



Texas Public Policy Foundation
**LEGISLATOR'S GUIDE
TO THE ISSUES
2021-2022**

Civic Education

The Issue

Civics education in the United States is in a state of crisis, which, if not addressed, will doom our constitutional democracy.

If the above assertion sounds unduly apocalyptic, consider these facts. Recent polling of Americans' civic literacy, conducted by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, should shame all of us involved in education: While 90% of immigrants to this country pass the USCIS citizenship test (passage of which requires answering correctly 6 out of 10 questions), only a third of native-born Americans can pass the test. Digging deeper into the numbers reveals even more alarming news. Seventy-four percent of senior citizens can pass the test, but only 19% of Americans under the age of 45 can answer even 6 of the 10 questions correctly.

Similarly, only 37% of all Texans, and only 23% of those under the age of 45, can answer even six questions correctly, with Texas rated as the 12th lowest performing state in the country. Even worse, unlike the real test, Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation's survey consisted of multiple-choice questions, giving participants at least a 25% better chance of passing simply based on odds. **This means that far less than 37% of all Texans would have even passed if given the actual USCIS citizenship test.**

Informed and involved citizens are critical to the survival of any democratic society. Texas's own Constitution gives "the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people" as the very reason for providing for public education in the state.

One of the **objectives** stated in the Texas Education Code is that "Educators will prepare students to be thoughtful, active citizens who have an appreciation for the basic values of our state and national heritage and who can understand and productively function in a free enterprise society." To these ends, the state of Texas has written civic education into its curriculum standards, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS).

Sadly, these good intentions appear to be failing in execution. If the Texas education system is indeed to produce informed citizens, Texas should ensure that its students are instructed in the basic facts of American history and government. The United States requires specific knowledge of anyone applying to become a United States citizen. Though natural-born citizens do not need to defend their citizenship, it only stands to reason that our nation should attempt to impart the same basic knowledge to them.

Civic education should not end in high school. Texas should also reinforce knowledge of our history and civics structure in college. The Legislature has already stated that every student in a state university must take at least two American history courses to fulfill general education requirements. However, there is no distinction regarding the types of courses that meet this requirement.

The statute should clarify that these history courses must be survey courses, and both must be American history courses.

These reforms would better ensure that civic education is given its proper role within Texas education. With basic civic knowledge covered and tested in high school, and subsequently reinforced in college, the state will set up its students—and its democracy—for continued success.

The Facts

- In 2016, only a quarter of Americans could name the three branches of American government, and nearly a third could not name even a single branch. In the Lone Star State, fewer than 2 in 10 Texans knew when the Constitution was even written.
- Half of American college students believe it is acceptable to shout down a speaker they consider controversial, and one fifth believe it is acceptable to use violence to silence a controversial speaker.
- The Legislature has set civic education as a priority for Texas schools, but testing of civic education is minimal.

Recommendations

- Clarify that history courses to fulfill college general education requirements must be survey courses, and both must be American history courses.
- Pass the 2019 Senate bill, SB 1776, which would allow students to request an elective course in the Founding in high school (if no less than five students request it).

Resources

["A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge,"](#) Thomas Jefferson (1779).

["Americans' Knowledge of the Branches of Government Is Declining,"](#) Annenberg Public Policy Center (2016).

["Free Expression on Campus: What College Students Think About First Amendment Issues,"](#) Knight Foundation (2018).

["Views Among College Students Regarding the First Amendment: Results From a New Survey,"](#) John Villasenor, Brookings Institution (Sept. 18, 2017).

["Study for the Test,"](#) U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (Accessed Aug. 2020).

["Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies,"](#) Texas Education Agency (Accessed Aug. 2020).

continued

Texas Education Code, Chapter 4, [“Public Education Mission, Objectives, and Goals,”](#) (Accessed August 2020).

[Civics \(History and Government\) Questions for the Naturalization Test,](#) U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2017).

[Woodrow Wilson Foundation American History Initiative 50-State Survey Data,](#) Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (2019).

[“Woodrow Wilson Foundation Finds Only One State Can Pass U.S. Citizenship Exam,”](#) Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (2019).

