

Considerations for Use of Civics Assessment Instruments

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As part of the larger library of instruments, EdInstruments catalogs civics assessments for use in research and practice. These instruments are organized within Academic Knowledge and Skills > Civics on the EdInstruments website. While EdInstruments does not endorse individual instruments, we provide examples of instruments for various uses. Users can navigate the EdInstruments website to explore additional options.

This brief is intended to increase understanding among educators, policy analysts, and researchers about the process and assessment of civic development, which is sometimes called political socialization. The cognitive or knowledge dimension is of particular interest, but other domains (i.e., attitudes and behaviors) are also discussed. In this brief, we suggest ways of approaching the measurement of students' understanding of and knowledge about civic education topics.

This document is divided into four sections. First, we provide a general description of civic education and a brief history of civic education assessment from the perspective of The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). Next, we review the existing Civics EdInstruments and add a third section on additional major civic education assessment related resources. Fourth, and finally, we make recommendations and address gaps in the field. An overarching assumption is that imparting civic knowledge and skills is important for students' eventual civic participation.

Part I. Framework for Civic Assessment: Domain and Historical Perspective of Civic Education

Over the decades, the assessment of civic and citizenship education has been conceptualized in many ways and from a multi-disciplinary perspective. For example, researchers have examined the extent to which young people develop civic knowledge and skills, positive civic-related attitudes, the ability to discern fact from opinion, and a willingness to participate in civic life. Concepts such as knowledge of political processes, the development of skills necessary for citizenship, political efficacy, trust in institutions, and a civic identity have been investigated by psychologists, political scientists, sociologists, and educational researchers. Although there may not be universal agreement on the definition or measurement of these concepts, there does seem to be agreement on the importance of equipping citizens with the knowledge and skills they need to make meaningful contributions to civic life.

When it comes to measurement, however, civic knowledge is somewhat different from knowledge in other subject areas, such as math or natural science. The types of civic knowledge that we can measure reliably could be considered proxies for measuring students' understanding and generalized support for their electoral and political system. Understanding that the election system operates according to a set of rules (and that safeguards are in place to guard against its corruption) is assumed to create greater motivation to vote. It might also encourage engagement in civic discourse or in other positive behaviors. Stated another way, civic development can be conceptualized as a progression of understanding. It proceeds from a general lack of knowledge about the democratic processes, institutions, and activities to basic factual knowledge and skills through abilities to get and evaluate relevant information and participate knowledgeably in civic discussion, and finally through participation in available civic activities, including informed voting at the age of majority.

In short, citizens in a democracy have the potential to make meaningful contributions to civic life and political processes. However, to do so requires the development of civic-related knowledge (i.e., political processes and institutions), civic skills (i.e., deliberation and communication), as well as the dispositions, efficacy, and motivation to effectively and constructively participate.

History of Civic Education Assessment

Because civic education is less often discussed than other subject areas, and to provide context for our review, we begin with a brief history from the perspective of one of the authors. In the 1960s, a team of researchers at the University of Chicago worked on an early project studying political socialization. The project began by conducting interviews with 7-to-12-year-old students in the United States in order to design survey instruments, which were then administered to several thousand students from four regions of the United States. The project was initiated as a collaboration between professors in developmental psychology and in

political science. Once the differences in the perspectives of the two project leaders had become clear, and after the data had been collected from 12,000 students from eight U.S. cities, the researchers decided to publish two books. *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children* (Hess & Torney, 1967) was written by the psychologists, and *Children in the Political System* was written by the political scientists (Easton & Dennis, 1969). This indicates the extent to which individuals interested in this topic area approach it from different vantage points. It should be noted that the instruments administered to children did not deal explicitly with political or civic knowledge per se. In other words, there were no right and wrong answers to these questions. However, the process of constructing the survey of attitudes and behavior and analyzing the students' responses did make clear some of the misunderstandings that children and early adolescents possessed. To give one example, many did not understand that presidents were not able to take most actions on their own but that there were three branches of government designed to be co-equal.

Also, during the late 1960s, other political scientists were conducting similar political socialization studies of the attitudes of secondary students. For example, Jennings and Niemi (1968) published an article in a political science journal entitled *The Transmission of Political Values from Parent to Child*. These studies concentrated on attitudes, not on students' knowledge of civics or politics.

In addition, and also at the University of Chicago, several professors of education were successfully completing the first IEA international study of achievement in mathematics in collaboration with European professors. Research centers for these early educational studies were located in England, Germany, and Sweden. In the 1970s, the leadership of IEA decided to expand its studies into six subject areas, including civic education. This resulted in the construction of test and survey questions for the first IEA Civic Education Study and a book publication (Torney, Oppenheim, & Farnen, 1972).

Two decades later, in the 1990s, the IEA organization launched a second study in civic education (CIVED), resulting in the publication of *Civic Education in Twenty-eight Countries* (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001) and *Civic Knowledge and Engagement: An IEA Study of Upper Secondary Students in Sixteen Countries* (Amadeo, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Husfeldt, & Nikolova, 2002). The first book reported an analysis of the responses of 14-year-olds, and the second was an analysis of upper-secondary students.

Recently, IEA published a book providing a retrospective view of this civic education research entitled *Influences of the IEA Civic and Citizenship Education Studies* (Malak-Minkiewicz & Torney-Purta, 2021). This book consists of fifteen chapters that contain reflections on the process and products of the project from the perspectives of countries' representatives (many from the post-Communist region). Other chapter authors provide a regional point of view on the studies (i.e., Europe, Latin America, and Asia). Still, others consider the studies from the point of view of political science, educational psychology, or moral education. There is also a chapter about the United States from the National Research Coordinator of the CIVED study of the 1990s, the last IEA Civic Education Study in which the U.S. participated. This book suggests

the breadth of civic understanding that the studies have promoted in both well-developed democracies and new democracies, especially in post-Communist countries. A scan of publications of secondary analysis based on the IEA Civic Education data found nearly a hundred articles, with most examining the attitudinal and participatory parts of the IEA instrument (Knowles, Torney-Purta, & Barber, 2018).

IEA Civic Education studies have continued, with the planning for a new one initiated soon after the publication of results from the last. The IEA civic education knowledge tests have strong psychometrics and the breadth of material includes attitudes and expected participation as well as knowledge. Individual countries also can add short modules of national questions and take advantage of the nationally representative samples of respondents. Perhaps most important, researchers who have had no contact with the project are encouraged to do secondary analyses of these data. This is facilitated by a data archiving project at The Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan, which has enabled a large number of researchers to analyze and publish from the IEA data (CIVICLEADS.org). This has a considerable multiplier effect.



Part II. Overview and Review of the Civics Measures on EdInstruments

Table 1 below presents seven civics assessment instruments on the EdInstruments website.

Table 1. Civics assessment instruments on the EdInstruments website

#	Civics assessment instrument	Brief description
1	Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. Government and Politics	The exam is designed to measure knowledge of U.S. government and politics taught in high school AP classes. The goal is to prepare high school students for college-level study. It is administered at the conclusion of the AP course to students in grades 11 and 12. It is both computer and manually scored and is criterion-referenced.
2	Florida Civics EOC Assessment	Florida Civics EOC Assessment measures students' (in grades 5, 6, 7, and 8) understanding of principles of U.S. democracy; the Constitution; founding documents, the U.S. Supreme Court, and landmark legislation and executive actions.
3	HEIghten Civic Competency Assessment	HEIghten Civic Competency Assessment is designed to measure college students' civic competency (knowledge and skills), attitudes, and participation.
4	International Civic and Citizenship Education Study: Civics Assessment	International Civic and Citizenship and Citizenship Education Study Civics Assessment is designed to measure civic-related knowledge and skills, attitudes, and expectations for civic-related actions/behaviors.
5	Missouri Higher Education Civics Exam	Missouri Higher Education Civics Exam is a state-mandated exam students need to pass to graduate from a public higher education institution in Missouri. It is comprised of multiple-choice questions designed to measure knowledge of government institutions, the U.S. Constitution, and political processes.
6	National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)-Civics	NAEP Civics measures civic knowledge, skills, and civic dispositions. The assessment distinguishes between civic cognitive skills and civic participatory skills. It is administered to nationally representative samples of students in grades 4, 8, and 12. The most recent civics assessment was in 2018 and included approximately 13,000 U.S. students in grade 8. It is scored by computer and criterion-referenced.
7	United States Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) Naturalization Test - Civics	The USCIS Naturalization Test-Civics is designed to measure knowledge of U.S. history, government, geography, symbols, and holidays. It is designed for the general public (e.g., immigrants), not for educators' use. It is manually scored, criterion-referenced, and available in multiple languages.

We now review each assessment in Table 1. The first one, the Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. Government and Politics exam, is three hours long with 55 multiple-choice questions and four free-response items. Based on a review of the released items, the questions are quite difficult. Some changes would be necessary to make this a contributor to civic education assessment for the general student or students without access to the AP course. One suggestion to increase attention to civic knowledge would be to encourage more students (especially students who have typically been under-represented in AP courses) to take AP courses and sit for the end-of-year test. Depending on the school district, increasing enrollments in AP courses might be expensive and dependent on staffing. One innovation might be to assign students in AP Government classes as mentors for students in their schools (or other local schools) who were recent immigrants or had not had experience with strong civic education. Both the mentor and mentee could benefit from the collaboration.

The items of the second instrument in Table 1, the Florida Civics EOC Assessment, include stimuli such as original sources, charts, and graphs, and many seem to go beyond rote memorization and require students to interpret and apply concepts. This is an examination specifically for students taking any one of nine courses in the state of Florida. Examples of courses are U.S. Government, Advanced Placement U.S. Government and Politics, and a couple of American history courses. In order to recommend whether this should be instituted by other states, it would be necessary to get quite a bit more information (i.e., costs to local schools or parents, failure rate and consequences, and what educators in Florida think this has accomplished). Without further data, it is appropriate only to recommend that other states “explore” this option if there is sufficient funding available to develop both such a test and courses that would prepare students to take the test. Examination of the students' test scores over time may provide valuable information about student group performance and an evaluation of the civics curriculum in the state.

The third instrument, the HEIghten Civic Competency Assessment, appears successful in developing secure and high-quality knowledge items for college students. Whether they had sufficient uptake on the tests by colleges and universities to justify the expenditure in developing them is embargoed information.

The fourth instrument in Table 1, the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study Civics Assessment, has been administered to nationally representative samples of secondary and post-secondary students in a wide range of countries. It includes a well-designed test of civic knowledge and skills and a survey about attitudes and current and expected civic-related behaviors. This assessment has expanded over decades and still continues, although the U.S. has not participated in collecting data for nearly 30 years. This project has always included an equal focus on knowledge, attitude, and participation items.

With the fifth instrument, the Missouri Higher Education Civics Exam, it is not clear how the questions relate to what Missouri students are taught in college or high school, nor how well it would translate to other states. However, mandating the test as a graduation requirement seems to acknowledge the importance of civic and political knowledge.



Regarding the sixth instrument, the NAEP Civics, its full testing materials are not available to the public. Almost all measures cover content knowledge and civic-related skills, but only a small proportion are released for use by educators or researchers. However, secondary analyses of NAEP data can be used by researchers to examine trends across time, grade levels, and/or student groups. The NAEP data explorer can be accessed through the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/data/>. As with all research, care should be taken not to claim causation with correlational data, but secondary analyses of NAEP data can be useful for educators, policy-makers, and researchers.

Finally, the United States Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) Naturalization Test- Civics (2008 & 2020) measures knowledge (not skills, attitudes, or behaviors). It relies heavily on memorization versus more in-depth understanding. In educational settings, some items may be useful as either baseline data points or for summative evaluation.



Part III. Additional Civic Education Assessment Resources

Researchers and practitioners interested in civics assessments may find the following additional resources useful.

- The Political Engagement Project (PEP) (Beaumont, Colby, & Ehrlich (2018). A pre-post instrument was designed, and data were collected (2003-2005) to assess the effectiveness of college courses and programs designed to enhance political understanding, participation, and political efficacy among college students. Although the items were designed for college undergraduates, they could be adapted for use with high school students. However, PEP does not include many knowledge items. More information about the project can be found at <https://www.aascu.org/programs/adp/PEP/>.
- CivicLEADS.org at the University of Michigan. This is a collection of instruments, data sets, and references related to civic education and engagement. In addition, CivicLEADS provides training and tutorials on data use and serves to connect researchers across disciplines. It is housed at the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan and funded by a Spencer Foundation grant.
- Center for Research and Information on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) provides high-quality data, fact sheets, research, and analyses related to civic education and engagement. Their website: <https://circle.tufts.edu>.
- The iCivics Project. Located in Massachusetts, it was founded in 2013 by retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. They provide online resources to educators, families, and students designed to enhance civic learning. A link to their website is <https://www.icivics.org>.

Part IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

In 2021, a resource to help educators and policymakers assess “civic readiness” was prepared for the Institute for Education Sciences (IES). Specifically, Tedeschi et al. (2021) examined survey instruments and scales, provided psychometrics when available, and created worksheets for practitioners to use to determine the most appropriate scales to use to measure their constructs of interest. The authors looked at 183 scales and broke them into six categories: civic attitudes; civic behaviors; civic/political knowledge; civic traits and skills; political attitudes; and political behaviors. Of the scales the authors identified, the most (46) fell under the political behaviors category and the least (4) under the civic/knowledge category (Tedeschi et al., 2021). This document includes a description of the methodology, construct definitions, psychometrics, and terminology. This resource, along with our review of civic assessments, supports the conclusion that the cognitive or knowledge dimension has received too little attention and has few available and reliable items. The optimal solutions, for example, using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Civics) and/or Heighen, have two challenges. The instruments that are of high quality are either not available (embargoed for future use) or, if available, they are high in cost. A further challenge is that unlike attitude scales (which can be valid over the years), knowledge items can go out of date because of political changes in the world.

We have two recommendations connected to the IEA International Civic and Citizenship Studies, in which the U.S. participated the last time in the 1990s. The first recommendation is to make available the released items from the IEA CIVED Study and the subsequent ICCS studies for use in research and evaluation and hold virtual workshops. The second recommendation is to help organize and obtain funding for the participation of the United States in the upcoming IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study. The first recommendation is cost-effective, with substantial numbers of released items from previous studies that are not in wide circulation in the U.S. The second recommendation is costly. However, it would be a much bigger step forward. Participating countries in the IEA studies have some influence on the test, and it is possible to have a country-specific module of questions. The study’s results could receive widespread attention. And there are multiple ways in which analyses of student group achievement and the impact of specific school-related factors could be helpful in planning future directions and programs.

Finally, although we did not address this here, an important component of civic education is information literacy. This is an area of interest among educators and researchers alike, especially given the proliferation of social media use among teens and young adults.

In summary, there is a long history of assessment and research related to civic education and engagement, which has benefitted from a multi-disciplinary perspective. And there are well-respected and longstanding programs, research organizations, scholars, and educators dedicated to improving civic education both in the U.S. and abroad. The challenge is to find

valid and reliable scales and/or data to measure constructs of interest. Those discussed in this brief offer potential, with some limitations.



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