



Themes Emphasized in Social Studies and Civics Classes: New Evidence

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A survey conducted by the Council for Excellence in Government and CIRCLE reveals unprecedented information about the content and significance of civics and social studies classes today.¹ Overall, the curriculum and message of history and social studies classes appear to be more traditionalist than is commonly supposed.

There are differences in the civic attitudes and behaviors of people who recall different major themes from their history and social studies courses. For example, those who report that a major theme was "Great American heroes and the virtues of the American system of government" were more trusting than other young people and more likely to believe that voting is important (even if background characteristics are controlled). Those who report an emphasis on "racism and other forms of injustice" are more likely than any other group to be registered to vote (again, the relationship holds when background characteristics are controlled).

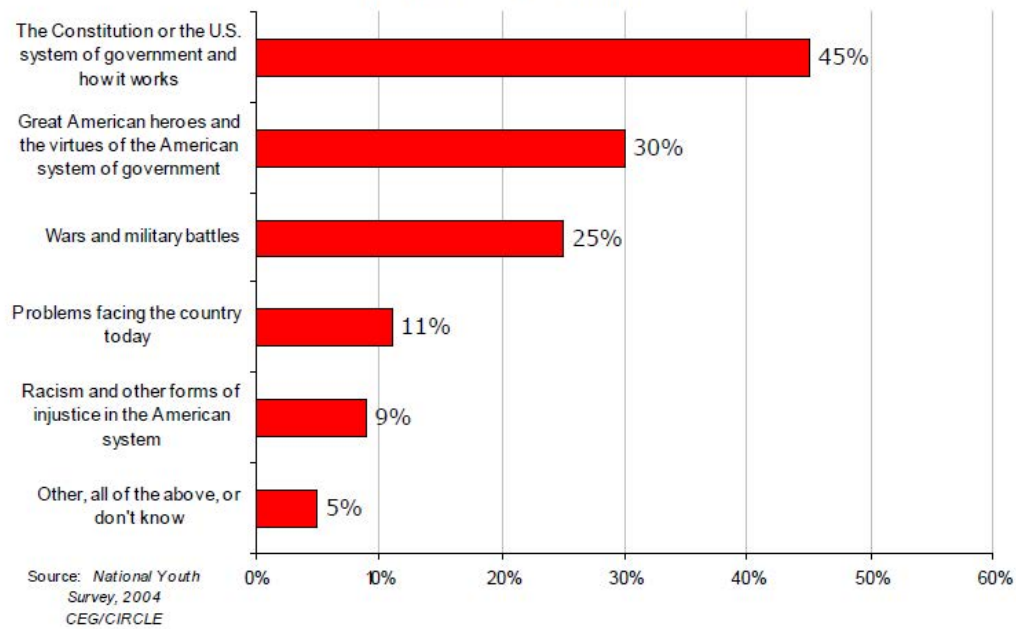
On a range of civic engagement measures, the survey suggests that those who choose to take civics, politics, or government classes are much more engaged in community affairs and politics than other young people.

Most Social Studies Classes Emphasize Traditionalist Themes and Values

There have recently been strong criticisms suggesting that high school social studies teachers emphasize the negative aspects of American history and culture and fail to transmit an understanding or appreciation of American institutions.

However, when a random sample of young Americans (ages 15-25) were asked to pick the one theme that had been most emphasized in their social studies or American history classes, their top choice was "the Constitution or the U.S. system of government and how it works." The second most common choice was "great American heroes and the virtues of the American system of government." In contrast, just 11 percent selected "problems facing the country today" and nine percent chose "racism and other forms of injustice in the American system."

Graph 1: When you think about government classes, civics classes, or American history classes you had in middle school or high school, which of the following aspects were emphasized the *most*?



These statistics should profoundly influence arguments about history and social studies education—arguments that have been part of the “Culture Wars” since at least the 1960s. This is the first such national survey to ask what happens in typical classrooms.

Some Students Reported Combinations of Themes

Certain combinations were frequent. For example, almost half (45%) of those who said that they had been exposed to “problems facing the country today” also reported an emphasis on the “Constitution and US system of government.” The following chart shows the combinations of two answers that were reported.

	<i>Great American Heroes and Virtues of American System</i>	<i>The Constitution/U.S . System of Government</i>	<i>Racism and other forms of injustice in the American System</i>	<i>Wars and military battles</i>	<i>Problems facing the country today</i>
only gave one answer	68%	56%	77%	60%	42%
also mentioned:					
Great American Heroes and Virtues of the American System		15%	4%	7%	6%
Constitution/US System of Government	23%		10%	29%	45%
Racism and other forms of injustice in the American System	1%	2%		2%	3%
Wars and military battles	6%	16%	6%		4%
Problems facing the country today	2%	11%	3%	2%	

Differences by Demographic Background

There are relatively small differences in these answers among subgroups of the population. For example, the same proportion of males and females and of White and African American young people report an emphasis on the negative (racism and injustice, and problems facing the country today).

There are some statistically significant differences. College graduates are more likely to study the Constitution and US history; liberals and African Americans are more likely to report that their classes have emphasized great American heroes and the virtues of the US system; conservative males and Republican males are more likely to recall an emphasis on the US Constitution and political system; and Latinos are more likely to report a focus on racism and other forms of injustice. But large majorities of Americans from all groups recall that their social studies, history, and civics classes emphasized the Constitution and political system and/or great American heroes.

Themes Emphasized in Social Studies Classes and Later Civic Engagement

There are correlations between the main themes that students have studied in their social studies, civics, history, or government classes and their likelihood of participating in various ways. For example,

- Those who say that their classes emphasized “Great American heroes and the virtues of the American system” are most likely to trust other people, to trust the government, and to say that they have volunteered recently.
- Those who report that “problems facing the country today” was the major theme in their social studies classes are most likely to feel that they can make a difference in their communities and the most likely to think that voting is important.

- Those who feel that their teachers concentrated on “racism and other forms of injustice” are most likely to be engaged in community problem-solving and also most likely to be registered to vote (counting only those 18 and over).
- Those who report an emphasis on “the US Constitution and system of government” and also “great American heroes and the virtues of the system of government” are civically engaged, across the board.

We do not know whether emphasizing particular themes in social studies classes *causes* various forms of civic engagement. It is possible that young people in certain communities and demographic groups are more likely to have particular attitudes and habits, and the same people are often exposed to particular themes in their history and social studies classes. Then the relationships described above would not be causal. However, some of these relationships hold even when gender, ethnicity, party identification, education, region, and other variables are controlled. Those especially strong relationships are indicated with triple asterisks in the following chart.

Civic Engagement Activity	Themes Emphasized Most in Civics/Government/Social Studies/American History Classes								
	Average for the whole sample	Great American heroes and virtues of the system of government	The Constitution/US system of government	Racism and other forms of injustice in America	Wars and military battles	Problems facing the country today	The Constitution/US system of government and great American heroes	The Constitution/US system and wars and military battles	The Constitution /US system and problems facing the country
Community Problem Solving in last 12 months	17%	19%	16%	22%	15%	21%	21%	*	*
Can Make a Difference in Community	38%	40%	40%	44%	34%	46%	55%	35%	47%
Volunteered Recently	46%	53%	48%	48%	38%	50%	74%***	37%	39%
Trust People	35%	41%***	40%***	33%	31%	36%	58%	38%	39%
Trust Government	50%	56%	51%	46%	46%	51%	64%	55%	45%
Boycott	29%	30%	27%	28%	31%	15%***	37%***	*	*
Buycott	28%	29%	29%	27%	31%	17%***	49%***	*	*
Voting is Important	53%	54%***	60%***	56%***	45%	64%	73%	70%***	67%
Registered to Vote (18-25)	70%	69%	75%***	81%***	72%	73%	*	77%	*

Note: Results are weighted. *** indicates a statistically significant difference once factors such as race, gender, parental political involvement, educational success, ideology, partisanship, and immigrant generation are controlled. * indicates that the sample size is too small to provide reliable estimates. Other combinations are not shown because the number of respondents reporting those combinations is too small.

Those who choose to take civic classes are much more civically engaged

Those who report that they recently chose to take a civics or government class are more likely than other young people to report that:

- they helped solve a community problem,
- they can make a difference in their community,
- they have volunteered recently,
- they trust other people and the government,
- they have made consumer decisions for ethical or political reasons,
- they believe in the importance of voting, and
- they are registered to vote.

Civic Engagement Activity	<i>Have Chosen to Take a Class in Civics/government/Politics in Recent Years</i>	<i>Have not Chosen to Take a Class in Civics/Government/Politics in Recent Years</i>
Community Problem Solving in last 12 months	29%***	12%
Can Make a Difference in Community	51%***	31%
Volunteered Recently	60%***	40%
Trust People	46%***	29%
Trust Government	58%	46%
Boycott	33%***	27%
Buycott	32%***	26%
Voting is Important	64%***	47%
Registered to Vote (18-25)	72%	70%

Note: Results are weighted. *** indicates a statistically significant effect once factors such as race, gender, parental political involvement, educational success, ideology, partisanship, and immigrant generation are controlled.

It is important to note that people were asked whether they *chose* to take a class; those who make that choice may be more prone to be civically engaged even before they begin the course.

Overall, 35 percent said that “in the past couple of years” they had “chosen to take a class on government, politics, or civic education.” Among 15-17 year olds, 53 percent said they had chosen to take a class in government, politics or civic education. We know from studies of high school transcripts that approximately 80 percent of all high school graduates take government courses.² But some do not take these classes by choice, and some young people have not taken civics or government “in the past couple of years.”

¹ The survey of 1,000 people between the ages of 15 and 25 was conducted November 17-24, 2003, and has a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percent. It was supported by CIRCLE, The Pew Charitable Trusts, Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Gill Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the W.T. Grant Foundation. The data on civics and social studies classes have not been previously released in any form.

² Richard G. Niemi and Julia Smith, “Enrollments in High School Government Classes: Are We Short-Changing both Citizenship and Political Science Teaching?” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2001), pp. 281-7.