad term used to refer to the following classes: government classes, civics classes, or American history classes.

² Research Director, and Senior Research Associate, respectively. We thank Peter Levine, Karlo Barrios Marcelo, Abby Kiesa, and Deborah Both for comments on previous drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in fact or interpretation are our own.

³ Niemi, Richard G. & Junn, Jane (1998) “Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn.” Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Carnegie Corporation and CIRCLE (2003) “The Civic Mission of Schools,” New York.

⁴ Lennon, Tiffany (2006) “Education Commission of the States State Policy Brief: Citizenship Education.”
<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/71/30/7130.pdf><http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/71/30/7130.pdf>

⁵ Kahne, Joseph and Middaugh, Ellen (2006) “California Survey of Civic Education”
http://www.cms-ca.org/civic_survey_final.pdf

Levinson, Meira (2006) “CIRCLE Working Paper #51: The Civic Achievement Gap.”
<http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP51Levinson.pdf>

⁶ The 2006 CPHS relies on respondents’ ability to “recall” what occurred in their classroom. All data reported rely on self-reports.

⁷ The 2006 CPHS asked two sets of questions about civic education to two different groups. The first set of questions (q83, q84, & q85) were given to only *current* high school and current college students. This set of questions asked about the types of teaching strategies teachers used in civics courses. The second question (q105) was asked of all respondents. This question asked about the themes emphasized in civics courses.

⁸ Carnegie Corporation and CIRCLE (2003) “The Civic Mission of Schools,” New York.

McDevitt, Michael and Kiousis, Spiros. (2006) “CIRCLE Working Paper 49: Experiments in Political Socialization: Kids Voting USA as a Model for Civic Education Reform.”
<http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP49McDevitt.pdf>

Torney-Purta, J. & Amadeo, J. (with a chapter by F. Pilotti) (2004). *Strengthening Democracy in the Americans through Civic Education: An Empirical Analysis Highlighting the Views of Students and Teachers*. Washington, D.C.: Organization of the States.

⁹ See Endnote #6.

¹⁰ Kahne and Middaugh's ability to assess causality was limited because they could not assess initial levels of student commitments (they are currently completing a longitudinal study of CA high school students that does control for prior commitments with support from CIRCLE and the MacArthur Foundation).

¹¹ See Endnote #4.

¹² Percentages do not add up to 100% because respondents could chose more than one theme that was emphasized in their civics course.