

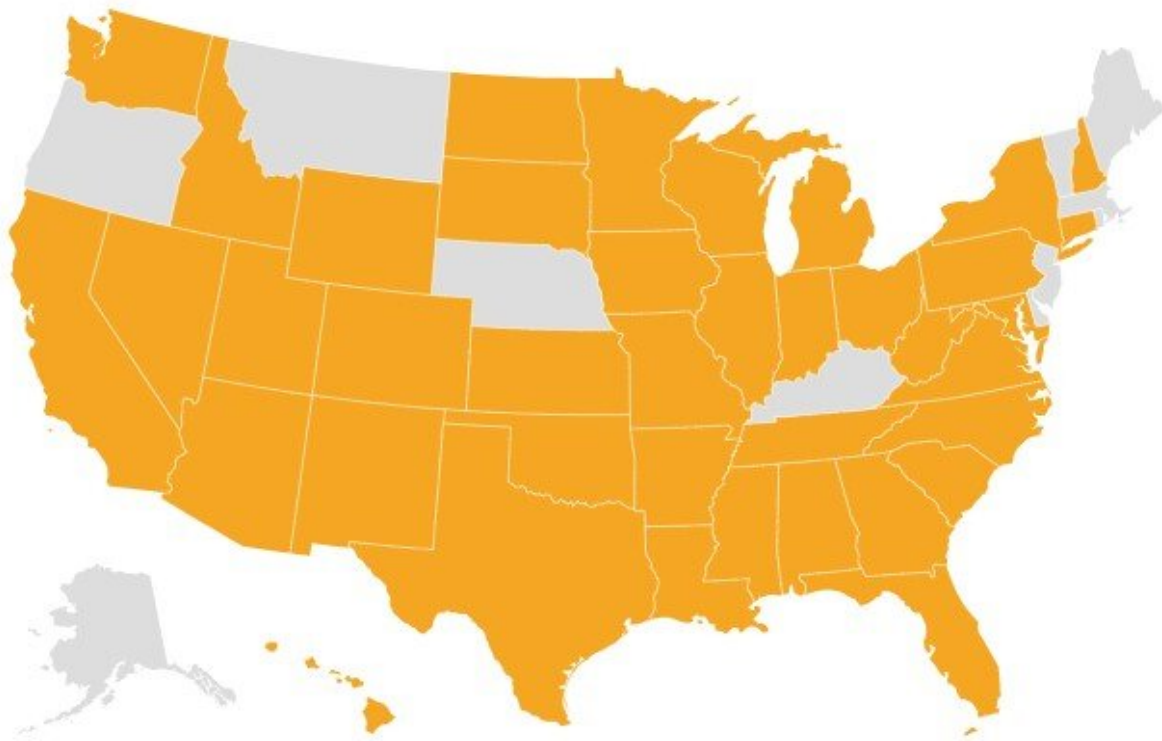
# Civics education isn't boosting youth voting or volunteerism

March 25 2021, by John A. Tures

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## Most of the US requires a civics class in high school

The District of Columbia and 39 states **require high school students to take a civics class** before getting a diploma. But on average, students in these states have lower voting rates, volunteerism and scores on Advanced Placement tests about civics and government, than students in the other 11 states.



Credit: Map: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: John Tures, LaGrange College

After the insurrection, the impeachment, the trial and ongoing partisanship in 2021, many Americans are looking to civics education as a source of hope, according to George Washington University's Center on Education Policy, which reports that "[Nearly all Americans \(97%\) agree that public schools should be teaching civics.](#)"

[According to the Center for American Progress](#), civics classes teach students about how the U.S. government works, history about how it was designed and information about how to participate, including voting. After those sorts of courses, it seems reasonable to expect that students should be voting more and engaging in community service.

But my research shows that states that require civics courses do not necessarily have better test scores, more youth voting or young people volunteering at higher rates than other states. And there may be a connection to QAnon support as well.

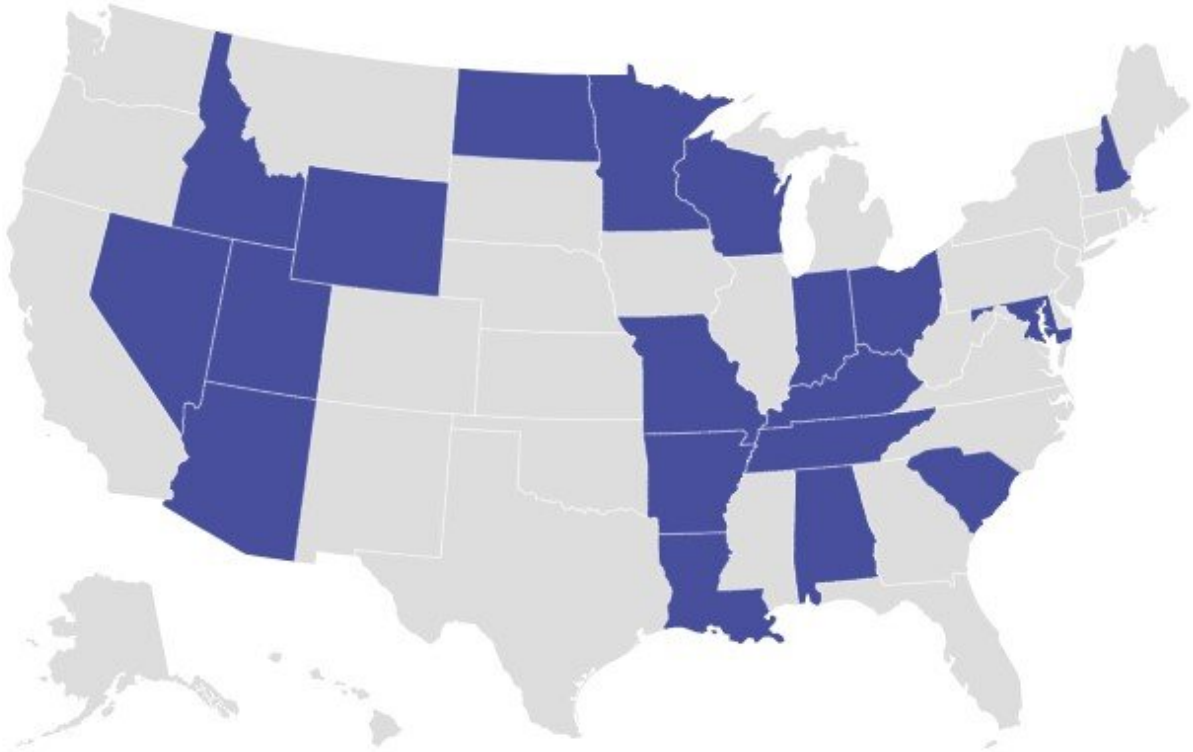
I'm a [political science professor](#) who also teaches government, history, geography and economics classes to [college students](#) who major in education. So I strongly believe that civics education is a good thing.

Unfortunately, though, my research has found that civics education isn't making the grade. In states that require students to take a civics course, young voters have slightly lower average voting rates—29.9% – than states without such a requirement—31.9%.

I analyzed data from the latest study by the [Center for American Progress](#), which provides information on which states require a civics test, and the voting rates for 18-to-24-year-olds, volunteer rates for 16-to-24-year-olds and average scores on the [College Board's Advanced Placement](#) civics and U.S. government test.

## 19 states require passing a civics exam before graduation

Many states, but not a majority of them, **require high school students to pass a civics exam** before getting a diploma. Students in these states have similar average voting rates and scores on Advanced Placement tests about civics and government, to students in the other states. But young adults in states with a required civics exam are more likely to volunteer.



Credit: Map: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: John Tures, LaGrange College

### Civics class requirements

Washington, D.C., and 39 states—including California, Iowa and South Carolina—have a civics class requirement. These same places also have lower percentages of youth volunteer rates—22.7% on average—than states without such a civics course requirement. In states that do not have a civics class requirement, including New Jersey, Kentucky and

Nebraska, the average youth volunteer rate is 23.5%.

States which require a civics course also have slightly lower scores on the Advanced Placement test about U.S. government and politics—2.75 out of 5—than states that do not make their students take a civics course—2.84. A score of 4 or 5 is often accepted for college credit in political science, though some schools may accept a 3 on the AP test, which covers subjects such as the foundations of American democracy, civil liberties and civil rights, as well as American political ideologies and beliefs, according to [the College Board](#).

## **Passing a civics exam**

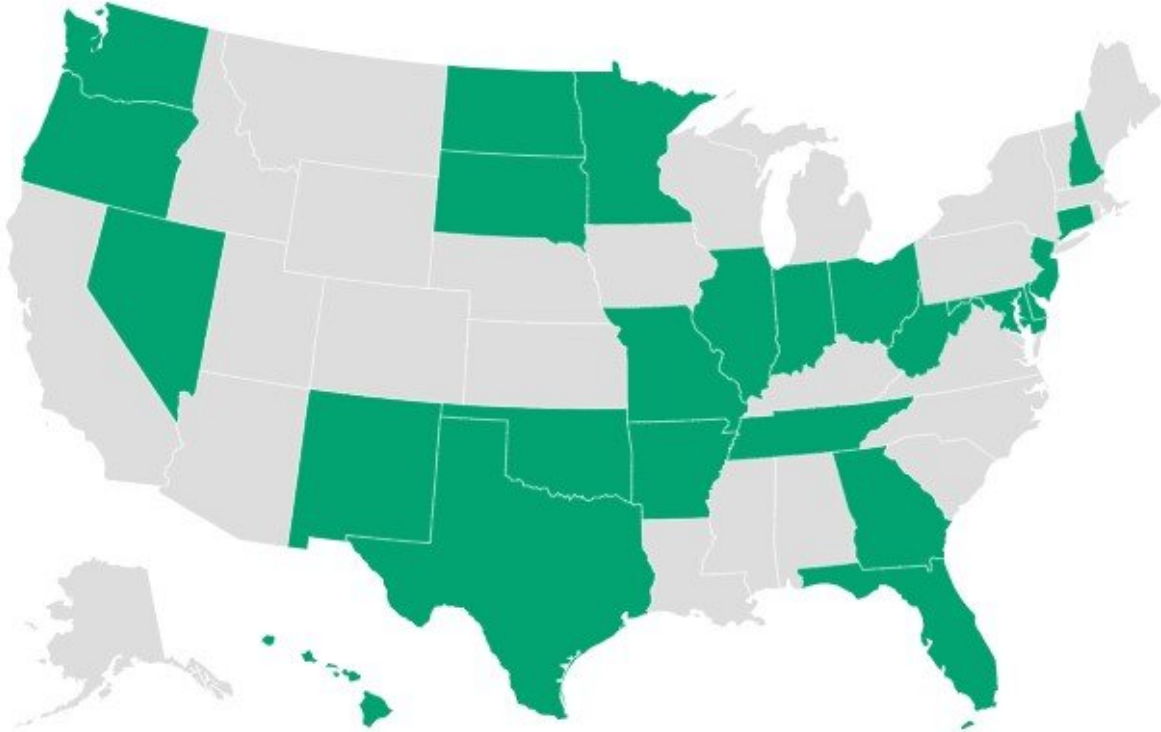
Nineteen states require passage of a civics exam for graduation, including Kentucky, which does not have a specific course requirement. But that doesn't seem to make a difference in boosting youth civic engagement or knowledge. States with the requirement have roughly similar youth voting rates—30% – as states that do not require passage of a civics exam—30.6%.

States demanding a civics exam be passed before receiving a high school diploma also have average test scores on AP exams related to civics or government—2.80—similar to those states without such a requirement—2.75.

There is one bright spot, though: States with a civics exam have higher volunteer rates among younger people—22.2% on average—than those states that do not—17.5%.

## Many states require community service during high school

The District of Columbia and 24 states **require high school students to perform community service** before getting a diploma. But students in these states have lower average voting rates, volunteerism and scores on Advanced Placement tests about civics and government, than students in the other 26 states.



Credit: Map: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: John Tures, LaGrange College

### Community service requirements

Nearly half of all states, plus the District of Columbia, require some sort of community service requirement or provide high school credit for students who volunteer, according to the [Center for American Progress](#).

But I was dismayed to find that states without such a requirement had

higher rates of volunteerism among younger people—an average of 24.4% – than among those states with a community service mandate—21.3%.

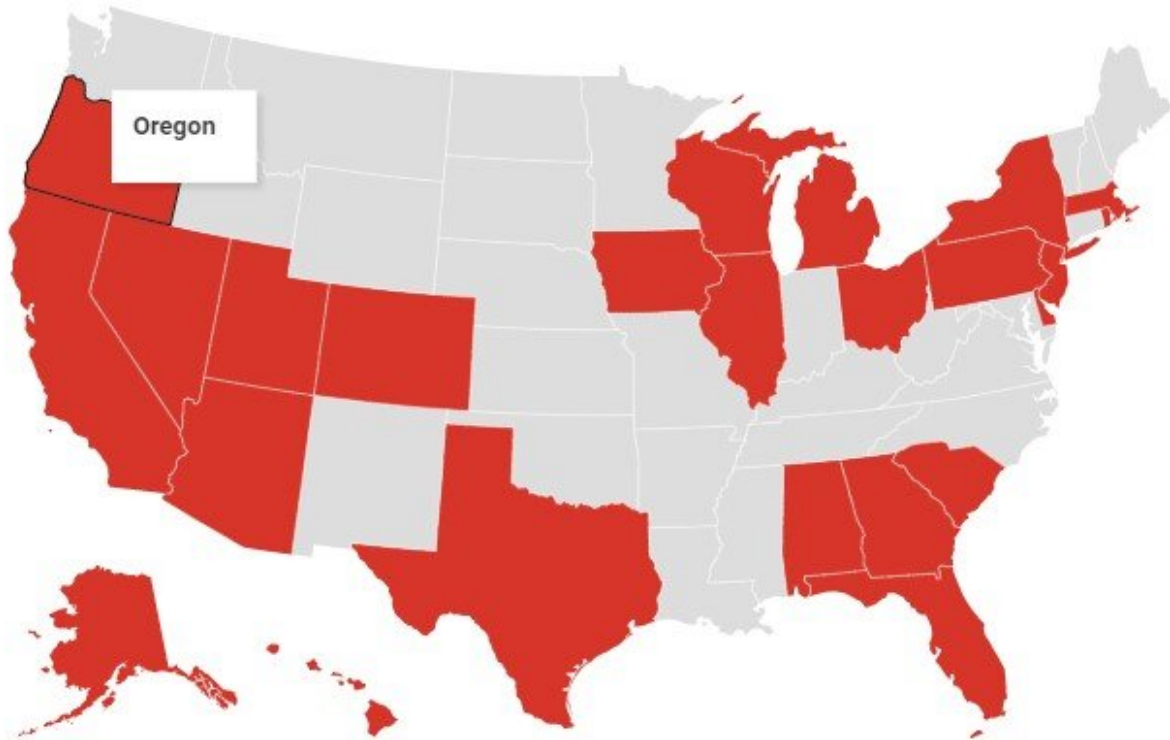
And states requiring high school students to do community service have lower youth voting rates—29.3% – than states where schools did not require volunteering—31.4%.

## Countering QAnon?

Failure to provide an adequate civics education doesn't just mean lower numbers of [young people](#) voting, volunteering and scoring a little lower on AP test scores. It could open the door for QAnon, a wide-ranging conspiracy theory that claims former President Donald Trump is helping the late John F. Kennedy Jr. [battle a secret cabal of cannibalistic pedophiles](#).

## 24 states have a major politician backing QAnon

Almost half the states are home to either **a congressional candidate openly espousing QAnon ideas, or a member of Congress who voted against condemning QAnon**. The states with QAnon backers have lower average youth voting rates and youth volunteerism than states without a similar prominent political figure.



Credit: Map: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: John Tures, LaGrange College

States with lower levels of youth volunteering, youth voting and youth civics test scores are also more likely to have QAnon sympathizers active in politics, or politicians who oppose criticism of QAnon.

To determine this, I looked at states which had a [congressional candidate who openly espoused some or all of the QAnon philosophy](#). I also examined which states had a [representative who voted against a](#)

[congressional resolution denouncing QAnon,](#)

The 24 states with QAnon-supporting politicians had lower average youth voting rates—38.5% – than states without them—42.4%. They also had lower average [youth](#) volunteering rates—21.8% – than states without major politicians supporting QAnon—24%.

There was no significant difference in AP test scores between the two groups of states.

Our country's civics education may not help solve the nation's current political crises. But [reform efforts touted by the Center for American Progress](#) are under way in several [states](#) to help replace memorizing facts and figures with active learning designed to engage students in real-life problems in and out of the classroom.

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