

American Civics Study of Undergraduate Students

Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership at UW-Madison

December 10, 2019

Summary

In late 2019, the Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership at the University of Wisconsin-Madison conducted a survey with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center to determine how much undergraduate students at UW-Madison know about American civics. Overall, students scored reasonably well on the exam, with an average “score” of 86% correct. The largest factor contributing to higher scores is the number of High School civics classes students took. Students coming from states that required them to pass a state civics exam to graduate from High School performed slightly better than students coming from states that did not require such a test. Students strongly support a requirement that High School students take civics classes (92% agree). Students also support requiring High School students to take a civics test in order to graduate (61%). On the negative side, only 32% of students are aware that the United States observes Constitution Day.

Background

A wide array of private actors focus their attention on the importance of civics education in America today. Organizations such as the Center for Civic Education,¹ The Rand Corporation,² the Brookings Institution,³ The American Enterprise Institute,⁴ The Annenberg Classroom at the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania,⁵ and the Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center⁶ administer initiatives to raise the profile of civics education.

The federal government considers knowledge of American civics a foundation for citizenship and civic engagement in the United States. Indeed, the government requires candidates to pass a civics test in order to become citizens of the United States.⁷ A citizenship candidate must pass six of ten civics questions to pass the civics test.⁸ Moreover, a range of U.S. Supreme Court Justices routinely

1 Center for Civic Education, <https://www.civiced.org/>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

2 Rand Corporation, Topics, Civic Education, <https://www.rand.org/topics/civic-education.html>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

3 Brookings Institution, “2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: An inventory of state civics requirements,” <https://www.brookings.edu/research/2018-brown-center-report-on-american-education-an-inventory-of-state-civics-requirements/>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

4 American Enterprise Institute, AEI Program on American Citizenship,” <http://www.citizenship-aei.org/about/#.Xc7H8TJKhUM>, accessed November 20, 2019.

5 Annenberg Public Policy Center, Civics Education, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/issue/civics/>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

6 Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center, Civic Engagement, <https://mlkfreedomcenter.org/civic-engagement>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

7 Official Website of the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, The Naturalization Test, <https://www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship/naturalization-test>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

8 Official Website of the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “Citizenship Resource Center: Study Materials for the Civics Test,” <https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship/learners/study-test/study-materials-civics-test>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

deliver public remarks promoting the importance of civics education, including Justice Sandra Day O'Connor who established iCivics to advance the cause.⁹ The Archivist of the United States also includes civic education within its mission to the American public.¹⁰

States often administer education policies emphasizing the importance of civics education as well. A range of states throughout the country require civics courses and/or tests as part of K-12 curriculums.¹¹ In Wisconsin, for example, Wisconsin students must pass a civics test comprised of 100 questions that are identical to the federal citizenship test to graduate from High School.¹² They must answer at least 65 of the questions correctly. The National Conference of State Legislatures, for its part, provides guidance to state policymakers on ways to improve civic education.¹³

Given the importance placed on civic knowledge, the Thompson Center sought to examine student awareness of it. The Center sought to answer a simple question: how much basic civics information do UW-Madison undergraduates know?

The Study

The Thompson Center contracted with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center¹⁴ to survey undergraduate students on campus during the fall of 2019. The Thompson Center received approval from the University's Institutional Review Board to move forward with a series of 35 substantive civics knowledge questions, which can be found online on the Thompson Center website,¹⁵ along with a handful of opinion and demographic questions. The Center employed questions derived largely from the Naturalization Test administered by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.¹⁶

The Survey Center canvassed a first batch of 1500 undergraduates beginning on September 20, 2019, and then a second batch of 3000 undergraduates beginning on September 23, 2019. Each batch consisted of a total of four email notices requesting students to complete the survey. At the encouragement of the Survey Center, and consistent with standard incentivization practices, the Thompson Center provided undergraduates who completed the survey with a \$10 incentive for their participation. All told, 413 eligible undergraduates completed the survey. The study response rate was 9.17%, which is well in line with similar surveys.

9 iCivics, "iCivics is Reimagining Civic Learning" <https://www.icivics.org/about>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

10 National Archives, "Educator Resources: Civic Education," <https://www.archives.gov/education/civic-education>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

11 Education Commission of the States, "Resource Title: 50-State Comparison: Civic Education Policies," <https://www.ecs.org/citizenship-education-policies/>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

12 Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "WI Civics Graduate Requirement," <https://dpi.wi.gov/education/civic-education>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

13 National Conference of State Legislatures, "The Civic Mission of Schools," <http://www.ncsl.org/legislators-staff/legislators/trust-for-representative-democracy/the-civic-mission-of-schools-executive-summary.aspx>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

14 University of Wisconsin Survey Center, <https://uwsc.wisc.edu/>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

15 Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership, University of Wisconsin-Madison, "Research: Civics Study," <https://thompsoncenter.wisc.edu/research/>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

16 Utah Education Network, American Civics Education Initiative, "Sample Basic Civics Test (pdf)" <https://www.uen.org/american-civics-education/downloads/Sample-Basic-Civics-Test.pdf>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

The survey questions focused on structural questions, such as those addressing the separation of powers and lawmaking, and those addressing features like terms in office and institutional roles.

The results led to two findings. First, students' basic civics knowledge is generally strong. Second, High School civics courses are the strongest predictors of civic awareness of factors considered in the survey.

1. Civics Awareness Among UW-Madison Undergraduates is Strong.

Generally, civics awareness among UW-Madison's undergraduates is strong. Of the 413 students who completed the survey, the average score was 86% correct (29/34). The modal score was 33/34; the minimum was 7/34; and the maximum was 34/34. As Figure 1 shows, the distribution of correct scores is skewed, with most students answering most questions correctly. Roughly 68% of the respondents scored between 24.74 and 33.80 correct out of 34.

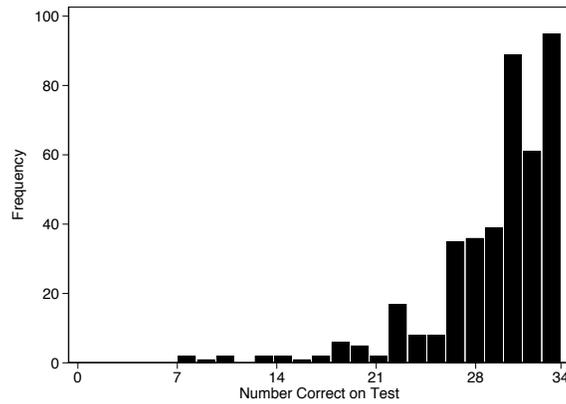


Figure 1: Number of questions answered correctly, UW-Madison survey respondents.

While students overall answered most questions correctly, some questions proved more difficult than others. For example, respondents were somewhat unsure about length of tenure for elected office holders. 60% of respondents knew that Senators are elected to six-year terms, while 59% knew that we vote for Representatives every two years.

Q: We elect a U.S. Senator for how many years? Choose One:

Response	Frequency	Percent
Ten (10)	14	3.4%
Four (4)	69	17.0%
Two (2)	81	20.0%
Six (6)	249	60.0%

Students had some difficulty with the succession of office. 59% of respondents knew that the Speaker of the House of Representatives becomes president if the President and Vice President can no longer serve.

Q: If the President and Vice President can no longer serve, who becomes President of the United States?

Response	Frequency	Percent
Secretary of State	116	28.0%
President Pro Tempore of the Senate	39	9.4%
Speaker of the House	242	59.0%
Secretary of Defense	16	3.9%

Students were less sure who the Commander in Chief of the military is, with 79% knowing it is the president.

Q: Who is the Commander in Chief of the Military? Choose One:

Response	Frequency	Percent
The President	326	79.0%
The Vice President	4	1.0%
The Secretary of Defense	56	14.0%
The Attorney General	27	6.5%

68% of respondents knew that running for federal office is a right that belongs only to American citizens (i.e., not to non-citizens). The same amount of respondents (68%) knew the Supreme Court consists of nine justices.

2. Increased Civics Awareness Comes Primarily From High School Civics Courses.

Among the factors analyzed, a student's exposure to High School civics classes was the largest driver of basic civics awareness. For purposes of the study, we examined the behavior only of respondents who graduated from a United States High School. All of the respondents were 18 years of age or older.

The study team regressed the students' number of correct answers on the civics test on:

- The number of high school civics classes (or whether the student took one or more courses);
- Whether the respondent took a state civics test;
- The respondent's year in college (freshman-fifth year);
- Whether the respondent's major requires a civics type course; and
- The number of civics type college courses the respondent completed.

The data revealed a statistically significant and positive correlation between the number of High School civics classes a respondent completed and the number of correct responses scored on the test. On average, a respondent scored 1.5 points higher when taking one or more high school civics classes versus none. What is more, as Figure 2 shows, each additional civics class generated a higher score on the test. Students who took three or more civics classes in high school scored higher than those without any courses and slightly higher than those who had one or two courses.

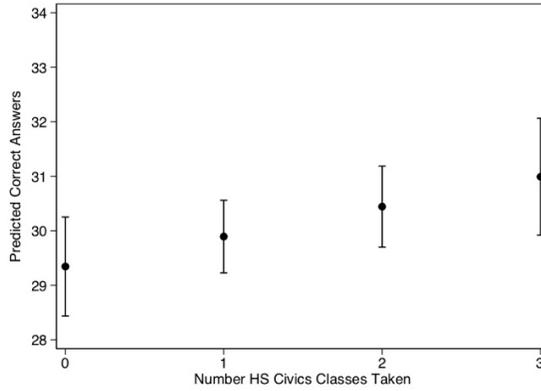


Figure 2: Predicted number of correct answers as a function of High School civics courses.

Next, state mandated civics exams play a role in civics awareness. There is a statistically significant and positive effect between taking a state-required civics test and the number of correct responses scored. As Figure 3 shows, a respondent scored roughly one point higher when mandated to take a state civics exam to graduate from high school.

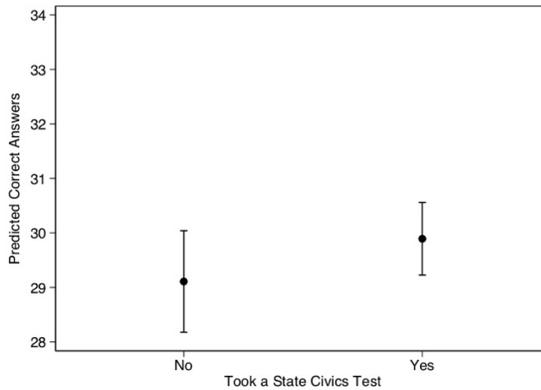


Figure 3: Predicted number of correct answers as a function of whether the student was required to pass a state civics test.

The impact of the state civics test is smaller than that from civics courses. Figure 4 shows that when controlling for other factors, the increase from a civics test is positive but small.

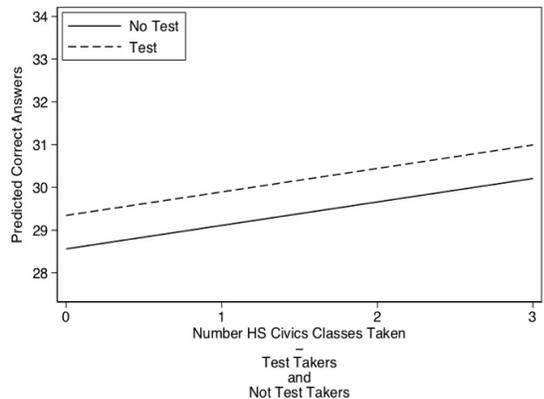


Figure 4: Predicted number of correct answers as a function of High School civics courses for students required to pass a state civics test and those not required to do so.

3. Surprising Results.

While the effects of High School civics classes is strong and positive, the same cannot be said of college level courses. Somewhat surprisingly, the number of college civics classes a respondent took did not influence that person’s score on the civics test. Respondents indicated whether their undergraduate major requires a civics-type course. Students who reported having a major requiring a civics-type course did not score any higher than everyone else on this basic civics exam.

Two other results were surprising. Only 32% of respondents knew that the United States observes Constitution Day each year. It appears that institutions of learning are not disseminating information about Constitution Day. Additionally, only 82% of students knew that the voting age is eighteen. Given how close the majority of respondents are in age to the voting age, one might expect almost all students to know the voting age is 18.

4. Conclusion.

In closing, the Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership expects that government and private actors will continue to emphasize the importance of civic education in promoting civic engagement in the years to come. Among the common initiatives that are likely to continue, if not become more robust, are state policies requiring civics courses and/or tests as part of K-12 curriculums. Wisconsin, for example, recently increased from 60 to 65, the number of answers out of 100 a student must answer correctly to graduate from high school.¹⁷ In recognition of this trend toward greater emphasis on civics education, the Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership surveyed UW-Madison undergraduate students on the topic. The survey found an students performed better on substantive civics test questions the more High School courses in civics the students completed. Interestingly the extent of civics coursework in college did not impact student performance, however. Moreover, students performed better if their high school graduation requirements included a civics test. On the whole, the undergraduate students surveyed strongly supported requiring an American civics course in high school and supported, albeit to a lesser degree, requiring High School students to take a civics test to graduate. In other words, the

¹⁷ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "WI Civics Graduation Requirement," <https://dpi.wi.gov/social-studies/laws/civics>, accessed on November 20, 2019.

Thompson Center's civics survey results largely reinforce the logic underlying existing public policies mandating civics education courses and/or tests in High School.

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Please contact the Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership at 608-265-4087 with any questions regarding this American civics study.