

Written Testimony
By Michael Weiser

Chairman Bean, Ranking Member Bonamici, distinguished members of the Subcommittee; thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify about the state of civic education in the United States today.

I am chair of the Jack Miller Center, a non-partisan nationwide network of scholars and teachers dedicated to reinvigorating education in America's founding principles and history.

At the Jack Miller Center, we do not have a set of prescriptive policies to enact, let alone a model curriculum to suggest. Instead, I am here to present a descriptive vision of the democratic heritage we must pass to each generation of young Americans.

The JMC stands neither on the right nor the left, but on the side of optimism in America's future and faith in its fundamental principles. We believe that the ideals of the American Founding, expressed in the Declaration of Independence and United States Constitution, are the pre-partisan inheritance of every citizen of this great republic. And we therefore believe that every citizen deserves an education in those principles.

Anyone who has lived in this decade can tell you that the United States of America has had some hard days. During another bitter election season, there were many dispiriting moments. Civil dialogue about issues we face was all but absent. From the news to social media, even at our holiday tables, our current civic culture neither *sees* nor *seeks* common ground.

Especially troubling was a [November 4 Wall Street Journal report](#) that civics teachers were steering clear of the election or really, any current political issue in their classrooms. Political campaigns and national issues are crucial opportunities for teachers to engage students in the democratic process—to invite them into the essential practice of civil discourse, to encourage openness to seek to understand all sides of an issue, to look to our history and core documents for insight, to find ways we can move forward—to teach them to become thoughtful citizens.

Yes, there are some teachers out there who have taken it upon themselves to teach their personal politics, but more teachers, I believe, understand their critical role and simply lack the *confidence* to lead their students in political discussions. Civics teachers are provided with limited educational resources and content-based training while dealing with a highly volatile political climate and a culture that disregards what we as Americans hold in common.

We need to work together to find solutions for this crisis of knowledge and this crisis of confidence. We need to support civics teachers every way we can, so they can, in turn, teach students to grow into their roles as young citizens and take responsibility for self-government.

I come with hopeful news. Last month the Jack Miller Center held its third National Summit on Civic Education, and our country is experiencing a renaissance of interest in civics education. And none too soon.

There is, however, still much work to do. At college campuses across the country, courses in traditional fields of liberal education – from history and political thought to philosophy and literature – have been disappearing. The move away from this core knowledge has trickled down to the K-12 classroom as well.

For 20 years, the Jack Miller Center has been working to fill this gap by supporting scholars devoted to teaching America’s founding principles and history. Our programs also aim to empower K-12 civics and history teachers with a deep understanding of core primary-source texts, great debates, and key moments in our history. We work with the top professors in our network of 1,200 university scholars to provide the rigorous professional development programs and innovative classroom application models that give teachers the knowledge and the confidence they need.

Across the country, we have found partners in both the private and public sectors – and on both the left and the right side of the aisle – who share our reverence for the American political tradition. We have witnessed, for example, a rising desire to incorporate civics into college and university curricula, expressed through the development of new civics and liberal arts focused programs—at Stanford University, Purdue University, and Johns Hopkins University, to name a few.

Additionally, after decades of under-funding, a number of state legislatures are now stepping up to provide support for interdisciplinary departments at public universities dedicated to this kind of education and staffed by leading political scientists, historians, economists, and humanities scholars—like the one you’ll hear about today at the University of North Carolina led by Professor Jed Adkins.

This is great news, and every citizen should be celebrating these exciting developments.

Another benefit provided by this emerging movement for civics in higher education is advanced civics education for teachers. Arizona State University and Utah Valley University have introduced innovative graduate programs for civics, history, and other social studies teachers to advance their knowledge of the subjects they teach.

UVU’s Center for Constitutional Studies is a particularly excellent example of the kind of nonpartisan, academic rigor civic thought can bring to higher education. Its Constitutional Literacy Institute has offered teachers thousands of hours of professional development, and it is partnering with the university’s School of Education on a Master of Arts in Constitutional Government, Civics, and Law that will serve as an important credential. UVU and other similar institutes across the country can empower genuine civic revival by connecting top scholars with K-12 teachers.

The beating heart of American civics education will always be at the K-12 level. We need to redouble our efforts to teach students about all of America’s history, the good and the bad. Civics education is not about indoctrinating children into one ideology or another but, rather, inviting them to learn more about our country’s story—and to see themselves in it.

It was [Frederick Douglass who called](#) the Constitution a “glorious liberty document.” In that same speech, he went on to say that “every citizen has a personal interest in understanding thoroughly” the meaning of the 1787 charter. As a man born in slavery who had to fight even to learn to read, Douglass understood full well the importance of education in a republic. Civic ignorance leads to division, decline, and ultimately oppression. Republics only thrive when the whole citizenry understands the principles on which they are founded.

The occasion of America’s 250th birthday presents an opportunity for this civic education renewal. During the Bicentennial in 1976, Americans of all stripes were hungry for history—biographies became bestsellers and reenactors honored the memory of our Revolution. We believe the same spirit can take hold in 2026. Let’s make the most of it.

<https://www.wsj.com/us-news/education/civics-teacher-education-election-2024-f92b8ad6>

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Why Some Teachers Are Keeping This Election Out of the Classroom

Many civics and history teachers are keeping current events out of their lessons this fall

By [Sara Randazzo](#) [Follow](#)

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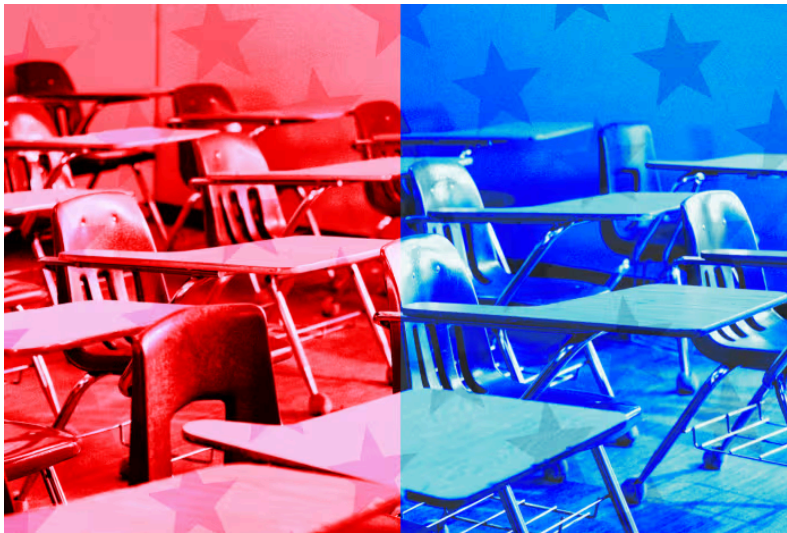


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The 2024 election cycle has seen the sitting president drop out of the race, one of the candidates prosecuted in a criminal trial and the second female presidential candidate on a major-party ticket. It is hard to imagine a better backdrop for teaching students about the American political process.

Yet many civics and history teachers say they are keeping current events out of their classrooms this fall. Some are skipping mock elections and debate-watch parties, while others are using historical rather than current examples to address topics such as immigration or vaccine skepticism. Others are teaching the importance of voting, without invoking candidates or political parties.

“What I’m seeing is everything from, ‘This is too hot, I can’t touch it,’ to, ‘These issues are too important for me to not take a stand,’” said Eric Soto-Shed, a lecturer at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education who trains teachers and develops civics and history curriculum.

Nationally, enthusiasm for civics in schools is growing after a few decades of decline. About half of the states have backed measures over the past three years to boost civics education, through new funding, teacher training or graduation requirements, according to iCivics, a nonprofit.



Kansas teacher Bridgett McMichael, who decided not to hold a mock presidential election this fall, wears historical outfits when teaching some lessons. PHOTO: BRIDGETT MCMICHAEL

During the last six presidential races, Augusta, Kan., middle-school teacher Bridgett McMichael staged a mock election for her students, complete with voting booths. She and her colleagues decided to skip it this year.

In McMichael’s community, where Donald Trump gear is more visible than Harris-Walz yard signs, she worries a parent could take offense or say the lesson is inappropriate for sixth-graders. A parent herself, McMichael says she got frustrated when one of her daughter’s teachers told her daughter to turn a Trump shirt inside out.

“It used to be a thing where you could agree to disagree,” she said.

Still, she finds teachable civics moments. When some of her sixth-graders called Trump a tyrant during a lesson on ancient Greece, she stopped to explain that Trump was elected, and that is one difference between democracy and tyranny.

Big picture

Eighteen states have enacted policies in recent years defining how schools can teach subjects related to discrimination, race and gender, according to an Education Week tally. Teachers say those policies have made them unsure about election-related lessons.

Civics curricula have changed since the 1940s and 1950s, when schools saw their mission as forming citizens and taught patriotism, said Louise Dubé, the chief executive of iCivics. The subject became sidelined over the decades as schools focused on college and career readiness, Dubé said.



Democracy Prep, a charter-school network, hosted a voter-empowerment rally in New York City. PHOTO: DEMOCRACY PREP

voting. Ballot questions range from the apolitical, like which part of a brownie students prefer, to whether the country is headed in the right direction.

Students can see results from other states, which Washington state teacher Shari Conditt said widens their perspective. “It’s so helpful during an election cycle because we so often live in a bubble,” Conditt said.

In some states and districts, civics is a stand-alone class; others combine it with history or social studies. There is no national civics exam, and most states don’t include social studies in mandated standardized tests.

Some civics teachers say they are finding support in social-media groups, where they compare notes on teaching current politics and help with practical questions such as finding the best primary documents.

“There’s a camaraderie,” said Kimberly Huffman, a government teacher in northeastern Ohio.

One group of teachers started an exercise this year called On Tuesday

We Vote to teach students about

Teachers say they generally hold off on sharing their political leanings in class, and some school districts forbid it. Students can sometimes tell, however.

“I’ve never been the one to lie to my students or sugarcoat things,” said Brian Bezner, a high-school history teacher in Los Angeles who calls himself a moderate Republican. “They know exactly which way I lean.”

Bezner said he has been focused this fall on giving his students a range of perspectives on issues such as immigration and abortion.

New strategies

Civics and history teachers say they are finding ways to engage students in civil discussions at a time when more Americans view their political opponents with distrust. Teachers have students start sentences with “I respectfully disagree because” or ask them to repeat someone else’s views before sharing their own.

To teach students to respect opposing views, Huffman, in Ohio, asked them to walk to different corners of the room if they preferred Pepsi over Coke, an island or the mountains. “Every time they moved, I’d ask, ‘Do you think less of the people over there?’” she said.

Kymberli Wregglesworth, who teaches civics and current events in a rural, Republican-leaning community in northern Michigan, landed in local news when a parent pushed back on two books she taught about race relations in 2020 after George Floyd’s killing by a Minneapolis police officer.

Since then, she says she is extra careful about giving the right and left equal treatment in her classes. That includes alternating which presidential candidate’s name she says first.

“I’m doing my students a disservice if I’m not giving them the big picture,” Wregglesworth said.

Critical thinking

Recognizing that students get a lot of their news—sometimes misinformed—on TikTok, Colorado English teacher Jordyn Etling created a unit this year to help her ninth-graders think critically about what they see online. She left out current events to avoid turning off students or families. When asking students to

probe claims that vaccines are harmful, she cited 2015 examples of vaccine hesitancy.

“That was before Covid, which helped us thread the needle on controversy,” Etling said.

Democracy Prep Public Schools, a charter network of 17 schools in New York, Texas and Nevada, sent a message to parents this fall letting them know the schools would be teaching about the election without advancing any political party. “Our goal is to help students understand the context in which they are living,” said Rashid Duroseau, Democracy Prep’s civics program director.

Any parents with concerns could remove their students from the lessons, as in prior years, Duroseau said.

So far, no parents have opted out.

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