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**A systematic review of the last decade of civic education research in the USA**

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## Abstract

The United States has witnessed a steady increase in concern about political polarization and its impact on youth. We systematically review and compare the empirical research literature on civic education pedagogy in the United States between 2009 and 2019 to frame efforts to construct an inclusive and healthy democracy – one that decreases polarization and increases broad youth civic participation. Despite evidence that civic education must be revitalized to address societal inequities underlying participation and polarization, few articles addressed how to achieve such education. We recommend future researchers evaluate promising practices for increasing youth participation and decreasing political polarization. There is a related need for more civic education research in K-12 schools, particularly critical research focused on program implementation and outcomes.

**Keywords:** civic education, citizen, systematic review, youth civic engagement, USA

**A systematic review of the last decade of civic education research in the USA**

From 2009-2019, public and scholarly attention towards civic education increased. Some of this increased research has focused on understanding persistent gaps in civic participation, especially why marginalized youth[1] are less engaged (e.g., Levinson, 2012). Simultaneously, some scholars and practitioners re-conceptualized civic participation and engagement as more complex outcomes that engage various publics (e.g., protest art) and societal issues (e.g., social movements) directly. Yet, the research on civic education engaging marginalized youth remains limited, which may limit educators' abilities to support effective civic development.

Two important conversations related to centering the experiences of marginalized youth in civic engagement include conceptualizing civic engagement and addressing political polarization. The first encourages reconfiguring civic education to address inequitable civic learning opportunities and celebrate diverse civic strengths; the second illuminates the increasing need for civic education amidst heightened intolerance and exclusion. The extent to which these two conversations permeate the research has yet to be explored.

This paper outlines the last decade of civic education research, and how it intersects with those two conversation. We characterize the field's current landscape, identify gaps in the field and potential contributions to reducing the civic engagement gap and/or political polarization, and offer implications for research and practice.

**Conceptualizing civic engagement**

Civic participation in the United States of America (USA) has been defined by democratic ideals that are in stark contrast to actual opportunities for formal civic engagement

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[1] We define marginalized youth as low-income youth and/or youth of color who experience socioeconomic or racialized forms of oppression (see Garcia Coll et al., 1996).

(Mills, 2014). Yet, demographically-patterned structural forces (e.g., structural racism) affect one's ability to harness formal civic opportunities (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). Despite overall increases in youth civic engagement in the USA (Youniss & Levine, 2009), structural inequities, and corresponding barriers and gaps in opportunity, can lead youth of marginalized backgrounds to participate less in civic life than their more privileged peers (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Kirshner, 2015); a phenomenon often called the "civic engagement gap" (Levinson, 2012).

Thirty-nine states require at least one American government or Civics course, but usually only one semester of each (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2012). These requirements rarely involve direct action. Only Maryland and Washington DC mandate service learning for high school graduation (ECS, 2014). At the school level, schools that serve mostly marginalized youth are less likely to mandate and/or support civic learning opportunities like service learning (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

There is also research interest in broadening measures of civic participation (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013), as marginalized youth may engage differently than more privileged peers (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). For example, marginalized immigrant-origin youth often support their particular ethnic group (e.g., translating for a family member) (Stepick, Stepick, & Labissiere, 2008; Suárez-Orozco, Hernández, & Casanova, 2015). Yet few studies examine the type of civic education useful to supporting such civic development (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2010). Diverse civic engagement experiences fundamentally impact youth's positive development (Lerner, 2004), particularly for marginalized youth (Ginwright, 2010), and can predict future civic participation (Diemer & Li, 2011). Potential benefits of non-traditional civic engagement may be hidden from both educators and researchers seeking to support or promote effective civic development among marginalized youth.

**Political Polarization**

Political polarization, "the extent to which the two major parties have ideologically purified" (Hess & McAvoy, 2014, p. 293), has increased in the USA since the 1960s. Within the last decade, conservatives reacted to Obama's presidency by shifting further right, embodied in movements like the Tea Party (Dunlap, McCright, & Yarosh, 2016). Subsequently, the Trump presidency further intensified political polarization, among both liberals and conservatives (Kennedy et al., 2019).

In schools, political polarization has increased bullying and discrimination (Rogers et al. 2017), and renewed understanding of what it means to prepare an increasingly diverse youth population to be civically engaged (Garcia, Levinson, & Gargroetzi, 2019). Classrooms, though influenced by the political climate, remain paramount for developing citizens who can navigate polarization and remain open to different points of view (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). New conceptualizations of civic education designed specifically to develop open-minded citizens (e.g. Levy et al., 2019) merit further investigation. Education about political polarization can help de-escalate polarization. Another article in this special issue (McAvoy & McAvoy, pending) explores one such strategy in greater depth.

**Fostering Youth Participation in Civic Education**

Evidence suggests that diverse approaches like youth participatory action research (YPAR), action civics, and youth organizing can promote civic development, particularly for marginalized youth. YPAR, a growing approach to promote civic development (Anyon et al., 2018; Ballard et al., 2019), encourages youth to analyze and resist societal inequities, thus exercising civic agency (Caraballo et al., 2017). YPAR can improve school experiences and outcomes for underserved youth (Irizarry, 2009). Action civics takes a student-centered, project-

based, experiential approach to civics education (Pope, Stolte & Cohen, 2011), and can increase civic and academic engagement (Blevins, LeCompte & Wells, 2016; Cohen et al., 2018; Cohen et al., pending). Youth participating in nonprofit grassroots organizing groups go on to report high levels of civic participation through young adulthood (Terriquez, 2015). In each of the three approaches, youth can effectively learn about and address issues affecting their communities (e.g. Gustafson, Cohen, & Andes, 2019; Maker Castro et al., under review).

Youth who critically examine educational equity issues and who engage in inquiry-based learning with the support of positive adult relationships develop civic self-efficacy (Hipólito-Delgado & Zion, 2015). But civic education in social networks and out-of-school contexts merit more attention (Garcia, Levinson, & Gargroetzi, 2019), since marginalized youth are more likely to learn and practice civic competencies through informal structures that acknowledge their experiences with civic exclusion (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002).

Meanwhile, theoretical frameworks have emerged to understand structural barriers, societal marginalization, and youths' efforts to enact change. Sociopolitical development emphasizes structural and institutional challenges, but shows how community involvement helps youth transform themselves and their communities (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Educating for critical consciousness (Pope, 2014; Seider & Graves, 2020; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011) and justice-oriented citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) focus on how youth enact change for justice and equity. These theories can help educators and researchers structure and evaluate civic education.

**Current Study**

In sum, we situate this paper within two shifting contexts: the national sociopolitical climate, and refinements in the conceptualization and measurement of civic engagement. While

it seems clear that youth experiences with civic engagement can promote later civic participation, less is known about what type(s) of civic education can promote such participation, and for whom. The ways in which youth respond to their sociopolitical environments will shape their future civic lives (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). It is thus important to identify specific attributes of effective civic education programming and pedagogy, especially given youth's potential to contribute their voices and action to civic life (Bass, 2012).

We seek to provide a comprehensive view of the state of the civic education literature. We explore civic education literature from 2009-2019, a time when researchers began re-conceptualizing civic engagement to include marginalized youth and when political polarization increased. We detail the types of studies and grounded themes that emerged from this literature. Three research questions guided the review: (1) How is civic education studied in the USA? (2) To what extent does civic education research in the USA focus on engaging marginalized youth, youth participation, and/or political polarization? (3) Who was studied?

## Methods

We systematically identified all studies indexed in ERIC that mentioned civic, citizenship, or citizen in conjunction with education ($N$=778) in their titles or available abstracts. We identified 648 relevant non-duplicate references from the search to include in this study.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Our search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published January 2009 through December 2019, written in English, where the participant pool was from the USA. Limits provided a coherent exploration into research on the distinct experiences of marginalized youth populations in the USA as well as the influence of increasing partisanship.

### Data Extraction

We established high-level categories linked to each research questions. *RQ1: Research Method* distinguished between argument, qualitative, and quantitative research methods. *RQ2: Topic/Themes of Study* distinguished between studies related to concepts of youth participation— especially focused on marginalized youth—and political polarization. *RQ3: Level/Place of Education Studied* distinguished between studies conducted in different educational and community settings. Within each high-level category, sub-categories were added using a grounded theory approach, enabling an authentic exploration of our research questions. For each article, a coder read the article abstract, introduction, and methods sections to code for the above categories. Inter-rater reliability of the codes was 98% after conference.

For RQ1, we categorized how civic education was studied into ten different methods. Philosophical/Theoretical pieces were categorized as explanation or argument. Explanation articles were practitioner-focused, explaining a particular classroom or institutional intervention. Argument articles drew on logic or literature reviews without empirical data. Qualitative articles were categorized as discourse analysis, case study, historical manuscripts, ethnography, or photovoice. Quantitative articles were categorized as descriptive statistics and/or analytic statistics. A final sub-category captured meta-analyses. Studies that included multiple methods were coded twice, for the specific qualitative and quantitative methods used.

For RQ2, we conducted open coding to identify 19 topic categories for different focal concepts (Table 1), pulled from major themes discussed and presented by authors across all papers. We did not limit the number of codes that could be applied to a single article. To identify the extent research focused on the civic engagement gap (Levinson, 2012), youth participation (Zukin et al., 2006), and/or polarization (Hess & McAvoy, 2014), we focused on (1) the topics/themes that co-occurred in the articles with these themes and (2) the other topics that

authors explored. The 16 additional topics were divided among studies related to (a) components of civic development, (b) civic education planning level (e.g., classroom experiences vs. institution-wide experiences), (c) tools and measures of civic education, and (d) philosophical and theoretical focus on concepts related to civic engagement.

For RQ3, we coded articles that had (1) K-12 education, (2) higher education (including community college), and (3) community members as subjects/participants. In cases where there were subjects/participants from two or three of these groups, our codes reflected these multiple affiliations. This allowed attention to the different constituencies included in research, as a proxy for which populations the research was likely relevant.

## Results

### Summary of Selected Studies

Most of the 648 relevant (62%) were located via the citizen AND education search. 49% appeared in the civic AND education search, and 8% appeared in the citizenship AND education search; some articles appeared in multiple searches (Figure 1). The citizenship search returned more articles from the beginning of the time period (2009-2012) than later. A majority (53%) of articles focused on students in higher education, 39% focused on K-12 populations, and 9% focused on community or public audiences. 2.8% of articles focused on marginalized youth.

### Content of the articles

The most common content areas related to civic outcomes and civics coursework (Figure 2). Thirty-eight percent of articles reported on or theorized about civic outcomes. For example, Richard, Keen, Hatcher, and Pease (2017) reported on 1000-plus Bonner Scholars across 30 institutions, finding that the outcomes of the dialogue and reflection aspects of the program persisted post-graduation. At the K-12 level, Berson et al. (2014) found increased youth political

participation results following their engagement in a civics education program. Other articles focused on the outcomes of particular state-wide programs (e.g., Fleming et al., 2014), service-learning programs (e.g., Buch & Harden, 2011; Hawkins & Kaplan, 2016; Hurtado & DeAngelo, 2012), or classroom/small group interventions (e.g., Bowman et al., 2016; Diaz & Perrault, 2010). All studies in this category explored the impact of civic education on students' knowledge, skills, and disposition for use beyond the civic education setting.

Thirty percent of articles reported on civic education coursework and classroom interventions. At the K-12 level, most articles focused on the role of social studies and (more specifically) civics teachers in providing civic education (e.g., Chandler et al., 2011; Dabach, 2014; Epstein, 2013; Journell et al., 2015). However, Shulsky, Baker, Chvala, and Willis's (2017) trans-literacy study illustrates that civic education is not isolated to social studies. Many higher education articles were from political science (e.g., Bolsen et al., 2016; DeLaet, 2016; Emery et al., 2014); other disciplines included psychology (e.g., Chenneville et al., 2012), engineering (e.g., Duffy et al., 2011), women's studies (e.g., Guillard, 2016), economics (e.g., Hazlett, 2016), honors (e.g., Hester & Besing, 2017), and education, including preparing pre-service teachers to develop K-12 students' civic capacities (e.g., Chant, 2009; Ryter, 2012).

Other topics included civic skills and capacities (19%), specific models or programs (15%), civic identities (14%), institutional structures (14%), concepts (13%), and theories or philosophical models (11%). (All other codes were in less than 10% of articles.)

**Methodological approaches**

A plurality of articles (34%) reported on qualitative research, most of which were discourse analyses (18% of all articles) or case studies (12% of all articles); the rest were photovoice (1% of all articles), or ethnography (0.2% of all articles). Twenty-nine percent were

argumentative in nature. Just under one-quarter (23%) of articles reported on quantitative research, and the rest were explanatory (17%), or meta-analyses (1%).

## Discussion

Our systematic review found that civic education research published in 2009-2019 addressed diverse topics using diverse research methods. Most articles focused on college students. Across all settings, youth participation was a common topic, as illustrated by research on civic outcomes, skills, identities, process, and culture. Despite increasing polarization among the electorate and diversifying conceptualizations of civic engagement, youth participation was not often framed by efforts to engage marginalized populations or address polarization.

### How civic education is studied in the USA

Researchers most commonly framed their work in terms of "citizen" (versus civics or citizenship). In part, this may be explained by more inclusive discussions of citizenship in an increasingly global society (Appiah, 2006) that have broadened the scope of individuals' roles in political and social activity. But for many, citizenship remains an exclusionary term (Dominelli & Moosa-Mitha, 2016). We encourage deliberately defining citizen in expansive, inclusive terms or, alternatively, use a term like "civic actor" to be more inclusive.

Researchers applied a range of methods in civic education studies. Quantitative methods accounted for 23% of the articles, including local and national student survey and test results. In contrast, 29% of articles focused on descriptions of classroom and organizational practice but lacked formal evaluation. We encourage empirically rigorous quantitative and qualitative evaluations of civic education interventions to help strengthen this underrepresented area.

Argumentative essays (29%) focused on what "should be." This highlights ongoing debates about what civic education is and the role of education in promoting civic engagement

and/or combatting political polarization. Argumentative essays typically validated existing civic engagement research and instruction. We encourage future authors using this format to advance the civic education discourse by developing theories that reconceptualize civic education to center broad youth participation and overcome political polarization.

**Focus on engaging marginalized populations, youth participation, and polarization**

Despite the importance of minoritized voices in politics and increasing political polarization, the research reviewed here seldom focused on these topics. While studies such as Bondy's (2014) qualitative exploration of Latina youth's experiences with citizenship highlight the importance of minoritized populations in a politically polarized era, only 2.8% of the articles engaged such discussions. We offer four explanations for the apparent gap.

First, political polarization and engaging marginalized populations are both politicized and potentially partisan. As such, these topics may seem more contentious for researchers and educators to engage. There is also, however, a systemic lack of opportunity to study these ideas within traditional curricular frameworks. While the National Council for the Social Studies published its College, Career, and Civic Life Framework (2013) to guide state social studies standards, state civics education requirements often limit the time students can engage in civics education, let alone controversial issues and civic engagement (Shapiro & Brown, 2018).

Second, researchers and educators may lack background experiences or training associated with civic marginalization and/or polarization. Civic education has traditionally eschewed a critical or inclusive lens (Apple, 2000; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993), perhaps thereby limiting critical, inclusive research. Compounding that, a corps of predominately white and/or wealthier researchers may well perpetuate marginalization of minoritized people's experiences.

Third, we found a disproportionate research emphasis on college students. Many of the

articles studied the immediate and longer-term impacts of civic education course projects on student participation in politics or political discourse (including service-learning, simulations, and use of social media in instruction). A frequent pre-post study design using convenience samples limited generalizability. Also, notably absent are studies of college age youth not enrolled in college. Thus, we make two recommendations: a diversification of populations studied to include marginalized youth or youth not attending college, and an expansion on studies of polarization (only 2.5% of all articles reviewed) in general.

Fourth, a broad construction of civic culture, identities, and skills limited connections with specific forms of marginalization. Extant research tended to focus on the ways that civic culture could be developed within a diverse community, but not necessarily in an under-represented one. In a representative example, Richardson (2011) explored how food celebrations can create a multicultural environment. Multiculturalism at this level is often considered superficial and less impactful, *vis-à-vis* civic education than addressing critical, systematic issues that marginalize youth populations (Banks & Banks, 2010). We recommend future studies that advance our understanding of non-traditional non-majority engagement.

**Subjects and proposed beneficiaries of civics education research**

While variations in the target population of the articles were not statistically significant, most articles (53%) focused on students in higher education settings. Only 15% of the higher education articles (6.2% of articles overall) addressed marginalized populations in higher education. Many of the higher education articles considered the role of higher education in civic education and strengthening democracy, often inspired by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement's (2012) *A Crucible Moment* report. In comparison, research of K-12 populations focused more on the social studies classroom than the broader

mission of K-12 education. We also note that while civic education is often thought about in the context of social studies, studies on civic education are in fact marginalized within the body of social studies education research (Journell, Beeson, & Ayers, 2015).

Using college conceptions of civic engagement as a model, we encourage K-12 researchers to consider civic development within a broader range of disciplines, courses, and after school activities. The entire school ecology can be fertile ground for civic development. We also recommend transcending formal schooling spaces to consider how informal contexts may encourage civic development. While studies have demonstrated the importance of community arenas on civic outcomes, less is known about the mechanisms of this civic education.

## Conclusion

In the context of re-conceptualizing civic education and of increasing political polarization in the USA, research between 2009 and 2019 supports calls for more active, experiential, and relevant civic education for youth. Most articles focused on engaging college students, though articles exploring K-12 civic education increased slightly over time, perhaps in part a result of the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework's attention to civic action (NCSS, 2013). Many methodological approaches are appropriate for studying the complexities of civics education. We encourage diverse methods and encourage researchers to engage in more rigorous evaluation designs of promising civic education programs and practices.

Few articles directly addressed political polarization or the engagement of diverse and marginalized groups. These findings come even as shifting demographics increase the importance of widespread civic education. Given these shifts, we argue that more research is required in these areas, particularly at the K-12 level. For example, researchers should rigorously evaluate civic education practices and pedagogies that have the potential to be particularly

effective with marginalized students, and to study these approaches at increasingly larger scales, with the goal of identifying strategies that can help close the civic engagement gap.  Similarly, it will be important to study curricular approaches to redressing political polarization, and determine their effectiveness in a wide variety of settings in order to identify the most promising practices to scale.  The literature of the last decade has demonstrated the importance of active civics education; the next decade needs to focus on providing that education for all students.

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**Table 1. Topic Concepts by Sub-category**

| Components of Civic Development | Civic Education Planning Level | Tools and Measures | Philosophy & Theory Concepts |
|---|---|---|---|
| • Building a Civic Culture<br>• Student Civic Outcomes<br>• Teaching Civic Processes<br>• Teaching Civics Skills<br>• Developing Civic Identities | • Coursework<br>• Leadership towards Civics Education<br>• Institution-wide experiences<br>• Addressing the Civic Engagement Gap | • Analysis tools for civic engagement<br>• Instructional Methods for teaching civic engagement<br>• Specific civics education models<br>• Comparative models of civics education<br>• Technology in civics education | • Defining Concepts Related to Civic Engagement<br>• Philosophical Analysis<br>• Focus on concepts related to civics education<br>• Globalization & civics education<br>• Polarization & civics education |

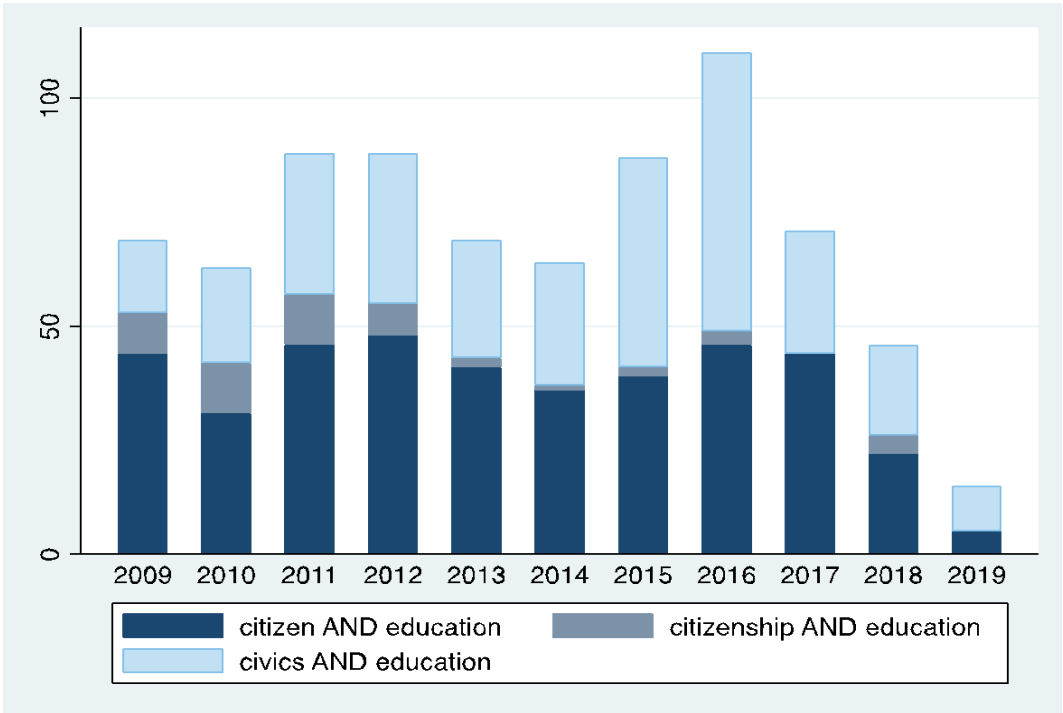Figure 1. Number of articles captured by each search term in each year.



Figure 2. Proportion of articles for each code.