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US Government and History Classes Emphasize Fundamentals, Heroes, and Virtues

Students Say Classroom Focus is Very Traditional

For at least three decades, critics have charged that social studies, history, and civics classes primarily impart negative views of the nation's political heritage and are devoid of fundamental facts about our system and history. But a new survey of current and recent high school students shows that the opposite is actually happening in classrooms.

Three-quarters of 15-25 year olds said the themes emphasized the most in government, civics, and American history classes are the Constitution and how the US system of government works or "great American heroes and the virtues" of the US system. The third most-chosen theme is "wars and military battles." Lagging far behind were studies of current problems and "racism and other forms of injustice." Although critics often cite these two areas as the most common, each was identified as the main classroom theme by only one-in-ten young people.

The survey is the first national poll to ask current and recent students what happens in classrooms. It was sponsored by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at The Council for Excellence in Government and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), and conducted by Democratic pollsters Lake Snell Perry & Associates and Republican pollsters The Tarrance Group.

"When schools teach citizenship, studies show that they produce good results, yet they invite criticism from across the political spectrum," said William A. Galston, Director of CIRCLE. "Some of the criticisms of modern social studies appear to be unjustified. What's actually taught in our classrooms is very traditional, and this evidence should inform discussions about the future of teaching history and social studies."

When asked to choose one or two themes that were emphasized the most in middle and high school classes, the respondents said:

- 45% -- The Constitution or the US system of government and how it works
- 30% -- Great American heroes and the virtues of the American system of government
- 25% -- Wars and military battles
- 11% -- Problems facing the country today
- 9% -- Racism and other forms of injustice in the American system
- 5% -- Other, all of the above, or don't know

Differences of race, education, and political ideology made little difference in the answers given by young people, although liberals and African Americans were more likely to say their classes emphasized heroes and virtues, conservative and Republican males were more likely to remember an emphasis on the Constitution and the political system, and Latinos were more likely to report a focus on racism and other forms of injustice.

“We know civics can make a big difference in building a more engaged and informed citizenry,” said former Congressman David Skaggs, the Executive Director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship. “This survey is the latest in a series of studies showing a powerful, positive relationship between taking civics classes and being engaged in politics and volunteering. Now, with evidence in hand, we can agree on what concepts are actually being taught, and we should begin to push schools to do more, not less, with civic education.”

Thirty-five percent of young people said they’d “chosen” to take a class on government, politics, or civics in the last two years. Those young people are far more engaged in their communities and in politics than other students, even if comparing people of similar demographic backgrounds. Reviews of school transcripts show that about 80 percent of high school graduates take government courses; and in past studies, students who have taken government classes have performed better on tests of political knowledge and skills.

“Too often, those who criticize the social studies curriculum – from various ideological perspectives – rely on anecdotes about particular teachers who have said things that they find offensive,” said Peter Levine, CIRCLE’s Deputy Director. “There is no reason to think that these anecdotes reflect what is going on in most American classrooms.”

The survey also found correlations between the themes students said were emphasized and their likelihood to participate in various ways.

- 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.

“The authors of *The Civic Mission of Schools* report represented diverse political views, but they relied on rigorous research,” said Levine, the co-organizer of the groundbreaking report, “so they were able to reach consensus about civic education. Today’s survey results provide additional information that should be part of all future discussions.”

According to *The Civic Mission of Schools*, there has been a decline in the amount of civics courses taken in American high schools, as today civic education “comprises only a single course on government – compared to as many as three courses in democracy, civics, and

government that were common until the 1960s.” The report, a joint project of CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation of New York, was released a year ago by nearly 60 top scholars, educators, and practitioners from very diverse political perspectives.

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.

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The Council for Excellence in Government is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to improve the performance of government and to enhance American citizens’ understanding of and participation in their democracy. Visit the Campaign for Young Voters Toolkit at www.campaignyoungvoters.org.

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