



“Action Civics”: Summary

by Lucy Meckler

This paper summarizes the findings of the Foundation’s research study [“Action Civics,” “New Civics,” “Civic Engagement,” and “Project-Based Civics”: Advances in Civic Education?](#) by Thomas K. Lindsay and Lucy Meckler.

Civics education in the United States is in a state of crisis, which, if not addressed, will doom our constitutional democracy.

If the above assertion sounds unduly apocalyptic, consider these facts. Recent polling of Americans’ civic literacy, conducted by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, should shame all of us involved in education: While 90% of immigrants to this country pass the USCIS citizenship test (passage of which requires answering correctly 6 out of 10 questions), only a third of native-born Americans can pass the test. Digging deeper into the numbers reveals even more alarming news. Seventy-four percent of senior citizens can pass the test, but only 19% of Americans under the age of 45 can answer even 6 of the 10 questions correctly.

This paper explores why civic literacy is on the decline in America and pinpoints one educational methodology in particular, “Action Civics,” which presents itself as a “cure” for our civic illiteracy but is in fact worse than the disease. Defenders of Action Civics claim that our civic illiteracy crisis is due to an overemphasis on book learning. This could not be further from the truth. If anything, it is the departure from civics content that has deprived recent generations of the knowledge needed to be informed and effective citizens.

Studies from the 1990s compared students’ civic knowledge in 1989 with that of the 1940s and ’50s and found that, when the level of education is controlled, “levels of knowledge appear to have declined for most of the items” on which students were questioned ([Carpini & Keeter, 1991, p. 583](#)). Other studies conducted in the 2010s confirm this hypothesis. In the past, “three courses in civics and government were common in American high schools,” but that is no longer the case today ([Gould, 2011, p. 12](#)). It is quite likely that the fall in civic literacy can be attributed to the “‘anti-curriculum movement’ [that began in the ’60s] that shunned a common core in favor of a child-centered approach” ([Folz & Dodd, 2014, para. 10](#)).

What the above studies attest—*contra* Action Civics’ defenders—is that it is not the case that content-based civic education has been tried and found wanting. Instead, our departure from this educational regime, beginning with the ’60s “anti-curriculum movement,” brought on us the poor state of civic literacy under which we suffer today.

Proponents of Action Civics also make a strong assertion that “project-based” or “experiential” learning is “non-political,” which, on its face and if practiced correctly, would not be a false claim. This, however, does not take into account that what occurs inside the classroom often looks very different than non-partisan service learning. Proof of this can be found by even glancing over a random sampling of political projects listed on Generation Citizen’s and its allies’ websites—a list of these projects is compiled and analyzed in the full version of my paper with Dr. Thomas Lindsay.

These Action Civics projects reveal a progressive bias in the assumptions underlying many of them. These assumptions (e.g., anthropogenic climate change) may or may not be true, and it is the task of a genuine education to investigate them. However, when “action” proceeds from unexamined assumptions, the result is not learning but indoctrination.

To see this more clearly, consider the case of Robert Pondiscio, a former advocate as well as practitioner of Action Civics. Pondiscio announced in an *Education Next* article in 2019, “Kids as Political Props,” that he was breaking ranks with the movement. He begins: “I’m starting to sour on ‘authentic engagement’ of kids in civic education, a concept I’ve long supported, and occasionally supervised and even led as a teacher” ([Pondiscio, 2019, para. 1](#)). Why? Although he agrees that “preparing young people for active and engaged citizenship is an essential and neglected purpose of public education,” he finds that, “in some circles [i.e., the Action Civics movement], it takes the form of encouraging children to be directly involved in activism and advocacy, ostensibly student-led.” The problem Pondiscio identifies is the “morphing” of this approach “from a valuable instructional strategy into a manipulative and cynical use of children as political props in the service of causes they understand superficially, if at all” ([para. 1](#)).

Such activities described by Pondiscio hardly resemble anything close to authentic civics. Worse, Action Civics cannot help but draw students further away from an approach of American civics based on the Founding documents. This toxic brew—of partisan projects with no historical or constitutional context—promises not only to rob our students further of knowledge of their precious inheritance but also to exacerbate separatism, misunderstanding, and hostility.

Therefore, although it may be well-intentioned, Action Civics must be rejected if we hope to genuinely restore civic education in American classrooms. ★

References

- Carpini, M., & Keeters, S. (1991). Stability and change in the U.S. public's knowledge of politics. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 55(4), 583-612. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2749408>
- Folz, D., & Dodd, C. (2014, October 31). Whatever happened to civics education? *PA Times*. <https://patimes.org/happened-civics-education/>
- Gould, J. (Ed.). (2011). *Guardian of democracy: The civic mission of school*. Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. https://media.carnegie.org/filer_public/ab/dd/abdda62e-6e84-47a4-a043-348d2f2085ae/ccny_grantee_2011_guardian.pdf
- Pondiscio, R. (2019, March 7). Kids as political props. *Education Next*. <https://www.educationnext.org/kids-political-props/>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucy Meckler is the Next Generation Texas Deputy Campaign manager. She graduated from Hillsdale College with a BA in English and a minor in classical education.