



Sixth Circuit 2020 Student Essay Contest

The Role of Civics Education in Protecting the Rule of Law

Full Essay Prompt

Thomas Jefferson once wrote that “[a]n enlightened citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic.” Over the past few decades, our nation has undergone a significant decline in the provision of civics education. The term “civics education” generally refers to a curriculum that integrates many subjects—social studies, history, government, language arts and media literacy—which help young people grow into self-aware, well-informed, equitable, and effective democratic citizens.

The effects of the decline in civics education are troubling. Only 39 percent of Americans can name all three branches of government.¹ Only 30 percent of U.S. millennials consider it “essential” to live in a democracy, compared to 72 percent of Americans born before World War II.² An increasing proportion of Americans “dislike, even loathe” people who support a political party different from their own (independent from disagreeing on issues that underly a difference in political parties).³ In short, the decline in civics education has arguably led to a less civil (and less functional) society.

To address this issue, some states now require high school students pass the U.S. citizenship exam in order to graduate. Other states require students to take a civics class in high school in order to graduate. However, such initiatives have been criticized as having mixed results in their success.

Keeping in mind the state of civics education in our country today, please address the following questions:

- *Is the teaching of civics valuable to maintaining American democracy?*
- *Why is the rule of law important to American democracy, and what role does the teaching of civics have in protecting the rule of law?*
- *How can civics education be improved to better “enlighten our citizenry”?*

Questions? Contact the Office of the Circuit Executive at (513) 564-7200 or civics_contest@ca6.uscourts.gov.

<https://connections.ca6.uscourts.gov/civics-contest>

¹ *Annenberg Civics Survey 2019*, Annenberg Public Policy Center (Sept. 12, 2019), https://cdn.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Annenberg_civics_survey_2019.pdf.

² Roberto Stefan Foa & Yascha Mounk, *The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect*, 27 *JOURNAL OF DEMOCRACY* 5-17 (2016), <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FoaMounk-27-3.pdf>.

³ Shanto Iyengar, et al., *Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization*, 76 *THE PUBLIC OPINION QUARTERLY* 405-31 (Fall 2012).