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# Developing Cultures

## Essays on Cultural Change

Edited by

Lawrence E. Harrison  
and Jerome Kagan

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Published in 2006 by  
Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
270 Madison Avenue  
New York, NY 10016

Published in Great Britain by  
Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
2 Park Square  
Milton Park, Abingdon  
Oxon OX14 4RN

© 2006 by Lawrence E. Harrison and Jerome Kagan.  
Routledge is an imprint of Taylor & Francis Group

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

International Standard Book Number-10: 0-415-95281-6 (Hardcover) 0-415-95282-4 (Softcover)  
International Standard Book Number-13: 978-0-415-95281-1 (Hardcover) 978-0-415-95282-8 (Softcover)  
Library of Congress Card Number 2005013571

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## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Developing cultures : essays on cultural change / edited by Lawrence Harrison and Jerome Kagan.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-95281-6 (hbk : alk. paper) -- ISBN 0-415-95282-4 (pb : alk. paper)

1. Progress. 2. Social values. 3. Social change. 4. Culture. I. Harrison, Lawrence E. II. Kagan, Jerome.

HM891 .D48 2005  
306.091724--dc22

2005013571

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19. E.g., Berkowitz and Beir.  
 20. See Lickona, 2004, for strategies for developing an effective school-parent partnership and for involving students in creating a school of character.

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### Civic Education and the Development of Civic Knowledge and Attitudes

RICHARD G. NIEMI  
 STEVEN E. FINKEL

In 1991 Samuel Huntington hailed a “third wave” of democratization, which saw an expansion of democracy in southern Europe, Latin America, and Asia, along with a sudden and dramatic growth in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union. Only a few years later, Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone*, decried the decline of civil society in the United States, and others noted a pervasive loss of confidence in governmental institutions and a decline in civic and political engagement.<sup>1</sup>

Evidence collected in the past few years has complicated this picture, pointing out that young people as well as old are heavily involved in community service. Nonetheless, trust in government and politics, though rebounding since the mid-1990s (and temporarily spiking immediately after September 11, 2001), remains low. Voter turnout in U.S. presidential elections is generally 50 to 55 percent, with even the heightened turnout in 2004 lower than in most other democracies, both new and established. Confidence in major institutions continues to be low.

Concerns are heightened by the fact that young adults and high school students are especially distrustful, disengaged, and uninterested.

Nationwide surveys, tests (including the most recent national civics assessment), reports from college freshmen, and other prominent data show that students and young adults pay much less attention to politics than previous generations, demonstrate limited knowledge of government and politics, and have an understanding of citizenship that emphasizes rights to the exclusion of responsibilities. They often claim not to know how to vote, and their turnout rates, always lower than among older adults, have dropped further behind.

These observations—especially the generational component, with its suggestion of still lower levels of interest and engagement in the future—have generated national concerns. Among a variety of responses, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) launched an initiative “to encourage the teaching, studying and understanding of American history and culture.”<sup>2</sup>

The most frequent call is for increased and improved civic education. It is easy to understand why. Elementary and secondary schools, in particular, reach the target population; schools are the institution designated for training in all subjects, including citizenship; and citizenship education needs improvement after three decades of relative neglect. But can schools effectively teach the knowledge, attitudes, and behavior associated with good citizenship? What is the state of civic education today? How many students do civics courses reach? How can they be most effective? What is the role of community service in civic education?

We address these questions here. First we review the history of civic education in the United States, noting the decline of civics courses in the 1960s and the growth in government courses in recent years. We discuss recent evidence about the effects of formal course work and school “climate.” Next, we turn to community service, the effects of which, we suggest, are understudied and perhaps overestimated. Finally, we review civic education efforts abroad, especially in the developing world, and note some recommendations for expanding and strengthening civic education.

### From Boom to Bust to Partial Recovery

The goal of training for citizenship has been integral to school curricula practically since the U.S. public school system began. Indeed, the ambitious goal of making all Americans active and informed citizens

was one of Horace Mann’s critical selling points in his campaign for universal mandatory public education. His arguments focused on the need for basic literacy, so that citizens would be able to receive information about politics and express their wishes. The content of political knowledge that was taught was typically left for the local jurisdiction to establish, in order to protect children from indoctrination.

The content of the “social studies” curriculum developed in the early 1900s. While history had been commonly taught, instruction in social studies for high school students only began to be considered in 1916, after the report of the Social Studies Committee of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. Many high schools needed to “Americanize” the many adolescents coming from other countries, and include the American teenagers who were now kept out of the labor market by child labor laws. In response, the Commission report argued for courses in civics, government, and problems of democracy. Also in 1916, the American Political Science Association issued a report declaring its commitment to “education for citizenship and public service.”<sup>3</sup> These two reports helped establish a pattern that persisted for more than four decades, of civics courses, usually in eighth or ninth grade, and government courses, usually in twelfth grade.

The turmoil in education that began in the 1960s greatly reshaped the curriculum, including civics. Three major developments occurred: enrollment in civics classes declined precipitously; civics courses, with their focus on the responsibilities of citizens, were transformed into government courses, with a more analytical and “objective” approach; and enrollment in government courses rose steadily after 1990.

In the 1960s, civics classes went into a sharp decline; by the early 1980s, so was any sort of teaching about American government and politics. There was a substantial erosion in the proportion of students taking American government as a stand-alone course. The length of many government classes declined, from a full year to one semester. It is also likely that attention to social studies in the elementary grades dropped precipitously over the same period.

Since the 1980s, this decline has been reversed. The “New Social Studies” that had dominated the 1960s and 1970s began to fade. And, while civics classes per se continued to decline and economics classes and other nongovernment classes continued to increase,

enrollments in American government classes quickly rebounded. By 1998, about four out of five graduating seniors had taken an American government course.

Changes since the mid-1980s, however, have not restored the pre-1970s situation. About a fifth of recent graduates have no stand-alone course in government and politics in their four-year high school career. Even fewer (about 50%) have such a course in their senior year. Moreover, a recent survey of state statutes revealed that many states have no requirements at all for civic education, and of those that do, most simply specify that civics topics be taught at some time during the high school years; it is likely that constitutional history, taught in some amount in virtually every American history class, meets the requirements. Despite the move toward high-stakes testing, only five states in the late 1990s had statutes that required some form of testing/assessment in civics.<sup>4</sup>

As important as the changes in the numbers of students taking civic education courses is the content of those courses. Though harder to quantify, it seems clear that the movement from "Civics" to "U.S. Government" has been accompanied by significant changes in emphasis. Some of the change probably occurred because of ambivalence resulting from the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war. Another stimulus was changes in the associated professional disciplines. In the 1950s and 1960s, social science researchers increasingly saw themselves as part of scientific disciplines, with no responsibility for teaching good citizenship.

Nonetheless, some of the new social studies initiatives did include discussion of and teaching about values in American politics. Dealing with controversial issues in contemporary politics is difficult in the best of circumstances; in recent years, the increasing diversity of American students and concerns about political correctness, multiculturalism, and rigorous nonpartisanship have made it particularly difficult for teachers to deal with such topics. The resulting reluctance to deal with such issues has no doubt led to some of the concerns over the supposed blandness of civics and government classes.

A concrete indicator of this shift can be noted in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In the late 1960s, the initial "civics" NAEP was titled "citizenship." In the 1970s, the title was expanded to include "social studies." In 1988, a completely new test was created, this time called "U.S. Government and Politics." Moreover, while the earlier tests included attitudinal questions, the

1988 test included only factual items, and NAEP is now explicitly precluded from asking about student attitudes.

Questions within recent NAEP assessments are indicative of current topical coverage. Student reports indicate that course content leans heavily on the structure of U.S. government: the Constitution, Bill of Rights, the three branches, and generally how laws are made. There is little progression across topics between earlier and later courses. In 1988, the test itself contained little about topics such as the international system and the skills that citizens need to participate effectively in a democratic society.

We cannot return to the type of courses that were taught before the 1960s. Yet the need for revisions—especially some attention to the attitudes and behaviors that underlie responsible citizenship—is driving suggestions to expand and reform the civics curriculum.<sup>5</sup>

### Effects of Civic Education

Whether students take government classes in high school or have civics lessons in earlier grades matters only if those classes and lessons have some effect. High school graduates have routinely been shown to know more about all manner of political (and nonpolitical) subjects than those with less education, with college graduates knowing still more. Educational effects are also widely apparent with respect to various forms of political behavior. Greater education has long been associated with higher voter turnout and with participation in more demanding kinds of political behavior and many forms of political attentiveness. Likewise, attitudes such as political tolerance and efficacy have a strong relationship with education levels.

But only recently has persuasive evidence shown that civics courses have an effect on students' knowledge. The most systematic results are the NAEP civics (and history) assessments. In a book based on the 1988 civics NAEP, Niemi and Junn showed that exposure to the civics curriculum was related to greater student knowledge.<sup>6</sup> In fact, course impacts and the effects of individual achievement varied by subject matter. These two factors had the greatest effect on topics that students are least likely to encounter outside the classroom, such as details of constitutional provisions. They had less impact on knowledge of topics that students know relatively well, presumably because they encounter this material in their daily lives as well as in the classroom.

Having perhaps convinced skeptics that civics (and history) courses have a genuine effect, recent work has begun to shift the focus to what kinds of courses are most effective, what kinds of teaching have the greatest effect, and so on. Major efforts are underway to improve civics course work. The development of the voluntary National Standards for Civics and Government in 1994 was an important step, in part because it was the basis for the most recent NAEF civics assessment, which has served as a starting point for revisions of state standards.

### Community Service: The New Wave of Youth Participation

Though the young usually lack interest in politics and government, they are often heavily involved in community service. In schools at all levels, voluntary service—often in the form of so-called service learning—has surged dramatically. Efforts are increasingly well-coordinated; in 1997, for example, a wide-ranging group of nonprofit organizations, universities, schools, and government organizations established the Partnering Initiative on Education and Civil Society to help build service learning opportunities into elementary, secondary, and postsecondary classroom curricula.<sup>7</sup> “Voluntary” service is also increasingly required. School systems at both state and local levels have established service components in courses or encouraged voluntary service.

Still, concerns remain about the extent of and kind of participation. The push for voluntarism has quickly outstripped evaluation of its effects. Here, after laying out the theoretical context for student voluntarism, we discuss the extent and kinds of participation that have been observed, and finally review the more limited work on the effects of participation.

### Theoretical Context

Theorists have long suggested linking school and community in civic education to develop shared or common democratic values and fundamental citizen participatory skills. Since the early 1900s, the United States has heard from many advocates for applied civics and seen many experiments based on the assumption that service in the

community will strengthen one's intellectual appreciation of democracy and practical skills for participation. Since the mid-1990s, service learning has resurfaced as a widely proposed means to renew political engagement. Advocates say it is an essential part of civic education that can arouse interest, increase knowledge, and generate positive participatory and civil attitudes.

### Practice

Some community service education programs aim to develop the skills needed to influence public affairs; others bolster civic “charity” or service as an alternative to government or public programs. Currently, community service for secondary students is found in two general formats. *Service learning* generally refers to community service that is incorporated into school courses. The service interval in the community is typically preceded by preparatory sessions that provide an informational and conceptual framework. Postservice activities include written reflections and classroom discussion. *Community service* generally refers to voluntary work in the community that is not linked to the school curriculum, although the school may encourage or even arrange it. Proponents of student service tend to favor more systematic and substantial service learning programs. In practice, however, more students are involved in community service that is not assimilated into school courses, is not debriefed, and is likely to be for short periods of time.

### Extent of and Kinds of Participation

Rates of community service among high school students are high by almost any yardstick. Overall rates are at levels associated with voting turnout in closely fought presidential elections, and they are higher than comparable adult rates. In the 1996 and 1999 National Household Education Surveys (NHES), for example, just over half of students in grades nine to twelve claimed to have participated in “community service activity or volunteer work at your school or in your community” during the present school year.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, participation at least once, which is what is denoted by most of the rates cited, is not the same as sustained

participation. In the 1996 NHES survey, many students only participated once or twice or a few hours altogether. If one excludes these, the rate of participation drops from just over half to below 30 percent. If one sets the bar relatively high (at least 35 hours), the figure drops to just 14 percent. This puts quite a different face on participation rates.

The kinds of activities students engage in suggest additional qualifications. According to the Independent Sector survey, the most frequent type of work is baby-sitting (13 percent of all teenagers), followed by cleaning or janitorial work (9 percent).<sup>9</sup> Such services are unlikely to enhance students' understanding of civic organizations or of adult social and political concerns. Less than 1 percent of reported activities take place in explicitly political organizations.

As with all kinds of "public" participation, youthful community service varies across types of individuals. Differences occur along the same lines as those found in adult political participation although sometimes with a twist; for example, females typically outperform males. Differences also echo variations in family background, including both family status and degree of parental involvement. A variety of school-related factors, such as grades earned by the student and district policies toward service, are also important.

Importantly, analysis of the 1996 NHES data revealed that African Americans and Hispanics participate in community service at rates similar to those for non-Hispanic whites. This pattern is similar to that found for African Americans over the years with respect to many kinds of political participation. Rather more surprising are possible school effects. In one study, when a school encouraged students to participate by helping arrange for their service, the probability of a student participating increased considerably; when a school required such service, there was no statistically significant effect.<sup>10</sup>

Participation also varies across types of schools and communities. It is greatest in church-related schools and least prevalent in public schools; in 1999, the difference recorded in NHES was quite large, with over 70 percent of the students in church-related schools having participated, just under 70 percent of those in other private schools, and 50 percent of those in public schools. Participation also depends to some extent on the wealth of the community; in the 1996 NHES, 54 percent of all students participated when poverty rates were very low (less than 5 percent in the given zip code living below the poverty level), while it declined steadily to 42 percent when poverty rates

were high—more than 20 percent below the poverty level. Overall, then, a relatively large percentage of students participate in community service; sustained participation is less frequent. Many standard variables associated with skills, resources, and enhanced opportunities are correlated with regular participation, though surprisingly, service seems to be encouraged most when schools facilitate but do not require it. And wealthier and church-related schools foster higher rates of participation.

### *Effects of Participation*

Despite the high frequency of volunteer work, research on the effects of community service is still inadequate. Very few have rigorously examined whether community service contributes specifically to gains in civic knowledge. But some positive results have been reported. In the 1996 NHES study, regular, sustained participation in community service (over 35 hours) was associated with a substantial difference in political knowledge. For example, it had a larger effect than did participation in school government and about the same as participation in one to two in-school or out-of-school activities. The relationship between community service and knowledge was also comparable to the difference made by moving up two grades in school. Involvement in community service was unrelated to self-reported ability to "write a letter to a government office," perhaps because this is a frequent assignment in high school civics courses, and a very high proportion of students claimed the ability. Involvement was, however, related to self-reported ability to "make a statement at a public meeting."

Research on attitudinal effects has been more mixed. Studies in the 1980s raised considerable doubt about whether service learning programs could improve political efficacy and, therefore, whether they would have any lasting effect on participation. With hindsight, it seems likely that the intensely activist programs designed in the 1970s, when tested in the 1980s, confronted an increasingly conservative climate in both school and community. Still, in the 1996 NHES study, as in others, the findings were only weakly supportive of service effects on specifically political attitudes.

Overall, community service holds considerable potential for involving young people in the broader social world. Indeed, given young people's disdain for many forms of political behavior, it may

be the primary means of societal involvement for them today. We would, however, offer two cautionary observations. First, much current participation is decidedly nonpolitical. Second, more research is needed about what kinds of activities students participate in and what effects that participation has. As noted above, participation of ten seems to consist of infrequent and low-level tasks, hardly the kind of thing proponents tout when they promote community service/service learning.

### International Civic Education

The increased attention given to civic education and its effects has by no means been limited to the United States and other advanced industrialized democracies.<sup>11</sup> Since the early 1990s, there has been an explosion of civic education programs in the newly emerging countries of Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America, many of which had little or no prior experience with democratic political systems. Much activity is occurring in the formal school system, with a variety of specialized civic education programs, often funded by the United States or other international donors and philanthropic organizations, attempting to inculcate the knowledge, values, skills, and participatory orientations that are thought to develop a supportive democratic political culture. At the same time, in the immediate aftermath of many countries' democratic transitions, it was widely recognized that vast numbers of adults also lacked the basic knowledge, skills, and supportive values that would facilitate their effective participation in democratic politics. Hence donors have also funded an extensive array of programs aimed at adults to foster the more immediate consolidation of these often-fragile democracies.

It is difficult to determine the exact numbers internationally of school-age children who are exposed to civic education. Studies along the lines of NAEP or the Department of Education's Transcript Studies simply do not exist outside the United States or Europe. Still, there is evidence that within the school system, children are increasingly exposed to civic education topics. In a comprehensive study of civic education teachers, curricula, textbooks, and national standards across some twenty-four advanced and new democracies in 1999, Torney-Purta and her colleagues found courses in virtually every country that covered such areas as the importance of elections, in-

dividual rights and obligations, and the role of political parties, civil society, and the media.<sup>12</sup> Though the topics were often not discussed in a separate civics course, by age fourteen the majority of students in these countries would likely have some exposure to the subject matter of democracy.

Importantly, many specialized programs have been instituted for younger students in emerging democracies, some even at the pre-school level. For example, the Step by Step program run by Children's Resource International has trained over 500,000 students in some thirty Eastern European countries since 1994. The program promotes a "child-centered" approach to teaching children as young as three in ways designed to counter the often rigid, rote-oriented teaching and learning culture of previous authoritarian regimes. The program focuses on developing critical thinking, communication and interpersonal skills, and cooperative learning patterns among children, and in involving parents, teachers, and the wider community.

At the middle school level and beyond, programs are also increasingly emphasizing more active, participatory forms of democracy education. Patrick, for example, identifies the "active learning of civic knowledge, skills and virtue" as one of the key "global trends" in recent democracy education.<sup>13</sup> Examples of this approach in specialized programs in developing democracies are Legion, ranging from the Democracy for All program run by Street Law, where high school students in postapartheid South Africa engage in mock elections, trials, and simulated human rights cases, to the Project Citizen program run by the U.S.-based Center for Civic Education and currently in operation in approximately fifteen developing democracies (as well as many U.S. states). Project Citizen students work as a group to identify community or national problems, participate in simulated legislative hearings on the topic, and then have the opportunity to engage in public presentations to educators, government officials, and journalists.

Programs directed at developing the civic capacity of adults are even more numerous. These efforts, implemented in developing democracies by thousands of nongovernmental organizations, vary widely. For example, they provide instruction about women's social and political rights, educate voters, organize to solve neighborhood problems, and encourage public participation in constitutional and political reform processes. We have little data on the rates of exposure to these kinds of democracy training activities, though the



2001 to 2002 Kenya National Civic Education Program, an election awareness and constitutional reform program consisting of some fifty thousand discrete workshops, lectures, drama and puppet shows, and community meetings conducted by nearly eighty different NGOs, appears to have reached nearly 18 percent of the adult Kenyan population.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Effects of Civic Education in Developing Democracies*

Despite the proliferation of civic education programs in new democracies, relatively little research has been conducted on the effectiveness of these programs in changing democratic orientations among students or adults. Still, a small but growing body of work focuses on the effects of civic education in international contexts, with the results both replicating and extending the findings reported earlier in the United States.

Research on school-age students in developing contexts consistently echoes the long-standing finding that civic education has the strongest effects on students' levels of civic knowledge as opposed to such attitudes and values as political efficacy, tolerance, and trust in government. Finkel and Ernst, for example, found that high-school students who received civics instruction on at least a weekly basis were far more likely to identify correctly the names of key South African political leaders and possess basic knowledge of the South African constitutional structure than students who received civics instruction less often or not at all.<sup>15</sup> The differences between these groups on political knowledge was over 10 percent, roughly double the effect that Niemi and Junn attributed solely to exposure to civic education in the United States.<sup>16</sup> These findings, along with those reported in several other studies of developing democracies, suggest that civic education has much potential to increase students' store of basic political knowledge, perhaps more so than in advanced settings, where civics instruction may be redundant to other sources of political information.

Although the effects of civic education on attitudes, values, and orientations toward political participation are typically more modest, even these orientations appear open to change under certain conditions related to the classroom and instructional environment. For example, Torney-Purta and colleagues reported a positive effect in

more than 80 percent of countries studied of an "open classroom" environment, that is, one where controversial political issues are discussed frequently and freely.<sup>17</sup> Finkel and Ernst find stronger effects of two other variables: the perceived credibility and likability of the civics teacher, and the degree to which active, participatory teaching methodologies were used in the classroom.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, the pedagogical methods that had the greatest impact involved students directly in interactive democratic behaviors such as participation in mock elections, trials, or role-playing activities. Students appeared to learn democratic values and skills by practicing and engaging in democratic participation in venues made available to them inside and outside the classroom.

Among adult populations, the largest effects of civic education are often found on political participation, especially at the local level, rather than on democratic attitudes and values. In nine programs among adults in the Dominican Republic, Poland, and South Africa, for example, individuals who were exposed to civic education were often nearly twice as participatory as individuals in control groups, with the largest effects being seen in community problem-solving participation and attendance at local municipal meetings.<sup>19</sup> Evidently, adult civic education conducted through NGOs and other civil society organizations has beneficial synergies: because civics training encourages participation in politics, it seems to be amplified by the "normal" mobilization processes already taking place within these groups. Democratic attitudes and values were the most difficult to change, though significant effects were found on the values of efficacy, political tolerance, and institutional trust.<sup>20</sup>

Equally important, the Finkel study found consistent evidence that the effects of civic education vary dramatically, depending on the nature and frequency of the individual's experience with democracy training. Specifically, three conditions seem to make adult civic education more effective: (1) attendance at three or more training sessions; less frequent exposure to civic education often has no impact whatsoever; (2) when training sessions were conducted with more participatory methodologies, such as role playing, simulations, mock elections, and the like; (3) by trainers whom the participants see as knowledgeable, inspiring, and interesting. It is not enough, then, for individuals simply to be exposed to civic education; what matters is its frequency, participatory orientation, and overall quality.

### A Reminder About Family Effects

With all the emphasis given to the role of schools in civic education, we must remember the abiding importance of the family in imparting knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and norms to the next generation. Family characteristics are included in many of the analyses noted above, and they routinely prove to be statistically and substantively significant. Relevant family characteristics include the frequency of family discussions, the extent to which resources such as books are found in the home, the nature of family decision making, and parental educational level.

### Conclusion

For a generation or more, civic education has been considered old-fashioned, ineffective, even unnecessary. Now, however, in light of widespread disengagement and distrust among the young, we have begun to turn our attention back to the topic of citizenship for democracy. Our study has reinforced some long-standing conclusions and yielded new ones:

Education is a major factor underlying civic and political participation *and the attitudes that support it*.

Education is a strong correlate of interest in politics.

Education promotes both following politics (passive participation) and active participation.

Education generally increases political tolerance.

Education encourages personal responsibility in the political life of the community and nation and the feeling that one can participate effectively (political efficacy).

Civic education per se is an important component of education for democracy.

Civic education should begin early, and continue through the end of secondary schooling.

The way in which the school and classroom ("classroom climate") are run is also an important component of civic education.

Students should be encouraged to follow and discuss current events, to discuss controversial social and political issues free-

ly and openly, and to think about school problems and ways of solving them.

Student councils are an excellent way of involving students in understanding how problems can be solved and in actually solving school problems.

Teachers and principals need protection from excessive criticism when raising controversial issues as long as they do it in a responsible, nonpartisan manner.

Community service may be a significant way for young people to become involved in civic engagement.

Sustained, long-term engagement has greater effects than episodic, short-term involvement.

Service should involve projects that meet real needs rather than projects created simply to fulfill some minimum level of involvement.

More uncertain is whether community service should be required; encouraging and facilitating participation seems to stimulate high levels of involvement.

Whether and how such service should be integrated into the curriculum is the subject of continued experimentation and evaluation research.

The family remains a major contributor to all aspects of social and political development.

Attitudes of young people are strongly influenced by their parents' attitudes, especially if parents have strong opinions and express them clearly.

Adult voluntary and political participation is strongly influenced by parental behavior patterns.

Parents are important indirectly as well, because they support good civic education.

Civic education is increasingly prevalent in the new democracies of Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

Civics programs funded by U.S. and other international donors are being widely implemented, not only in the formal school system, but also in many community-based programs for adults.

The effects of these programs on democratic orientations can be even greater than those found in the United States, provided that individuals are trained frequently with active participatory methods and in open classroom environments.

Civic education conducted for adults by community-based organizations can have particularly powerful effects on political participation.

The way civic education is delivered differs from one country to another, but the goals of an informed, active, and thoughtful citizenry are widely shared, and many of the same principles govern instruction of new generations across a wide range of democratic settings.

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