



GENERATION CITIZEN
EDUCATION PAVES THE ROAD TO
SUSTAINED DEMOCRACY

INTRODUCTION

EDUCATING FOR CITIZENSHIP AFTER THE 2016 ELECTION

Trite scandals and the saturation of falsities overshadowed substantial policy debate during the 2016 presidential election. Most Americans, irrespective of political affiliation, felt frustration and fatigue as a result. The presidential election season underscored a lack of meaningful civic and political knowledge and participation and accentuated the continual and dangerous deemphasis of local government. While municipal races elect officials responsible for governing some of the most important facets of citizen's daily lives and for holding state and federal officials accountable on behalf of their constituents, the 2016 election painted the illusion that there is one single person in charge of our nation. Vitriolic debate, partisan divide, and low voter turnout ensued. Our democracy itself may be at risk.

Yet, accompanying this crisis is a great opportunity: the recognition of the urgent need to invest in nonpartisan, systemic efforts to revitalize our democracy for - and with - future generations.

Youth are key to this process not only as agents today, but as voters, decision makers, and involved citizens of tomorrow. Real changes in our democracy will not come overnight. Despite the partisan efforts to continually move back the pendulum to the other party, fundamental change requires long term and nonpartisan investment. By stimulating civic engagement practices and attitudes of youth today, before they are asked

to cast a vote, we can build a citizenry rooted in a culture of participation - a citizenry that has the skills, knowledge, and motivation to participate in their communities in substantial ways.

Public education must be at the crux of this reform. Intended as a foundational piece of America's public school system, educating for effective citizenship is vital for engaging citizens in the political process and ultimately rebuilding our democracy. We must equip students with the ability to think critically and navigate and negotiate different data and perspectives. We must supply them with the tools to interact with decision-makers so they can impact issues important to them and their communities. We must empower them to be change agents now.

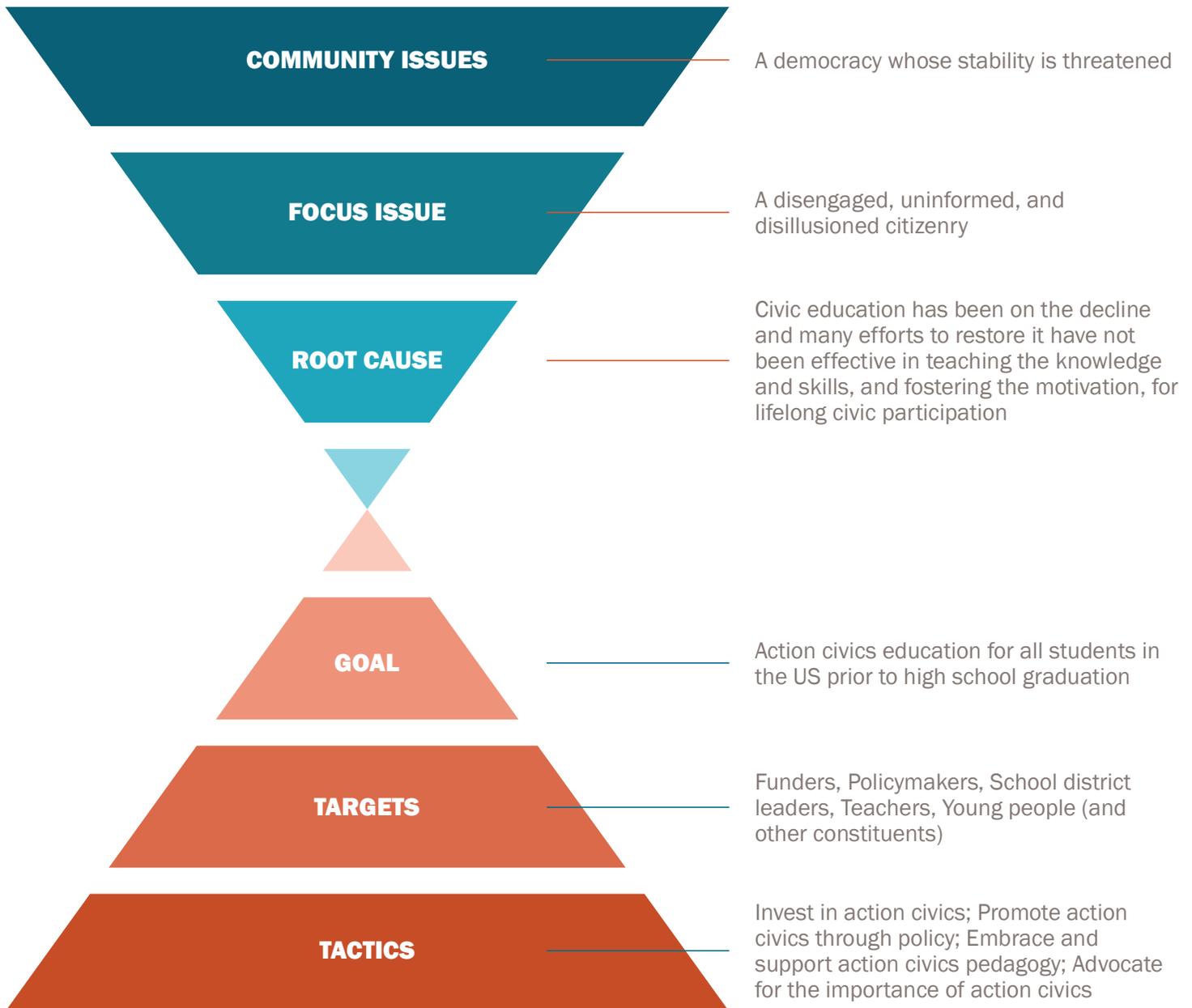
In the period after the 2016 presidential election, there has been an influx of public calls for civic education from educators, academics, policymakers, and the media alike. This is a call we want to echo, with an important caveat: this civic education must be action-based and local-focused. Every student in the United States must receive an experiential action civics education so that they learn not just rote facts, but have experiential exposure to local political action that instills in them the skills and motivation to participate in ways that most resonate with them. An engaged, locally-focused citizenry can enforce democratic norms that will trickle up. ■



THE HOURGLASS MODEL

GENERATION CITIZEN’S ACTION CIVICS CURRICULUM ASKS STUDENTS TO USE AN HOURGLASS FRAMEWORK TO BREAK DOWN COMPLEX ISSUES, AND CONSTRUCT AN ACTION PLAN TO ADDRESS AN ISSUE OF IMPORTANCE TO THEM.

THE REMAINDER OF THIS PAPER WILL UTILIZE THE SAME FRAMEWORK TO EXAMINE AMERICA’S DISENGAGED, UNIFORMED, AND DISILLUSIONED CITIZENRY RECOGNIZING ITS THREAT TO THE STABILITY OF OUR DEMOCRACY, AND WILL CAPTURE THE OPPORTUNITY TO INVEST IN EFFECTIVE CIVICS EDUCATION TO RESTORE IT.



THE ISSUE

PUBLIC PROBLEM IMPACTING A POPULATION

WE HAVE A DISENGAGED, UNINFORMED, AND DISILLUSIONED CITIZENRY.

VOTER TURNOUT IS LOW, PARTICULARLY IN LOCAL ELECTIONS AND ESPECIALLY AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

The US ranks 31st out of 35 OECD countries in voter turnout based on data from 2012-2016.¹ This trend of poor voter turnout continued in the US 2016 presidential election where four in ten eligible voters, or a grand total of nearly 100 million, did not cast a ballot.² Turnout rates consistently plummet in state and local elections where those elected directly influence voters' daily lives and communities. The 2014 midterm saw a 36% turnout across eligible voters³ while fewer than 15% of eligible voters regularly turnout in municipal elections to vote for community leaders such as mayors and city council members.⁴

Young people aged 18-29, in particular, turnout at damaging low rates. An estimated 50% of eligible voters in this age group voted in the 2016 presidential election⁵ while only 20% voted in the 2014 midterm elections, representing the lowest turnout ever recorded.⁶ The discrepancies in turnout between age groups are magnified in municipal elections. According to the Who Votes for Mayor Project, in the 30 largest cities across the United States, the median age of voters in local elections (57 years) is 15 years older than the median age of eligible voters (42 years).⁷

YOUNG PEOPLE CANNOT DISTINGUISH BETWEEN REAL AND FAKE NEWS

From middle school through college, students demonstrate challenges in distinguishing real news from native advertising, determining whether a source is credible or fringe, and critically assessing whether images have been falsified, or information from diverse sources might be biased. This is particularly true on social media sites where the lines, symbolically and literally, between what is truth and what is fabricated or simply tweaked are blurred.⁸

The findings outlined above, derived from numerous research studies, suggest that young people are misinformed because they are not equipped with the tools to identify what information is worthy of their trust and consideration. The ramifications of a factless society are vast, ranging from a distrust in institutions to dangerous scandals such as the recent "Pizzagate" incident.⁹

MEANINGFUL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THOSE WHO DISAGREE ARE RARE

People increasingly live within ideological bubbles. This is particularly true for those who identify as consistently liberal or conservative. 63% of people who identify as consistently conservative, and 49% of those who identify as consistently liberal, say that most of their close friends share their political views and many live in communities that are distinctly "blue" or "red."¹⁰ Interacting primarily with others who agree with one's own political positions tends to harden those political positions.

This hardening has been referred to as "enclave extremism."¹¹ These enclaves, and resulting polarization, deepen with more time spent on social media. Indeed, 47% of consistently conservative and 32% of consistently liberal people say that most Facebook posts they see are in line with their views, and 31% and 44% respectively, say that they have hidden or blocked a Facebook connection because they disagreed with something that they posted.¹² Even internet search results and advertising are tailored to the interests and values of computer users, filtering what surfers see and requiring them to make a concerted effort to find diverse sources.¹³

YOUNG PEOPLE WHO WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE DO NOT SEE GOVERNMENT AS AN ANSWER

As we noted in our 2016 white paper, *Educating for Democracy*¹⁴, young people today are active across social movements and strive to make a positive impact on the world and their communities. A recent study by the Brookings Institute found that 64% of millennials say it is a priority for them to make the world a better place.¹⁵ Yet this drive to make change does not translate into political action. A 2013 poll found that more millennials think that the best way to make positive change in society is through volunteering and charities—not by being active in or through engagement with government.¹⁶ Rather, millennials see the political system and institutions as roadblocks to addressing, and even part of, the problems that they're attempting to solve. Only 20% trust the federal government to do what is right most of the time. This is a steep decline from 1973 when the majority of young people trusted government to do the right thing.¹⁷

THERE IS A STARK CIVIC ENGAGEMENT GAP

White, higher-income citizens are substantially more likely to engage with their government and vote than minority and low-income populations. Higher income individuals (80% of those with an income of \$100,000 or more) report that they have taken part in a civic or political activity at a significantly greater rate than lower income individuals (49% of those who earn less than \$20,000).¹⁸ This discrepancy is mirrored when it comes to voting. In the 2012 presidential election, 77% of people with an annual income of over \$75,000 voted as compared to 62% of people earning less than \$50,000.¹⁹ ■

THE ROOT CAUSE

THE PRIMARY REASON THE ISSUE EXISTS

CIVIC EDUCATION HAS BEEN ON THE DECLINE AND MANY EFFORTS TO RESTORE IT HAVE NOT BEEN EFFECTIVE IN TEACHING THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS, AND FOSTERING THE MOTIVATION, FOR LIFELONG CIVIC PARTICIPATION.

THERE IS NOT ENOUGH CIVIC EDUCATION IN PUBLICS SCHOOLS

A focus on civic education in America's public schools has been in steady decline over the past several decades.²⁰ Particularly as focus on testing of core subjects has been amplified, social studies more broadly, and civics more specifically, have been pushed to the side and often left without sufficient funding or allocated school time.

Where civic education does exist, it is most often focused solely on rote historical and governmental knowledge and lacks a local focus and interactive components that foster the skills, critical thinking, and ultimately, motivation that lead to civic participation. Taught the same way it was decades ago, most civics curricula have not been updated for the 21st century. For instance, more than half of students report they never participate in mock trials or simulations and less than 20% of teachers organize visits from members of the community or report that their students participate in community projects.²¹

THE CITIZENSHIP TEST AS REQUIRED ASSESSMENT DOES NOT TRANSLATE INTO EFFECTIVE CIVIC EDUCATION OR ACTION

Many states' civic education efforts have focused on implementing a version of the Citizenship Test – the multiple choice exam typically required for non-citizens looking to become American citizens – as a mandatory graduation assessment.²² Implementing an assessment requirement has the potential to be positive toward ensuring effective civics education is taught in schools, but the Citizenship Test's focus on the rote memorization of facts means that it alone is not sufficient. In the more than dozen states where passing the Citizenship Test is required for high school graduation, the correlating instruction does not prepare for substantial civic action such as interactions with decision-makers, participating in policy conversations, or even voting. This solution is akin to solely teaching the Periodic Table to address a lack of science education, rather than immersing students in how scientific principles work.

THERE IS A STARK CIVIC EDUCATION GAP

Even in areas with strong civic education programs, troubling inequities persist. Students in low-income schools, when compared with average socioeconomic status schools, are half as likely to study how laws are made, and 30% less likely to report having experiences with debates or panel discussions in social studies classes.²³ Furthermore, African-American, Hispanic, and rural students score lower on tests of civic knowledge and have less optimistic views of their civic potential than their more privileged counterparts.²⁴ ■

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THE GOAL

WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO DO AND ACHIEVE

ACTION CIVICS EDUCATION FOR ALL STUDENTS IN THE US PRIOR TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION.

ACTION CIVICS EDUCATION TAKES A HANDS-ON APPROACH TO TEACHING CIVICS

Action civics education is a pedagogical and disciplinary model of civic education wherein students take a project-based approach to civic engagement that develops the skills, knowledge, and motivation necessary for 21st century democratic practice.²⁵ Just like science classes are supplemented with labs, civics classes must be supplemented with practical application. In the case of action civics, the lab is students' actual communities. Though addressing political issues, the pedagogy and discipline of action civics are decidedly nonpartisan and can serve to address the diverse students and needs of communities across the country.

Generation Citizen, a nonprofit pioneer of action civics, works with middle and high school teachers to offer a semester-long curriculum that has students identify an issue in their local community, develop a targeted strategic plan to address it, and implement tactics targeted at decision-makers to enact the plan. Students have addressed a wide range of issues including a lack of affordable public transit, fraying police-community relations,

civil asset forfeiture, and the widening opioid crisis, and have informed legislation, school-board decisions, and community infrastructure. Charged with advocating for issues throughout the action civics course, students are required to understand the diverse factors influencing, and perspectives surrounding their issues and engage in deliberative discussion with peers and decision-makers around them. Generation Citizen students, nearly universally, demonstrate increased civic knowledge, skills, and motivation.²⁶ Other organizations such as Mikva Challenge and Street Law have similar programs that educate youth in school to be effective citizens through action civics principals.

THE BENEFITS OF ACTION CIVICS ARE VAST

Action civics can powerfully increase civic engagement. Students who receive a combination of traditional and interactive civics, score highest on civic assessments and demonstrate high levels of critical thinking and crucially, news comprehension.²⁷ Civic knowledge and civic attitudes are subsequently associated with young people's intention to vote in the future.²⁸ Furthermore, action civics reduces civic inequality by empowering students from



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disenfranchised communities to participate politically and, on a macro-level, paving a path to just and representative policies.

Action civics is also beneficial for student success and positive school culture. 81% of high school dropouts said they would have been less likely to do so if there were more opportunities for experiential learning and students who received a combination of traditional and experiential civic education demonstrate higher work ethic than those who did not.²⁹

CIVIC EDUCATION LEGISLATION HAS BEEN EFFECTIVE IN PROMOTING ACTION CIVICS

The implementation of widespread action civics is a lofty undertaking, but with the support of nonprofits, foundations, and policymakers, a movement is beginning to bring the model to schools across the country.

In Sacramento, an Action Civics Initiative was launched out of a Civic Learning Task Force, with the support of the Stephen D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, to bring civic engagement to the heart of student learning. To date, the Initiative has brought action civics to 12 Sacramento schools and has seen its students self-report that they are now able to address community issues, think more critically about the news, and believe that young people can make a difference in their communities.³⁰

Following suit, Illinois and Tennessee passed legislation to promote action-based civic education. In Tennessee, one project-based assessment is a requirement for all students grade 4-8 and students grade 9-12 ensuring that students obtain civic knowledge in real-life contexts and address complex problems.³¹ In Illinois, a set of best practices, informed by the esteemed Guardians of Democracy report, outlines many action civics tenets that are to be adopted as part of a requirement that students have a stand-alone, semester-long civics course prior to high school graduation.³² A three-year, 1 million dollar investment from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation has facilitated the implementation of Illinois' policy. Additional states such as Massachusetts are introducing similar, comprehensive project-based civic education legislation.

SUPPLEMENTAL POLICIES CAN BUILD DEMAND FOR ACTION CIVICS

Peripheral bipartisan policies can also support and encourage widespread action civics. One example is the effort to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds for municipal elections. This policy has been adopted in two cities in Maryland and generated

momentum and public support in San Francisco in the 2016 election.³³ Advocates argue that 16 is a better time to establish the habit of voting than 18, and that allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to vote in local elections makes high school civics classes that focus on local issues more relevant to students' lives.³⁴

A related policy idea is voter pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds. Eleven states currently allow citizens to pre-register to vote at age 16, which has effectively increased youth voter turnout.³⁵ By engaging youth in the voting process before they turn 18, these policies ask that parents, educators, and elected officials engage young people in policy conversations and teach them to participate in meaningful ways while they are still living at home and attending school. ■

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TARGETS AND TACTICS

CRITICAL ACTORS, AND NECESSARY ACTIONS, REQUIRED TO ACHIEVE THE GOAL

THE ROAD AHEAD

Political disillusion, disengagement, and illiteracy are broad, and increasingly critical, issues in society. Voter turnout is low, people cannot distinguish between real and fake news, meaningful interactions between those who disagree are rare, many who want to make a difference do not see government as the answer, and there is a stark civic engagement gap. The effects of these issues can be severe for our population and democracy, as illustrated by the current national political climate. However, when we begin to implement initiatives that support young people today, we can begin to paint a different picture of citizens tomorrow. This is about more than future elections. This is about repairing the divisions of democracy by focusing on its foundations.

Action civics for every student is an ambitious goal, but as this paper has demonstrated, it is a vital step towards a revitalized democracy. Efforts from funders, policymakers, school district leaders, teachers, and young people themselves have already begun to make great progress, but this work must be prioritized and scaled swiftly across the country. This moment in America's history demands that a wider audience consider specific actions they can take to ensure that all students in the United States receive a high quality, action civics education. There is a role for everyone.

Funders can:

- Identify action civics as a key agent for democratic change
- Invest in action civics programs to support their expansion to new schools and regions
- Partner with states and school districts to facilitate professional development and programmatic partnerships
- Come together to create a "Democracy Education" fund of at least \$25 million to fund promising practices and conduct further research in the field³⁶
- Provide expertise and support to groups doing advocacy work in the field, ensuring that their support is not purely financial or programmatic as the field develops

Policymakers can:

- Introduce and advocate for policies in schools, school districts, and state that require and support action civics
- Create public funding opportunities for action civics in schools and districts
- Support legislation that promote youth civic activity and encourage necessitated civic education such as pre-registration and lower voting ages
- Consult youth as you shape policies and consider their needs and perspectives
- Interact with, and inspire, students by visiting schools and talking about your work and the issues important to them

School district leaders can:

- Include effective civic education as a priority in district strategic plans
- Offer guidelines and resources to principals and teachers for bringing action civics to schools
- Provide professional development opportunities for teachers to help them learn and implement best practices for teaching action civics
- Provide information about partner organizations that can facilitate action civics programming in the classroom

Teachers can:

- Embrace and adopt action civics pedagogy in classrooms
- Create opportunities for students to take meaningful political action in their communities and to interact with their local decision-makers
- Talk with school administration and district leaders about the need for, and benefits of, action civics to build support and resources
- Create school-based communities of action civics teachers to exchange best practices and generate school-wide support

Young people (and other constituents) can:

- Talk about the value of action civics with your peers and community members
- Develop an understanding of the state of civic education in your community
- Lobby school district leaders who influence school priorities - set up a meeting and ask your school district leader to include action civics in the district's priorities
- Write an op-ed for a local newspaper or blog that explains why action civics education is important for your community
- Attend - and participate in - a school board meeting to advocate for action civics
- Host a political gathering that brings together action civics teachers, students who have benefited from action civics, and local policymakers to discuss the importance of learning the knowledge and skills necessary for civic participation at a young age ■

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ENDNOTES

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