

Claremont Colleges

## Scholarship @ Claremont

---

CMC Senior Theses

CMC Student Scholarship

---

2022

### Critical Race Theory and the Civic Education Debate: Why Race Should be a Part of the Curriculum

Reilly Scott

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc\\_theses](https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses)



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), and the [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Scott, Reilly, "Critical Race Theory and the Civic Education Debate: Why Race Should be a Part of the Curriculum" (2022). *CMC Senior Theses*. 2884.

[https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc\\_theses/2884](https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/2884)

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you by Scholarship@Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in this collection by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

Claremont McKenna College

Critical Race Theory and the Civic Education Debate: Why  
Race Should be a Part of the Curriculum

submitted to  
Professor George Thomas

by  
Reilly Scott

for  
Senior Thesis  
Fall 2021  
December 6th, 2021

## **Abstract**

If we accept the purpose of civic education is to teach students how to be good citizens, I argue the way civic education currently exists and operates is failing to achieve this goal. Traditional and mechanical civics has been the norm in education for decades. This has failed to teach students how to be good citizens because it 1) often isolates students with non-dominant identities 2) it does not encourage the motivation nor skills needed for civic engagement after high school and 3) does not include race as part of the curriculum. I argue race needs to be included in civic education curriculum in order to prepare students to be good citizens. Race affects the way students view and interact with America. What it means to be a citizen – and what good citizenship looks like – is different for everyone, and some non-dominant identities have consistently been disadvantaged civically. Including race in the curriculum is fundamental to overcoming the civic empowerment gap, as well as cultivating social values critical to good citizenship such as respect and tolerance. Although teaching race in schools has recently become a cultural flash point, there are ways to incorporate race into the civic education curriculum that do not invoke Critical Race Theory while still providing students the space to create civic identities and political attachments. To not include race in civic education is to continue privileging certain identities in civic society and to deny every student the quality civic education they deserve.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	3
Chapter 1: An Overview of Civic Education Today and a Vision for Civic Education Tomorrow.....	7
Chapter 2: Including Race in Civic Education .....	28
Chapter 3: How to Incorporate Race.....	42
Conclusion.....	56

## Introduction

Critical Race Theory has become the latest issue in America's ongoing culture war. The debate over whether or not to include Critical Race Theory in public schools across the nation has ignited an explosion of outcry from parents and conservatives over the past year. Republicans often view Critical Race Theory as unpatriotic and as a way to incite white guilt in their students. Trump called the 1619 Project, associated with Critical Race Theory, "ideological poison that will destroy our country" and "a crusade against American history."<sup>1</sup> The fear around Critical Race Theory is real for many people and can threaten the Republican worldview and perspective. For example, in a school board meeting in Virginia, a fight broke out during a discussion on Critical Race Theory, and someone ended up arrested.<sup>2</sup> The degree to which Republicans feel threatened and disempowered over Critical Race Theory and their lack of control over what is taught to their children cannot be underestimated. Some states, such as Florida, have even banned Critical Race Theory and other divisive topics from being discussed in schools as 'theories that distort historical events' are not supported by the school board<sup>3</sup>. Similar policies are being passed in other states.

One argument for why Republicans have reacted so forcefully and quickly to the discussion of teaching Critical Race Theory in schools is because the version of history

---

<sup>1</sup>Bryan Anderson, "Critical race theory is a flashpoint for conservatives, but what does it mean?", *PBS*, November 21, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/so-much-buzz-but-what-is-critical-race-theory>

<sup>2</sup>Terry Gross, "Uncovering Who is Driving the Fight Against Critical Race Theory in Schools", *NPR*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/24/1009839021/uncovering-who-is-driving-the-fight-against-critical-race-theory-in-schools>

<sup>3</sup>Bobby Caina Calvan, "Florida bans 'critical race theory' from its classrooms", *Associated Press*, June 10, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/florida-race-and-ethnicity-government-and-politics-education-74d0af6c52c0009ec3fa3ee9955b0a8d>

taught, including discussions of privilege and oppression, is the *accurate* version. For example, “The real problem with the new left historiography is not that it is unpatriotic, but rather that it makes the conservative movement look very bad.... it’s not the most radical material of the project that is so upsetting to conservatives, though that is typically what they rail against. The deeper trouble lies with all that is more mundane and straightforwardly accurate.”<sup>4</sup>

However, Critical Race Theory, by definition, is looking at bias beyond the individual level to the systemic level, a point which I will explain in detail in chapter three. The core idea is that racism is embedded in the nation’s institutions. It is a law school level framework that is overwhelmingly not taught in K-12 schools. The term has been expanded and misconstrued in the media to mean much more than looking at America through a lens of systemic racism. NBC Reporter Tyler Kingkade explains,<sup>5</sup>

“Opponents are using critical race theory as really more of a catchall to include anything teaching students about systemic racism, any mention of white privilege, and, really, the definition that they’re using has expanded to include anything related to equity, diversity and inclusion. They tossed in terms like social-emotional learning. These are not things that the average person maybe gives a lot of thought about, but these are very commonly used terms in K-12 schools across the country.”

As a result, the issue of Critical Race Theory has expanded much beyond its intended scope in the minds and psyches of many American people. Discussion and debate surrounding the issue feels almost ubiquitous today. Because the issue feels so personal to so many, Critical Race Theory has thus been grafted onto debates and discussion

---

<sup>4</sup>Laura Field, “Three Confusions in the Anti-CRT Movement”, *The Constitutionalist*, November 15, 2021, <https://theconstitutionalist.org/2021/11/15/three-confusions-in-the-anti-crt-movement/>

<sup>5</sup>Gross, “Who Is Driving the Fight Against Critical Race Theory”

surrounding civic education - its aims, its implementation, and its curriculum. In this thesis, I will argue that race should be included in civic education, but not necessarily in the way that conservatives are afraid of. As I will explain in chapter three, there are plenty of ways to incorporate race into civic education that cultivate the outcomes I am hoping for without realizing conservative fears. In the context of this huge debate raging throughout society right now, I want to bring race back into the civic education curriculum in a way that reaffirms not just the best of civic education but also reaffirms political attachment to the country for students.

Much of the conservative rhetoric surrounding Critical Race Theory centers on the idea that it is an unpatriotic way to teach history, and it teaches students to hate America. I argue the exact opposite - by not including race in the curriculum, students with non-dominant identities can feel isolated and unrepresented in the country they are learning about, leading to a disaffiliation with America. Because race impacts the way individuals view America and themselves as citizens, it should thus be addressed in civic education, as a way to cultivate a sense of belonging amongst all students and to create certain habits of mind, like respect conducive to good citizenship among students of all identities. A crucial component to cultivating the sense of belonging and attachment I am hoping for is teaching true history. We can be deeply critical of the past – indeed we should – while still being patriotic and providing students space to create attachment to American civic society. By being critical about history, we allow for deeper attachment to occur among students. Additionally, including race in the curriculum is not equivalent to indoctrination, in contrast to the narrative often present in conservative media outlets. We do not have to teach race in a way that demands students adhere to one view or

another. As chapter three will show, there are myriad ways to include race in civic education curriculum that do not fall into the indoctrination category.

Throughout the rest of the paper, I lay out a case for including race in civic education. In chapter one, I start by providing a definition for what a good citizen is, and what we are hoping to achieve through civic education. I then go through an overview of the state of civic education today: how it focuses on traditional, mechanical civics, and how that is a mistake. I also introduce the civic empowerment gap and its implications and mandate for civic education. In chapter two, I demonstrate why race needs to be included in the civic education curriculum. Because race affects the way individuals interact with America, and therefore their civic identity, it should thus be addressed in civic education. I explain how white is still synonymous with American, and how civic education needs to work to overcome this association. I also address the role textbooks play in isolating non-white students, and how the information in textbooks often clashes with students' history lessons outside of the classroom. In chapter three, I address how Critical Race Theory has become politicized and detail ways to incorporate race in civic education without Critical Race Theory. I conclude by underscoring the importance of including race in civic education, providing students space to form civic identities and social values. This is how we provide quality civic education, and how we overcome the civic empowerment gap.



## **Chapter 1: An overview of civic education today and a vision for civic education tomorrow**

When thinking about civic education, it is important to step back and consider why we undertake such an endeavor in the first place. If we accept the purpose of civic education is to teach the next generation how to be good citizens, we must answer a series of questions that arise as a result. First and foremost, what does it mean to be a good citizen?

### **What a Good Citizen Is**

I argue a good citizen is a person who is willing to work with other citizens, is tolerant of other people's views, and is actively working to improve their community (which requires the person to be, to some degree, informed about their community and about government/community processes). My definition is inspired by the one from the Civic Mission of Schools criteria for 'competent and responsible citizens'<sup>6</sup>:

1. Are informed and thoughtful; have a grasp and an appreciation of history and the fundamental processes of American democracy; have an understanding and awareness of public and community issues; and have the ability to obtain information, think critically, and enter into dialogue among others with different perspectives.

2. Participate in their communities through membership in or contributions to organizations working to address an array of cultural, social, political, and religious interests and beliefs.

---

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Gould, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Peter Levine, Ted McConnell, and David B. Smith, eds. *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*. Rep. Philadelphia: Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of, 2011. 4

3. Act politically by having the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to accomplish public purposes, such as group problem solving, public speaking, petitioning and protesting, and voting.

4. Have moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and belief in the capacity to make a difference.

It is important to recognize the many ways citizens can legitimately engage in their community, and the Civic Missions of Schools definition addresses this well through the second tenant, by acknowledging cultural, social, political, and religious engagement. I will highlight that in my own definition below. However, the definition I purport diverges from the Civic Missions of Schools in a couple of key areas. First, in order to be actively engaged in the community, citizens must have a baseline understanding of government and community issues. As a result, it is unnecessary to include this as its own tenant of citizenship, as being informed is only necessary to being a good citizen as it relates to engagement. Second, my definition of good citizenship does not have a distinct political element as the Civic Missions of Schools one does, as I do not believe a requirement of good citizenship to be politically involved. Under my definition, as long as a person is involved in improving their community in whatever way they choose - whether through volunteering at school or church, participating in a local athletic club, or simply raking their neighbor's leaves, they qualify as a good citizen. Here it is important to distinguish between activism and engagement. Civic engagement does not necessarily mean political activism, as mentioned before; it can look like many

different things in the community apart from the political sphere. But political activism is a form of civic engagement.

In order to have citizens that are engaged, let alone citizens that are politically active, we must have a baseline level of civic education that serves as a foundation. Civic education should impart agency in students to engage in their communities to the level of which *they choose*. Undoubtedly, that will result in some choosing to partake in activism, while some will choose to engage in other ways. The key is that civic education should allow everyone to make this choice while providing the tools and foundation necessary to be successful in whatever direction they decide on.

The discussion on engagement versus activism brings to the forefront the fact that certain kinds of citizenship have been privileged in society. As Meira Levinson points out in her book *No Citizen Left Behind*, there are consequences for people who try to engage civically in culturally nondominant ways, such as having their views written off, ridiculed, and/or ignored.<sup>7</sup> An illustrative example of this is the Citizenship Award that is given out to students in many public schools. According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals, students who receive the award:<sup>8</sup>

- Participate in school and/or community service
- Show a positive attitude toward classmates, school, and the community
- Display an understanding and appreciation of civic responsibility
- Possess strength of character and the courage to do what is right

---

<sup>7</sup> Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 75

<sup>8</sup> National Association of Secondary School Principals, *American Citizenship Awards*

- Promote citizenship with their school or community through other activities

Having and showing a positive attitude towards school and community excludes certain students from receiving the award. Schools mirror the government in that certain student demographics may trust them more than others, which should not disqualify them from being considered good citizens. Robert Putnam touches on this in *Bowling Alone*: “In virtually all societies have nots are less trusting than haves, probably because haves are treated by others with more honesty and respect. In America, blacks express less social trust than whites, the financially distressed less than the finically comfortable.... It is reasonable to assume that in each case these patterns represent actual experience rather than different psychic predispositions to distrust.”<sup>9</sup> If a school, again, like the government, is not serving its students to a degree the students are satisfied with, it is their right to complain and demand better. Students should feel entitled to not be positive about their school if certain standards are not being met - although, given the above criteria, this means these students will not be rewarded for their good citizenship. Further, having the courage to do what is right could likely be challenging school administration on a policy that is unfair or discriminatory. Yet this behavior will go recognized under the citizenship award criteria. Meira Levinson notes the students who were given this award were “unusually helpful and compliant”<sup>10</sup> - but this is not the only nor the best way to be a good citizen. The ramifications of the award are vast: this award indoctrinates certain views of good citizenship early in students. As a result, it is critical that when defining

---

<sup>9</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: Revised and Updated: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2020), 138

<sup>10</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 42

good citizenship, we consider these concerns, and that we do not privilege certain types of civic engagement over others. My definition leaves space for people to show up as good citizens in myriad ways. It looks different, and moreover, it *should* look different for everybody.

In summary, I maintain that a good citizen is willing to work with others, tolerant of other views, and actively working to improve their community. There is intentional latitude incorporated in this definition, as being tolerant, collaborative, and actively engaged in a community looks different for different people. This understanding of citizenship is illustrated through the words of Lee Hamilton, U.S. House Representative 1965-1969, who said,<sup>11</sup>

“Citizenship requires both knowledge about government and the ability to be involved in governance. It means knowing how to identify and inform yourself about issues, explore and evaluate possible solutions, and then act to resolve problems. It demands that you know how to interact respectfully with others. And it asks that you accept responsibility for meeting your community’s and the nation’s challenges.”

I will reiterate again that acting to resolve problems is not meant in a strictly political sense, but includes community problems, in the broadest sense, as well. I ask you to keep this conception of citizenship, and what it may demand from civic education, in mind throughout the rest of the paper.

At present, there is a fundamental misalignment between what we have defined as good citizenship, what we want from our fellow Americans as citizens, and what we teach students in civic education. Civic education in public schools is often what is called ‘traditional civics’, and is mechanical information about how the government works,

---

<sup>11</sup> Gould et al., *Civic Mission of Schools*

along with history and economics (sometimes). I argue this kind of ‘traditional civics’ does not teach students how to engage in their community in a way that speaks to them, nor why they should. Civic education must go beyond traditional civics in order to realize this purpose. However, it is important to acknowledge the conception of civic education that accomplishes this purpose necessitates some level of traditional civics. Going beyond traditional civics is not equivalent to abandoning it. Unfortunately, we are even failing to successfully teach the mechanical knowledge of how the government works.

### **State of Traditional Civics**

With the acknowledgement that traditional civics is insufficient in teaching students how to be good citizens, the way traditional civics is taught in public schools is failing to impart students with a mechanical understanding of how the government works. For something that has clear importance and demonstrated support from citizens, educators, and politicians, the current state of civic education in America is appalling. To begin with, the majority of Americans lack basic knowledge regarding how the government proceedings. In 2020, 51% of Americans could list the three branches of government, which is the highest percentage on record.<sup>12</sup> In 2011, almost a third of the population thought a Supreme Court ruling could be appealed. Further, the results of a basic civic knowledge survey of American adults showed that “only 5% of Americans were competent in economics, only 11% in domestic issues, only 14% in foreign affairs,

---

<sup>12</sup> Michael Rozansky, “Amid pandemic and protests, civics survey finds Americans know more of their rights”, *PennToday*, September 2020, <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/amid-pandemic-and-protests-civics-survey-finds-americans-know-more-their-rights>

only 10% in geography, and 25% in history.”<sup>13</sup> It is clear we have failed to provide adequate traditional civic education to the adult American population.

Unfortunately, civic knowledge among school-age students is similarly discouraging. The national standardized test (NAEP) civics assessment section showed that more than two-thirds of American students have below proficient civic understanding.<sup>14</sup> To give a specific example, on that test, more than two thirds of eighth grade students could not accurately identify the reason the Declaration of Independence was written. However, NAEP trends show small though consistent increases in overall civic assessment scores over the last two decades, although with growth happening at a much slower pace in civics than in math.<sup>15</sup> Further, the gaps in scores on the NAEP civic assessment between different demographics remain large and alarming. In summary, despite the focus on traditional civic knowledge, the state this among all parts of the American population is discouraging.

I now turn to state standards for civic education to provide context in regard to the low-test scores. Before looking at the state requirements however, it is important to provide a brief summary of the six proven practices of civic education. The civic education community has developed six proven practices, or learning components, that are effective in teaching students civics. The proven practices are as follows:<sup>16</sup>

1. Instruction in government, history, law and democracy.

---

<sup>13</sup> Gould et al., *Civic Mission of Schools*, 4-14

<sup>14</sup> Gould et al., *Civic Mission of Schools*, 4-14

<sup>15</sup> Michael Hansen, Elizabeth Levesque, Jon Valant, Diana Quintero, “The 2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well are American Students Learning?”, *Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings*, 2018, 3

<sup>16</sup> Gould et al., *Civic Mission of Schools*, 26-34

2. Discuss current events and issues in class
3. Service learning
4. Extracurricular Activities
5. Students participating in school governance
6. Student participation in democratic simulations

All states mention some kind of current event discussion in their curriculum frameworks, and most states (42/50) require at least one course related to civics as a graduation requirement, corresponding to proven practice one and two.<sup>17</sup> However, some states do not require the civics related course until twelfth grade, when some students have dropped out. If only one course is required related to civics, those students, who may need civic education and empowerment more than others, completely miss out on civic education. Leaving civics until twelfth grade also indicates civics' status as a low priority subject and prohibits students from building knowledge up year to year.

Almost all of civic education today is discussion-based, despite much evidence that this is inadequate civic education. The participatory proven practices, such as service learning and participating in democratic simulations, are rarely required by states. For example, only 11 states have a service-learning requirement, and only half mention participation in democratic process simulations.<sup>18</sup> Students self-report on the type of civic education they receive is reflected in figure one below.

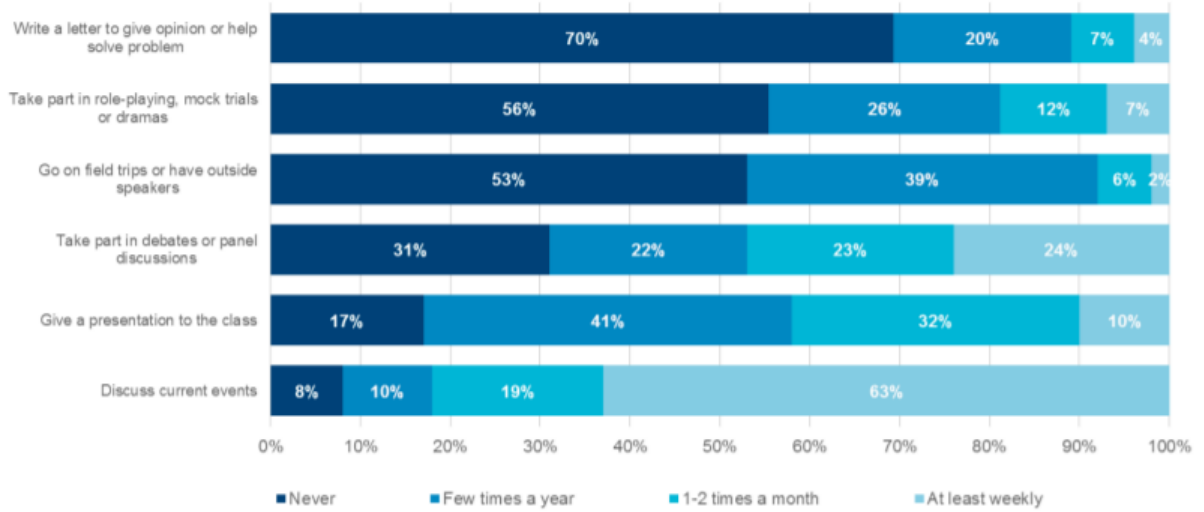
---

<sup>17</sup> Hansen et al., *Brown Center Report*, 21

<sup>18</sup> Hansen et al., *Brown Center Report*, 21



Figure 1: 12th-grade students' reported participation in civics-oriented activities



Source: 2010 NAEP civics student survey, weighted national averages, 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students.

BROOKINGS

Figure 1: Students' self-report on civic education activity from the Brown Center on Education Policy

In line with the state requirements, the majority of students have discussed current events, and the majority have not participated in the action-oriented components of the proven practices of civic education, such as field trips and role-playing a democratic process.

The clear conclusion is that state requirements do affect the quality and type of instruction students receive in classrooms. Discussion-based civics, which is currently the norm, is insufficient in effectively teaching students civics. In summary, “the most room for improvement [in state curriculum standards] lies in the incorporation of participatory and community engagement elements into state standards. This gap suggests that, overall, policy lags behind the widely held view that these aspects of a civics education are essential.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Hansen et al., *Brown Center Report*, 22

The lack of funding for civic education may explain both the low-test scores among students and the failure to incorporate all of the six proven practices into schools. With the increased emphasis on STEM in K-12 education, money has been funneled away from civics and other social studies areas to bolster math and science education. In quantifiable terms, the federal government spends about \$50 per student on STEM education, and about 5 *cents* per student for civic education.<sup>20</sup> The federal government spends about four million dollars a year on civic education programs - and three *billion* on STEM education programs.<sup>21</sup> The No Child Left Behind Act had a particularly strong role in moving school emphasis away from social studies, “NCLB gave special status to math and reading assessments. It required schools to measure math and reading performance in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school, with sanctions for schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress toward 100-percent proficiency by the 2013-14 academic year. This created strong incentives for schools to emphasize math and reading.”<sup>22</sup> Few states require a significant civics assessment, and the NAEP, the national test, only assesses fourth and eighth graders. As such, there is little incentive for schools and teachers to devote precious time and resources to civic education. Additionally, there are fewer high school civics courses offered now than in the past, and less time dedicated to civics in elementary school.<sup>23</sup> Civic education is not a priority among state and federal lawmakers, and schools, and their students, reflect that.

---

<sup>20</sup>Educating for American Democracy (EAD). 2021. “Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for All Learners.” iCivics, March 2, 2021. [www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org](http://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org).

<sup>21</sup> Kimberly Adams, “What federal funding for civics reveals about American political discourse,” *Marketplace*, November 6, 2019, <https://www.marketplace.org/2019/11/06/what-federal-funding-for-civics-reveals-about-american-political-discourse/>

<sup>22</sup> Hansen et al., *Brown Center Report*, 9

<sup>23</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “The Challenges Facing Civic Education in the 21st Century”, *American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 2013: 75

In addition to lack of state prioritization and funding, there are other obstacles to instituting quality civics education, even in strictly the traditional sense. In her essay *The Challenges Facing Civic Education in the 21st Century*, Kathleen Hall Jamieson also points to dull social studies textbooks, the polarized political climate, and the significant differences in civic education between upper- and lower-class students as challenges to improving civic education.

To begin with, social studies textbooks often focus on the mechanical aspects of government - the three branches, separation of powers, names of important historical figures, etc. This is traditional civics. However, the dullness of social studies textbooks and their unwillingness to engage in controversial issues results in an unsatisfactory and inadequate civic education for students. Political scientists Richard Niemi and Jan Junn, in a survey of U.S. government and civics textbooks, concluded that

“When we say that students have a ‘textbook’ knowledge of how government operates, what we mean is that they have a naive view of it that glosses over the fact that democratic politics is all about disagreement and the attempt to settle quarrels peacefully, satisfactorily, and in an orderly manner. We think it is a disservice to students to let them think that government ideally operates without conflict, as if it were possible to enact and administer laws that benefit everyone and harm no one.”<sup>24</sup>

Conferring information to students about government operations does not translate to them becoming engaged citizens; indeed, it may discourage them from participating in a system that appears to be lifeless and sterile. Successfully teaching civics, even traditional civics, requires an injection of life and controversy into social studies textbooks.

---

<sup>24</sup> Jamieson, “The Challenges Facing Civic Education”, 76

In addition to historical controversy, I will argue in chapter two that civic education needs to also include race. However, I want to underscore that teaching race and incorporating more about civic engagement in civic education curriculum does not mean we totally neglect mechanical civic knowledge. A large baseline level of mechanical civic knowledge is still important and necessary for civic empowerment. Knowing how the government works is undoubtedly an important part of the foundation for civic engagement. However, I am arguing that civic mechanical knowledge can and should be taught in more interesting and powerful ways. Teaching controversy and the bad events of history can lead to more engagement in the classroom. There is no evidence showing that shying away from controversy leads to better civic education or civic engagement – it actually increases classroom engagement by making history feel more important and relevant. Additionally, by highlighting these historical bads, we bring students in that do not share dominant identities and create a deeper version of the we in we the people. It also provides a way to foster a sense of belonging for students. Further, if we completely abandon mechanical knowledge in some schools, the students in schools where they do teach it will end up more civically empowered. As a result, it is imperative we maintain a level of mechanical civic knowledge in civic education curriculum. I am only advocating we do this more creatively.

Introducing controversy into social studies textbooks brings us to another one of the challenges Jamieson highlights: political polarization. One of the biggest reasons social studies textbooks are the way they are is because of politics. People disagree on what is important about the government, and which historical figures to highlight and want to ensure that public schools are unbiased in the way they teach civics. Levison

showcases this phenomenon well by describing the controversy that followed the Texas State Board’s debate over including Cesar Chavez, Anne Hutchison, and Thurgood Marshall in social studies curriculum.<sup>25</sup> Further, the intense democratic and republican division in the country has infiltrated the civics education dimension. Overall, progressives tend to view civics more as a stand-alone class, include social justice curriculum, and want to discuss contemporary issues. The progressive view of civics often gets conflated with teaching Critical Race Theory, which will be taken up in a later chapter. On the other side, conservatives tend to view civic education in the traditional sense, where the curriculum focuses on mechanical information and the ideals associated with the founding.<sup>26</sup> George Packer writes in “Can Civics Save America?” that “Right-wing critics want to strip civics of any trace of activism, or even debate, on contemporary issues. They accuse the Biden administration of conspiring to impose ‘action civics,’ along with critical race theory, on school systems across the country.”<sup>27</sup> Accusations abound on both sides about how the other view is deficient and faulty at preparing students for civic life. Schools often deal with this political controversy by avoiding it, and civic education gets left behind. Packer concludes, “By intent or blunder, the left and right are colluding to undermine the noble, elusive goal of giving American children the ability to think and argue and act together as citizens.”<sup>28</sup> The politicization of civic education, and its potential consequences in the American political landscape, result in

---

<sup>25</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 138-140

<sup>26</sup> Peter Berkowitz, “The Civic-Education Battles,” *RealClear Politics*, May 30, 2021, [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/05/30/the\\_civic-education\\_battles\\_145849.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/05/30/the_civic-education_battles_145849.html)

<sup>27</sup> George Packer, “Can Civics Save America?,” *The Atlantic*, May 15, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/05/civics-education-1619-crt/618894/>

<sup>28</sup> Packer, “Can Civics Save America?”

the stifling of civic education improvement and reluctance of schools to update their civic education curriculum.

The last barrier to improving civic education Jamieson highlights is the difference in civic knowledge between upper and lower-class students. This barrier is so profound and influential in civic education that I use the next section to explain it fully. In summary, civic education has become less of a priority among states in terms of funding, while becoming more of a priority among politicians who want their vision of civic education to prevail. The increased emphasis on STEM and unwillingness of social studies textbooks to engage in controversy all contribute to the current state of traditional civics.

### **The Civic Empowerment Gap**

The misalignment in civic education between what good citizenship is and what is taught is made much worse when including the inequality in civic knowledge, and civic empowerment that follows, between certain demographics in America. The civic empowerment gap is the crux of Levinson's book *No Citizen Left Behind*. She explains by writing, "There is a profound *civic empowerment gap* - as large and as disturbing as the reading and math achievement gaps that have received significant national attention in recent years - between ethno-racial minority, naturalized, and especially poor citizens, on the one hand, and White, native-born, and especially middle-class and wealthy citizens, on the other."<sup>29</sup> In short, the quality of one's civic education is often predetermined by their status - their race, their citizenship status, and their socioeconomic

---

<sup>29</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 32

status. Students that receive better civic education are more prepared, and more importantly more *likely*, to engage in civic life after the K-12 years.

The civic empowerment gap can be demonstrated through test scores. On the NAEP civics assessment, “White fourth and eighth graders who were poor performed as well as non-poor African American and Hispanic students - and significantly better than students from those groups who were poor.”<sup>30</sup> Jamieson highlights the NAEP civics assessment discrepancy in income by writing, “Whereas at the fourth grade level only 10 percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch scored at the proficient level and just 40 percent were at a basic or higher level, that figure rose to 60 percent and 90 percent, respectively, for those fourth graders not eligible for the lunch program.”<sup>31</sup> Further, test score discrepancies on civics assessments first appear in fourth grade and are maintained throughout high school. The graph below shows the civic empowerment gap by demographic. As of 2014, the white-black gap on NAEP civic assessment scores was .83 standard deviations, the income gap was .82 standard deviations, and the white-Hispanic gap was .71 standard deviations. In each case, “the median score for the lower-scorer group falls between the 10th and the 25th percentile of the higher group’s scores.”<sup>32</sup> The white-Hispanic gap has shown a reduction over time, but the other gaps have been widening slightly over the last couple decades.

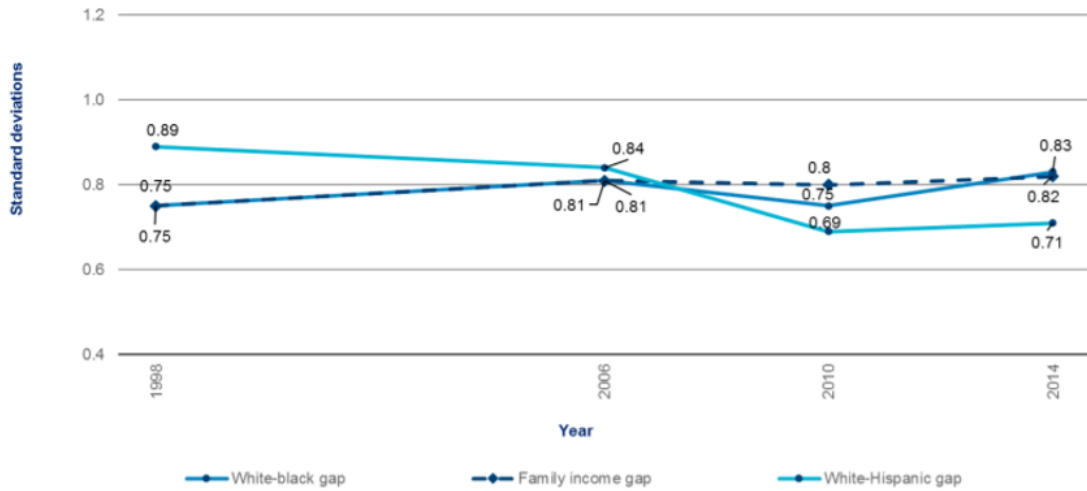
---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Jamieson, “The Challenges Facing Civic Education”, 77

<sup>32</sup> Hansen et al., *Brown Center Report*, 11

Figure 6: NAEP test score gaps—civics, grade 8



Source: Authors' calculations based on NAEP Data Explorer.

Figure 2: Trends in NAEP civics scores by demographic group from the Brown Center Report

The civic empowerment gap results in not only lower test scores for certain groups, but lower civic *opportunity*. For example, Jamieson writes, “More worrisome than low levels of aggregate NAEP scores are indications that students from families of lower socioeconomic status have fewer opportunities to engage in activities that stimulate voting and civic engagement, and they substantially underperform those from upper SES families.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, a student’s mere environment has a bearing on their civic life and civic potential. About 60 percent of rural youth and roughly a third of suburban and urban youth describe their own communities as ‘civic deserts’, or places “without adequate opportunities for civic engagement— places for discussing issues, addressing problems together, and forming relationships of mutual support.”<sup>34</sup> The role of civic education is

<sup>33</sup> Jamieson, “The Challenges Facing Civic Education”, 77

<sup>34</sup> Matthew Atwell, John Bridgeland, and Peter Levine, “Civic Deserts: America’s Civic Health Challenge” 2017, Civic Health Index Update, 5



thus more important in these communities. Although civic education and, moreover, civic empowerment has more importance in civic deserts, the very fact that education is occurring within a civic desert means those students' civic education will be worse, as they have not had the experience with civics growing up nor the opportunity to engage in community civics other students in other communities have.

Additionally, the type of instruction different demographics receive is worrisome. For example, "African-American students report fewer civic-oriented government classes, and Latinos are afforded fewer community service opportunities and open classroom environments."<sup>35</sup> Further, "white students and those with high socioeconomic status are more likely to be exposed to current events, discussion, debates and panels, and simulations."<sup>36</sup> Three of the six proven practices of civic education include active participation: participating in extracurriculars, participating in school governance, and participating in democratic simulations. These practices require significant school resources, particularly extracurriculars. The students that go to richer schools will likely receive more opportunities to participate in these kinds of significant and influential civic-related activities than poorer schools. Apart from school-provided activities, richer parents also spend more on enrichment for their kids. For example, in the year 2005-06, high income families spent \$7500 more on child enrichment than lower income families did.<sup>37</sup> This will inevitably lead to a stronger civic education foundation for the students who received opportunities to participate in activities than those who did not.

---

<sup>35</sup> Illinois Civics Hub, *Why Civics?*

<sup>36</sup> Illinois Civics Hub, *Why Civics?*

<sup>37</sup> Jamieson, "The Challenges Facing Civic Education", 77

The civic empowerment gap is also dictated by students' attitudes and trust towards the government. White, native born, and middle class or wealthy students have usually had experiences with the government that lend itself to trust. For example, they may not have to worry about the government deporting them or their loved ones, as other students might. Their larger baseline level of trust in the government and attitude that results from that is civic capital and is one less hurdle to civic engagement. They can identify with the government, and the ideals associated with it, taught in civics class. Students that do not have this baseline level of trust in the government may find it more difficult to identify with the government and may find it more difficult to engage civically as a result.

However, as Levinson discusses, lack of trust in the government is not the biggest predictor of civic engagement; it is efficacy. Lack of trust in government does not need to be a barrier to political engagement, as long as it is accompanied by a sense of efficacy, that an individual can make an impact.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, there is a negative statistical correlation between trust in government and political engagement, and the relationship is stronger among African Americans.<sup>39</sup> This is not to say lack of trust causes political involvement, but simply to show that lack of trust does not necessitate a lack of political involvement. Efficacy is the key determinant in civic engagement, and there is a large difference among demographics in their sense of personal efficacy. Levinson dubs this aspect, a subset of the civic empowerment gap, the "efficacy gap."<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 40

<sup>39</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 39

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*

Further, the difference in efficacy is unfortunately accompanied by data. Some groups, namely white, upper middle-class citizens, do have more influence on government. For example, Congress is 77% white, a percentage disproportionately larger than their percent of the American population.<sup>41</sup> Further, when looking at policy outcomes, political scientists found “economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence.”<sup>42</sup> This also illustrates how the efficacy gap may be a rational response to certain citizen’s experience with government. However, a critique of this study makes the important distinction that, first, the rich and the middle class often agree on what policies they want passed. When they disagree, they each get what they want about half of the time.<sup>43</sup> This is encouraging in terms of efficacy, but still does not account for the lower-class, which means they do not have significant influence over policy outcomes. In addition to the efficacy gap being a rational response, it may also create a feedback loop. If you believe you cannot make a difference in your community, you likely will not.

The principal reason the civic empowerment gap is important is that it impacts civic engagement. In the 2008 election, less than half of the Asian and Hispanic population voted. Citizens with a college degree are twice as likely to vote as citizens with less than a high school diploma. People in upper-classes are more likely to vote than

---

<sup>41</sup> Katherine Schaeffer, “Racial, ethnic diversity increases yet again with the 117th Congress”, *Pew Research Center*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/28/racial-ethnic-diversity-increases-yet-again-with-the-117th-congress/>

<sup>42</sup> Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page. "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens", *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 564-81.

<sup>43</sup> Dylan Matthews, “Remember that study saying America is an Oligarchy? 3 rebuttals say it’s wrong.”, *Vox*, May 9, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/5/9/11502464/gilens-page-oligarchy-study>

those in lower-classes. Aside from voting, college-educated and upper-class people are much more likely to participate politically than citizens without a college degree. “People who earn over \$75,000 annually are politically active at up to *six times* the rate of people who earn under \$15,000.”<sup>44</sup> Further, white citizens are more likely to contact a government official than non-white citizens.<sup>45</sup> These statistics underscore the reality of the efficacy and civic empowerment gap. Certain groups are more civically engaged than others, and because of that, have government work more in their favor. Therefore, it is imperative all citizens, starting in the classroom, feel empowered to engage civically in their communities. However they chose to do so is remains under their jurisdiction.

The civic empowerment gap represents a failure of the U.S. to live up to its ideal of equality. If everyone is an equal citizen, everyone should feel they could, if they desired, have the same impact on the government and their community as their peers. Citizens should feel empowered and important in creating a society that works for *them*, whatever that may be. Civically empowering all citizens would result in a more equitable, desirable, and democratic society for all. Encouragingly, education is successful at dissipating the civic empowerment gap; “Education is the single most highly correlated variable with civic knowledge, civic skills, democratic civic attitudes, and active civic engagement.”<sup>46</sup> Working in classrooms across the country to impart civic skills and civic engagement in students is the first and most important step to achieving universal civic empowerment.

---

<sup>44</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 34

<sup>45</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 37

<sup>46</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 52

## **Chapter 2: Including race in civic education curriculum**

Another way civic education is failing, in addition to mainly teaching traditional civics in a way that does not encourage engagement, is that it does not include race as part of its curriculum. Race impacts the way citizens interact with America. Given the large effect race has on identity and citizenship, particularly for younger students forming a relationship with America, it should be addressed appropriately in schools through civic education. The civic empowerment gap stratifies students on the basis of race and class, leading to certain groups of students receiving better civic education, and more civic empowerment, as a result. Race being omitted from the curriculum exaggerates this gap. Although there are other ways to improve civic education, such as more funding and the inclusion of service learning, civic education will not be sufficient until race is included in the curriculum.

### **Race as a decisive part of civic identity formation**

Given my definition of a good citizen as a person that is willing to work with other citizens, tolerant of others' views, and actively engaged in their community, any civic education that will be effective in cultivating students as good citizens needs to include race in the curriculum because race influences how citizens interact with America. The relationship each person has with America, and moreover, what it means to be a citizen for an individual, cannot be divorced from their race. Race attaches a lens through which we each view our country and our community, for both minority and non-minority citizens. As a result, the way we interpret America and how we fit in as individuals is through this lens. In *No Citizen Left Behind*, Levinson explains this concept, "...civic identity is not a 'neutral', shared space in which all can participate

equally and in the same way. Even if we are all equally citizens in theory, our other identities intersect with our civic identity in such profound ways that they cannot be disentangled.”<sup>47</sup> As explained in chapter one, certain identities have been privileged in civic society. There are many ways this occurs, such as through compliance, helpfulness, and positivity about the environment being rewarded with the citizenship award, to having to engage a certain way in political discussions, and more. In terms of civic education, certain groups of students receive better civic education, and civic *experience*, than their peers which gives them a civic advantage. They know how to act civically in a manner that is considered appropriate. This will then allow them to influence government and their community if they wish. The inequality in civic education in schools among different demographics reflects the inequality in civic influence among demographics outside of schools. As Levinson notes, we are all equal as citizens in a legal sense, but not in a civic sense. Failing to address this reality in civic education, that certain identities, namely white upper-middle class citizens, have historically been privileged in the civic realm, denies students the type of civic education that will empower them all individually and morally. As a result, teaching about race is imperative to a quality civic education, as race affects students’ views on America, their community, and their personal civic efficacy.

Additionally, when we teach civic education in the way I am advocating for, we are also trying to teach certain habits of mind. America as a country and a society has abundant pluralism - ethnic, religious, ideological, racial, etc. Developing social attitudes

---

<sup>47</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 55

attuned to this diversity is an important part of being a good citizen. Indeed, being tolerant of others is one of my criteria for being a good citizen. Through civic education, I argue we are trying to develop habits of mind where we all recognize each other as fellow citizens. This is also part of how we create space for all students that have diverse backgrounds and foster an association between belonging and civic community among students. Through civic education, we can cultivate toleration and respect across differences as part of social attitude formation, and civic society will be better for it. Citizens that are tolerant and respectful of how others differ from themselves are better equipped for civic engagement.

Further, being civically engaged and feeling like you have a place in the community are different, but we are trying to achieve both through civic education. An important aim of my vision of civic education is that we bring all students in – they all feel like they belong and have attachments to their communities. In order for this to happen, we have to be honest about the experience some students have that result in a feeling of the other or an othering experience. As mentioned earlier, certain identities get treated as if they always belong and others do not. Civic education can work to rectify this imbalance. We can acknowledge that race was not thought about by most founding political thinkers, but by bringing race into the conversation now, we create belonging and attachment to civic society among students of color. It also works towards achieving another purpose of my vision of education – cultivating tolerant and respectful habits of mind by setting the example of having important conversations about differences in a respectful way. By including race and engaging in important controversy, we reach out and bring in all students, and work to create a space for them to feel like they are a part

of. To civically engage, it is important to feel you have a baseline level of belonging in the community you are engaging in.

### **Civic Education Outside the Classroom**

We cannot assume students arrive at school and in civics classes as a blank slate, with no preconceived notions of government, history, and citizenship. The way civic education is taught today often assumes this as the default, which is a mistake and one of the reasons for its failure. What students learn in civics class can and often does clash with what they are learning about civics outside of class. Students are being ‘civically educated’ constantly outside the classroom on what it means to be an American. They see what it means to engage in their community - politically or otherwise - through their parents, siblings, and other family members. They may have a conception, or at least pieces, of American history through what they have been told by their families. Levinson notes this by writing, “Students aren’t empty vessels waiting to be filled with appropriate civic attitudes and knowledge; rather, they come into the classroom having already at least partially constructed their own understandings of their civic identity, of their membership in or exclusion from the polity, and even of history’s significance and meaning for their own lives.”<sup>48</sup> If the civic education students receive in schools does not match or at least complement the civic education they are receiving outside school, they are less likely to be engaged in the classroom and as a result less likely to receive the quality civic education they deserve. They may even be skeptical of all school civic education, as they may feel it applies to someone else, a different type of person in

---

<sup>48</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 107



society. Because race is generally excluded from civics, some students do not see themselves reflected or as part of the government they are learning about. For this reason, it is important to address race in civic education, in part to ensure all students feel civic education is relevant and applicable to them.

As Levinson notes, being American is still viewed as synonymous to being white.<sup>49</sup> This presents an enormous obstacle to effective civic education, as students are often aware of this. If students feel they are less American than others, that they matter in their country less than others, it will likely be more difficult to motivate them to care about civics and to engage in their communities in a civic manner. Returning to the discussion on trust in government from chapter one, minority students may trust the government less, and for good reason, as in their experience the government has not worked for them in the same way it has worked for white, upper-middle class students. Further, civic education has often excluded on the basis of race. As detailed in chapter one, low-income and minority schools often do not have the same quality of civic education nor civic opportunities for students. Additionally, as students are also learning civic education from their families, if their parents received poor civic education, they are less likely to be active civically, and thus their children are learning this example of citizenship from them as well. All of this is to highlight that students may view American as synonymous with white for good reason. In order to combat this, it is imperative civic education, in schools, take this into account and teach race.

---

<sup>49</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 85

An illustration of this association between white and American is the disjuncture some immigrants feel when viewing themselves as Americans. Levels of patriotism among immigrants is usually as high or higher than native-born citizens, but their view of themselves as American, in other words, their civic identity, is more unclear. Levinson describes that during interviews with first and second-generation Arab American students, interviewees frequently used the word ‘they’ in regard to Americans, implying other people and separation from being ‘American’, as opposed to the word we.<sup>50</sup> This is a clear demonstration of the difficulty some students may feel identifying and connecting with the government they are learning about in civics. If they do not think of themselves as a ‘full’ American, they may think civics does not apply to them. This is further highlighted by the following quote,

“[Second-generation Americans] used the term *American* in two different ways. One was to describe themselves as American compared to the culture, values, and behaviors of their parents...But they also used “American” to refer to the native white Americans that they encountered at school, the office, or in public places, but whom they knew far better from television and the movies. Many respondents sidestepped this ambivalent understanding of the meaning of being American by describing themselves as ‘New Yorkers.’”

The identification of white with American is clearly prevalent and thus has serious ramifications for civic education and for the way we should approach civic education in this country. Students enter the classroom already with conceptions of citizenship, which may include that white, native citizens are more American than others. Because of this, race must be included as part of the civic education curriculum. If not, this association will remain, and the civic empowerment gap will continue. Teaching race and addressing

---

<sup>50</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 41

this association is imperative in creating a civic education curriculum that is effective in civically empowering *all* students.

### **The Role of Textbooks**

History plays a fundamental role in civic education. Having an accurate understanding of America's founding, past, and ideals is an important foundation for civic action. It is crucial in helping students form a civic identity for themselves; to understand how they fit in as Americans, they need a historical education on what America stands for and what it is. As a result, history textbooks play a crucial role in civic education. It is through history textbooks that the majority of US public school students learn American history. Indeed, in history especially, teachers are more likely to rely on the textbook, and use it as a crutch rather than a tool.<sup>51</sup> However, as mentioned in chapter one, U.S. history textbooks are often dry, mechanical, and devoid of real and insightful political controversy. Guidelines for bias regulation in textbooks are such that,

“The guidelines prohibit controversial topics, even when they are well within the bounds of reasonable political and social discourse. They combine left-wing political correctness and right-wing religious fundamentalism, a strange stew of discordant influences. The guidelines aim to create a new society, one that will be completely inoffensive to all parties; getting there, however, involves a heavy dose of censorship. No one asked the rest of us whether we want to live in a society in which everything objectionable to every contending party has been expunged from our reading materials.”<sup>52</sup>

Even beyond these guidelines, it has been shown that many textbook companies self-censor due to political pressure.<sup>53</sup> It is understood history textbooks are so dull because of the need to be unbiased and impartial. However, it is impossible to narrate history in a

---

<sup>51</sup> Alia Wong, “History Class and the Fictions About Race in America”, *The Atlantic*, October 21, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/the-history-class-dilemma/411601/>

<sup>52</sup> Diane Ravitch, *The Language Police*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 32.

<sup>53</sup> Tyler Brunner, “Censorship in History Textbooks: How Knowledge of the Past is Being Reconstructed in Schools”, *The Undergraduate Research Journal at the University of Northern Colorado*, 2013: 1

completely impartial manner. For example, “History textbooks incorporate attitudes and ways of looking at the world. In making judgments about what should be included and what should be excluded, and how particular episodes in history should be summarized, textbook authors assign positive or negative interpretations to particular events, thereby asserting a set of values.... passages in textbooks that are "factually correct" may also be communicating very selective values and moral judgments.”<sup>54</sup> There is no single ‘history’, just interpretations of historical events, although certain interpretations and accounts are more accurate and fair than others. But history textbooks do not take this nuance into account. They perpetuate the detrimental myth that history can be completely impartial and unbiased.

That myth is especially harmful for the students whose experience clashes with the history they are being taught in school. History in K-12 education is usually presented in line with the ‘moderately triumphalist’ narrative of America. The moderately triumphalist narrative you are probably familiar with from your own experience of American history in school. It emphasizes the admirable ideals America was founded on, liberty and equality, and although we have not fully realized them, we have never stopped striving to fully realize them. This narrative “has proved to be empowering by motivating people to be civically active in order to be part of the wonderful ‘experiment’ that is America. Action here is an expression of identity: ‘I’m proud to be an American’ and civic engagement follows from this pride.”<sup>55</sup> This narrative may succeed in empowering

---

<sup>54</sup> Michael Romanowski, “Problems of Bias in History Textbooks”, *Social Education*, 1996: 170

<sup>55</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 135

and inspiring some students, likely white upper-middle class students who may have more positive experiences as Americans with the government.

However, the triumphalist narrative will not work in civically empowering all students. It may clash with some students' conceptions of America and their experience of the government. Some students have not experienced the equality and liberty the triumphalist historical narrative preaches, even with the acknowledgement that the country is still in pursuit of these ideals. As a result, if what they are learning in school is misaligned with what they are learning outside of school, these students will write off what they are learning in history class. To illustrate this, "Because textbooks and teachers rarely presented historical events from the perspectives framed by [their] assumptions, the African American students perceived school-based historical accounts as 'white people's history.'"<sup>56</sup> History textbooks make moral judgements by including and excluding certain information and perspectives. Students see and feel that. If they recognize that the history they are being taught does not reflect them and their identities, they are denied the quality civic education they deserve, as they will be missing the important historical perspective and foundation civic empowerment is predicated on. Levinson writes on this, "If students reject what they are being taught in school as being someone else's history - in this case, being both *about* other people and *for* other people - then any hope for history education's being civically empowerment is lost."<sup>57</sup> It is critical, on a civic and a moral level, we change the way history is taught, and the narrative that is presented, so we can reach all students.

---

<sup>56</sup>Terrie Epstein, "Deconstructing Differences in African-American and European-American Adolescents' Perspectives on U. S. History", *Curriculum Inquiry*, 1998: 28, no. 4, 419

<sup>57</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 114

In addition to the moderately triumphalist narrative present in K-12 history, there is also the problem of inaccuracy and bias in history textbooks. The bias in history textbooks, despite their inclination and desire to be unbiased, has been well-documented and widespread. For example, “textbook publishers tend to “mystify” the reasons for the South’s secession largely “because they don’t want to offend school districts and thereby lose sales.”<sup>58</sup> The political pressure to be unbiased leads textbook companies to avoid controversy in textbooks. However, the controversy that exists in history is important to learn about, in addition to it being some of the most engaging material. Further, when there is a controversial topic in history, that usually indicates there was wrongdoing by a party. In an ideal historical education, this would be investigated by students so they can learn from it and not skirted around. This is another important reason for it to be *included* in textbooks because students can acknowledge and learn from previous historical actors’ mistakes. It also allows for a real, complex, and nuanced understanding of history that will be the most engaging and the most effective at civic empowerment. But because of political pressure and bias guidelines for textbooks, historical content is often told from a single perspective: the dominant one. This leads to alienation among students who are not reflected by their history class, as well as textbooks that do not paint the full nor fully accurate picture of history. For example, “Some of the most widely used history textbooks today even insinuate that the South’s motivation for secession was simply to protect states’ rights—not to preserve slavery.”<sup>59</sup> These claims have widespread consequences. For example, “while 54 percent of Americans identify slavery as the

---

<sup>58</sup> Wong, “History Class and the Fictions About Race in America”

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

cause, 41 percent do not”.<sup>60</sup> Belittling the role slavery played in the past - and by extension its consequences for the present - is precisely the danger of teaching history from the conventional triumphalist perspective. This presentation of slavery and its impact, or lack thereof, on the Civil War, will likely conflict with black students’ understanding of the past. It is thus rational for them to reject the history they learn in school, and the opportunity they have to learn history, and have it be civically empowering for them, is gone. Indeed, Jessica Huseman notes distorted history is part of the reason for the increase in homeschooling among black students and families. She continues by saying schools “rob black children of the opportunity to learn about their own culture... Typically, the curriculum begins African American history with slavery and ends it with the civil-rights movement... You have to listen to yourself simply being talked about as a descendent of slaves, which is not empowering. There is more to African history than that.”<sup>61</sup> The consequences of teaching history from solely the dominant perspective are grave, including student alienation to the point of homeschooling. As another example of history distortion, “Many textbooks frame the Reconstruction era after the Civil War as a tumultuous period whose chaos was attributable to the uncivilized governance of newly freed slaves; what these textbooks fail to mention is how white supremacists sowed this narrative specifically to justify the disenfranchisement of Black voters.”<sup>62</sup> By not portraying the complete picture, history

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> Jessica Huseman, “The Rise of Homeschooling Among Black Families”, *The Atlantic*, February 17, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/02/the-rise-of-homeschooling-among-black-families/385543/>

<sup>62</sup> American University, “The Problem of Bias in US History Textbooks and Curriculum”, American University School of Education, May 24, 2021, <https://soeonline.american.edu/blog/bias-in-history-textbooks>

textbooks, in an effort to avoid controversy, set up certain students for alienation and lack of opportunity by not reflecting them in the material. As a result, the way history is currently taught alienates black students. Pieces of black history are invoked, such as the Civil Rights Movement, to support the triumphalist narrative conventionally taught in schools. This presentation of history also denies white students the accurate and complete historical education they need to become good citizens and allies.

Additionally, it is important to note that not all bias in textbooks is race related. Texas recently proposed textbooks that “include the notion that Moses and Solomon inspired American democracy, that in the era of segregation only “sometimes” were schools for black children “lower in quality” and that Jews view Jesus Christ as an important prophet.”<sup>63</sup> In short, the bias present in history textbooks, despite the stated intentions of textbook companies, is widespread and damaging. By reflecting a single perspective, often the triumphalist narrative, these textbooks allow students to disregard a whole subject as someone else’s history. The civic consequences of this are severe.

Although history is an important pillar in a quality civic education, teaching historical facts does not translate into civic engagement among students, especially if the history students are learning in schools is misaligned with their experience and the history they have learned elsewhere. Students already walk into the classroom with a conception of American history and what that means to them and their community. We need to take this seriously and ensure the history we are teaching does not isolate students. To do this, we need to be intentional about how we are presenting historical

---

<sup>63</sup>Valerie Strauss, “Proposed Texas textbooks are inaccurate, biased, and politicized, a new report finds”, *The Washington Post*, September 12, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/09/12/proposed-texas-textbooks-are-inaccurate-biased-and-politicized-new-report-finds/>



events. We should be cognizant of the triumphalist narrative and the alienating effects it has on students because it has been documented that “the overwhelming dominance of Euro-American perspectives leads many students to disengage from academic learning”.<sup>64</sup> Instead, we need to present historical events through multiple perspectives. We need to improve textbook quality, and until that happens, lessen our reliance on them when teaching history. All of this, I recognize, will take energy, time, and resources, especially from teachers who are already strapped for time and energy. But the price we pay of not adapting history and its textbooks - the price of students writing off history as by someone else and for someone else and of students denied the quality education they deserve - is a price too high to pay.

Including race in civic education is a campaign different from that of improving the quality of civic education overall. By including race in civic education, I do think we improve it. By including race, we honor the burgeoning citizens students are by reflecting them in the government and society they are learning about, and by leaving space for them to show up as good citizens in different ways. We also create space for all students and foster a sense of belonging in their community. But giving more funding and resources to civic education, as well as including service learning and debates, etc., would go a long way at improving civic education without including race. I contend that these changes would improve civic education but would never reach the level of sufficient civic education. As long as American is still synonymous with white, there is a role for civic education to play in rectifying the civic empowerment gap. The way this

---

<sup>64</sup> Christine Sleeter, “The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies”, *National Education Association*, 2011, vii

should be done is by including race in the curriculum, by acknowledging the conflicts students may have when forming a relationship with America, and particularly through modifying the triumphalist narrative typically taught in history classes. Without these changes, we risk a large portion of the next generation of American citizens disregarding civic education as designed for *someone else*. The only way we achieve true, quality, civic education is by including race, because it is the only way we ensure we civically empower *all* students and overcome the civic empowerment gap.

### **Chapter 3: How to Incorporate Race**

When race is not included in civic education, there are consequences, as demonstrated in chapter two. The civic empowerment gap remains unresolved, and students are denied the quality civic education they deserve to become good and moral citizens in American society. There are many ways to include race into the civic education curriculum in the way I am advocating; there are even ways to incorporate race without igniting the culture war and angering people on both sides of the aisle. We can teach race without invoking Critical Race Theory and organizations are already doing this, as the end of the chapter will demonstrate. However, including elements of Critical Race Theory or Critical Race Theory-adjacent curriculum is one way to include race in civic education, although as I will show, there are many political strings attached to this that makes it a less feasible option.

#### **The Stakes**

Civic education that neglects race and its impact on citizenship has significant and influential consequences. In 2016, I graduated from Park Hill South High School, a large public school in Riverside, Missouri, a small suburb outside of Kansas City. This fall, at Park Hill South, a group of students distributed a petition to bring back slavery. The petition was circulated online, along with comments such as “I hate blacks,” and “I love slavery.”<sup>65</sup> Fortunately, other Park Hill South students saw this and reported it to administration, who gave the students who distributed this content ninety days of out of school suspension, followed by a hearing to see if these students are fit to be part of the

---

<sup>65</sup>Jacob Kittilstad, “School district investigates after Park Hill South students circulate racist petition”, *Fox4 News*, September 22, 2021, <https://fox4kc.com/news/school-district-investigates-after-park-hill-south-students-circulate-racist-petition/>

Park Hill South community again. But the simple fact that this happened is crushing, disturbing, and an illustration in why we need to include race in the civic education curriculum.

Somewhere along the way, civic education has clearly failed. For high school students to be so uneducated and uninformed on the true evils and effects slavery had and continues to have, for them to be so ignorant about the way the petition would be hurtful to their fellow classmates of color and to administration, and for them to be advocating for a return of the most cruel and inhumane system of oppression our country has experienced marks a clear failure of the civic education provided to them. These students are not ready to be good citizens - they are intolerant and actively working to make their community *worse*. The civic education provided to them was insufficient. We need to do better. We can do better. The way to do better is to include race as part of the civic education curriculum.

However, as mentioned in the Introduction, Critical Race Theory and the introduction of race content into classrooms has ignited a fierce debate among parents and politicians. Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Theory-esque content has been banned from public schools in a number of states. The states that have a ban or are working on instituting a ban are shown in the figure below.

States That Have Banned Critical Race Theory 2021

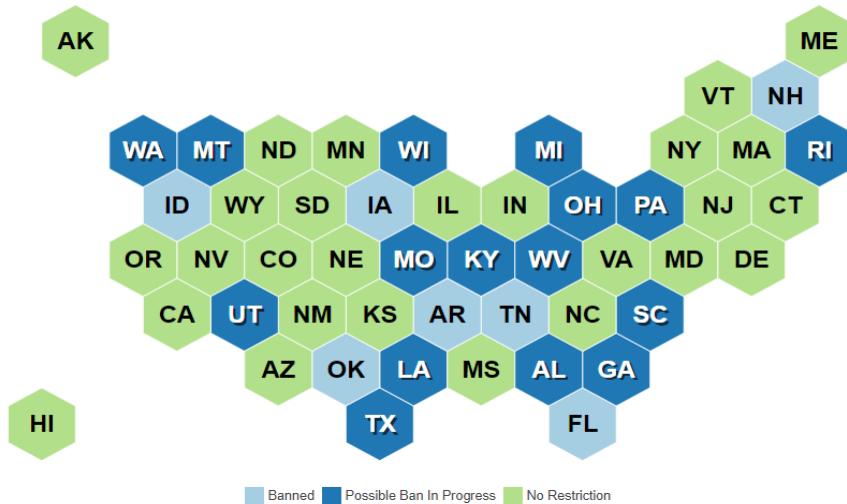


Figure 3: States that have Critical Race Theory Banned or are instituting a ban as of 2021 from World Population Review

States banning Critical Race Theory often exaggerate or misunderstand what it really is. In short, Critical Race Theory is centered on the idea that racism is systemic, meaning it is embedded in American structures, and goes beyond the personal biases American citizens may or may not have. It calls for an investigation of American structures and the disparate impact those may have on different groups of people. Importantly, it encourages moving beyond the level of personal racial biases. However, some citizens may have trouble grappling with the difference between personal biases and institutional racism. For example, “Many Americans are not able to separate their individual identity as an American from the social institutions that govern us—these people perceive themselves *as* the system. Consequently, they interpret calling social institutions racist as calling them racist personally.... There are also people who may

recognize America’s racist past but have bought into the false narrative that the U.S. is now an equitable democracy.”<sup>66</sup>

As a result, Critical Race Theory has often been construed as something it is not. Opponents of Critical Race Theory often deem it Marxist, anti-American, and anti-white. Indeed, “Conservative activists and politicians now use the term as a catchall phrase for nearly any examination of systemic racism in the present.”<sup>67</sup> There is a particular set of criticisms and fears that emerge in the argument of whether or not to include Critical Race Theory in schools. Parents and other actors in the education community are afraid teaching Critical Race Theory will indoctrinate students with the idea that America was established on racism, and that “white people are inherently privileged, while Black and other people of color are inherently oppressed and victimized.”<sup>68</sup> They are afraid white students will be demoralized and students will become unpatriotic.

These fears have led some states to ban Critical Race Theory under the reasoning that teaching students that America is bad and racist is harmful to them. However, most laws prohibiting the teaching of Critical Race Theory do not name it outright. Instead, “The legislations mostly ban the discussion, training, and/or orientation that the U.S. is inherently racist as well as any discussions about conscious and unconscious bias, privilege, discrimination, and oppression. These parameters also extend beyond race to

---

<sup>66</sup> Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons, “Why are states banning Critical Race Theory?”, *Brookings*, August, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/>

<sup>67</sup> Marisa Iati, “What is critical race theory, and why do republicans want to ban it?”, *Washington Post*, May 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/05/29/critical-race-theory-bans-schools/>

<sup>68</sup> Stephen Sawchuck, “What is Critical Race Theory and Why is it Under Attack?”, *EdWeek*, May 18, 2021 <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05>

include gender lectures and discussions.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the Arkansas ban prohibits schools from teaching ‘divisive concepts’ in general.<sup>70</sup> Further, the vagueness of these laws may cause the censorship or neglect of other important racially focused events in history, like the Civil Rights Movement. An English teacher in Tennessee noted, “History teachers cannot adequately teach about the Trail of Tears, the Civil War, and the civil rights movement. English teachers will have to avoid teaching almost any text by an African American author because many of them mention racism to various extents. Even classics written by white authors like ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ and ‘Huckleberry Finn’ will now be off limits.”<sup>71</sup> The Tennessee ban allows the state to withhold funding from schools that teach elements of Critical Race Theory. Thus, these bans have consequences on curriculum and civic education, dictating what can and cannot be taught. Moreover, they ironically prove the point of Critical Race Theory, as “making laws outlawing critical race theory confirms the point that racism is embedded in the law.”<sup>72</sup>

Conservative comments and arguments regarding Critical Race Theory reflect an overall misunderstanding and misconstruction on what Critical Race Theory is and what it calls for. For example, Florida governor, Ron DeSantis, said about his state banning Critical Race Theory, “Let me be clear, there’s no room in our classrooms for things like critical race theory...Teaching kids to hate their country and to hate each other is not

---

<sup>69</sup> Ray and Gibbons, “Why are states banning Critical Race Theory?”

<sup>70</sup>Jack Dutton, “Critical Race Theory is Banned in These States”, *Newsweek*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/critical-race-theory-banned-these-states-1599712>

<sup>71</sup>Cathryn Stout, “Teaching the Truth: Tennessee educators respond to proposed limits on teaching about racism”, *Chalkbeat*, May 10, 2021 <https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2021/5/10/22429654/teaching-the-truth-tennessee-educators-respond-to-proposed-limits-on-teaching-about-racism>

<sup>72</sup>Victor Ray, Twitter post, June 11, 2021, 12:44 p.m., <https://twitter.com/victorerikray/status/1403437961367240711?s=12>.

worth one red cent of taxpayer money.”<sup>73</sup> It is clear the foundation and core of Critical Race Theory is misconstrued in politics and in the media and is overpowered by people’s fears over what it might be teaching their kids and their students. It is not advocating for students to learn to hate their country or to feel bad about their identity. Indeed, an argument can be made that it is doing the opposite. For example, “If we love America, we should want it to be the best it can be. Rather than run from the issue of racism in America, we should confront it head on. Our kids and country will be better for it.”<sup>74</sup>

Further, the way Critical Race Theory is approached in classrooms is often much more subtle than its opponents portray it as. The teaching of Critical Race Theory often does not involve the explicit naming of Critical Race Theory in the classroom, nor requires students to read the academic papers the framework was founded upon. Critical Race Theory is a framework used to examine structures and outcomes, and it is best suited for collegiate level students. As a result, in a survey of over 1,000 American teachers, over ninety-six percent of them said their schools did not require them to teach Critical Race Theory.<sup>75</sup> The bans on Critical Race Theory in states thus appear misguided - they are banning something that is overwhelmingly not taught in schools, which is again reflective of the widespread way Critical Race Theory has been misconstrued. However,

---

<sup>73</sup>Steven Lemongello & Leslie Postal, “DeSantis calls for \$3,000 bonuses for teachers who complete civics education training”, *Orlando Sentinel*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/politics/os-ne-desantis-civics-proposal-20210317-hid2h2f5r5ai3ln3jdhgi2dsju-story.htm>

<sup>74</sup>Ray and Gibbons, “Why are states banning Critical Race Theory?”

<sup>75</sup>Phil McCausland, “Teaching critical race theory isn't happening in classrooms, teachers say in survey”, *NBCNews*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/teaching-critical-race-theory-isn-t-happening-classrooms-teachers-say-n1272945>



the bans have made teachers more hesitant to cover race-related issues in general, which is a real obstacle to teaching a quality civic education.

Learning how American structures may work in favor and against certain demographics, an element of Critical Race Theory, will help students form an accurate understanding of America and help them form their own civic identity. It will allow them to become good citizens and provide tangible ways for them to actively work to better their community. If elements of Critical Race Theory had been included in the civic education provided at Park Hill South High School, it is hard to believe a slavery to bring back slavery would have emerged.

### **Teaching Race Beyond Critical Race Theory**

The root of the Critical Race Theory debate is likely the school telling students what to think and how they should feel. Critical Race Theory or Critical Race Theory adjacent curriculum in schools is sometimes presented as ‘here is what we want you to think’, which bears a lot of similarity to the strict, traditional civics. The Critical Race Theory version could be taught along the lines of teachers saying, for example, systems in America are racist. Even if this is true, it still presents the issue, as in traditional civics, that students are being told what to think and believe and are unable to strengthen their civic muscles by deciding what to think for themselves. We can instead present the important questions along with research and discussion and let students choose what to think *for themselves*. For example, we can present the idea that neutrality might not be neutral as a question and let students arrive at their own conclusions, although with some teacher guidance and provided materials. There is no reason we cannot teach race in

schools like we do other controversies in history. We can do it in a smart and intentional manner that does not resemble indoctrination, in a way that is not left nor right politically.

We should put questions of race and racism at the center of civic education as they constitute an important part of society and fundamental part of how American citizens feel and relate to society. We should then explore these questions with students honestly, with the understanding that we as a collective do not - even should not - have to decide on answers. Making students wrestle with these important questions and considering them for themselves is the important step in fostering the kinds of qualities I assert make good citizens. By taking some elements of Critical Race Theory and presenting them as questions open for discussion instead of facts describing the reality of the world and how they should feel, we allow students the space to form their own opinions as well as practice in having real, important, and constructive conversations with their peers. This, again, will help to cultivate the habits of mind of toleration and respect conducive to good citizens and quality civic engagement.

There are ways to incorporate race into civic education curriculum with and without Critical Race Theory and its elements to create dialogue amongst students and teachers in a way that I expect will be more palatable to people criticizing the use of Critical Race Theory in schools. However, it is entirely possible to include race-related elements that allow students to fully develop their civic identity and relationship with America in civic education without invoking Critical Race Theory at all. Indeed, some civic education organizations are already doing so.

The first organization I want to highlight that succeeds in this purpose is the We Are America Project. This organization aims to answer the question: “What does it mean to be American?” in order to start a national conversation among young people and students about identity and belonging.<sup>76</sup> It was started by a group of students and their teacher in Massachusetts, and they create books compiling individual and diverse stories on what it means to be American, specifically aiming to empower the voices of young people. This organization encourages students to think about their place as an American and to tell that story. In this way, this organization subtly touches on race.

It is understood that different people have had different experiences and relationships with America in the past and in the present. They encourage students to think deeply about their position and identity in relation to America, and to answer the fundamental question “What does it mean to be American?”, as there will never be identical answers. As an example, one student’s response explains her feelings as an outsider in her community as a Moroccan Muslim, even though she is an American citizen.<sup>77</sup> By going through this exercise, students are forced to consider themselves and their civic identity, as well as how their existing identities interact to create their civic identity. They are given space to consider that question freely and honestly, with the understanding that no two students will end up with the same answer. In this way, the We Are America Project provides an avenue for incorporating race into the civic education curriculum in a productive and inspiring way.

---

<sup>76</sup> We Are America Project, *About*, <https://www.weareamericaproject.com/about/>

<sup>77</sup>We Are America Project, *An Outcast*, <https://www.weareamericaproject.com/story/sara-el-mahil>

Another organization incorporating race into civic education is Generation Citizen. Generation Citizens begins with an acknowledgement of the Civic Empowerment Gap and that there is unequal representation in political power at all levels of government, in addition to the fact that there are government policies in place that work against the already disadvantaged. They also begin with the statement that many young people want to make a difference in their community, but they do not see the government as the best way to do so.<sup>78</sup> From this foundation, Generation Citizen implements a semester-long curriculum that shows students how government and politics *is* a successful way to make change and improve their communities, as well as taking steps to rectify the civic empowerment gap by working in primarily under-served areas.<sup>79</sup>

The Generation Citizen curriculum focuses on action civics, with the entire course centering on an issue the students care about and choose themselves. In the first stage, students debate and build consensus on which issue they want to address that is affecting them and their community. They then research the issue and identify root causes, and act on their plan, by reaching out to local government or whatever other action the issue demands.<sup>80</sup> The curriculum culminates in ‘civics day’, a mega-civics event where students from all different regions share their plans to each other and to public officials and other community stakeholders. In addition, Generation Citizen brings in keynote speakers on civics day, such as governors and mayors. The goal of Generation Citizen curriculum is to foster and inspire long-term civic engagement and to overcome the civic

---

<sup>78</sup>Generation Citizen, *The Problem*, <https://generationcitizen.org/about-us/the-problem/>

<sup>79</sup>Generation Citizen, *Our Solution: Action Civics*, <https://generationcitizen.org/about-us/the-solution-action-civics/>

<sup>80</sup>Generation Citizen, *Our Curriculum*, <https://generationcitizen.org/our-programs/our-curriculum/>

empowerment gap through action civics. They are successful in that they show students how historically they may have felt their voices were not listened to and how to overcome that. They allow students to see that they matter as citizens, and they can make a difference. They provide the space and the support to have students realize *themselves* they have civic power - a crucial realization in the formation of civic identity and in overcoming the civic empowerment gap. By subtly employing race in the curriculum - through education on the civic empowerment gap and how to overcome it - Generation Citizen provides a model for successful civic education that supports students becoming active and moral citizens today and beyond.

Another organization incorporating race into civic education is Facing History and Ourselves. This organization provides free lessons and resources for teachers to use on a range of topics - history, civics, human rights, media literacy, bullying, and more. They provide important and accessible resources on how to successfully teach these subjects, although I will focus on their civics resources. Under their civics curriculum, they have a lesson called, “Dr. King’s Legacy and How to Participate”.<sup>81</sup> In this lesson, students aim to answer the fundamental questions of 1) “What is your vision for the kind of world in which you would like to live?” and 2) “What responsibility do you have for bringing about that kind of world?”. As a result, students are forced to consider their community and civic society, and how they may fit into it and what impact they can have civically in their surroundings.

---

<sup>81</sup>Facing History and Ourselves, *Dr. King’s Legacy and Choosing to Participate*, <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/memphis-1968/dr-kings-legacy-and-choosing-participate>

In another lesson, entitled “The Impact of Identity” from the unit “Facing Ferguson: News Literacy in a Digital Age”, students aim to answer the essential questions of 1) “What is the relationship between identity and the way we respond to news and information?” and 2) “How did people’s identities and experiences influence the way they responded to news and information from Ferguson?”<sup>82</sup> These questions encourage students to grapple with the idea that different identities experience and perceive American society differently, and to consider the way their own identity may impact the way they perceive and experience American society. In both of these lessons, race is invoked subtly, and students are compelled to consider identity in a civic context, a crucial aspect of civic education. The scope and extent of lessons makes Facing History and Ourselves as an important and underutilized civic education resource. Teachers can use their curriculum without having to design it themselves. Some of their lessons bleed into Critical Race Theory territory, but some do not. Facing History thus provides clear, accessible, and intentional lessons regarding civics and race, as well as providing a way for teachers to incorporate the race into civics without invoking Critical Race Theory. All three of these organizations - We Are America, Generation Citizen, and Facing History and Ourselves - offer much to the civic education community. They provide tangible ways to teach civics in the way I am calling for and in a way that compels students to consider their own place in civic society and how they can engage civically from that place, without Critical Race Theory.

---

<sup>82</sup> Facing History and Ourselves, *The Impact of Identity*, <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/facing-ferguson-news-literacy-digital-age/impact-identity>

## Schools as Civic Institutions

Lastly, it is important to note and consider that schools themselves are civic communities. As such, they impact students' and teachers' perception of civics and citizenship outside the school walls. Schools thus provide a type of civic education to students on their own, regardless of what they are learning in classes. Levinson describes this by writing,

“Schools inherently shape young people’s civic experiences. Both students and adults learn ‘their place’ by what’s expected of them in the broader public sphere we call schools. Schools also give - or deny - students and teachers opportunities to practice a variety of civic skills and behaviors via classroom procedures and routines, curricula and pedagogies, interaction in the hallways and cafeteria, and co-curricular and extracurricular activities. This need not be intentional. Rather, *all* schools teach experiential lessons about civic identity, expectations, and opportunities, even when they have no intention of doing so.”<sup>83</sup>

Schools are often the first and most consistent interaction students have with a public institution. As a result, the school and the interactions a student have in it are often used as a proxy for interactions with public institutions in general. In this way, schools offer a civic education in and of themselves. Whether or not student voice is heard by teachers or administrators, whether or not students are given autonomy in the hallways or even in bathroom privileges, etc., all compile to form a conception of civic community and civic life for students.

As a result, it is important schools model healthy civic communities, or at least not unhealthy civic communities. One of the six proven practices for quality civic education, as detailed in chapter one, is student participation in school governance; “Students should be allowed to practice civic skills within the relatively controlled

---

<sup>83</sup> Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 174

environment of the classroom and within school walls. Here they can learn from challenges and triumphs, responses and failures—all the varied realities of the democratic process.”<sup>84</sup> This proven practice underscores the importance of the school civic community on student’s civic empowerment and engagement level. The opportunity to engage successfully in a civic manner in school is a powerful part of civic education and a way to foster civic engagement after the public-school years.

On the flip side, the school civic community can also provide a disempowering civic education. If students are consistently put down by teachers and administrators, ignored and not listened to, and regulated to an extreme degree, it is likely their civic aspirations will decrease, as will their sense of civic empowerment. If in their experience, working to improve their community has been pointless, and the civic community of the school has been a negative experience for them, why should the outside world, and the government or other civic avenues, be any different? As a result, it is imperative the role the school itself plays is considered in civic education. It has the potential to be a powerful resource and empowerment mechanism as well as the potential to be disheartening to students and to weaken their civic inclination.

In short, I maintain race is imperative to a quality and effective civic education. It is crucial to the development of civic identity and to the creation of good citizens beyond the K-12 years. If not, we risk more episodes like what Park Hill South experienced this year. There are many ways to succeed at this - either through including elements of Critical Race Theory, or through an examination of what it means to be an American, as

---

<sup>84</sup>Lisa Guilfoile and Brady Delander. “Guidebook: Six Proven Practices for Teaching Civic Education”, *Education Commission of the States*, 2014, 19



the We Are America Project calls for. Action civics as Generation Citizen exemplifies is also an option for achieving this, as is using one of Facing History's many civic education and history lessons that touch on race. Further, and aside from race, the role the school itself plays in civic identity formation is substantial, and often neglected from the civic education conversation. I urge school administrators and teachers to be mindful of their actions and words and their impact on student civic identity when dealing with matters regarding student voice and input to ensure students receive a positive civic education in the classroom as well as in the school.

## **Conclusion**

Despite all of the noise and misunderstanding surrounding Critical Race Theory in the media, for civic education to be successful in preparing and creating students as good citizens, race needs to be a part of the curriculum. Race impacts the way each and every citizen interacts with and views America. Citizenship is thus inherently connected with race. Even though we are all equal as citizens under the law, we are not all equal as citizens in terms of civic empowerment and civic influence. For schools to neglect this aspect of civic life is to provide inadequate civic education.

The traditional vision of civics that is present in schools today is not getting through to students. Test scores are lower in civics than in other subjects, there is a large gap in test scores between different demographics, time on civics as decreased in classrooms, and funding has been funneled away. Although I argue for introducing race into the civic education curriculum, I am not advocating for the complete removal of traditional civics. Traditional civics and knowing how the government works is important for civic empowerment and rectifying the civic empowerment gap. I simply wish to see civic education taught more creatively and powerfully, and in a way that all students connect with. But because the focus of civic education continues to be on traditional and mechanical aspects of civic life, and it is overwhelmingly taught in an uninspiring way, students are not convinced of why they should engage themselves in their communities civically. There is a mismatch between what they are learning in civics and what applies to their life, in addition to a mismatch between what they are learning inside the classroom with what they have learned outside the classroom. Further, the way traditional civics and history is taught can be alienating to students with non-dominant identities.

Reliance on history textbooks results in both students feeling not reflected in the country they are learning about and disengagement due to the dullness of the material. For students to be civically empowered and create a civic identity, they need to feel like they see themselves in the country they are learning about. Thus, civic education, in the way I am arguing for, will also create social values and identities that cultivate respect and tolerance among people with other views.

Civic education today has also resulted in the Civic Empowerment gap, which is real and disturbing. White, native born, and upper middle-class students often have more civic knowledge and capital than their non-white and lower-class peers. This is reflected in the opportunities these different groups have in school and how some forms of civic engagement are more acceptable than others. For civic education to be truly empowering for all students, we need to address the fact that different identities are treated differently in America, in history and in the present, and be honest about the civic implications of this. When accompanied with traditional civic knowledge, this vision of civic education would allow every student to form a political attachment with America and their individual community, as well as be evenly equipped to make the change they desire in their own communities in the future.

There are many ways to include race in civic education in the way I am advocating for without inciting the culture wars that often accompany the mention of Critical Race Theory. Facing History, Generation Citizen, and the We Are America Project all provide templates and examples of including race in a way that encourages civic identity formation, fosters tolerant and respectful social values, and prepares students to be good citizens. Elements of Critical Theory can also be introduced as

questions that students can then research, discuss, and then arrive at an answer on their own. This way, they are forced to grapple with race and citizenship and what that means for themselves and others.

In short, I argue civic education today is failing to prepare students to be good citizens: people that are tolerant, willing to work with others, and working to improve their community. This failure is attributable to a lot of things – an overreliance on traditional civic knowledge in classrooms, civic content that does not reflect all students and results in isolation, and overall, how civic education curriculum does not address race and its effects on citizenship and civic empowerment. To overcome the civic empowerment gap and truly develop all students as good citizens, we must include race. Without this change, we risk a large portion of the next generation of American citizens disregarding civic education as designed for *someone else* and should anticipate a lack of civic engagement and involvement in the future as a result. The civic empowerment gap would be allowed to continue. I am unwilling to accept that. We – the education community, parents, students, policy makers, *all citizens* – should be unwilling to accept that. Join me in fighting for the alternative: a country where every student receives a civic education that results in civic empowerment, a positive social attachment, and lifelong civic engagement. How much better the country would be.