

An illustration featuring several hands of different skin tones (light skin, orange, red, brown, dark brown) holding various shapes and speech bubbles. The shapes include a dark blue speech bubble, a teal circle, a grey speech bubble, a dark blue speech bubble, a yellow shape, and a teal shape. The background is light blue with a large white circle on the left side.

**THE STATE OF THE CITIZENRY AND
RISKS OF CIVIL DISENGAGEMENT**
Lindsey Cormack

Each fall, my university works to get students informed about upcoming elections.

In my role, as a professor of an Introduction to U.S. Government, I lead a “Students to the Polls,” collaborating with school administrators, student organizations, and Greek life to encourage first-time voters to cast their ballots. The exercise is not about which candidates or measures our students support, but simply about establishing the process and habit of voting.

I’m lucky to work at a place with great students. They are young adults who really know how to “do school,” they tested well to get in, and many of them eventually go on to remarkable careers. Yet without fail, on Election Day, a good number of them leave crestfallen, having been turned away from the polls for not being registered to vote. I always push students to then cast provisional ballots, but the experience of being turned away is discouraging, nonetheless.

These are students who navigated the labyrinth of college admissions, and who go on to develop techniques in various STEM disciplines to push humanity forward. But in that moment of rejection, they must grapple with a truth that erodes their sense of empowerment and downgrades their care for our political system. The realization is that their voice is muted not by lack of will, but by lack of preparation, and it does not feel good.

This problem is symptomatic of a larger crisis in political know-how. It is after watching this happen for a decade and hearing increasing complaints about our seemingly dysfunctional politics that I decided to take on this topic at length.

We are failing our young people by not teaching and talking enough about politics and government. As states reduce civics education and teachers navigate restrictive mandates, the issue only grows more dire. And this is not because children do not want to know these things—the 2023 Harvard Kennedy School’s annual youth poll demonstrated an enormous level of interest among young people in becoming involved in politics—it’s that they lack the know-how because our systems are failing them.

If our young adults had a bit more instruction around voting, and a better understanding of politics, their participation rates would be greater.

Right now, we have a very low level of government and political knowledge in the United States, but this also means there’s great potential for positive change. Parents can be the ones to start this change by recognizing that imparting the knowledge necessary to become a participating citizen is a parenting responsibility, and one that needs to be taken up by each of us.

If our young adults had a bit more instruction around voting, and a better understanding of politics, their participation rates would be greater. What's missing is that parents and families typically don't see this work as a parenting responsibility, and instead think that schools will be able to teach kids all they need to know about how our government works.

While schools do have a role in civic instruction, one of the challenges in increasing political know-how and government understanding in schools is that each state gets to set the curricula and instruction time for civics, and in many cases these choices are further delegated to individual school districts. Though there are many benefits to allowing states flexibility in schooling, and though some states teach civics and voter readiness better than others, the overall picture is not promising.

THE NATION'S REPORT CARD

Beginning in 1988, Congress mandated that the National Center for Education Statistics conduct the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) survey to report on student achievement in math, science, reading, writing, history, geography, and civics. This assessment survey is called the Nation's Report Card. The test, given to select students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades, was last conducted in 2018. In this iteration, only eighth graders took the civics element, now part of a combined "History, Geography, and Civics" section.

The assessment focuses on civic knowledge, dispositions, and skills that encourage civic engagement. Instead of current events trivia, like "Who is the Speaker of the House?" it asks broader questions about citizenship and American principles.

It gauges students' attitudes toward democracy and society and evaluates their intellectual skills for engaging in civic life.

From 1998 to 2014, average civics scores for eighth graders rose slightly. But since then, they've plateaued, with most students scoring at or below proficiency: 51% at "basic," 22% "proficient," and 2% "advanced."

The numbers are not promising no matter how we look at them. Young people are not learning enough about politics and government to be invested and involved when they become voting eligible citizens. And beyond just lower voter turnout, there are other downsides to consider.

IMPACT OF LOW CIVIC KNOW-HOW—DISTRUST, VULNERABILITY TO MANIPULATION, DISEMPOWERMENT

It's hard to trust something you don't know a lot about. Unsurprisingly, our collective slide in government knowledge also corresponds to a slide in government trust. In 2021, the Pew Research Center asked respondents, "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" Only 2% responded "just about always" and just 22% said "most of the time."

Since the beginning of the George W. Bush presidency in 2001, our trust in government has declined, though not always in a linear way. These trends do not appear to be due to generational or demographic differences; trust across respondent ages and racial categories has pretty much followed the same basic patterns.

This erosion of trust is concerning, as it highlights the need for a solid understanding of democracy to combat susceptibility to manipulation and misinformation. Without such understanding, people more easily believe outrageous claims about government powers or the actions of politicians. This vulnerability to sensational stories, whether from traditional media or social platforms, undermines our nation's well-being.

Since the 1950s, the American National Election Survey has asked a nationally representative sample of adults about their thoughts on government. One question asks if people believe they have a say in government and another whether the government cares what people think. From 1952-2012, the share of people who thought they could effect change and/or that the government cared for their thoughts at all has dropped. In the most recent years, fewer than 40% of Americans said they had any power to change government and only 18% said the government cared what they thought.

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These attitudes are pervasive, but they are, for the most part, not correct. And what's worse is that these views, when passed on to our kids, are harmful in the disempowering message that they send.

NOT KNOWING CREATES A WORSE POLITICS

A situation where people are uninformed about how democracy works, don't comprehend the roles of different branches of government, or don't understand their own points of political power leads to a worse politics. It's like sailing a ship without a compass or trying to get through a maze blindfolded. Without knowledge and practice, people can be convinced of a distorted perception of reality and be more prone to accept misguided ideas about the challenges our society faces.

The consequences of this lack of knowledge are far-reaching. When people are easily swayed by sensational stories, media manipulators can exploit this vulnerability, feeding the outrage machine and distracting us from other issues that demand our attention. This sort of despair politics is common today, where rather than having discussions about how we can use our processes for solutions, we find ourselves entangled in a web of distractions and division.

If more of us understood the basics, there would be less room for deception and far better conversations about how to fix the problems we have. A well-informed citizenry is the backbone of a healthy democracy. It enables us to make better decisions, hold our elected officials accountable, and actively participate in shaping our collective destiny. It's something worth working toward as parents.

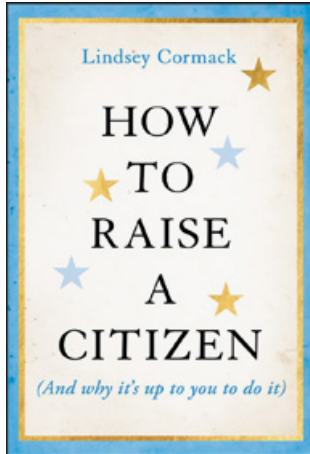
IT'S UP TO US TO CHANGE

A pervasive lack of knowledge and the related increasing public fatalism have culminated in lower levels of civic participation, voting, knowledge, and political engagement. This has happened in our democratic system—one that is meant to be rooted in power from us, the people. By subcontracting out our care for politics and government to schools, we have allowed ourselves to be both the product and the consumer of educational systems that are not able to do the work of preparing students for the real civic world that we must operate in.

By actively choosing to engage and learn about politics, we can better participate in decision-making processes, advocate for our interests, and contribute to society. By knowing more, we make it more likely our voices are heard, our values are represented, and our concerns are addressed. The payoff of opting in to learn about politics is the ability to actively shape our future and create a more inclusive and responsive democratic system. **In passing this on to our kids, we allow them to create a better future for themselves.** 📖



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lindsey Cormack, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Stevens Institute of Technology. She is a contributor to the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, CBS News, Fox News, Bloomberg, FiveThirtyEight and other media outlets. She authored *Congress and U.S. Veterans: From the GI Bill to the VA Crisis* and runs DCinbox.

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