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CIVICS EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: A LEGACY OF FAILURE AND HOPE
FOR THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

CIVICS EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: A LEGACY OF FAILURE AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Civics education is essential for developing an informed and politically engaged electorate. Recent declines in civics proficiency across the United States have prompted state legislatures to pass reforms to bolster the subject in schools. This study is an evaluation of recent civics education reform efforts in the United States between 2017-2020. Comparisons are made between trends in national NAEP civics exam data and civics test score trends in Florida and Virginia, which both passed civics reforms during this period, but maintained civic republican and liberal standards in their curricula. Louisiana is used as a control case, as the state has not passed any reforms regarding civics. The data suggests no correlation between civics reform efforts and civics test scores for either Florida or Virginia. Furthermore, an analysis using previous research on the Student Voices program, founded by the Annenberg School of Public Policy at the University of Pennsylvania, is examined as a potential alternative to modern civics teaching, using data from their program sites in Philadelphia and Seattle. This paper advocates for a new form of civics education that addresses the lived experience of students to increase political engagement and to supplement or replace the current methods of teaching civics.

Introduction:

The foundations of American democracy rely on popular engagement with the institutions that are meant to serve the people, but while expectations of political citizens have changed significantly, the way students are prepared to engage with the political environment has not. In the years following the 2017 presidential election, several states in the U.S. passed laws aimed at reforming civics education, with particular emphasis on raising levels of political knowledge in students with the intent of creating a more informed and politically engaged citizenry for the future. However, prior research on civics education in the United States suggests that simply having political knowledge is not a sufficient motivator for long-term political engagement (Pasek et. al. 2008). In the current situation where traditional political knowledge among the population has declined with each generation (Kleinberg and Lau 2019), there has been a push to reinforce existing pedagogy to solve this uniquely modern issue. While the importance of having a politically informed citizenry has grown with time, the type of political knowledge that civics curricula are teaching does not align with the lived experiences of the population and will not lead to increases in democratic engagement (Johnson 2021).

Despite its present shortcomings, I argue that an updated civics education curriculum is the key to creating a politically informed and engaged citizenry, but this can only be achieved through significant changes in how the subject is taught in schools. The issues with civic education are that recent reform efforts continue to reinforce the formation of rote political knowledge as their primary goal and that they are ineffective at achieving this goal. Instead, current reforms should be replaced with new curricula that address the lived experiences of all citizens. To advance this argument, I will answer the questions: To what extent have civics education reforms between 2017-2020 led to increases in student civic knowledge? And, to what

extent do alternative conceptions of civics education address the shortcomings of the current dominant model?

The Purpose of Civics Education

Since the creation of the United States, civics education has been used as a tool to develop the “American” citizen. Beginning in the eighth and nineteenth centuries, the goal of civics was a unified national identity, specifically promoting patriotism and loyalty to the republic (Scribner 2020). The founding fathers and heroes of the revolution were presented as model American citizens that students should strive to emulate. Additionally, white Protestant values became synonymous with American citizenship during this era. Moving into the twentieth century, civics education began to take on more critical perspectives, challenging the history of the United States through different contextual lenses. However, despite this greater emphasis on reevaluating events of the past, what remained was a discrediting of minority culture and experiences in the conception of the American citizen. Civics teaching continued to assert that for people of other cultures to become “American” then those groups must assimilate into established (white Protestant) American values (Scribner 2020). These developments set the stage for the future of civics education into the modern era: The purpose of civics education is to develop students into American citizens, and proximity to white, protestant ideology correlates to one’s degree of citizenship.

Today, civics education still aims to develop a capable and informed citizenry prepared to participate in American democracy. However, as the franchise has extended throughout America’s history and the nation has become more diverse, civics education has had difficulty adapting to engage new groups that have a stake in American politics while addressing the exclusionary history of American politics (Scribner 2020). Because of this. Civics education

curricula have largely focused on developing a singular national identity that students are expected to buy into as their own (Tichnor-Wagner et al. 2022; Johnson 2021; Scribner 2020). Throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, it was widely held that developing a singular national identity would strengthen American democracy and prevent fracturing based on personal identity (Scribner 2020). However, attempts to create this singular identity have been ineffective. Instead, high levels of political polarization still exist, reflecting cultural divides between communities and individuals (Tyler and Iyengar 2023; Tichnor-Wagner et al. 2022).

Civics education is also meant to develop a political knowledge base for students as they interact with politics directly, thereby contributing to the creation of an informed citizenry. In traditional accounts of political knowledge, it is defined as “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; 10). This definition is widely used in political science and discussions around civics education. Having more political knowledge increases the likelihood of an individual voting correctly – that is, voting in the way that best suits their interests – (Kleinberg and Lau 2019), but does not necessarily contribute to political engagement later in life (Pasek et al. 2008). However, because political knowledge is the basis on which civics education curricula are evaluated in the United States (Nelsen 2023), recent reforms focus on growing political knowledge rather than giving students the necessary skills to participate in modern democracy (Johnson 2021). Increasingly, scholars find that civics education curricula fall short of equipping students for the modern political environment because of its continued emphasis on creating a national identity based on a liberal notion of political knowledge (Pasek et. al. 2008, Feldman et. al. 2009; Johnson 2021). If the stated purpose of civics education remains as it is, the diverse perspectives and differences

found in American politics today will continue to be overlooked, and those who are already disengaged from the system will continue to be.

Civics Education in the United States Today

Most civics education curricula today fall under either the Civic Republican or Liberal framework of citizenship discourse (Johnson 2021; Tichnor-Wagner et al, 2022). The civic republican framework places a strong emphasis on patriotism, self-sacrifice for the common good, and the formation of a strong base of political knowledge as the most important aspects of citizenship in America (Tichnor-Wagner et al. 2021). The liberal conception of citizenship discourse instead emphasizes the role of the individual in securing political rights, critical thinking, and the formation of critical stances to authority (Tichnor-Wagner et al. 2021).

Both the civic republican and liberal conceptions of citizenship discourse face criticism from those who find that curricula built around them are “non-critical” and perpetuate a notion of citizenship based on being white and middle-class (Johnson 2022). The civic republican framework, being the most common among U.S. curricula, affirms whiteness as a marker of citizenship with its emphasis on how the lives and accomplishments of prominent white, male figures, such as the founding fathers, developed American democracy, and that emulating the characteristics of these men makes one a citizen. While the liberal framework at first seems to address these issues by focusing on the rights of the individual, these curricula encourage individuals to rely on institutions to gain and secure citizenship rights. This framework does not acknowledge how marginalized communities have historically had unequal access to these institutions which has resulted in reluctance and wariness of them to this day. Citizenship conceptualized in these ways was historically sufficient since white, middle-class men were the only group to have enjoyed the full rights of American citizenship since the nation’s founding.

However, continuing to base civics education under the assumption that all students fit this description fails to create a society where the diverse groups within it will have any incentive to participate in its governance or uphold its institutions.

These perceptions of citizenship discourse assume that citizenship looks the same for all individuals, which is in no way true. For example, the lived experience of a Black student on the south side of Chicago varies greatly from the experience of a white student in Texas or an Asian-American student in California. In areas where historically marginalized communities make up larger portions of the population, political efficacy is markedly lower than in areas with more white and affluent residents (Nelsen 2023). Further, when citizens participate in political action without achieving desired outcomes, which occurs more often within marginalized communities, belief in institutions and desire to engage politically in the future diminishes (Nuamah 2022). Without acknowledging these differences in lived experience, civics education cannot develop students into political citizens who have the necessary skills and knowledge to articulate and advocate for the particular needs of themselves and their communities. However, despite these obvious shortcomings, recent reforms in civics education policy across the United States have continued to perpetuate the civic republican and liberal conceptions of citizenship discourse.

In the years following the 2016 presidential election, state governments pushed to reinforce the importance of civics education in schools. The 2016 presidential election cycle marked a renewed interest in civic life by America's youth (Associated Press 2017). However, despite this increase in engagement, national data revealed that most students did not have a sufficient understanding of the American political process (American Federation of Teachers 2018; NEAP 2022). The response to this data across the nation was the implementation of state-level legislation aimed at addressing this gap in youth political knowledge through updates to

civics curricula. The tumultuousness of the 2016 election cycle along with increased youth engagement made addressing the youth political knowledge issue particularly salient for lawmakers. Accusations of biased media coverage and interference by foreign actors highlighted the need for citizens to be able to parse out accurate information from “fake news” and the confusion surrounding the election’s outcome, marking the fifth time in U.S. history that a candidate won the electoral college while losing the popular vote, demonstrated the need for creating a more robust understanding of the systems of American governance (History.com Editors). However, while the 2016 election revealed a uniquely modern political arena, state reforms reinforced existing methods of teaching civics rather than creating new ways to develop students into politically engaged and informed citizens. In a study of 45 state bills regarding civics education across 29 states passed between 2017 and 2019, scholars found that 38 bills evoked civic republican discourse, 10 evoked liberal discourse, and six evoked a combination of both (Tichnor-Wagner et. al 2021). This illustrates that even as civics education has moved to the forefront of education policy discussions, minimal effort has been made to change how civics is taught to students to address modern political discourse.

Another study conducted in 2021 examined 230 individual civics education standards¹ across eight states of varying political skews to find that 96% of the standards were civic republican, with 41% of those requiring some form of political knowledge development, that being the rote memorization of political knowledge (i.e. the three branches of government and their function) for reproduction on an assessment(Johnson 2021). As of 2018, the last time this data was collected nationally, 17 states had adopted the United States Citizenship and

¹ A civic education standard refers to the specific knowledge or skill a student is expected to demonstrate upon completion of a civics lesson or course (National Council for the Social Studies)

Immigration Services (USCIS) naturalization test in some form as a requirement for students to graduate from high school (Johnson 2021). Using a test such as this as a standard for political knowledge may seem like an ideal way to ensure students have a baseline of political knowledge. However, for marginalized students whose experiences with the state are already not represented in civics education materials, standards like these only serve to reinforce the sentiment that those who do not fit the white middle-class conception of citizenship must conform to those ideas to be recognized as a proper citizen. Furthermore, in the 2022 administration of the National Association of Education Progress (NAEP) civics exam, a national examination of eighth- grade political knowledge conducted once every four years, scores reveal that student political knowledge has not increased since the first administration of the exam in 1994 (NAEP 2022), calling into question the usefulness of reform efforts on civics education.

How Civics Education Fails Students of Color

“Political efficacy refers to one’s belief in the responsiveness of government and one’s own ability to influence public affairs,” (Nelsen 2023, 12). As it currently stands, only white students gain boosts in political efficacy as a result of taking a civics education course in high school, with white boys seeing the most significant gains in both efficacy (Nelsen 2023). Black and Latinx students do not see the same gains in political efficacy. By establishing that white students are the only ones with direct access to the institution of government, modern civics education curricula lower political efficacy among marginalized students by creating a barrier to entry into the political environment.

Civics education curricula in the United States focus on a select group of white, protestant men who founded the United States of America (the Founding Fathers), their influences, and the documents they created during that process. For example, Florida civics

standards for the seventh grade require students to “recognize ideas contained in the founding documents... have origins in religious texts,” and, “Recognize how Enlightenment ideas including Montesquieu's view of separation of power and John Locke's theories related to natural law and how Locke's social contract influenced the Founding Fathers.” Even today, most curricula either downplay or ignore the role of people of color in the development of America’s political society (Nelsen 2023). The below example from Florida’s ninth-grade civics standards reframes the granting of civil rights to people of color by placing particular emphasis on the role of “foundational documents” and white male figures without any mention of the Civil Rights Movement or the Black leaders who contributed to securing these rights.

SS.912.CL.2.7 Explain how the principles contained in foundational documents contributed to the expansion of civil rights and liberties over time.

- *Students will explain how different groups of people (e.g., African Americans, immigrants, Native Americans women) had their civil rights expanded through legislation action (e.g., Voting Rights Act, Civil Rights Act) executive action (e.g., Truman’s desegregation of the army and Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation), and the courts (e.g., Brown v. Board of Education, In re Gault).*
- *Students will explain the role founding documents, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, had on setting precedent for the future granting of rights.*

The lack of engaging and relevant civics education for racially marginalized students has led to the creation of a “civics performance gap” resulting from unequal access to political power (Tichnor-Wagner et al. 2022). This gap refers to both gaps in tests meant to assess a student’s political knowledge (Nelson 2023) and gaps in political participation, namely voting, that can be observed later in life, such as in the 12% gap in voter turnout between white and non-white individuals in the 2020 presidential election (Morris and Grange 2024). Like other scholars such as Feldman et. al. (2007) and Pasek et. al. (2008) I argue that the civics performance gap is the result of marginalized individuals' lack of political efficacy, itself being the result of civics education curricula that do not address their lived experiences. While ineffective civics education

is certainly not the only reason for lower political efficacy among minorities and marginalized groups, with their lived experiences with institutions playing a role in distrust, improved civics education would provide an understanding of how institutions are supposed to work for them, have historically failed to meet their needs, and how to create avenues by which further action can be taken to improve those institutions.

The existence of a civics performance gap further perpetuates the idea that, to solve issues relating to political participation, schools must create more standards that develop political knowledge in students and reinforce civic republican forms of citizenship discourse. A quote from Delaware Senator Chris Coons highlights this thinking “...equipping students with robust understandings of their government and history is a critical step toward building a stronger, more resilient America” However, continuing to develop civics education in this way will not help marginalized students become more effective political citizens. It will, however, further grow the gap in political efficacy between white students and their minority counterparts.

The nature of political knowledge has also been complicated by Cohen and Luttig (2020) who find that expanding definitions of political knowledge reveal that the political knowledge of different racial groups varies based on lived experience. In their study, when carceral violence was included as a form of political knowledge, Black individuals displayed higher levels of knowledge. This further demonstrates how experiences unique to one group or another impact how individuals interact with the political arena, and further highlights the necessity for more expansive definitions and conceptions of civic education.

Moreover, in addition to having lower levels of political efficacy, marginalized students are also more aware of the injustices that exist in society due to their lived experiences (Nelsen 2023). Many civic republican civics education standards mention the importance of citizens

upholding existing political structures (Johnson 2021). However, upholding existing political structures may not be in the best interest of marginalized students. Thus, rather than teach students how to invoke change in institutions, modern civics courses, in an attempt to create a “unified” national identity, encourage these students to uphold the institutions that oppress them. This exemplifies how civics education perpetuates the notion that the full rights of citizenship belong to those who fit within its definition of a citizen, that being the white middle class.

Alternate Conceptions of Civics Education

Current conceptions of civics education revolve around maintaining systems of power that disregard the lived experiences of marginalized American citizens. What is needed to rectify this issue is a form of civics education that provides students with the necessary skills to engage in politics in whatever way they deem necessary to address the issues that emerge in their lived experience, whether that be through voting, creating petitions for local issues, volunteering, or participating in social movements.

Nelsen (2023) argues that the purpose of civics education should be to develop students into active political participants rather than develop political knowledge based on rote memorization of facts or the formation of a homogenous national identity. By informing students on how to use their lived experiences to create the changes that they want to see, civics education curriculums can embrace the diversity that is present in the modern political environment instead of making vague attempts at creating a singular identity that disregards the complexities that exist within American politics and its electorate.

In *The Civic Mission of Schools* (Patrick 2003), six possible approaches are listed as valuable ways to conduct civics education in the classroom, they are:

1. Instruction in government with more than just rote learning
2. Discussion of current events, particularly those important to youth
3. Opportunities to apply classroom lessons in a service-learning framework
4. Extracurricular community involvement opportunities
5. Student participation in school governance
6. Simulation of procedures and the democratic process

An example of these principles in practice is the Student Voices Program that took place in the public schools of 12 U.S. cities in the early 2000s. A more thorough examination of this program and its outcomes will be provided later, but in short, the program allowed students to engage with local issues using local politics as the instrument for solving these problems (Pasek et. al. 2008). Although this program took place outside the classroom, students who participated self-reported higher efficacy and showed increased attention to the 2004 presidential election and knowledge of candidate positions when compared to their peers who only had standard civics courses (Pasek et. al. 2008). This one example, as limited as it is, demonstrates that civics education focused on a student's direct lived experience can have larger effects on their overall political efficacy and engagement.

Youth Political Knowledge in the Internet Age

Younger individuals do not retain as much political information as older generations (Pew Research Center, 2023; NAEP 2022). This decline can partly be explained by the changing ways young people receive their information. According to a 2016 Pew Research Center survey, 50 percent of Americans aged 18-29 regularly use the internet to find political information. Despite the increased accessibility of information online, however, individuals who primarily get political information online are less likely to commit that information to memory (Kleinberg and

Lao 2016). In addition to this, younger people find having political knowledge less important than older generations, while also believing that checking a candidate's website a few months before an election is significantly more important than older generations. Kleinberg and Lau argue that having instant access to information via the Internet decreases the need and incentive for memorization.

While Kleinberg and Lau made note of this phenomenon as it relates to political knowledge surrounding elections, this same logic can explain why young adults lag behind older generations in civic knowledge. Because young Americans rely on the internet to recall information, they no longer need to commit that information to memory. However, because young people regularly use the internet for political information, they are more susceptible to misinformation, an issue that has become more salient over the years (Dancey and Sheagley 2012). Moreover, individuals are likely to act based on misinformation (Hochschild and Einstein 2015). This is one area in which modern civic education fails to prepare students for today's political environment. A modern civics education curriculum should inform students of how to navigate the complex information systems that are in place today. What we see instead is an emphasis on rote memorization that serves very little purpose in modern politics.

Recent Civics Education "Reform"

In a 2021 study, Aaron Johnson analyzes civic education standards for eight states that require students to pass some portion of the USCIS civics exam (colloquially known as the citizenship test). In his research, he examines 230 state standards across Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, North Dakota, Utah, and Wisconsin. Johnson finds that 96% of the standards across these states reflect civic republicanism, emphasizing rote memorization of ideas about American political institutions, or the creation of national unity rather than critical

discussion about the institutions (Johnson 2021). This emphasis on memorization translates well to completing the citizenship test requirement, but has not prepared students to engage with political life beyond school.

In a similar study, Tichnor-Wagner et al. evaluated 45 civics education reform laws across 29 states from 2017-2020. In their findings, the vast majority of state reforms continued to perpetuate civic republicanism, with laws from all red states and 12 out of 15 blue and purple states producing civic republican pedagogies (Tichnor-Wagner et. al. 2021). For example, Colorado Senate bill 21-067, passed in 2021, requires civics education in the state instruct on the grounds of “history, culture, and civic government,” (Colo. S. 2021) These findings suggest that although there has been a recent push towards restoring civic education in schools, the method in which states are doing so is outdated and in need of overhaul.

Despite reforms, American political knowledge has remained largely at the same level since 1996 (Shapiro and Brown 2018). This further suggests that civic republican conceptions of civic education are no longer relevant in the modern political environment. In an era where easy access to knowledge lowers students’ incentive to memorize political information (Kleinberg and Lau 2019), having students memorize information for a test will not assist in the development of a politically informed electorate.

Contribution to the Literature

Research in the field of civics education has highlighted the discrepancies in modern curricula that develop students of all backgrounds into effective political citizens for the modern era. It has been established that current curricula are primarily built around the civic republican and liberal frameworks (Tichnor-Wagner et. al 2020; Johnson 2021), both of which fail to

address the lived and varied experiences of Black and other marginalized communities when engaging with the political system in America (Nelsen 2023). Studies have also identified notable gaps in political efficacy (Nelsen 2023) and voter participation (Morris and Grange 2024), both of which contribute to the “civics performance gap” (Tichnor-Wagner et. al. 2020). Observed gaps in political knowledge between Black and White demographics are complicated by Cohen and Luttig (2020), who found that when carceral violence is included as a metric of political knowledge, Black people demonstrate higher levels of knowledge. This suggests that traditional measurements do not adequately assess the political knowledge of marginalized groups, as their lived experiences provide them with different types of political knowledge than their white counterparts.

While existing research has noted the shortcomings of current civics education curricula and the persistence of the civic republican and liberal frameworks in developing civics education standards that address the gaps in political efficacy and knowledge between racial groups, scholars have not examined whether the reforms passed in recent years regarding civics education have had any effect on developing student political knowledge for *any* demographic since their implementation. In this paper, I intend to build upon the existing literature surrounding modern civics education by evaluating the effectiveness of recent civics education reforms on their stated goals of developing a stronger political knowledge base for students. I hypothesize that if a state passed civic education reform that reinforced the dominant civic republican framework, there would be no corresponding significant increase in student civics proficiency in that state. Doing so will reveal the limits of the current civics education frameworks: If no significant change is noticed in student proficiency after the implementation of new standards, that serves as evidence of the limits of the current methods of teaching civics

since these reforms reinforce rather than revolutionize current pedagogy. Additionally, I argue that if a form of civics education is introduced that addresses the lived experiences of students, there will be more long-term political participation and engagement by students who are exposed to these alternate programs, with political participation referring to voting, participating in campaigns, contact with local officials, participation in protests, and other political activities. If these hypotheses prove to be true, I advocate for a shift in civics education away from rote political knowledge formation toward developing skills that the modern political environment demands from citizens, focusing on the lived experience of students.

Methods:

To address the question of the extent to which reforms in civics education have affected student political knowledge since 2017, and whether the teaching style of civics education influences outcomes, I adopt a mixed-methods approach. First, I conduct statistical analyses of student civics test scores in Florida, Virginia, and Louisiana to evaluate how effectively reforms have supported political knowledge development among students. I chose these states due to data availability, consistent civics education assessment requirements, and the civics education reforms enacted by their state legislatures. A key challenge in this study was identifying states that publish annual data on student civics assessments. Although every state is mandated to publish standardized testing scores under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into federal law in 2015 (US Department of Education), these assessments primarily emphasize reading, math, and science. Civics and other social studies subject assessments are not universally required, and in some states where these assessments take place, score reporting lacks the completeness and rigor found in reports for reading, math, and science. Both Florida and Virginia administer civics examinations for all students in the eighth and seventh grades,

respectively. Additionally, both states provide score reports based on racial demographics, enabling a comprehensive examination of the impact these legislative efforts have had on both student populations as a whole and on specific target groups that have been historically underserved by civics education curricula.

Florida and Virginia both passed legislation relating to civics education between 2017 and 2020. However, the bills in each state are not meant to accomplish the same goals. The Florida bill directly calls for examination and adjustments to be made to the civics curriculum, while the Virginia bill restructures the already existing Civics Education Commission to have more members and greater oversight capabilities over the administration of civics standards across the state.

Louisiana is chosen as a comparison case to Florida and Virginia because of its robust data collection of civics assessment data and similar reporting strategies to Florida and Virginia. Louisiana collects civics assessment data in aggregate and by racial demographic. Louisiana conducts a civics examination for all students statewide at the end of eighth grade, however, because the state has not passed any reforms for civics during the timespan I am examining for this study, it can serve as a control case to compare the effectiveness of the reform efforts in the other states.

Because curricula and programs focusing on civic engagement as a form of civic education are uncommon, I use the Student Voices program as a case study to examine long-term political engagement trends for students who participated in the program. Using post-program data from two of the program's pilot sites in Philadelphia and Seattle, I can assess the extent to which participation in the program impacted students' long-term political efficacy and participation.

Analysis of State Civics Exam Data:

To evaluate the effectiveness of recent state reforms surrounding civics education, I use paired sample t-tests to compare the competency of eighth-grade students in civics in the years before and after legislative reforms were passed in the respective states. I then compare changes in the percentage of students that place “sufficient” or higher on yearly civics education examinations in the years before and after legislation was passed. Finally, I compare changes in state proficiency with changes in national levels of civics proficiency to determine whether changes can be attributed to the passing of legislation, or if they align with national trends despite reform efforts.

The states included in my analysis were chosen based on the presence of yearly civics/social studies exams for students in the 8th grade (the grade that NAEP tests students), and whether they passed legislation from 2017-2020 related to civics education. I also considered whether the legislation maintained civic republican standards or liberal, as codified in the 2022 study “Currents and Cleavages in State Civic Education Policy Discourses” (Tichnor-Wagner et. al. 2022). Furthermore, states that made explicit reference to “civics” in their curricula, standards, and yearly exams were given preference over other states with general social studies curricula, however, the availability of data limited my choices on this front. Where a “social studies” exam was used, I evaluated proximity to determine if a particular state is a good fit for this analysis. I made this evaluation by looking for assessment items and learning objectives that reference notions of civic knowledge formation, specifically aligning with civic republican and liberal frameworks. For example, the roles and powers of the three branches of government, and notions of a singular “American identity” serve as indicators of civic republican standards, while

standards regarding the significance of foundational documents for individual citizens represent the liberal framework.

For this study, Florida and Virginia were chosen as cases due to their explicit “civics” exams. Furthermore, while eighth-grade exams were preferred, Virginia’s “Civics and Economics” Standards of Learning (SOL) exam is included in the study despite its administration to seventh-graders across the state. Virginia’s passing of HB957 regarding civics education in the state, as well as its consistent data reporting, makes it a valuable test case. Because SOL testing is conducted at the end of the school year, and NAEP testing occurs between January and March of the following school year, I believe the political knowledge base of these students can still be compared to the national averages from the NAEP exam given the relative closeness of their testing dates. Finally, on the point of comparison. In this study, Louisiana was chosen as a control case because of its lack of reforms surrounding civics education between 2017-19, allowing for a comparison to national averages without the variable of civics education reform. Thus, Louisiana provides another baseline to compare changes to state-level civics proficiency in Florida and Virginia over the same period.

While civics examinations of 12th grade students would have been ideal, as they are the nearest to being able to participate in democratic politics, many states do not report data on 12th grade civics proficiency. Thus, data limitations prevent a comprehensive study on this front. There are also data limitations in states where students are required to pass a civics test comprised of a selection of questions from the US Naturalization exam to graduate high school. Because this exam can be taken any number of times until a student achieves proficiency, using this data would not indicate levels of civics proficiency, since all students would eventually achieve a passing score. In contrast, many states conduct and report some form of civics/social

studies examination through middle school, providing year-to-year data for comparisons. Additionally, the NAEP civics exam is only conducted in the 8th grade, meaning that this is the only grade where a comparison to national averages could be made.

Because the reforms that I am observing took place in the period of 2017-20, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic must be considered when evaluating the effectiveness of these reforms. To this end, civics test scores will be analyzed, comparing the last full school year without the state reform and the first school year with the ratified legislation once the state returned to full in-person instruction. To further verify results, the civics proficiency at the state level will also be compared to national trends over the same period, helping to contextualize some of the data inconsistencies that may appear due to the pandemic. Comparison between national and state scores further elucidates whether individual state action or larger national trends help to explain the shifts in civics proficiency from year to year.

Finally, because I will be using scoring for standardized civics exams, which differs between states, instead of raw test scores, I will be looking at the percentage of students who exhibit “proficiency” within each of the state exams rather than averages of the scores themselves. While the qualifications for proficiency may also differ between states, this data can be more easily compared across contexts and with national NAEP civics data.

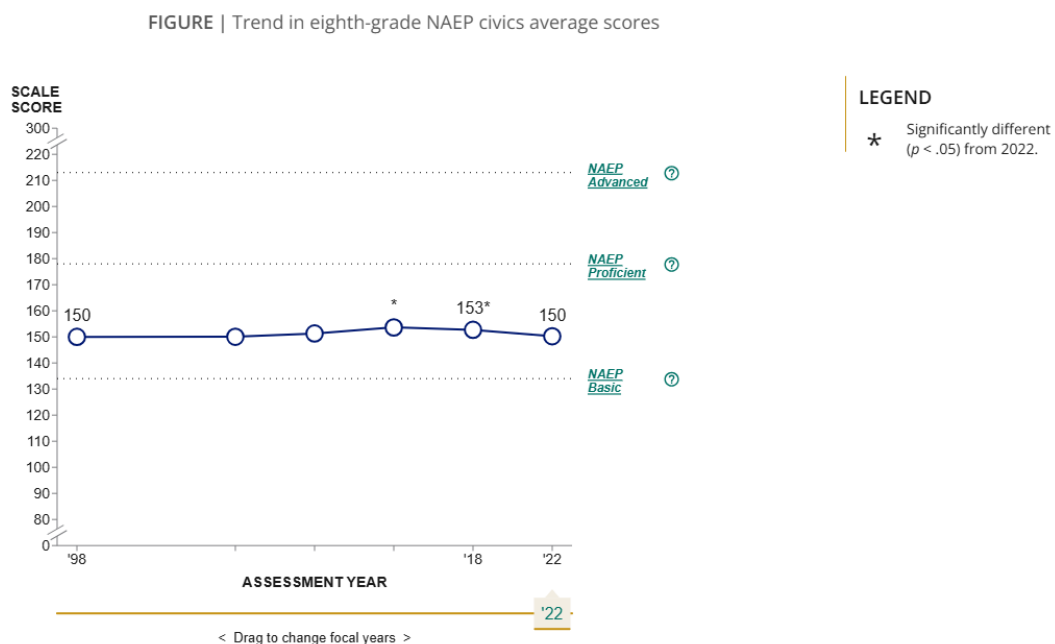
Case Study: Philadelphia Student Voices Program

To explore the effectiveness of alternative conceptions of civics education, I look at post-program data from the Student Voices program in the pilot locations of Philadelphia and Seattle high schools in the early 2000s. This example is chosen because it is a prime example of schools providing resources for students to engage in their local communities directly as a form of civics

education, relating political action to local contexts in hopes of developing more politically engaged students. In addition, previous studies conducted on the Student Voices program provide longitudinal data on participants of this program which is used to evaluate changes in political knowledge, efficacy, and intent to engage in political activities as a result of participation. If done effectively, the Student Voices program would demonstrate the ability to close gaps in political participation and efficacy among marginalized demographics while also increasing students' political knowledge.

Data and Results

National Data



Source: NAEP Report Card: Civics (2022)

Every four years, the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) conducts a nationwide examination of civics and social studies education in 8th graders. While this test has been conducted since 1994, it has also been historically noted that only minor changes to the test

have been made throughout the examination's existence. Test-by-test, there have been statistically significant changes in scores. The most recent exam in 2022 displayed a nationwide drop in 8th-grade civics proficiency since 2014, with a consistent downslide in proficiency over the past three exams. However, the most recent exam scores show that student proficiency in civics has returned to the levels it was when the exam was first administered in 1994.

The NAEP civics exam groups students into four levels of proficiency: below NAEP basic, NAEP basic, NAEP proficient, and NAEP advanced. Comparing the 2018 NAEP civics examination to the 2022 exam results, the only statistically significant change came in the form of a three percent increase in students whose scores placed them in the “below NAEP basic” designation, indicating that across the nation, civics proficiency has dropped in recent years.

Additionally, the NAEP exam highlights how student scores on civics exams vary by race. The data shows how NAEP civics exam scores for black students have historically been lower than those of white students. Even as scores have trends have changed over time, the gap between these groups has not had any significant shift since the civics exam began administration in 1994. These trends are a further indication of the racial disparities that exist in the teaching of civics in schools and reinforce the assertion that the current standards based on the civic republican and liberal frameworks have not translated into developing a more politically knowledgeable public.

FIGURE | Trend in eighth-grade NAEP civics average scores for Black students

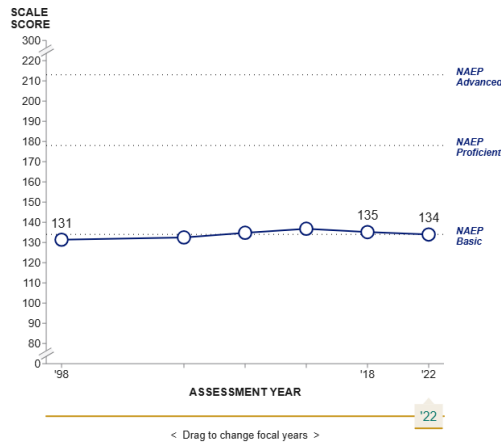
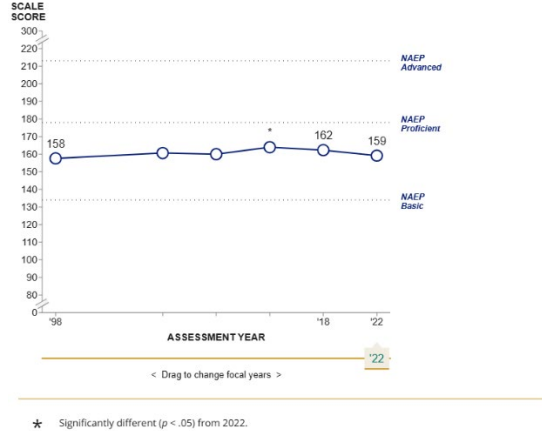


FIGURE | Trend in eighth-grade NAEP civics average scores for White students



Source: NAEP Report Card: Civics – Student Group Scores and Score Gaps (2022)

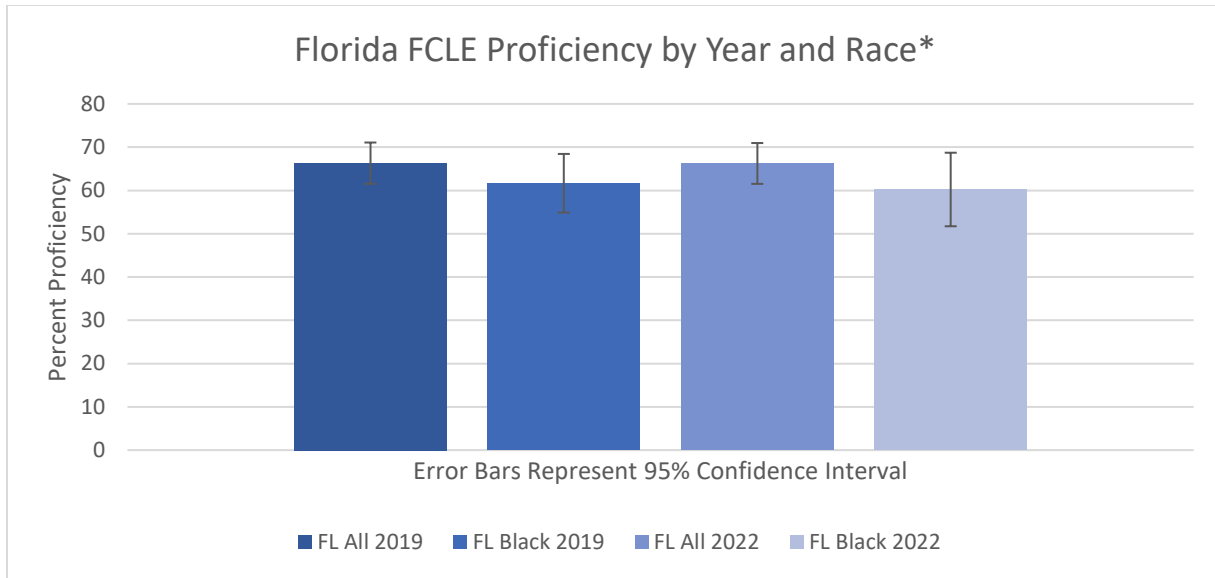
Using this national data as a baseline to compare to individual state scores is valuable because it allows me to see if the individual states go against national trends, thus suggesting the value of the reforms to the civics curriculum they instituted. However, if changes in civics proficiency at the state level over time follow the same trends as the national averages in proficiency, it would suggest that there are external factors contributing to changes in civics exam scores, that reform efforts aimed at civics education have been ineffective, or a combination of both.

Florida

In 2019, Florida passed HB 807 relating to Civics Education. The bill came about shortly after the election of Governor Ron DeSantis. The governor, as part of his push for sweeping reforms to the education curriculum, highlighted civics education as a primary focus in Executive Order 19-32 in January of 2019, claiming it was the state’s responsibility to “equip high school graduates with sufficient knowledge of America’s civics, particularly the principles

reflected in the United States Constitution, so as to be capable of discharging the responsibilities associated with American citizenship.” The bill, introduced in the Florida legislature just weeks later, required a full review of civics education standards by the commissioner of the board of education, erasing “any errors or inaccuracies” from the curriculum and presenting recommendations for changes by the end of 2019. In 2020, the larger board of education was to have a full review of civics standards done. The bill also required all sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade students to take a civics course each year of middle school and take the end-of-year civics exam, for which passing will constitute 30% of their grade in each of these civics courses. Finally, the bill mandates that to progress into high school, all eighth-grade students must pass the End-of-Course Civics exam.

The Florida Civic Liberties Exam (FCLE) tests students on civic duties and responsibilities, U.S. history, the functions of the branches of the U.S. government, and the historical documents of the United States. These standards fall closely in line with civic republican standards of civics education, with a strong emphasis on the memorization of facts relating to government processes and institutions. The test is 60 questions long, and students must score at least 60% to be deemed “proficient.” While the test is administered once during each season of the school year, only the data from the Spring test administration is used for analysis as it provides the largest sample size of students and best represents student knowledge at the end of the school year. As a result of HB 209, the legislature of Florida hopes to increase the number of students who pass the test each year.



**Racial comparisons made by calculating average scores in counties with the highest percentage of Black residents*

State	Demographic	Year	Mean Proficiency	SD	SE	n
FL	All	2019	66.3095	15.4517	2.384251	42
FL	Black	2019	61.6667	10.1612	3.387067	9
FL	All	2022	66.2381	15.292	2.359602	42
FL	Black	2022	60.2222	12.7454	4.248457	9

The data represents student achievement on the FCLE in 2019 and 2022. The mean represents the average percentage of 8th grade students scoring a 3/5 (displaying proficiency) or higher from data taken across 42 counties in Florida, where data was available for both 2019 and 2022. The data shows almost no change in average proficiency percentages between these years when observing data across all races. In addition, the small change that is observed (less than a tenth of a percent change) is not statistically significant ($p>0.05$).

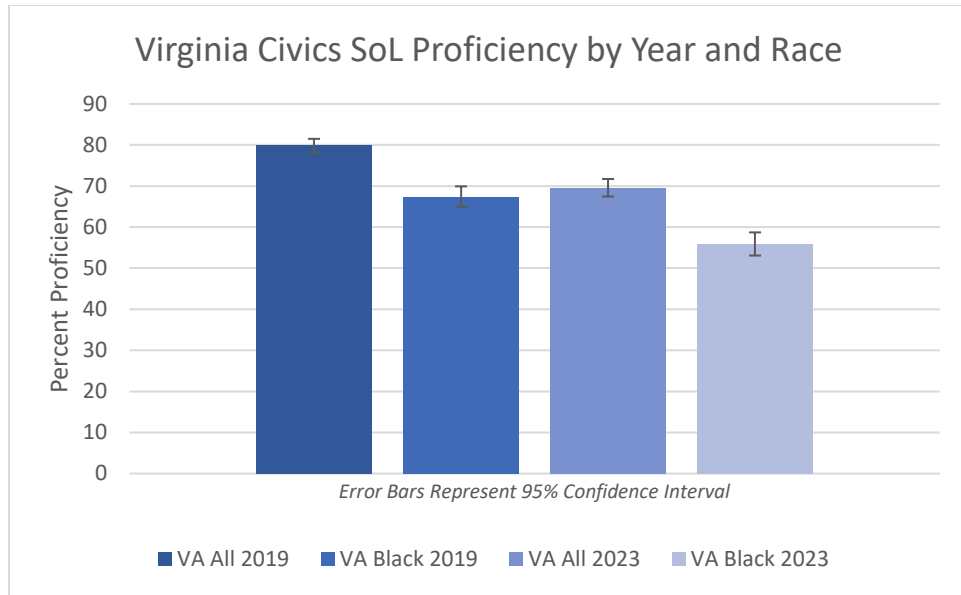
Unfortunately, while Florida does provide yearly examination data by county, data is not published on the percentage of passing students based on race. Therefore, in order to evaluate potential racial differences in regard to the FCLE, the average scores of the 15 counties with the

highest percentage of Black residents were compared to the wider state averages. Of the 15 counties, nine had complete data for both 2019 and 2022. The comparison of these means reveals slightly lower scores in the counties with more black residents when compared to statewide averages, but because of the limited sample size, no strong conclusions can be made on the validity of this data.

Virginia

In 2020, the Virginia Legislature passed SB 957, extending the Virginia Commission on Civics Education, expanding its membership, and allowing state funds to be used in achieving its goals of educating students on the importance of civic participation, increasing student knowledge of government, and enhancing communication with external organizations involved in civics education. With this bill, the Virginia legislature planned to increase the Commission's ability to conduct oversight and provide support for civics education with state funds, thus providing avenues to make meaningful changes to the state's civics curriculum. However, since this bill was passed, no significant changes have been made to the structure of Virginia civics education, and the current, largely civic republican standards have remained in place. In Virginia, only one civics course is required in grades K-8, and one more civics and government class is required in order to graduate from high school.

Virginia examines student civics proficiency through their end-of-year Civics and Economics SOL exam for all 7th graders in the state. Tests are administered online in a multiple-choice format. The raw scores for this exam lie on a scale from 0-600, and are then grouped into one of 3 different designations: "fail/does not meet", "pass proficient", and "pass advanced". Students whose scores fell under the designations "pass proficient" and "pass advanced" are counted in this study.



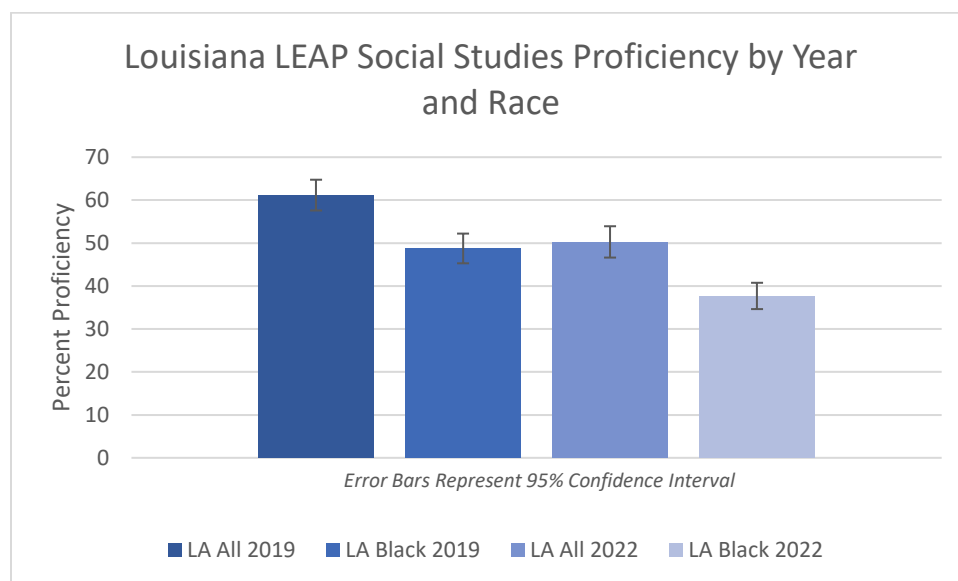
State	Group	Year	Mean Proficiency%	SD	SE	n
VA	All	2019	79.8481	9.24627	0.823723	126
VA	Black	2019	67.4363	11.6016	1.243818	87
VA	All	2023	69.5851	11.9715	1.066504	126
VA	Black	2023	55.9012	13.1456	1.409356	87

The data represents the percentage of students who passed the Civics and Economics SOL in the school years 2018-19 and 2022-23. The data is collected from 126 school districts in Virginia before and after SB 957 was passed. These specific years are chosen to draw the most direct comparisons to both the national averages as well as the other states included in this analysis. The data shows a more than 10 percent drop in the number of students passing the exam in 2023 as compared to 2019, with high statistical significance ($p < 0.05$). This aligns with national trends, as previously mentioned, since NAEP civics scores have been on the decline since 2014. However, a 10 percent decrease in student pass rate is much more pronounced than the non-statistically significant decrease in proficiency observed in Florida, which is worth noting.

Additionally, there is an observable difference in proficiency percentage between black students and statewide averages that is highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This gap in student proficiency by race has been maintained over time, demonstrating how legislative efforts have not led to a closing of the civics performance gap in Virginia, along with failing to have any impact on political knowledge formation for students in the state.

Louisiana

The Louisiana Department of Education requires that all students in grades 3-8 to take the statewide Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) examinations in each grade, one of which is a social studies examination. Using data from Louisiana 8th graders in the years 2018 and 2022 provides a line of comparison for the changes in scores in Florida and Virginia. Moreover, because Louisiana has not made any changes to its curriculum through legislation during the timeframe of the study, it acts as a control for other states that also have yearly data, as opposed to the data from NAEP that only occurs once every four years.



State	Race	Year	Mean Proficiency%	SD	SE	n
LA	All	2019	61.1739	14.8704	1.791564	68
LA	Black	2019	48.7536	15.3421	1.729022	69
LA	All	2022	50.2754	15.2345	1.823626	68
LA	Black	2022	37.6957	13.3491	1.531469	69

The data presented here represents student achievement on the LEAP 2019 and LEAP 2022 social studies exams. The data was collected from a 68 Louisiana parishes for which data was available in both 2019 and 2022. This timeframe was selected to draw the most direct comparison possible to the data collected from Florida. Unlike Florida, Louisiana experienced a statistically significant drop in student performance on its LEAP civics exam between 2019 and 2022. It is also worth noting that because Louisiana made no legislative changes regarding its social studies curriculum, the drop in scores suggests that factors beyond pedagogy influence student retention of civic knowledge.

Also of note is that, like in Virginia, racial differences in proficiency are stark, statistically significant, and have persisted over time. Again, these differences demonstrate that the existing gaps in political knowledge are not remedied by civics education under the civic republican and liberal frameworks. In addition, the trends observed in Louisiana also reflect the national trends on the NAEP civics exam, both in the decline in proficiency over time as well as the noticeable gap in proficiency between Black students and aggregate averages of all students.

Analysis of Statistical Data

The data presented offer up a number of possible findings regarding civics education and the role of reforms to civics curricula. In the case of Florida, a lack of significant change in FCLE scores over time suggests that the legislative changes passed in the state have had little to

no effect on improving student outcomes with civics education. The changes made to the Florida curriculum were meant to improve student achievement on these exams by ensuring that middle school students had a dedicated civics education class in grades 6, 7, and 8, and by removing inaccuracies within the curriculum, but these actions have not translated into gains in political knowledge for students.

This Florida case demonstrates a scenario in which the reform efforts were made to adjust and update the civics education standard for students. However, even after the bill was passed and adjustments were made to the overall curriculum, the prevalence of civic republican and liberal standards remained. This example supports the hypothesis that if reforms are made that maintain a curriculum based on these frameworks, then there will be no significant increases in student civics proficiency as a result. It is worth highlighting, however, that while the national NAEP civics exam scores and proficiency saw declines between 2018 and 2022, the stagnation in Florida does not reflect these trends.

The Virginia case is different than Florida. In Virginia, there is an observable drop in student civics proficiency despite reforms making adjustments to the composition and powers of their Commission on Civics Education and the maintenance of the same civic republican standards that existed prior. The legislation, by expanding the number of members on the commission and allowing for the use of state funding in support of programs focused on civics education, could have facilitated expanded oversight over civics education programs and new programs in schools built around developing students into engaged political citizens. Instead, the focus has remained on developing rote political knowledge, and the data does not reflect success in advancing this goal. The decline in student pass rates in Virginia more closely aligns with national NAEP data, but a 10 percent drop when compared to the lack of significant change in

Florida is striking. This demonstrates how, despite both states introducing legislation meant to improve civics education, the outcomes of students after passing the legislation vary greatly, suggesting that passing legislation may not have had a great impact on changes in student achievement. Moreover, it suggests that when changes are made to the administration of civics education instead of to the curriculum, there is the danger of a significant decrease in student proficiency scores.

I believe that where the Virginia legislation has the greatest potential for impact on civics education is in addressing the wide gaps in proficiency between Black students and the greater student population. By expanding the board to increase oversight, and allowing the use of state funds to promote civics education, the Commission on Civics Education has the power to provide programs and materials to Black students that could address the civics performance gap in the state. However, the persistence of the gap from 2019 to 2023 serves as evidence of the Commission's ineffectiveness in this regard. This example reveals that in order to improve civics education, reform efforts must be explicit in the issues they aim to address and in their goals. Vague policies such as HB 957 will not be sufficient.

Results from Louisiana further complicate our understanding of civics reform. Like Virginia, Louisiana experienced statistically significant drops in student proficiency rates over the given period. Also, like Virginia, the decline in proficiency was around 10 percent. The fact that Louisiana did not pass any legislation regarding civics education between 2017 and 2020, but demonstrates trends reminiscent of both a state that did make changes to the administration of civics as well as national trends in civics proficiency, suggests further that legislation has not had any significant effect on improving civics education. Additionally, the existence and maintenance of gaps in proficiency between Black Louisiana students and statewide averages

demonstrate how civics education is not reaching Black students in the ways that it should, while also further challenging the usefulness of Virginia's legislation, which has not made any improvements to this phenomenon despite having the potential to. Alternatively, this data could also suggest that other, more salient factors impact how effective civics education is at developing political knowledge in students.

When taking the outcomes of each observed state along with the national trends, Florida stands out as the only state observed that did not experience a significant decline in student civics proficiency. Although Florida did not experience an increase in civics performance before and after the passing of HB 807, it also did not experience any decrease, as seen in Virginia, Louisiana, and the NAEP 2022 results. While both Florida and Virginia passed legislation aimed at improving civics education, only Florida's bill explicitly called for adjustments to state civics standards and curriculum. This could suggest that the changes made in Florida allowed the state to combat and go against the national trends, but the data analyzed does not allow me to make these assertions. It is also very likely that other factors played a strong role in preventing the downslide of civic scores observed in other places. Specifically, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic affected schools in these states very differently, which likely led to the discrepancies noticed in the data.

The Impact of COVID

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic varied across the United States. Specifically, as it relates to education, these differences affect when and under what conditions students returned to classrooms across the country. In Virginia, all schools remained closed for in-person instruction for at least the first semester of the 2020-21 school year, with some schools reopening for the second semester with strict guidelines to curb the spread of the disease. Similarly, most of

Louisiana's schools remained closed for the 2020-21 school year in response to the virus, opting instead for remote instruction during the most volatile period of the pandemic.

Unlike these states, the majority of Florida schools returned to on-campus instruction to begin the 2020-21 school year and remained committed to in-person instruction for the duration of the pandemic. While this strategy may have put more students at risk of disease, evidence has shown that in states where more in-person instruction occurred, declines in student test scores across all subjects were less pronounced (Halloran et. al. 2021). Florida, by returning to full in-person instruction earlier than both other states observed, may have avoided taking on losses in civics proficiency as large as those in Virginia and Louisiana. Therefore, the maintenance of steady student civic scores in Florida may not have been a result of the legislation passed, but rather the result of an earlier return to normalcy and a continuation of long-term trends with less interruption from the COVID pandemic. Ideally, to parse out the impact of student return to classrooms versus adjustments to civic curriculum, I would need another state that reformed or altered its civics curriculum and kept student out of the classroom until late in the 2020-21 school year.

Case Study: The Student Voices Program

The Student Voices Program was founded in 2000 by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. The primary goal of this program was to address declines in youth political engagement, an issue that persists to this day. To make progress toward its goal, the program developed a unique curriculum centered around student involvement and engagement in local politics with the goals of increasing political efficacy, increasing the extent to which students engage in political activities, and increasing how much students follow and discuss politics outside of the classroom.

The program revolved around teaching students about political participation by directly engaging them with local elections taking place during the semester of participation in the program. By involving students in local elections, the program exposed students to and engaged them with politics at the level most directly connected to them. In doing so, the Student Voices program also aimed to address widespread disengagement from local politics observed across the country. The program was conducted over 10 weeks and took place during regular school hours in place of a standard social studies course, allowing for comparisons between students who participated in Student Voices and those who took standard civics courses.

Student Voices was piloted in 12 cities across the United States. For this analysis, I will reference data collected about the program participants in Philadelphia's 2002-2003 cohort and from the first administration of the program in Seattle during the 2000-2001 school year. In a study conducted by Feldman et. al. (2007), student outcomes from the 2002-2003 school year program cycle in Philadelphia were collected to evaluate the extent to which the program met its goals. Surveys were conducted to examine changes in three outcome variables: how much students follow and discuss politics, student political efficacy, and knowledge of current political events (Feldman et. al. 2007). In a follow-up study by Pasek et. al. (2008) Student Voices participants of the 2002-2003 Philadelphia cohort were surveyed during the lead-up to the 2004 U.S. presidential election to see if program participants continued to display higher levels of political participation years after their involvement in Student Voices.

The results of these studies are compared to reported student outcomes in Seattle after the first iteration of their Student Voices program in the 2000-2001 school year. Data for this comparison is taken from the report evaluating student outcomes from the Seattle administration of the program done by Mike Xenos, Lance Bennett, and Adam Simon of the University of

Washington (2002). To determine the effectiveness of the program, the authors conduct surveys to evaluate the extent to which the program affected student political engagement and knowledge along six criteria: News media consumption, attention to and interest in news about local affairs and the mayoral election, discussion of politics and local issues, political knowledge, political cynicism/trust in government, and political participation (Bennett, Simon, and Xenos 2002).

The data from these studies were chosen because the outcomes analyzed by these authors directly relate to modern shortcomings of civics education, those being the formation of political knowledge, establishing political efficacy (especially for minority students), and political engagement by youth. The Student Voices program provides a unique look into how alternate conceptions of civics education based on the lived experiences of students can effectively create engaged and well-equipped political citizens for the future.

Results

The study conducted by Feldman et. al. (2007) found that for students who participated in the Student Voices program for one semester, survey data indicated a statistically significant increase in all three target categories: political engagement, political efficacy, and political knowledge when compared to students who did not participate in the program. When program participation is expanded to a second semester, the researchers observed continued statistically significant increases in political engagement and knowledge. While there was still an observed increase in political efficacy two-semester participants, the data no longer showed statistical significance in this increase (Feldman et. al. 2007).

As a part of getting students to engage with local politics, the Student Voices program advocated for the use of modern technology to facilitate communication between students and

between students and candidates. At the time of the study, modern technology was the internet and online forums, which were rapidly gaining popularity. Students were encouraged to use online resources to engage in discussions about political issues with their peers, which ultimately resulted in these students having a higher inclination to discuss politics outside of the classroom at the end of the program's completion (Bennett, Simon, and Xenos 2002; Feldman et. al. 2007).

The reported results from Seattle corroborate many of the observations made in Philadelphia but with some variance. In Seattle, the participants in the Student Voices program were also more likely to discuss political issues. However, the data only shows a statistically significant increase in students' likelihood of having these discussions with peers. With parents, the increase in students discussing political affairs, while positive, was not statistically significant. Furthermore, while students who participated in the program were highly knowledgeable about the 2001 mayoral election that they followed throughout the class, compared to students who did not participate, there was no statistically significant increase in political knowledge at the state or national level. It is also of note that while the program in Seattle did observe increases in political efficacy, measured by students' reported trust in local and national government institutions before and after the program, these changes were not found to be statistically significant. A reason for these differences between Philadelphia and Seattle could be that while the emphasis in Seattle on the local mayoral race did allow students to connect more with candidates and their campaigns directly (Bennett, Simon, and Xenos 2002), a classroom visit from a mayoral candidate does not ensure that a student's specific political wants and needs are met if that particular candidate gets elected at all. Furthermore, engaging in local politics in this way does not convey to students how their voices can be heard on the national political stage, preventing significant gains in efficacy.

Another potential reason for these discrepancies could be the measurements for efficacy chosen by the researchers in Seattle. The Seattle study uses trust in government as a proxy for efficacy, but this measurement could be better looked at as a measurement of *external efficacy*, which “refers to beliefs about how responsive the government will be to citizens’ needs and demands,” (Pasek et. al. 28), as opposed to *internal efficacy*, referring to “beliefs about one’s own competence to understand and participate effectively in political life,” (Pasek et. al. 2008, 28), which Feldman et. al. and Pasek et. al. pay particular attention to in their respective studies.

Feldman et. al. (2007) also noted that the statistically significant increases in all three observed categories were consistent in schools located in urban and underprivileged areas of Philadelphia. Statistically significant gains were seen across all demographics of students who participated in the program for at least one semester. Because of these consistent increases across locations, the authors argue that programs such as Student Voices can help address the discrepancies in political knowledge and participation observed in underprivileged and minority communities.

Long-Term Political Participation

In a follow-up study to Feldman et. al. (2007), Pasek et. al. (2008), hoped to track the lasting effects of the Student Voices program on the 2002-2003 Philadelphia cohort by evaluating the extent to which the gains in efficacy, political attentiveness, and political knowledge translated to engagement with the 2004 presidential election cycle, specifically regarding awareness of events surrounding the election, knowledge of candidates, and tendency to vote. By conducting over-the-phone surveys of former members of the Philadelphia cohort, Pasek et. al. determine the impact of the Student Voices program on the long-term political behavior of program participants.

In this study, the researchers first found that participation in Student Voices itself did not lead to significant increases in individuals' likelihood of having candidate knowledge or keeping up with current events surrounding the 2004 presidential election (Pasek et. al. 2008). However, participation in Student Voices was strongly correlated to higher internal efficacy. Higher internal efficacy, in turn, was found to be strongly correlated with increased knowledge of candidates, more political attentiveness, and a higher likelihood to vote in the upcoming presidential election. In short, this study finds that increasing internal efficacy in individuals leads to greater long-term political engagement, and the Student Voices program was able to build this internal efficacy in its participants.

The results of this study further demonstrate the value of the Student Voices program as a form of civics education to create a more engaged and politically aware electorate for the future. Gains in efficacy, political attentiveness, and political knowledge were observed in participants of the Student Voices program. Thus, students who participated in this program were better equipped and more inclined to participate in politics than students who took part in traditional civics education classes.

Discussion

Current civics education pedagogy is outdated and in need of replacement if schools are to serve as sites for the development of a new generation of politically aware and engaged citizens. The increased attention brought to civics in recent years resulting from falling test scores and political turmoil should have opened the pathway for new and innovative ways to teach students how to actively and effectively participate in American democracy. Instead, the opportunity has been taken to reinforce the notion of a unified and homogenous American citizenry that did not exist 150 years ago and does not exist today.

In Florida and Virginia, the national trends of stagnation and decline in civics proficiency influenced lawmakers in these states to pass legislation meant to highlight and address these issues. However, by passing legislation that maintained the existing style of civics education based on forming a base of political knowledge and teaching to standardized tests, it makes sense that the outcomes for students taught using these curricula have the same outcomes as they did before the laws were passed.

If the primary goal of these state-level reforms was to develop stronger political knowledge bases in students, these efforts failed. In both Florida and Virginia, there is little evidence that the introduction of legislation and in the case of Florida, curriculum reforms, had any effect on how well students retained the information given to them in their mandatory civics courses. In Florida specifically, the lack of statistically significant changes in eighth-grade end-of-year civics proficiency calls into question the usefulness of the reform in the first place. Meanwhile, Virginia's reform, which was largely administrative, did not prevent it from experiencing declines in proficiency in line with national averages. Additionally, the reform did nothing to address the large gaps in civics proficiency between Black students and the larger student population. Similarly, the test case of Louisiana, which did not pass any civics education reforms between 2017-2020, also witnessed declines in student scores and the maintenance of large gaps in proficiency based on race, further calling into question the usefulness of Virginia's legislation in particular.

While curricula based on fact memorization make it easy to test student proficiency, it is not conducive to developing the necessary skills for participation in democracy. For example, Florida requires all high school students to pass the FCLE as a requirement to graduate. However, because this test can be taken as many times as needed until a student achieves a

passing score of 60%, there is little incentive for students to commit this knowledge to long-term memory. Rather, systems such as these encourage students to “cram and dump,” forgetting this information as soon as it is no longer of use. Furthermore, civics is not math. The field that civics education prepares students for is constantly shifting and changing. Almost every scenario in politics is imbued with some level of nuance and subjectivity that cannot be fully captured on a multiple-choice quiz.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be understated for its impact on education as a whole. States and school districts are still playing catch-up from the disruption that came from lockdowns, school shutdowns, and transitions to and from virtual schooling. While the full-lasting effects of the pandemic on student learning are still unknown, the situation has provided an opportunity to try something new in the field of civics education. The post-pandemic drops in proficiency across the nation may not return to pre-pandemic levels using the current civics frameworks. Even if they did, nearly 30 years of stagnation is motivation enough to try something new.

Since legislation reinforcing civic republicanism in civics education has proven to be ineffective at achieving its goal of developing political knowledge in students, now is as good a time as ever to try alternative methods of creating citizens prepared to participate in the modern political environment. While understanding the foundations of American democracy is important, what current curricula fail to do is explain to students why their participation within democratic institutions matters for their futures and the future of the country; and how their participation can lead to the changes that they hope to see.

In an internet-dominated era where individuals are less likely and less incentivized to commit political knowledge to memory (Kleinberg and Lau 2019), civics education needs to

adapt. Students should be learning how to navigate the modern political environment where social media has replaced television news and written sources as their primary mode of receiving political information. More hands-on approaches should be taken in the classroom to engage students with local politics and issues that matter in their lives.

I am not arguing that the formation of traditional political knowledge has no place in civics education, but its continued emphasis is not beneficial if schools hope to make any real impact on students becoming engaged political citizens. Studies have shown that a semester of traditional civics education does affect student's political engagement (Niemi and Junn 1998), but I believe that civics education should not stop there, and civic republican style curricula should be used as a starting base of knowledge to be built upon and complicated by lived experience facilitated in the classroom.

The Student Voices program provides an excellent example of what an adaptive civics education curriculum could look like today. Even though the observations of this program were taken from the early 2000s, they demonstrate ways that teaching civics can adapt to the time and location in which it takes place and the value that flexibility presents for students. The Student Voices program came about at the turn of the century, just as the world was beginning its shift online. Rather than present the new technology as dangerous, the program embraced the internet, teaching students how and encouraging them to use the resource to communicate with each other to discuss relevant political issues, and how to contact elected officials and locate political information.

Another virtue of Student Voices was its potential to address many of the disparities that currently exist surrounding politics in the United States as a whole. By having students engage with a local election during their time in the program, the program created awareness for local

politics, which is an often overlooked sphere of influence in favor of state and national political discourse (Pew Research Center 2024). Remaining local allows students to become personally invested in the issues that they explore and provides more opportunities for direct involvement than simply teaching about the importance of voting and other civic responsibilities.

Another disparity that a program such as Student Voices can address is the gap in political efficacy experienced by students of color that may deter them from participating in politics altogether (Nelsen 2023). A program that is intentionally and intensely focused on local politics can affirm a minority student's lived experience as a citizen of the United States as an important piece in the larger political environment. The studies referenced in this paper show that participation in Student Voices led to an increase in efficacy by students after just one semester in the program. More impressively, these gains were seen in students of all demographics, again demonstrating the value of using local politics to affirm youth lived experiences as integral to the makeup of American society and encouraging them to engage with politics in the future.

A program like Student Voices introduces variance to civics education. On this front, it seems that civics has fallen behind other typical school subjects. Science encourages using different approaches to solve a problem, English classes are made to draw out the creativity and original ideas of students, and even modern math provides multiple ways to solve the same long division problem. For some reason, civics education has not caught up to this trend. Instead, civics curricula continue to highlight only one conception of what it means to be an American citizen, and it is a conception that does not reflect a large portion of the population. Learning from and implementing programs like Student Voices in schools in place of multiple semesters of rote memorization of facts that will not be retained will benefit American society greatly, and

create a generation of equipped, informed, and engaged political citizens that will guide the country toward its future.

Conclusion

It is time for fundamental changes to be made in the way civics education is taught in the United States. Long gone are the days when only land-owning white men had the right to have their voices heard at the ballot box. Yet despite this fact, students are still taught civics in ways that discount and discredit their lived experiences when they do not fit neatly into the established framework. In order to create an America in which every citizen feels that they have the full right of access to American institutions, we must teach all students that their lived experience is just as American as the next. Creating a cohesive citizenry does not mean forcing everyone into one box, it comes through recognizing that the uniqueness of each individual is what unites us.

Civics education should reflect that uniqueness, it should allow students to engage with issues that interest them and create avenues for making the changes they hope to see in the nation. The full rights of citizenship are not meant to be reserved for the few. Once we begin teaching students to understand this, the result will be a more politically involved and engaged citizenry, and ultimately a better country.

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