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## Center for Constitutional Studies Civic Thought and Leadership Initiative



### The State of Civics Education: Utah's Report Card

By Robert Burton, Lisa Halverson, and Glori Smith

Under the auspices of its Civic Thought and Leadership Initiative, the UVU Center for Constitutional Studies conducted a survey of public school teachers to understand how civics education is being taught and incentivized. Jay DeSart, Chair of UVU's Department of History and Political Science, conducted another survey of adult Utah residents to evaluate their level of civic knowledge. This is a summary of the findings.

#### State of Civics: In the Classroom

The survey of 518 public school teachers, carried out in January 2022, targeted secondary-level social studies teachers, as well as teachers of 4th and 5th grades (those responsible for teaching Utah Studies and United States History), to address the following questions:

1. What civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions are being taught?
2. What incentives and disincentives exist for the teaching of civics?
3. How, if at all, do state and district standards affect civics instruction?
4. What resources are most needed by civics teachers?

The findings indicate that teachers understand the importance of civics and prioritize it in the classroom. They cover a variety of important topics, from founding documents and the history of our nation to modern constitutional problems.

## Report Highlights

"Educated citizens [are] the basis of a strong society."

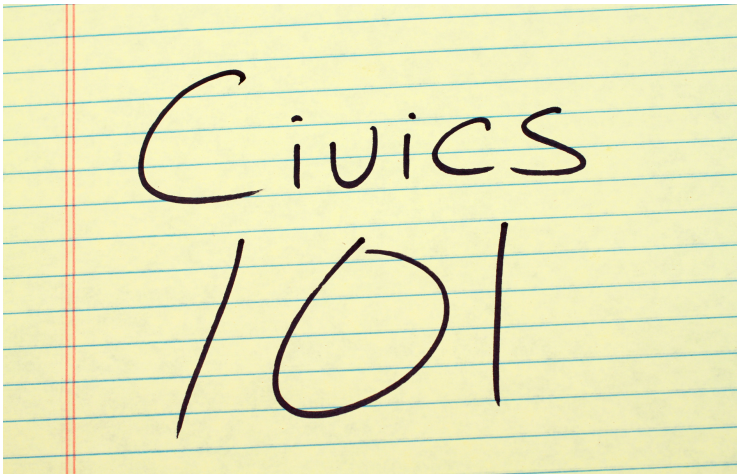
"[Elementary teachers] have NO resources for teaching civics/social studies."

Only 37% identified freedom of religion, and 18% freedom of the press, as being part of the First Amendment

Only 20% knew John Roberts is the chief justice of the Supreme Court

Almost 59% say "people like me" do not have a say in what government does

Because our republic relies on "We the People," solutions to the problem of civics education are more crucial than ever



Teachers work to instill key civic dispositions, including “engaging civilly across differences,” determining “reliable and unreliable sources,” and fostering “thoughtful engagement with American history.” They also diligently attempt to incorporate the state standards. According to the teachers surveyed, the strongest incentive to teach civics is the personal responsibility they feel to prepare future voters. As one teacher said, “educated citizens [are] the basis of a strong society.”

Of course, there is room for improvement. Teachers, particularly at the elementary level, are desperate for resources. Multiple 4th and 5th-grade teachers echo one who said, “We have NO resources for teaching civics/soc studies.” Teachers at both levels asked for access to unbiased resources and requested professional development, particularly for help teaching controversial topics. These requests also align with some of the deterrents teachers face. Some teachers avoid civics because it is “too easily politicized or controversial” or they are “concerned about parent reactions.” Also, the survey indicated that classroom time spent on civics was limited and a few important topics are being overlooked, such as economics and the Utah Constitution. But, overall the state of civics instruction in Utah is encouraging.

### State of Civics: At Home and the Ballot Box

However, while the state of civics education may be promising within the classroom, it is alarming beyond the school grounds. The survey of adult Utah residents’ civic knowledge demonstrates ignorance of basic civics facts, earning Utah adults a failing grade (or a “D,” if graded on a “national curve”).\* This statewide survey, conducted fall 2021, asked a representative sample of 942 Utah adults a number of factual questions about the U.S. Constitution, our political system, public policy, and assorted national and world political leaders. Questions ranged from being able to identify the three branches of government (only 57% could do so), the rights guaranteed in the First Amendment (only 37% identified freedom of religion, and 18% freedom of the press), and the office held by various national and world leaders (only 20% knew John Roberts is the chief justice of the Supreme Court).

### The Gap and How to Explain It

So why is there a great gap between teachers’ commitment to civics instruction and the adult population’s inability to recall basic civics facts? In short, we do not know, and much more research will be needed to explain this disconnect. Possible explanations include inaccurate, overly positive self-reporting by the teachers surveyed or improvements needed in teaching methods or classroom strategies. More likely, there may be a lack of emphasis on the dispositions that help students care about civics in the first place: if one does not care deeply, one tends not to remember. Alternatively, the problem may lie not in K-12 civics instruction, but in higher education. If civics education is not reinforced and deepened in our colleges and universities, students are far less likely to remember or value it later in life. Finally, it may be that the problem’s root lies in our civic culture, beyond classrooms and lecture halls: if partisan polarization sours citizens on the public square, it may be that no amount of civic instruction will save us.

A complete answer to the gap between the state of civics education in Utah and the civics knowledge of adult Utahns will likely reflect a mix of causes, making solutions multifaceted and complicated. However, because our republic relies on “We the People” for the health of its politics and the durability of its institutions, solutions to the problem of civics education, even partial ones, are more crucial than ever.

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\*Jay DeSart, “The Civic Knowledge of Utahns: Survey of Utah Residents.”

**“It’s important to develop a civic minded citizenry,” one teacher says; “educated citizens [are] the basis of a strong society,” writes another. Others speak of a divide and write “I want the next generation to be better Americans who can heal the divide.”**