JOURNAL OF CIVIC LITERACY
Indiana University center for CIVIC LITERACY
Volume 1, Issue 1 http://journals.iupui.edu/index.php/civiclit/index July 2014

Civic Identity, Civic Deficit: The Unanswered Questions

By Heather A. McCabe and Sheila S. Kennedy
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis

ABSTRACT: Though the ideological divide appears to be growing in the United States, it is not a new phenomenon. Throughout its history, the United States has struggled to resolve the tension between individual rights and the passions of the majority, to forge an overarching unity from our substantial and growing diversity without, however, demanding uniformity as the price of membership in the polis. This paper addresses the role that civic literacy—understood as basic knowledge about U.S. history, the constitution and Bill of Rights--plays in that process, and in fostering perceptions that Americans are all members of a national community despite differences in identity and ideology. We consider both theoretical perspectives and empirical research on the nature and role of civic knowledge in encouraging democratic participation generally, before moving to a consideration of the degree to which vulnerable and marginalized populations are disenfranchised and/or alienated from the political process by a lack of sufficient civic knowledge. Finally, we consider the role of basic civic knowledge in formulating a conception of what it means to be a member of the American political community.

Keywords: ideological divide, civic literacy, ideology, identity, community.

INTRODUCTION

The current concern over civic education and what might be called our *civic deficit* is founded upon a generally accepted belief that civic knowledge is an important foundation of democratic self-government.

There is substantial research linking civic literacy—defined as knowledge of the constitutional and historic bases and current structure of United States American government--to civic participation and engagement, although definitions of both civic knowledge and civic engagement vary widely. Beyond those connections, however, we are left with a striking absence of empirical research on some other, very foundational, questions: What do we mean by "civic literacy" and "civic knowledge"? Is there some essential, identifiable body of knowledge that civically literate people must know? Do people with and without such knowledge understand the United States of America differently, and if so, in what ways? How does informed participation differ from un- or misinformed engagement, and how do the outcomes differ? What evidence do we have to support the widespread belief that civic literacy matters, that there is some irreducible level of civic knowledge critical to the success of the democratic experiment? What evidence do we have to support the assumption that, with adequate and credible information, the average citizen would be capable of informed civic participation?

BACKGROUND

There is no dearth of theory on the importance of informed citizenship. In their important book *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) cite Locke's belief that it is the "obligation of all citizens to act in ways consistent with the public interest." (p.29). Acting in the public interest requires an understanding of what the public interest is, and possession of sufficient information to make informed decisions about where it lies. In a letter written by James Madison to W. T. Barry, Madison emphasized the importance of civic knowledge, saying, "A popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or tragedy, or perhaps both" (Madison, 1987, para 1). For his part, Alexis de Toqueville believed that "each new generation is a new people that must acquire the knowledge, learn the skills and develop the dispositions or traits of private and public character that undergird a constitutional democracy" (Branson, 1998). One dimension of knowledge acquisition involves learning the skills necessary to navigate a complex system and participate in the democratic sphere.

The emphasis placed on civic competence was one justification for the limited franchise that originally characterized U.S. government. The knowledgeable citizens Madison (1987) and de Tocqueville (Branson, 1998) were describing were propertied white males, comparatively privileged and educated men who alone were deemed likely to possess the civic skills necessary to participation in self-governance. Michael Schudson (1999) argues that the concept of the *informed citizen* as we know it today did not really emerge until the end of the Progressive Era, with the rise of mass media and the ideal of universal public education. Indeed, Walter Lippmann (1925) believed the concept of the *informed citizen* to be a beyond the scope of possibility: "I do not mean [the competent voter is an] undesirable ideal. I mean an unattainable ideal, bad only in the sense that it is bad for a fat man to try to be a ballet dancer" (p. 29). Prior to the 1890s, voters were handed their ballots by party functionaries, so-called ticket peddlers, who provided pre-printed slates of candidates. The voter did not mark the ballot; he simply placed the party's ticket in the ballot box. Beginning in 1888, states began to adopt

the Australian ballot, which was printed by the government and required a decision by the voter. As Schudson (1999) says,

> The Australian ballot shifted the center of political gravity from party to voter. Voting changed from a social and public duty to a private right, from a social obligation to party enforceable by social pressure to a civic obligation or abstract loyalty, enforceable only by private conscience. The new ballot asked voters *to make a choice among alternatives* rather than to perform an act of affiliation with a group (p. 170).

If the individual voter was to choose between alternatives, he (and it was still only "he") needed to be informed, to understand what the alternatives represented and to have the skills needed to evaluate their consistency with United States constitutional premises and the common good.

This belief in the importance of informed citizens—whether founded on Lockean philosophy or derived from the growing power vested in the voters—is now virtually universal. It has become an accepted axiom of political culture. While a few hardy souls dispute the nature and amount of knowledge needed for informed democratic participation (Levine, 2013), most political commentators accept the premise and profess their distress when faced with overwhelming evidence that large numbers of voters are woefully uninformed. As former Representative Lee Hamilton (2003) wrote,

> The truth is, for our democracy to work, it needs not just an engaged citizenry, but an informed one. We've known this since the nation's earliest days. The creators of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 thought the notion important enough to enshrine it in the state's founding document: "Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people," they wrote, are "necessary for the preservation of rights and liberties" (para 6).

CURRENT KNOWLEDGE

If democratic theory is correct, and a civically literate population is essential to liberal democratic self-governance, the concerns raised by available data are understandable and appropriate. Research from a multitude of sources gives evidence of a widespread lack of constitutional competence and civic literacy in the United States. Only 36% of American citizens can correctly name the three branches of government (Annenberg Public Policy Center Judicial Survey, 2007). Thirty-six percent of 12th grade students fail to achieve a basic level of civic knowledge (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Only 35.5% of teenagers can correctly identify "We the People" as the first three words of the Constitution (National Constitution Center Survey, 1998). The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) 2010 report on civics competencies

indicates that barely a quarter of the nation's 4th, 8th and 12th graders are proficient in civics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

These and many similar research findings clearly demonstrate that those surveyed are woefully ignorant of the subject matter on which they were being tested. What they do not show, however, is the materiality of that subject matter; we have no empirical research that identifies a body of knowledge acquisition of which is essential to informed citizenship. We can certainly speculate: knowing the three branches of government and their respective duties, for example, certainly seems like the sort of civic information citizens need in order to cast an informed vote or otherwise participate in the political process. On the other hand, knowing the composition of the Supreme Court or the names of particular Justices, while desirable, is probably less critical. If we are going to engage in collective hand-wringing over the state of the democratic enterprise, it would seem prudent to identify those elements of civic knowledge that are demonstrably linked to informed citizenship.

APPLICATION

It is not only the absence of empirical research on that question and many others that erects barriers to reasoned debate about our civic deficit. National efforts to improve civics education and civic literacy are also limited by the widespread belief that knowledge about our history and governing structures is of importance only in the political arena. There is less recognition of its theoretical and practical importance in other areas. In the age of the administrative state, anyone concerned with policy-- from business enterprises regulated by the state, to medical researchers dependent upon government grants, to science teachers under pressure to teach religious doctrine in the classroom-- quickly finds that knowledge of the nature and extent of the rules to which they are subject and the mechanisms that are available to them is a critical element of disciplinary competence. Increasingly, civic information and civic skills are required for effectiveness in arenas far removed from the political.

An example can be found in the field of social work. Social workers frequently work with clients from vulnerable populations. As a part of their work, social workers must advocate within institutions and systems (governmental agencies, regulated organizations, etc.) in order to assist their clients in obtaining needed services. In addition, social justice is a guiding principle of social work (Swenson, 1998; Breton, Cox, & Taylor, 2003; NASW, 1999) and social workers are expected to advocate within the policy arena when existing policies are not meeting their clients' needs. If social workers need to address a policy, either at an individual client level or a system level, they must have the requisite civic knowledge to do so. They must understand the difference between a legislative statute and an administrative policy. Additionally, they need to be able to identify whether the policy is a federal, state, or local issue. If social workers do not have the basic civic knowledge needed to parse out these details, they are unable to appropriately advocate on behalf of their clients. The same need for civic understanding applies to any enterprise that interacts with government at

any level, or is subject to government regulation. Civic competency is necessary for any person, industry or organization seeking to have an impact on the policy environment within which it operates.

Beyond the underappreciated practical importance of civic knowledge to professional practices and business operations of various kinds, beyond the more widely recognized concerns about connections between civic literacy and democratic stability, the sociological literature suggests that the existence of a common body of civic knowledge may play an even more vital role in promoting civic cohesion, due to its function in promoting social capital (Putnam, 2000). Work done in these areas has considerable relevance to questions about the role of civic literacy in a diverse polity.

References in the United States to social capital can be traced back to 1916 (Putnam, 2000), but widespread interest in the concept did not arise until the mid-1980s with Bourdieu (1986). The concept was popularized in sociology by James Coleman (1988); it was introduced into general political discourse by Robert Putnam, primarily with the publication of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). While there are numerous definitions of social capital, there is general agreement that social capital develops and rests upon norms of trust and reciprocity (both specific and generalized), which develop between people in social networks. Social capital can also build solidarity, which develops as a product of common group fate. Social capital has been defined as either *bridging or bonding*, depending upon the *thickness* of the connections involved (Geys, B. & Murdoch, Z., 2008). Social capital is understood to facilitate coordination, reduce transaction costs, and enhance the flow of information. Civic engagement has been demonstrated to build social capital (MacGillivray & Walker, 2000).

We do have ample research showing that greater civic knowledge leads to greater civic engagement (Galston, 2001; Galston, 2004; Milner, 2002). Civic engagement generates social capital, which connects Americans to each other with bonds of trust and reciprocity. Given the United States' growing diversity, such a civic value structure necessarily rests upon our common constitutional values. Civic literacy –knowledge of United States history, constitutional premises and governing structures—is thus a necessity, and to the extent that it fosters civic engagement, a generator of social capital.

CONCLUSION

We have ample research about what Americans do and do not know (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011; CIRCLE, 2013a, 2013b; Sullivan, 2013; ISI, 2011). What we need is research into the causes and consequences of that civic deficit. At a minimum, we need sound empirical investigation into the following questions:

- What are the essential elements of civic literacy? That is, what is the *content* of a minimal level of civic knowledge necessary to effective citizenship?

- What aspects of civic knowledge are most predictive of civic engagement, defined as regular voting, and political activism (work on a campaign, attendance at public meetings, and other indicators of civic involvement)?
- With respect to those who are civically and politically active, are there measurable, meaningful differences between those who are civically-literate and those who are not?
- Why have former efforts to improve citizenship education failed to have a lasting effect? What can we do differently in the future to make and sustain improvements?
- Are there measurable differences in levels of civic literacy between identifiable groups? For example, are scientists more or less civically literate than lawyers? Are members of certain religions more or less literate than others? Are people who harbor homophobic or anti-immigrant or anti-Muslim opinions less civically literate than those who are more accepting of diversity?
- What are the connections between civic literacy and mass media? How has the dramatic "morphing" of media, and the accompanying changes in the ways in which Americans access information affected levels of civic knowledge?

There are many other research areas we might suggest. These examples only begin to scratch the surface of a pressing research agenda that needs to be operationalized and pursued. But the answers to these and similar questions are an essential precondition to thoughtful action to address our civic deficit, and finding the scholars to address them and the resources to support those scholars is an increasingly critical task.

There is widespread recognition that our government institutions are broken. We will not fix them with exhortations alone. Doctors rely on accurate diagnoses in order to prescribe the right medicines; similarly, academics and concerned citizens must base our recommendations on credible empirical evidence. We can't fix our systems-- biological or political-- until we really understand what has gone wrong and why.

REFERENCES

Annenberg Public Policy Center. (2007). Annenberg Public Policy Center Judicial Survey. Retrieved from http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/Downloads/20071017_JudicialSurvey/Judicial_Findings_10-17-2007.pdf.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In John Richardson, (Ed.) Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education (pp. 241- 258). New York: Greenwood.

Branson, M. (1998). The role of civic education: A position paper. Calabasas, CA: The Center for Civic Education Press.

Breton, M., Cox, E.O. & Taylor, S. (2003). Social justice, social policy, and social work: Securing the connection. The Social Policy Journal, 2(1), 3-20

Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). (2013a). All together now: Collaboration and innovation for youth engagement: The report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge. Retrieved from: www.civicyouth.org/about-circle/commission-on-youth-voting-civic-knowledge/

Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). (2013b). Civic learning through action: The case of Generation Citizen. [Report]. Retrieved from: http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Generation-Citizen-Fact-Sheet-July-1-Final.pdf

Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. The American Journal of Sociology, 94(Supplement), S95-S120.

Delli Carpini, M.X. & Keeter, S. (1996). What Americans know about politics and why it matters. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Galston, W.A. (2001). Political knowledge, political engagement, and civic education. Annual Review of Political Science, 4(2001), 217-234.

Galston, W.A. (2004). Civic education and political participation. PS: Political Science & Politics, 37(2), 263-266

Geys, B. & Murdoch, Z. (2008). How to make head or tail of 'bridging' and 'bonding'?: Addressing the methodological ambiguity. British Journal of Sociology, 59(3), 435-454.

Hamilton, L. (2003, November 15). Why we need an informed citizenry. [Web log] Retrieved from: http://congress.indiana.edu/why-we-need-informed-citizenry

Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI). (2011). Enlightened citizenship: How civic knowledge trumps a college degree in promoting active civic engagement. Retrieved from: http://www.americancivicliteracy.org/2011/summary_summary.html

Levine, P. (2013, January 17). What did you voters know and understand in 2012? [Web log]. Retrieved from http://peterlevine.ws/?p=10620.

Lippmann, W. (1925). The phantom public. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

MacGillivray, A., & Walker, P. (2000). Local social capital: Making it work on the ground. In Stephen Baron, John Field, and Tom Schuller (Eds.), Social Capital: Critical Perspectives (pp. 197- 211). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Madison, J. (1987). Letter to W.T. Barry, August 4, 1822. In Gaillard Hunt (Ed.), The Founder's Constitution (Volume 1, Chapter 18, Document 35). Retrieved from http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch18s35.html

Milner, H. (2002). Civic literacy: How informed citizens make democracy work. Medford, MA: Tufts University Press.

National Association of Social Workers (NASW). (1999). Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers. Retrieved from http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2011). The nation's report card: Civics 2010 (NCES Report No. 2011-466). Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2010/2011466.pdf

National Constitution Center. (1998). National Constitution Center teens' poll. Retrieved from http://constitutioncenter.org/media/files/survey-1999-stooges.pdf

Putnam, R.D. (2000). Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Schudson, M. (1999). The good citizen: A history of American civic life. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sullivan, F. M. (2013, March). New and alternative assessments, digital badges, and civics: An overview of emerging themes and promising directions. (CIRCLE Working Paper #77). Retrieved from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) website: http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/WP_77_Sullivan_Final.pdf

Swenson, C.R. (1998). Clinical social work's contribution to a social justice perspective. A Journal of the National Association of Social Workers, 43(6), 527-537.