

Opinion

Opinion: Rebuilding our civics infrastructure

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As the trauma of the January attack on the Capitol continues to reverberate, many contentious issues linger. However, one that enjoys broad support is the urgent need to better equip citizens with a basic understanding of their rights and responsibilities and the functions of government. We stand with the growing chorus calling for a reset of our nation's civic education. Editorials and opinion pieces have appeared in publications across the spectrum to reinforce this call and highlight the peril our democracy faces. We must act to restore a common understanding of responsible citizenship in a constitutional democracy.

A healthy democracy depends on citizens who not only understand how their government works but also are empowered to engage constructively to effect change. However, our commitment to imparting these lessons has deteriorated over time. Currently, Oregon remains as one of 11 states that lacks a graduation requirement for a civics education class. The good news is the Oregon Legislature can help correct our course by passing the Civics Education Act ([HB 2299/SB 513](#)).

Late night comedy shows have long employed people-on-the-street interviews to poke fun at how little many seem to know or care about their government and elected officials. Asking people to name their governor or member of Congress is more likely to be greeted with blank stares than correct responses. While amusing, the implications for good government are deeply troubling. According to a [2016 study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center](#), three quarters of Americans couldn't identify the three branches of government, and one in three couldn't name a single branch at all. These statistics reflect marked decreases over previous surveys and are no laughing matter.

The circumstances that led us to this precipice must serve as a wake-up call. The Civics Education Act is a common-sense measure that guarantees every Oregon high school

student receives one semester of civics education before graduation. It is not a cure-all, but is absolutely critical in this moment. The enduring success of the American experiment relies on the active engagement of its citizens. Recommitting to civics education will provide students an essential building block in understanding how to participate, what's at stake and how it gets done.

Our institutions – the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, our Constitution and Bill of Rights – all serve as important guardrails to a functioning democracy. However, their strength depends on an informed citizenry that shares a common commitment to uphold them. We are concerned that failing to foster greater civic engagement will only accelerate and invite further threats to our democracy.

We urge every Oregonian to reach out to their state senator and representative to support the bipartisan effort in the Legislature to reestablish basic civics education requirement for graduation. Join in support of the Civics Education Act, raise your voice and be involved. This is a first critical step towards being able to promote the understanding, healing, and progress needed to make sure our democracy is safe, and citizens are equipped to be able to play their essential role as guardians to protect it.