WHATEVER HAPPENED TO CIVICS?

While teaching my undergraduate course recently – titled "Race and the American Story" – I mentioned in passing that we have been experiencing a serious crisis in American civic life for decades. One of my students, a visiting foreign journalist, immediately expressed surprise: "Do you mean it wasn't Trump's presidency that caused this?"

Our short memories often lead us to mistake symptoms for the disease, and this is certainly the case with the social and political upheavals of recent months. The protests and riots in reaction to the killing of George Floyd over the summer, the unprecedented contention over the presidential election, and the Capitol insurrection on Jan. 6 did not come out of a clear blue sky. The storm clouds of polarization, fragmentation and threatening disintegration of American society have been building for quite some time. What Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor once called a "quiet crisis" has become a deafening one.

O'Connor was referring to conspicuous deficiencies in U.S. civics and history education, deficiencies which were depriving entire generations of Americans of the prerequisites for constitutional self-government. The fact is, American constitutional democracy is not a wind-and-go toy or a perpetual motion machine. The U.S. Constitution established a form of government – a republic – that requires constant maintenance by the American people. In Benjamin Franklin's famous words, republics have to be actively "kept" by the people living within them.

As Alexis de Tocqueville explained in "Democracy in America," the foundation of American self-government has always been the active, informed participation of its citizens. And the foundation of active and informed civic participation in American society is effective classroom education in U.S. civics and history. Our schools have been largely neglecting this crucial task for the past 50 years. Without this foundation in place, American constitutional democracy appears to be teetering like a Jenga tower.

Why has this happened? Two main culprits are to blame: 1) the disproportionate emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education that followed the original "Sputnik moment" during the Cold War and has been reinforced in national policy ever since; and 2) the culture wars that emerged in reaction to the civil-rights movement, the Vietnam War, and second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Concerns surrounding national security and global economic competitiveness throughout and following the Cold War led to the systematic prioritization of STEM subjects in classrooms. During this time the federal government has invested about $2.8 billion per year in these subjects – more than $100 billion in total. The federal government currently spends $54 per student per year on STEM subjects, compared with just 5 cents per student per year on civics. The national Council on Competitiveness was created in 1986 to confront increasing international competition in the "race to see who will innovate and develop key technologies" in areas such as "artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT) and 3D printing, to name a few."

Federal and interstate education reform efforts have followed this emphasis. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 placed tremendous pressure on schools and educators to teach to standardized tests in reading and math, leaving less time for social studies and civics. The National Governors Association originally intended to include social studies (including civics) in the Common Core standards in 2009, but abandoned the idea as a result of polarized debates over American historical narratives. What was left – English language arts (ELA) and mathematics – reinforced the pressure and emphasis of No Child Left Behind. The Race to the Top grant program launched by the Department of Education the same year contributed to this imbalance, imposing further top-down pressure on schools to prepare students to "compete in the global economy."

There is nothing wrong, of course, with trying to improve education in STEM fields and keep up with the Joneses in the international arena. But schools have limited resources, and teachers only have so much time. The near-exclusive focus on STEM and ELA subjects has led to the systematic neglect of social studies and American civics at all grade levels (continuing into higher education as well) over the past 50 years.

As the experience of the National Governors Association with the Common Core standards illustrates, the focus on STEM fields has been the result not only of the positive aims of increasing national security and competing in the global economy, but also of deep polarization over how to teach American civics. Just as the Sputnik moment launched the United States on a STEM-focused trajectory, the cultural moment of the 1960s and '70s launched the nation on a trajectory of renewed political and social division that has continued unabated, and intensified, ever since.

This widening division began over racial tensions that were reopened in the postwar period and culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The moral clarity of World War II was succeeded by the disillusioning effect of the Vietnam War. *Roe v. Wade* and Phillis Schlafly's "Stop the ERA" campaign followed directly on its heels in the 1970s. In 1980, Howard Zinn published "A People's History of the United States."

These events and others joined to produce a society that was deeply divided about American identity and history. To some Americans, the United States was defined by the monumental progress represented by the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Civil War Amendments, victory over Nazi tyranny in World War II, and the "dream" of Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil-rights movement. To others, the United States was defined by the systematic failures of American history and the struggles of oppressed subgroups to overcome the tyrannies of privileged ruling elites.

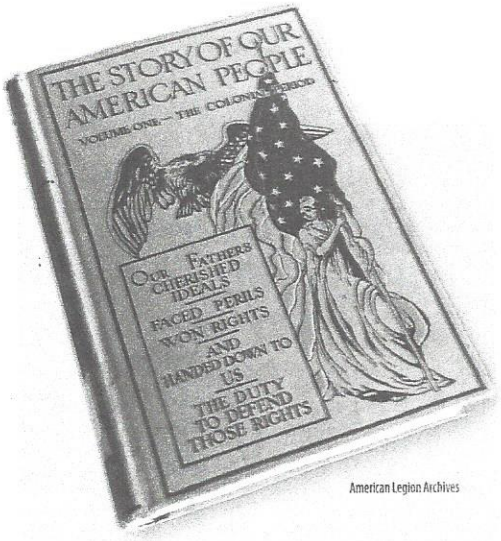
These opposed narratives clashed in the controversy over the National History Standards in 1994. Despite substantial federal funding and a consensus-building process that involved more than 30 major national organizations, these standards were vehemently criticized by conservatives as presenting a "politically correct" and "multicultural" narrative of American history. Led by Lynne Cheney, a former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, critics complained that the proposed standards presented a one-sided, "gloomy" narrative – an America defined by failures and oppressions rather than achievements and progress.

After being rejected by a 99-1 vote in the Senate, the National History Standards survive only as an unsightly shipwreck on the shoals of polarization, and a cautionary tale for anyone interested in reviving American civic education since. This cautionary tale has been heeded well by most K-12 educators in the 21st century. Almost entirely unsupported by school administrators and public officials, and wary of facing criticism or professional repercussions for perceived transgressions, most teachers are clearly incentivized to teach as little civics as they can. Many educators do, of course, courageously swim against this current and attempt to integrate civics into their teaching as much as possible. Until support and incentive structures are significantly changed, however, such examples will remain few and far between.

The longstanding failures of American civic education in schools have led directly to the disturbing deficiencies in civic knowledge we have seen in recent years – the once-quiet crisis that is finally making its voice clearly heard all over the political landscape.

As a CNN.com headline put it a few years ago, "Americans know literally nothing about the Constitution." Very few know the difference, for example, between the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Most college graduates think Thomas Jefferson was the father of the Constitution, though he wasn't even in the country at the time of its drafting. Only two in five Americans can name all three branches of government. More than a third can't name a single right guaranteed by the First Amendment, which is the most commonly known part of the Constitution. Most entertainingly, almost one in 10 U.S. college graduates polled in 2016 thought TV's "Judge Judy" was serving on the Supreme Court.

This embarrassing ignorance about American history and political institutions has corresponded with a troubling erosion of support for American political principles. According to a 2016 Harvard study, only 19% of U.S. millennials believe a military coup is not legitimate in a democracy, as



American Legion Archives

A commitment to civics

On Oct. 21, 1922, The American Legion formed a committee to lead the development of textbooks to be used by public schools to strengthen understanding of U.S. democracy, history and identity. Multiple organizations endorsed the project, including the American Legion Auxiliary, American Federation of Labor, Boy Scouts of America, Elks, Civic League for Immigrants and Knights of Pythias.

Five years later, "The Story of Our American People," a two-volume set of textbooks under the leadership of The American Legion, was in circulation to public schools.

opposed to 43% of older generations of Americans. More than a quarter of millennials believe that choosing leaders through free elections is "unimportant" (compared to 10% of the interwar generation and 14% of baby boomers). And only 30% of millennials believe it is "essential" to live in a democracy, compared with 70% among the interwar generation.

American constitutional democracy can't run on autopilot. By putting civic education on cruise control and falling asleep at the wheel, the American ship of state has run off course. If we are to avoid running aground, we need to open the eyes of all Americans, beginning in K-12 classrooms, to the essential knowledge and civic virtues necessary to maintain our constitutional democracy for future generations.

Prospects for revitalizing civic education The past five decades have been a tale of woe for American civic education, and thereby for American political culture in general. There are, however, emergent reasons for hope that the next five decades may be a different story.

For the past three years, I have served as a member of the faculty and leadership team in the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University. This school is an interdisciplinary academic department blending the traditional fields of political science, history, economics and philosophy into a single curriculum that focuses on educating students to be citizen-leaders in American society. We provide an American civic education to our undergraduate and graduate students through the discussion of classic texts of American political thought and history. We also reach beyond the university to the K-12 level, partnering regularly and extensively with our state's Department of Education and various nonprofit organizations to support civic education at all levels and for all citizens.

In 2020, we merged one of our outreach centers with the former Joe Foss Institute (founded by World War II Medal of Honor recipient Joe Foss) to magnify our civic education efforts at the K-12 level. Through its successful efforts to pass legislation requiring the testing of basic civic knowledge in 31 states, as well as its Veterans Inspiring Patriotism program in schools, the addition of the former Joe Foss Institute has enhanced our ability to resurrect and improve American civic education across the nation.

We are in some ways a unique program in higher education, but also one of a growing number of higher education institutions explicitly dedicated to resurrecting American civic education. Among these are our partners in a new national study of U.S. civics and history education that has courageously and ambitiously attempted to succeed where the 1994 National History Standards failed. The Educating for American Democracy project launched over a year ago with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Department of Education, and presented its completed report in March.

This project – led by our program at Arizona State University, along with the Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University, CIRCLE at Tufts University and the national civic education provider iCivics – has brought together more than 300 academics and K-12 educators from across the ideological and political spectrum to produce a new framework for U.S. civic education. The "Roadmap," as we have titled the centerpiece of the report, provides an inquiry-based and adaptable outline for teaching U.S. civics and history that can serve as a focal point for meaningful reform efforts at the national, state and local levels. It will also, we hope, serve as a galvanizing force to finally remedy the longstanding deficiencies of resources, time and energy devoted to American civic education in K-12 classrooms and beyond.

The events of recent months underscore the urgency of strengthening our civic fabric. There is a general acknowledgment of the fact that a constitutional democracy such as ours cannot survive on STEM alone. This task must start with a concerted effort to improve understanding of U.S. political principles, institutions and history.

American civic education should mirror the kind of American identity we would like to cultivate. This identity, at its best, has always consisted in a common commitment to certain ideals – certain "inalienable rights," in the words of the Declaration of Independence – rather than the mere fact of living in the same place. A common commitment to ideals can, in turn, inspire common assent to a shared narrative of American history. Until this is achieved, the United States will continue to fall short of being the "city upon a hill" that its best moments have called it to be.

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