

## We Still Need You! An Update on the Status of K-12 Civics Education in the United States

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### **Abstract:**

In 2001, Richard Niemi and Julia Smith published an article in *PS: Political Science and Politics* on enrollments in high school civics and government courses. They framed their study on the premise that political scientists were ignoring an important aspect of American civic and political life, and they concluded by issuing a call for political scientists to become more involved in K-12 civics education. This article provides an update on the state of K-12 civics education and renews Niemi and Smith's call for political science engagement in K-12 education.

**Keywords:** high school | civics education | K-12 education | American politics | political science

### **Article:**

Almost 15 years ago, Niemi and Smith (2001) published an article in *PS: Political Science and Politics* in which they analyzed enrollments in high school government classes using data from the 1994 High School Transcript Study. Framing the study was their assertion that political scientists had largely ignored pre-collegiate civics education for more than three decades and, as a result, had missed a potentially important aspect of American civic and political life. Niemi and Smith concluded their article with a call for political scientists to become more engaged with K-12 education, not only by researching the civic implications of the instruction that students receive in their high school civics and government courses but also by taking an active role in policy and curricular matters related to pre-collegiate civics education.

Much has changed within the civics education landscape since Niemi and Smith's 2001 publication. However, the divide between political scientists and the K-12 civics education curriculum remains as wide as ever. In this article, I provide an updated review of pre-collegiate civics education in the United States that expands on Niemi and Smith's study. I conclude by renewing their call for greater involvement by political scientists in K-12 education and by offering suggestions for ways that these collaborations can occur.

## **K-12 CIVICS EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: AN UPDATE**

Based on their analysis of the 1994 High School Transcript Study, Niemi and Smith (2001) concluded the following: (1) enrollments in high school civics courses were substantively higher than in the past; (2) most students (75%) had taken a civics course before graduation, with half taking it in the twelfth grade; (3) few students enrolled in honors or Advanced Placement (AP) civics courses; and (4) enrollments varied widely depending on the type of school (i.e., public or private) and geographic location, whereas academic, racial, and gender differences did not appear to influence students' choice or ability to enroll in a civics course.<sup>1</sup> Niemi and Smith also confirmed what social studies educators had known for decades: that civics often took a back seat to history instruction in K-12 education.

From an enrollment perspective, more recent data suggest that student access to civics courses has increased.<sup>2</sup> The most recent High School Transcript Study data (Nord et al. 2011), collected in 2009, shows that 86% of students had taken a civics course before graduation, which is an improvement from what Niemi and Smith (2001) found in their study. Moreover, this percentage is almost identical when the data are categorized by race, gender, parental educational level, and status as English Language Learners.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps one reason why this percentage has increased is that more states are requiring civics as a prerequisite to graduation and mandating that civics knowledge be assessed as part of a comprehensive state testing program. Niemi and Smith (2001) published their article before passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the apex of what is commonly referred to as an "era of accountability" in K-12 public education (Mehta 2014). Although NCLB and its successors (e.g., Common Core) focus primarily on language arts and mathematics, many states have expanded graduation and testing requirements to include additional content areas.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement's most recent study of pre-collegiate social studies requirements in the United States, 45 states currently list civics as a high school graduation requirement (CIRCLE 2014). On the surface, this

figure appears promising. However, only eight of those states require state-mandated assessments for their civics courses. Furthermore, within the social studies literature, there is considerable evidence to suggest that if content is not coupled with a high-stakes state assessment, then it is not given priority within the curriculum (e.g., Grant 2007; Journell 2010b; Pace 2011). Even within social studies education, civics appears to be marginalized. According to the CIRCLE data, the same number of states requires US history for high school graduation as those that require civics, but 17 of those states require state-mandated assessments for US history—more than double the number that require state-mandated assessments for civics. In 2015, however, Arizona became the first state to require that students pass the US Citizenship Test to graduate, and as many as 15 other states are considering similar legislation (Armario and Christie 2015).

It is worth noting, however, that the idea of using the US Citizenship Test to measure civics knowledge has been criticized by social studies educators. Although mandating the test as a graduation requirement seemingly would raise the profile of K-12 civics education, some educators express concern that it actually might reduce the amount of time devoted to civics instruction. If mastery of civics is determined by passing a relatively simple test containing questions that are public knowledge, then it is plausible that some schools might limit their civics instruction to requiring students to memorize test answers. Moreover, relying exclusively on a fact-based measure of civics knowledge could reduce the amount of time that students are engaged in civics skills, such as deliberating public policies and learning how to evaluate the merits of candidates running for office (Levine 2015). Of course, it is too early to determine whether these concerns are warranted, and further research in this area is needed once these requirements have been implemented.

A related concern is the plight of social studies education in the elementary grades. Since the passage of NCLB, research has shown that the amount of time students spend engaged in social studies content is limited, and teachers often report covering these concepts only a few times per week (e.g., Fitchett and Heafner 2010; Fitchett, Heafner, and Lampert 2014; Wills 2007). For example, in their analysis of 17 years of data from the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES) Schools and Staffing Survey, Fitchett and Heafner (2010) found that although language arts and mathematics have always received greater attention than social studies in the elementary grades, the mean amount of instructional time devoted to social studies decreased significantly since the passage of NCLB by approximately 30 minutes per week since 2000. In total, the NCES data showed that, on average, elementary teachers are teaching only 2.5 hours of social studies per week, compared to more than 11 hours of language arts and more than 5 hours of mathematics. Although the elementary social studies curriculum is not focused explicitly on civics instruction per se, the lack of a solid foundation in the social studies may limit students' ability to contextualize the content in their civics courses once they enter middle school and high school.

The way in which the field responded to the marginalization of social studies created by NCLB and Common Core was to develop its own set of standards. The College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework (National Council for the Social Studies 2013) is designed to accompany the Common Core and explicitly outlines disciplinary standards for civics, economics, geography, and history. For civics, the C3 Framework requires that students learn about civic and political

institutions; become civically engaged through political participation and civic deliberation; and become aware of the processes, rules, and laws of our democratic society. Given the relative infancy of the C3 Framework, it is too early to know whether it will have a widespread impact on civics instruction in the United States. As of this writing, only a few states have officially adopted the C3 Framework as an accompaniment to their social studies standards.

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Although state requirements and national curriculum standards provide a better understanding of how civics is valued (or not) in K-12 public education, they do not address which type of civics courses students are taking. In their analysis, Niemi and Smith (2001) reported that relatively few students took honors or AP civics courses. Recent data suggest that this trend is changing. According to its most recent national report, The College Board (2014) reported that 216,944 US government and politics AP exams were taken in 2013, compared to 86,815 taken a decade earlier. In fact, the US government and politics exam was the fifth most-taken AP exam in 2013, although it was taken less often than the US history exam.

In addition to coursework and assessment, a final aspect of K-12 civics education that has received considerable attention in the past decade is service learning. Research has shown that high school service-learning projects—either in conjunction with a civics course or as a standalone graduation requirement—are predictors of engaged citizenship when students become adults (Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, and Atkins 2007; Kahne, Crow, and Lee 2013; Kahne and Sporte 2008). For example, using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study, Hart et al (2007) found that both voluntary and school-required community service were strongly correlated with adult voting and volunteering. According to CIRCLE (2014) data, 32 states have adopted standards that mandate a service-learning component in their curriculum; however, the scope and quality of those experiences vary widely.

## **QUALITY OF K-12 CIVICS EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES**

Looking only at civics course enrollments, state requirements, and increasing numbers of students taking AP courses, we could surmise that the state of civics education in the United States has improved since Niemi and Smith's 2001 analysis—even if concerns remain about the value of civics relative to other courses both within and outside of the social studies. These data, however, do not provide much context about the quality of instruction that is occurring in civics classrooms. In the years since Niemi and Smith's publication, research suggests that the quality of civics instruction is often more important than the types of courses that students have the opportunity to take.

According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Civics (US Department of Education 2010), there is reason to question the effectiveness of K-12 civics instruction. Only 64% of high school seniors were deemed to have demonstrated a “basic” understanding of civic and political concepts; of those students, only 24% scored well enough to

be considered “proficient.” Even more concerning, both percentages were lower than results from the 2006 NAEP civics assessment.

The NAEP results also show that white and Asian/Pacific Islander students score, on average, higher than African American and Latino/Latina students. In their analysis, Niemi and Smith (2001) found that race had no bearing on whether students had an opportunity to take civics courses; in fact, they found that African American and Latino/Latina students actually took more civics courses than white students. Recent research suggests, however, that the quality of students’ civics education often correlates with their race and socioeconomic status. White students report having more opportunities for civic participation and discussing political issues in their civics courses, whereas African American and Latino/Latina students report spending less time discussing current events, participating in service-learning projects, and engaging in active instructional strategies (e.g., simulations) than white students (Kahne and Middaugh 2009). Both quantitative and qualitative data also suggest that students’ civics education often is tied to perceptions—either their own or their teachers’—of their future societal roles. Students who are expected to receive postsecondary education are privy to more civic opportunities in their K-12 schooling than those who are not perceived to be “college material.” Moreover, students who attend schools that draw from upper- and middle-class neighborhoods often participate in more in-depth political discussions and analyses than those who attend schools located in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods (e.g., Journell 2011; Kahne and Middaugh 2009).

The curriculum is another factor related to the quality of students’ civics educational experiences. In their article, Niemi and Smith (2001, 285) asked, “[A]re [K-12 civics courses] an introduction to political science or are they citizenship training?” Historically, the civics curriculum emphasized the latter outcome (e.g., Avery and Simmons 2000; Journell 2010a), which frames civics as a content area that students learn about as opposed to a discipline in which they use tools and ways of thinking that mimic political scientists. From this aspect, civics is unique; best practices in other social studies disciplines encourage students to engage in disciplinary knowledge and skills.<sup>5</sup> Even in the recently released C3 Framework, students are asked to “[apply] disciplinary concepts and tools” (National Council for the Social Studies 2013, 29), but the only actual disciplinary practice listed for civics is deliberations of policy. Most of what is considered civic disciplinary knowledge in the C3 Framework consists of increasing students’ knowledge of governmental institutions and civic processes.

Research also suggests that many social studies teachers may not possess sufficient knowledge of political processes and current political issues to effectively engage their students in analyses of political behavior.

According to the American Political Science Association (APSA), political science is “the study of governments, public policies and political processes, systems, and political behavior” that uses “both humanistic and scientific perspectives and tools and a variety of methodological approaches” to examine social and political phenomena (APSA 2014). Moreover, in the most recent official APSA standards for K-12 education—developed more than 40 years ago—the APSA Committee on Pre-Collegiate Education (1971) outlined eight purposes for K-12 civics education, including the transmission of knowledge about the (1) realities of political life and cultural ideals of American democracy; (2) political behavior and processes, as well as

knowledge of formal governmental institutions and legal structures; and (3) political systems other than the American system, as well as developing (4) a capacity to think about political phenomena in conceptually sophisticated ways; (5) an understanding of and skills in the processes of social scientific inquiry; (6) a capacity to make explicit and normative judgments about political decisions and policies; (7) an understanding of the sociopsychological sources and historical-cultural origins of their own political attitudes and values, as well as the capacity to critically analyze alternative values; and (8) an understanding of the skills needed to effectively participate in a democratic society. The civics curriculum in most states, however, is devoid of this type of disciplinary knowledge. Journell (2010a), for example, found that the Virginia Standards of Learning—one of the more comprehensive sets of state standards in the United States—focused primarily on attributes of good citizenship and knowledge of civic processes rather than disciplinary knowledge. Even the US government and politics AP curriculum has been found to favor breadth over depth of knowledge with respect to detailed analyses of political behavior and engagement with political issues (Parker et al. 2011).

Although research suggests that some civics teachers engage in this type of disciplinary instruction with their students (e.g., Journell, Beeson, and Ayers 2015), they are the exception and not the rule. One factor that has been found to limit teachers' ability to engage in aspects of political thinking with students is the time constraint related to pressure to cover tested material (Journell 2010b). Research also suggests that many social studies teachers may not possess sufficient knowledge of political processes and current political issues to effectively engage their students in analyses of political behavior. A recent three-year study of preservice social studies teachers in one teacher-education program, for example, found that the majority were woefully ignorant of basic political knowledge and lacked sufficient training in political science (Journell 2013).

As Niemi and Smith (2001) noted, history remains the dominant field in social studies education, and that dominance extends to social studies teacher education. Most preservice social studies teachers major in history; if they take any political science courses, they typically are survey courses on American government.<sup>6</sup> This practice is well below the threshold recommended by the APSA Committee on Education (1994), which states that K-12 civics teachers should have a solid foundation in philosophical issues related to political democracy and democratic citizenship, sources of pluralism in American political life, and methods of political science data analysis.

In summary, although examining enrollment data and state requirements for civics is useful, research suggests that ensuring quality civics instruction in K-12 education is the more pressing issue at this time. It seems clear that steps must be taken to ensure that all students receive high-quality civics instruction that not only prepares them for citizenship but also requires them to develop the disciplinary knowledge and skills used by political scientists. That the APSA would have a prominent role in these efforts seems logical; unfortunately, there has been little involvement in K-12 education among political scientists in recent years.

## **POLITICAL SCIENCE AND THE K-12 CIVICS CURRICULUM**

At the conclusion of their article, Niemi and Smith (2001) called for political scientists to become more involved in the quality of K-12 civics education. Unfortunately, the field has not heeded their request. We can easily find work by political scientists related to K-12 educational attainment as a predictor of future political participation (e.g., Kam and Palmer 2008; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996). However, regarding the quality of the civics education that K-12 students receive, the field has been noticeably silent.

As Niemi and Smith (2001) noted, K-12 education offers a wealth of possibilities for research, with implications not only for civics education but also in the field of political science. Yet, few political scientists have conducted research in this area in recent years, and it is rare to see articles related to K-12 civics instruction in mainstream political science journals—even in those that focus on pedagogy.<sup>7</sup> Other than a special issue in 2004, “The Teacher” feature of *PS: Political Science and Politics* has only occasionally published research and commentary related to K-12 civics instruction (e.g., Avery, Levy, and Simmons 2014; Journell 2010a; Kahne and Westheimer 2006), and the *Journal of Political Science Education* is almost exclusively focused on collegiate instruction. Even the most recent APSA Teaching and Learning Conference contained few references to K-12 education (Souerwine 2015).

Yet, a quick review of the prominent journals in social studies education reveals that educational researchers consistently use work by political scientists to frame their research on civics education. In other words, the field of K-12 civics education is already primed for political science involvement and collaboration with educational researchers. The state of K-12 civics education can be improved only when political scientists publish in social studies journals and present research at national educational conferences.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, what scholars research and where they publish and present will always be governed by personal interests, what is valued in that field, and—ultimately—by tenure committees. It is quite possible, then, that cross-disciplinary research might be an unrealistic proposition. At the very least, I echo Niemi and Smith’s (2001) call for the field of political science to become more involved with K-12 civics education at the state and national levels. At a minimum, I encourage the field to lobby for required civics courses in all states that are part of a comprehensive state testing program. I believe, however, that K-12 civics education also would benefit from having political scientists participate in the creation and/or revision of state civics standards, the development of state civics assessments, and the analysis of state assessment data. The only way in which the K-12 civics curriculum will achieve the goal of becoming more disciplinary in nature—thereby becoming an introduction to political science rather than merely an exercise in citizenship training—is for political scientists to have a seat at the table. I also believe that it would be a mistake for the APSA to wait for an invitation from states to engage in this type of work. The APSA possesses the disciplinary clout that educators often do not have and that legislators respect; therefore, the organization should insist on being included in these types of efforts.

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As a field, the last time the APSA officially weighed in on K-12 education was in 1971, and much has changed in the civics education landscape since then. Given concerns about the variance and overall quality of students' civics educational experiences, the APSA would be a powerful voice in making recommendations regarding the civics curriculum and the continued marginalization of social studies. The organization could take a cue from the American Historical Association, which regularly speaks out on matters related to K-12 history education—most recently in opposition to the conservative backlash against the revised AP US history standards (American Historical Association 2014). This type of involvement takes little effort but can provide immense political support to legislative and reform initiatives in K-12 social studies education.

## CONCLUSION

I conclude this article with the same call issued by Niemi and Smith (2001) 15 years ago. As a social studies teacher educator and civics education researcher, I state confidently: We still need you! Increased national emphasis on STEM-related fields in both K-12 education and teacher education programs has placed civics education at a crossroads. If the quality of students' K-12 civics education is an important factor for future civic participation and engagement, then it is critical that all stakeholders work together and take steps to improve the visibility and quality of civics education in the United States. Increased attention to K-12 education from political scientists can only aid in that endeavor.

## NOTES

1. As Niemi and Smith (2001) noted, there is an implicit difference between “civics” and “government” courses. “Civics” conveys the idea of broad citizenship training; however, among political scientists, the term “civics” represents an uncritical approach to studying politics that is not representative of their work. Yet, the term “government” tends to have political connotations, and many states prefer to use “civics” to describe those types of courses. Given that most states use the term “civics” to describe courses in which students learn about political processes, governmental institutions, and the role of citizens in a democratic society, I use that term here for brevity and consistency.
2. These data were collected using the NAEP High School Transcript Data Explorer, available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/hstsdata>.
3. The percentages of white (86%), African American (85%), Latino/Latina (90%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (87%) students were comparable to the national figures; however, the percentage of American Indian/Alaskan Natives (75%) was lower. The percentages of female (87%) and male (86%) students were almost identical. Each level of parental education that was used (i.e., “did not finish high school” [90%], “graduated high school” [88%], “some education after high school” [87%], and “graduated college” [85%]) was comparable to the national figures. The percentage of students identifying as English Language Learners (91%) was higher than non-English Language Learners (86%). Although not mentioned in Niemi and Smith's



(2001) analysis, it is worth noting that the percentage of students with disabilities (73%) who took civics courses was lower than the national figure.

4. Common Core has specific standards for “history and social studies”; however, they are couched within the standards for language arts and focus primarily on ways to increase students’ reading comprehension and critical-thinking skills.

5. For example, students are regularly encouraged to think historically (Wineburg 2001), economically (Schug and Wood 2011), and geographically (Nagel 2008).

6. To my knowledge, there is no large-scale national study that delineates the majors of social studies preservice teachers; however, it is well known in the field that history majors comprise the majority of students in secondary social studies teacher-education programs. For example, Keirn and Luhr (2012, 500) report that California—a state that certifies one of every eight teachers in the United States—requires 45 hours of content with the “vast majority” in history.

7. There are a few political scientists who have made significant contributions to K-12 civics education, including Richard Niemi, David Campbell, and Stephen Macedo.

8. The primary conferences for social studies research are the annual meetings of the College and University Faculty Assembly of the National Council for the Social Studies and the American Educational Research Association.

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