

Enlightened Citizens: Education for a Republic

by Glenn M. Ricketts

A Republic, If We Can Teach It: Fixing America's Civic Education Crisis, Jeffrey Sikkenga, David Davenport, Republic Book Publishers, 2024, pp. 250, \$19.89 hard-cover.

In November 2016, a few days after that year's presidential election, longtime BBC news reporter and anchor Laura Trevelyan was sworn in as an American citizen. As she prepared for the occasion, Trevelyan noted that she had to familiarize herself with a range of questions — one hundred, to be exact — about U.S. history and the Constitution under which the country is governed. The exam she was required to take consisted of ten questions selected from the larger list, for which applicants must provide at least six correct answers. Trevelyan passed the test, although she did not achieve a perfect score, and wondered in jest if most native-born Americans would clear the hurdle on the same exam.

My parents, who graduated from high school in 1939 and 1941 respectively, would have known the answer to nearly every question, as I would have as well, graduating from high school

in 1967. We were not particularly brilliant students. The curriculum at the time simply mandated a civic education which instilled all of the information which Ms. Trevelyan was obliged to master to qualify for citizenship. Today, however, a slim new book by political scientists Jeffrey Sikkenga and David Davenport suggests the answer to Ms. Trevelyan's question — could native-born Americans, especially the latest crop of high schoolers, pass the citizenship test? — is a resounding “no.”

Civics education in the United States, they demonstrate exhaustively, is in a bad way and, like much of K-12 public education, has been for some time. (See for example Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* [1987]; Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read* [1986]; National Commission on Educational Excellence, *A Nation at Risk*, [1983].) For many current high school graduates, knowledge of

American history and the foundations of American government are at best scant, and often consist of the ability to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and not much more.

The authors attribute this dismal state of affairs to a combination of factors: a heavy emphasis on STEM disciplines, which has displaced such traditional fields as history, government, and literature; a hyper-partisan, polarized political environment which often extends from Congress to state houses, to local school boards, making consensus on curricular content difficult or impossible; poorly prepared elementary and secondary teachers, who arrive steeped in pedagogical theory but with little knowledge of the subject fields they are hired to teach; textbooks which are uninspiring, dry and tedious, often replaced by Howard Zinn's farcical *A People's History of the United States*; excessive emphasis on rote memorization and lecturing rather than engaging students in "conversations" about American history and government; the extensive influence of the schools of education, which are heavily saturated with progressive ideology and pedagogy, and which maintain a near monopoly of the process through which most K-12 teachers obtain certification.

As the authors further note, there is indeed something in many high school curricula bearing the label "action civics," or "civic engagement," which most often focuses on progressive topics such as social justice, climate change, or Critical Race Theory, and which effectively turns students into lobbyists or

activists on behalf of these causes. Interestingly, the authors do not include the politically powerful teachers' unions in this list, somewhat surprising given the enormous influence wielded by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA). Union membership is often compulsory, with union leaders as eager ideologues on behalf of progressive causes and watered-down school curricula. In my own state of New Jersey, for example, the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) recently successfully lobbied the administration of Governor Phil Murphy to drop the state's minimum reading and writing skills test requirement for teachers' certification qualifications. (See Ryan Brooks, "Teachers Union Convinces State to Dumb Down Teacher Standards," Freedom Foundation, January 14, 2025.)

As one who has taught the standard American Government survey course and also U.S. History at the college level for my entire career, I am indeed familiar with both the complete lack of knowledge of the Constitution that many students bring to the classroom, or the ideologically skewed perspective found in many others. The latter know, for example, that the Constitution 1) Was created by white male property owners to serve their class interests; 2) That women were unable to vote; 3) That the Framers allowed slavery to continue in a purportedly "free" country; 4) That George Washington was a slaveholder. At the same time, they're not likely to know the length of terms served by U.S. Senators, why the United

States is a republic and not a democracy, or how the President is elected, or the reasons for the Electoral College. This is to say nothing of the epoch-making nature of the Constitution's protection of religious liberty, speech rights, checks and balances, federalism, and individual liberties.

Sikkenga and Davenport offer a lengthy list of measures and policy suggestions to correct the woeful state of civic education, which they declare should seek to create "informed patriots" who love their country. These include, in the authors' words, *more, more, more*: More civic education, beginning in families who can tell children stories of America's Founding and purpose; more instruction in school curricula at all levels, starting in Kindergarten; more professional development opportunities, even requirements, for teachers to take additional courses in American History and government, so that they are actually knowledgeable of the subjects they are assigned to teach; the building of a "layer cake" through the K-12 school experience, beginning in Kindergarten, in which students gradually encounter successively more detailed and sophisticated study of the American Founding; the use of original documents and texts, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution itself, the *Federalist Papers*, etc. I use this approach in my own classes, although as the authors interestingly do not discuss, student reading abilities, as of last January, are at an all-time low (see Dana Goldstein, "American Children's Reading Skills Reach New Lows,"

New York Times, January 29, 2025) The heavily Latinate *Federalist* essays, needless to say, pose quite a daunting challenge to most students.

Sikkenga and Davenport repeatedly stress that they *do not* advocate a major role for the federal government in facilitating the renewal of civic education since, as they acknowledge, federal funds usually carry extensive conditions and oversight requirements which would only impede such efforts. The major thrust, they emphasize, must come at the state and, especially, local level: state legislatures, which can set appropriate standards for civic education and teacher training standards; local school boards which have direct control over the curriculum and graduation requirements, and which can hire teachers with appropriate academic preparation.

All very worthwhile goals which readers of these pages would likely endorse. Like the present reviewer, however, they may also wonder how they can ever actually be brought to fruition. The obstacles to such an outcome, the authors acknowledge, are indeed formidable.

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