



Testimony

C.S.S.B. 1889

Testimony in Support Before the Texas House Higher Education Committee

by Thomas K. Lindsay, Ph.D., Distinguished Senior Fellow of Higher Education & Constitutional Studies

Chairman Murphy and Members of the Committee:

My name is Tom Lindsay. I represent the Texas Public Policy Foundation, and I am testifying in favor of the bill.

In my view, this is a worthy bill. National studies reveal that American universities have an opportunity to bolster their efforts at civic education, mindful of Jefferson's caution that any country expecting to be both "ignorant and free" expects "what never was and never will be."

This bill would address the alarming results of national studies documenting America's civic illiteracy. This is not merely a Texas issue. Civics education in the United States is in a crisis, which, if not addressed, threatens our constitutional democracy.

To see this, 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 45 can answer even 6 of the 10 questions correctly.

Similarly, only 37% of all Texans, and only 23% of those under the age of 45, can answer even 6 questions correctly, with Texas rated as the 12th lowest performing state in the country. Even worse, unlike the real test, Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation's survey consisted of multiple-choice questions, giving participants at least a 25% better chance of passing simply based on odds. ***This means that far less than 37% of all Texans would have even passed if given the actual USCIS citizenship test.***

In another national survey, only a quarter of Americans could name the three branches of the American government, and nearly a third could not name even a single branch. In the Lone Star State, fewer than 2 in 10 Texans knew when the Constitution was even written.

Informed citizens are critical to the survival of any democratic society. Texas's own Constitution gives "the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people" as the very reason for providing for public education in the state.

The bill calls for THECB to "develop the American History and Civics Project to strengthen education in American history and civics across colleges and high schools and to encourage the development and effective use of high-quality digital content and professional development materials for American history and civics." Rightly refusing to engage in micro-management, the bill states that this should be done "in consultation with institutions of higher education."

The bill seeks further collaboration with universities by calling on THECB to "convene an expert commission of scholars and educators to assist in the creation of the American History and Civics Project."

In addition, the bill allows THECB to use any funds appropriated for this purpose to "award grants to faculty content experts to recommend and develop digital content and professional development materials for the project."

The bill also mandates that funds for this project "shall" be used by THECB to "support the establishment of a professional development program for faculty and teachers who teach American history and civics courses, including dual credit

and dual enrollment courses, to encourage the effective use of digital content curated and developed for the project. This program may include an annual statewide conference” as well as “cross-institutional partnerships among school districts, colleges, and universities.”

The bill also instructs THECB that it “shall make available the content and resources developed for the American History and Civics Project Repository available in the State Repository of Open Educational Resources consistent with Section 61.0670.”

Finally, and to its credit, the Texas Legislature anticipated and sought to head off our civic literacy crisis. Its 1955 law requires all public university students to fulfill six credits of American history. This requirement was entered into the Education Code in 1971. But the disturbing civic-learning results show that we need to do more, beginning with clarifying the intention of the 1955 law.

To ensure that these courses fulfill the Legislature’s intentions, SB 1889 seeks to clarify the 1955 law. The 1955 law’s purpose is to guarantee that college students—the overwhelming majority of whom are not history majors—receive a broad encounter with American history from a diversity of perspectives, among them, political, intellectual, economic, military, scientific, and social history. A [2018 study of history majors](#) in American universities reveals that they currently represent “about five degrees per 1,000 23-year-olds.” The law’s concern is for the benefit of the other 995 out of 1,000. The law intends that American history be part of a common core *for all* students to enhance their civic knowledge and citizenship skills.

Given the legislation’s purpose, survey courses in American history best fit the bill.

“Special topics” courses, by definition, focus only on limited aspects of American history. These courses, clearly valuable for supplemental learning, rightly belong in every university curriculum. Just as clearly, our students first need the broad understanding of American history that the law requires.

The bill clarifies the 1955 law by mandating that only survey courses fulfill the requirement. Beyond that, the bill, again rightly leery of micromanagement, leaves it to universities themselves to ensure their courses satisfy the law, confident that professors are eager to see the law, once clarified, is followed.

Finally, because the bill merely elucidates preexisting law, opposition to it logically requires opposition to the 1955 law itself. Of course, anyone who rejects the 66-year-old law is free to seek its repeal. That is how our democracy works. But so long as the law is on the books, legislators have the right to enforce its implementation. That, too, is how our democracy works. The American history bill hopes to help guarantee that our democracy continues to work.

I commend this bill and recommend it for passage. ★

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Thomas Lindsay, PhD, is the distinguished senior fellow of higher education & constitutional studies, and he’s the Foundation’s senior constitutional scholar. He has more than two decades’ experience in education management and instruction, including service as a dean, provost, and college president.

Lindsay was the director of the National Endowment for the Humanities’ (NEH) signature initiative, *We the People*, which supports teaching and scholarship in American history and culture. He was later named deputy chairman and chief operating officer of the NEH.

Lindsay co-authored the American government college textbook *Investigating American Democracy* with Gary Glenn, published by Oxford University Press. He has published numerous articles on the subject of democratic education, many of which have appeared in the world’s most prestigious academic journals.

In recognition of his scholarship on democratic education, Lindsay was the 1992-93 Bradley Resident Scholar at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Lindsay earned a PhD and an MA in political science and government from the University of Chicago and a BA *summa cum laude* in political science from Northern Illinois University.

