



Keeping the Republic

Teaching Citizenship Starts in the Classroom

By Elizabeth C. Matto



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As the nation marks the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026, survey research indicates that Americans are concerned about the health of democracy. A Times/Siena poll in October 2024 reported that less than half of the respondents (49%) believed that American democracy does a good job representing the people with 76% stating that American democracy is currently under threat (with each party offering very different versions of how or why it is under threat). An Eagleton Center for Public Interest poll from November 2024 found that 47% were “very worried” and 39% “somewhat worried” about the future of America’s democracy. These concerns remind us that the United States’ unique system of representative government, “a republic if you can keep it” as Benjamin Franklin reportedly observed, is fragile and not necessarily guaranteed. Efforts to safeguard its core ideals, its structure, and its processes range from constitutional amendments to legislative action to transforming the makeup of elected bodies. A powerful approach to “keeping the republic” though is teaching democratic citizenship.

Over the years, a vast body of scholarship and set of best practices regarding high quality civic education has emerged that emphasizes not just imparting civic knowledge but also teaching civic skills and dispositions. An important facet of such civic preparedness is an understanding of what it means to think like a democratic citizen

with an understanding of such principles as liberty, equality, and respect for the rule of law. This article reviews this scholarship with particular attention to active learning approaches and the important role practitioners of law might play to help students link the study of American democracy with the practice.

The Theory and Practice of Civic Education

Understanding what it means to be a democratic citizen is not genetic—we are not born understanding how to navigate America’s complex system of representative government. Citizenship needs to be taught. As John Dewey asserted, “democracy needs to be born anew every generation, and education is the midwife.”¹

In the last 25 years in particular, a good deal of scholarship has been conducted that considers the multifaceted nature of civic competency and how best to foster such competency in the next generation of citizens. Integral to these efforts has been to conceptualize such learning as more than the acquisition of historical facts or information about the functioning of government. In her groundbreaking civic education study of adolescents around the globe in 2012, Judith Torney-Purta posited the idea that civic competency consists not only of knowledge of civic and political life but also the skills to engage in civic and political life as well as a disposition to do so.² This conclusion has served as the foundation to subsequent civic education research at all stages of education—primary, secondary, and higher education.

In studying how best to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, and disposition to be informed and engaged citizens, a consistent thread has addressed the powerful benefits of using “active” or “experiential” learning. It is when given opportunities to practice being a democratic citizen in the classroom that students acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of democratic

citizenship. What does active civic learning look like in practice? One of the best ways to practice citizenship is by engaging in political discussion in the classroom. Diana Hess in her book *Controversy in the Classroom* argues that discussion reflects the political equality intrinsic in democracy, “The ideal of discussion supports the validity of intrinsic equality by implying, at least symbolically, that all members of a community are political equals and are therefore equally qualified to participate in discussion and decision-making.”³ Cross-cutting political talk also builds political tolerance and can allow for consideration of the causes and solutions to public problems.

Other forms of active learning also have been shown to be highly effective including service-learning, project-based learning, and simulations that allow students to be part of the learning process and practice all facets of democratic participation. These best practices are gaining more prominence in classrooms around the country with more organizations and national efforts emerging to support these civic education efforts including iCivics, the Democratic Knowledge Project, and the National Constitution Center.

What It Means to Think Like a Democratic Citizen—Appreciating the Rule of Law

The fragility of America’s system of government is implicit in Benjamin Franklin’s characterization of America’s system of government as “a republic, if you can keep it.” The multifaceted nature of civic competency requires then not just a shared understanding of how the system works but why it works the way it does. Understanding democracy is fundamental to democracy’s health including a keen appreciation for its core values and tenets—chief among them is the rule of law. Although the notion of the “power of the people” is central in American democratic thought, popular sov-

erignty is meant to exist with the rule of law and the principles codified in a written constitution.

As the nation celebrates the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of the Independence, it is worth considering another important milestone marked in 2026—the 250th anniversary of the publication of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*. Wildly popular at its publication in January 1776, the essay outlined the key values and ideals intrinsic to American democratic thought and in many ways catalyzed the creation of the Declaration of Independence. Chief among the ideals enunciated was the power of the law. As Paine wrote, “in America the law is king. For as in absolute governments the King is law, so in free countries the law ought to be king; and there ought to be no other.”

Echoes of Paine can be found in the thinking of the nation’s Founders and the form of government they crafted—one in which the passions of the populace were filtered through a federal system of government, separation of powers, and checks and balances. The aim was to ensure that the populace would not be subject to the whims of a ruler or the majority. As James Madison wrote in *Federalist #51*, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”

The challenge of respecting the will of the people without violating the rights of the individual is meant to be met then by a shared commitment to the rule of law and the supremacy of the principles embedded in the Constitution. This is a commitment meant to be shared by those serving in office and positions of public authority and by the people they serve. It is to the U.S. Constitution that public officials take an oath—not to a

political party, or an individual, or even to “we the people.” To be sure, fidelity to constitutional principles and the rule of law has been practiced imperfectly throughout America’s history and certainly up to the present day. The theory and practice of civic education demonstrates though that it is a critical norm in the health of a democracy and a value that can be taught.

Teaching Democratic Citizenship and the Rule of Law—A Call to Action to Legal Practitioners

In the fall of 2025, the American Bar Association published the “ABA Task Force Report for American Democracy.” In her introduction, the former President of the ABA Mary L. Smith underscored the collective vigilance necessary to protect and defend democracy, “For 237 years, America’s Constitution has guided our country and defined us as a Nation of laws. When our democracy is tested, we draw strength from the Constitution as the bedrock, making our country more equal and more just for all our citizens. American democracy requires our constant care, vigilance, and full participation to determine the very future of our Nation.”⁴

Of the 12 recommendations offered by the ABA Task Force, “Reinvigorating American Civics Education” topped the list. Proposed solutions offered by the Task Force include supporting nonpartisan evidence-based legislative and policy solutions to support funding, curriculum development, and pedagogy related to civic education and the federal, state, and local levels with the assertion that investing in civic education today “would yield long-term results as the next generations inherit the responsibility to safeguard our democracy and the rule of law.”⁵

Given the body of scholarship on civic education and the support the legal profession has shown for its important role in safeguarding American democra-

cy, how can legal practitioners engage in the important work of “keeping the republic”?

As recommended in the ABA Task Force, one meaningful way to support civic education is by identifying and advocating for civic education reform at the local, state, and federal levels. A project of iCivics, CivxNow is an excellence resource for identifying high-quality and evidence-based legislative proposals and even includes an interactive state map tracking the status of state-level reform.⁶ For those unfamiliar or even uncomfortable with advocating for policy reform, CivxNow offers a toolkit for how to advocate for policy either in-person or virtually.

As indicated earlier, there are several excellent nonpartisan national organizations that create civics curriculum, provide professional development for teachers, and offer pedagogical support for educators seeking to provide their students a high-quality civic education. Such organizations include iCivics, the National Constitution Center, the Bill of Rights Institute, and the Democratic Knowledge Project. Learn more about these organizations and support them with a donation.

Also referenced earlier, active civic learning is a powerfully effective way to learn what it means to be a democratic citizen and to support the rule of law. There are several national and regional and school-based efforts that allow students to link the theory of democracy and law with the practice including the Center for Civic Education’s “We the People” program, Model United Nations and Model Congress programs, and such legally-focused civic engagement efforts as the organization Street Law and even mock trial teams. Identify these efforts in your community and volunteer your time and expertise by serving as an advisor, a sponsor, or a judge at a competition.

Demystifying the practice of law and connecting students to the reality of

what upholding the rule of law looks like by everyday legal practitioners is another powerful way of teaching this valuable norm. Share your expertise by visiting a classroom and discussing your work or by inviting student groups on a field trip to your law firm or courthouse. Again, students learn best when proximate to the practice of democracy—when they can see others engaging in citizenship and then envisioning themselves doing the same.

As the expression goes, democracy is not a spectator sport—there is a role for all of us to play. Moreover, it is fragile and not guaranteed, but democracy begins and ends with “we the people.” What better way to celebrate the nation’s 250th anniversary than by actively engaging to protect and advance it? ■

Endnotes

1. John Dewey, *The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Society* (1916).
2. Judith Torney-Purta, “The School’s Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-Eight Countries.” *Applied Developmental Science* 6, no. 4 (2012): 203.
3. Diana Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom* (2009), 15.
4. Report of the ABA Task Force on Democracy (2025), iii: americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/office_president/democracy-task-force/2025-report-american-democracy.pdf.
5. Report of the ABA Task Force on Democracy (2025), 18.
6. CivxNow: civxnow.org/.