



# Harvard Model Congress

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# CIVIC EDUCATION IN THE US UPDATE

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The state of civic education in the US continues to be a problem in need of addressing. A 2023 Annenberg Civics Study finds that one in six adults in the US are unable to name a branch of the government and one in 20 cannot name five rights protected by the First Amendment (Maroni, 2023).

There have been recent efforts across the nation attempting to improve the quality and scope of civic education in the United States. Several bills have been introduced at the state and national levels to address civic education. In the House of Representatives, Representative Emmanuel Cleaver (D-MO) introduced the Civics Learning Act of 2023. This bill would bolster support for civic education by \$70 million and would especially target underserved populations, schools for those impacted by learning disabilities, and low-access areas. All the sponsors of this bill are Democrats, highlighting the polarizations surrounding this issue. Nonetheless, bipartisan legislation has been introduced. The Promoting Programming, Research, Education and Preservation (PREP) in Civics and Government Act was introduced in February 2023 by a group of nonpartisan legislators. The bill would increase access to civics and government learning material by putting these subjects within the scope of the National Endowment for the Humanities' (NEH's) work (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023).

Civic education bills saw some success at the national level. The omnibus bill passed at the end of 2022 in Congress authorizes \$23 million to be spent on K-12 civics education (Vinnakota and Dubé, 2023). This funding is only part of the \$1 billion that was proposed in the Civics Secures Democracy Act which was introduced in 2022 but was not passed (Smith, 2023). While this is a small amount compared to the Civics Secures Democracy Act, it does show that civic education has the potential to see more legislative success in the future.

Conservative lawmakers have continued to fight against expanding the definition of civics to include topics such as Critical Race Theory (CRT). Conservative lawmakers have been active in legislating against CRT, a component of civic education that many liberal lawmakers champion, across the nation. UCLA School of Law research found that from March 2022 to August 2023, 300 anti-CRT measures were adopted, adding up to a total

of 700 across the nation (Munoz, 2023). Every state except for Delaware has now seen at the very least an introduction of anti-CRT bills at the local legislative level. At the local level, conservative lawmakers have seen success even in liberal states. For example, in California, 9 anti-CRT measures have been adopted in school districts.

Conservatives have continued to advocate for civics tests in education. In fact, former conservative presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy believes that voters aged 18 to 24 should have to pass civics tests to be eligible to vote (Nicholson, 2023). However, new research shows that despite a third of states requiring a basic civics test during high school, these tests do not change voting participation patterns (Schwartz, 2023). The study from the University of Pennsylvania analyzed the voting patterns of young people in states with and without voting tests and found that there was no significant increase in voter turnout among those who took state-mandated civics tests (Jung and Gopalan, 2023).

In summary, both conservative and liberal House members support more civic education, but they remain divided on what that looks like. Liberals champion for action civics and for a more encompassing definition of civics to be utilized in civics education, while conservatives seek to keep the definition narrower and focus on the basic components of government in civic education. While steps have been taken over the past year at the local level and in limited respects at the national level, progress is hindered by divisiveness over the problem.

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