



State-Mandated Civics Test Policy Does Not Improve Youth Voter Turnout

Jilli Jung, Pennsylvania State University

Maithreyi Gopalan, Pennsylvania State University-Main Campus

The United States has the largest age gap in voter turnout among advanced democracies. In the 2020 presidential election, voter turnout among young people was about 25 percentage points lower than among elder people, according to the [US Census Bureau](#). The stark contrast in voting participation between different age groups raises significant concerns because early voting experiences are related to individuals' future voting participation.

As a solution to low youth voter turnout, scholars, educators, and policymakers often recommend civic education. Recent efforts in some states have centered around the implementation of a civics test policy for high school students, with the aspiration that this policy would equip students with the knowledge, skills, and engagement required for active and informed citizenship. This policy requires high school students to take or pass a civics test as a condition for high school graduation.

Our study found that the civics test policy did not improve youth voter turnout, at least in the short term, which was [not surprising for many people](#), including us. Does this mean civic education doesn't work? Our answer is a resounding "No". Instead, our findings suggest that mandating civic tests that focus on rote memorization of fact-based civic/political facts might be a wasted policy opportunity when it comes to improving civic engagement among youth. We might be better served by rethinking what a high-quality civic education might look like.

What is the Civics Test Policy?

The Civics Education Initiative (CEI), a state-level civics test policy, emerged as an effort to tackle the issue of low youth voter turnout. It aims to ensure that high school students graduate with the foundational civic knowledge necessary to become informed and engaged citizens.

Between September 2015 and September 2017, the Joe Foss Institute led an advocacy campaign, urging states to adopt a mandatory civics test requirement for high school graduation. The recommended format for this civics test comprised 100 questions encompassing fundamental federal historical and civic facts, drawn from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services naturalization civics test. Since its initial adoption in Arizona in 2016, this civics test policy has become popular, with 18 states implementing some form of this testing-initiative as of 2022. The precise implementation of this policy, however, remains varied. First, while CEI advocated for making high school graduation conditional on passing the civics test, some states relaxed the graduation requirement. Second, the guidance on the administration of the civics test exam and the associated reporting system varies across states. For example, in Arkansas, each high school has a CEI

coordinator who registers students and report the test information to the state system. By contrast, in Minnesota, test results are not reported to the Minnesota Department of Education.

Did the Civics Test Policy Improve Youth Voter Turnout?

Although the civics test policy has been adopted across the country, the question about the effectiveness of this policy remains due to the lack of empirical research. Proponents of this policy argue that by implementing it, students will acquire essential civic knowledge, providing them with the foundational political knowledge necessary for active and informed political participation. However, some scholars caution that the memorization of basic facts about government and history may not necessarily translate into meaningful civic engagement. Using nationally representative data of 18-22-year-old US citizens' voting behavior, [our study](#) found that the civics test policy did not improve youth voter turnout, at least in the short term.

Why did it not work? Several factors may contribute to this policy's limited effectiveness. One plausible explanation is that the civic knowledge required for the civics test may not be directly relevant to the act of voting. The questions on the test, which include "naming the territory the United States purchased in 1803" and "naming the longest rivers in the United States", do not necessarily provide the kind of information that significantly reduces the cost of voting.

Furthermore, the approach to learning this knowledge may be problematic. Given that CEI draws its questions from the publicly available naturalization exam, students may resort to rote memorization to pass the test. Indeed, Quizlet, an online platform/application, provides flashcards to memorize simple facts to prepare for the test. This rote memorization probably helps students pass the test; however, it is highly questionable whether it will help students gain political knowledge or motivate them to participate more actively in the political process.

Rethinking Civic Education

Civic education efforts in schools, while often well-intentioned, struggle to move the needle when it comes to consequential civic participation among youth. This is particularly true for traditional civic education that emphasizes increasing students' political knowledge, like the civics test policy. [A growing body of research](#), including our study, shows the limits of such traditional civic education efforts.

We might have to fundamentally rethink the purpose of civic education. Facts about government and historical political trivia can only go so far! Instead, [emerging research](#) suggests that providing practical information on the voting process and developing students' non-cognitive skills may be a more effective way to reduce the cost of voting for young voters. For example, students who participated in voting-related activities at a high school, such as a get-out-the-vote campaign and visiting elected officials, have shown significantly higher voter turnout rates. Furthermore, recent [experimental studies](#) have demonstrated that comprehensive curricula focusing on non-cognitive skills not only boosted young voter turnout but also had a positive ripple effect on their parents' participation in the electoral process.

Given these emerging insights into civic education, it may be time to shift the educational focus away from the mere memorization of facts and toward teaching and practicing practical civic skills.

Read more in Jill Jung and Maithreyi Gopalan, [“The Stubborn Unresponsiveness of Youth Voter Turnout to Civic Education: Quasi-experimental Evidence from State-Mandated Civics Tests,”](#) Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, (2023).