

The Virginia NEWS LETTER

Democratic Government Can Be Lost if It is Not Understood: The Case for Bolstering Civic Education in the Old Dominion

by Bob Gibson

Virginia is entering the second decade of the 21st Century richer in history but poorer in its residents' knowledge of how government works.

The state's demographic makeup and its politics are changing faster than in previous decades, yet its burgeoning population, which hails increasingly from all across the nation and around the world, demonstrates flagging awareness of the functioning parts and roles of government, a crucial force and major employer whose actions touch everyone.

The Old Dominion, long ago nicknamed the Mother of Presidents, has lost some of its distinctive political identity as its civic and political life more and more resembles the nation's. Its hugely diverse politics and an educational system that has de-emphasized history and government are parts of national trends that tend to leave young people less than fully prepared to participate in a democracy that thrives best on citizen involvement.

Virginia and the nation could benefit from a better-informed citizenry with more of a grasp of the process of democracy.

Put another way, Americans and Virginians are increasingly at risk of losing the civic virtues that undergird the rights and welfare of all if tolerance, understanding, social responsibility, respect



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for others and the American belief in a capacity to make a difference are allowed to wither.

Calls for increasing civic education to help citizens make a difference accompany warnings that, in short, the nation is at risk of losing vital public participation.

Add in the turmoil of a news media establishment losing jobs, readership and viewership while cutting news coverage—and searching for a working business model—and a toxic recipe exists for citizens who know little about government and politics. A growing segment of the population is likely to be even less informed about public policy issues, actions and choices.

Reversing the loss of an informed and involved electorate should be a top national and state priority if rights and freedoms born in Virginia more than two centuries ago are to be preserved as the necessary safeguards of our form of government.

Understand It or Risk Losing It

Retiring U.S. Supreme Court Justice David Souter in May delivered a stirring call for better education of the American public about how government works.

The 19-year veteran of the court observed that surveys show large majorities of Americans cannot



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name the basic three branches of government: the executive, legislative and judicial branches.

Souter, in a speech at Georgetown University Law Center, warned that lack of knowledge about how government works threatens judicial independence and threatens the republic itself.¹

He reminded his audience that Benjamin Franklin, when asked after the Constitutional Convention of 1787 what type of government the new nation would have, replied: “A republic, if you can keep it.”

Souter sounded a note of pessimism based on the lack of civic knowledge.

“It can be lost, as he knew,” he said of Franklin. “And the lesson we have been learning over the past couple of years is that it is being lost. It is lost when it is not understood. If it is not understood, it will basically leech away.”

Souter said concern about attacks on judicial independence led to his understanding that “the real problem was the debasement, and in some places the disappearance, of knowledge of the structure and work of the government.”

The concepts of separation of powers and of a fair and independent judiciary must be widely understood for the American republic to survive, the 69-year-old jurist warned.

In his home state of New Hampshire, where he has retired, he has just joined an independent curriculum committee to upgrade the teaching of civics from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Souter’s talk won a prolonged standing ovation from several hundred lawyers and judges from around the country, according to Tony Mauro of *Legal Times*.

His words reverberate strongly across Virginia, where civics education has taken a back seat and where occasional calls for strengthening it have been heard in the General Assembly.

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Ken Stroupe and Larry Sabato, who are with the University of Virginia’s Center for Politics, found in a survey of 9th to 12th grade students in 20 states several years ago that:

- A third of students incorrectly thought that the Democratic Party is considered more conservative than the Republican Party.

- About 30 percent could not name the U.S. vice president at the time (Dick Cheney).

- More than 70 percent did not know the procedure by which a candidate is nominated to become president.

- Only 29 percent were able to name even one of their state’s two U.S. senators.

- Only 23 percent knew that most bills introduced in Congress are rejected in committee and never reach the full House or Senate.

- More than half could not identify which branches of government are most susceptible to being influenced by lobbying and more than half said that they did not know the purpose of a political action committee.²

Bringing this disturbing story closer to home, a majority of the more than 3,000 students surveyed were from Virginia schools. In their study the authors found that “the extent to which young people fail to engage in civic life is a direct reflection of the values and priorities of the society of which they are a part. The apathy of today’s generation toward politics is a symptom of society’s neglect of civic education.”

Involving more students in hands-on exercises—from volunteer experiences in their communities to civic game-playing in school and debates of issues—can be paths to teach civics through practice. Teaching the Bill of Rights by asking students to debate them could create a more universal understanding of why those rights were adopted, why they are still needed and why they are relevant to solving problems in our ever-more-diverse society.

Some educators believe that lively discussions and mock elections and debates trump the mere knowledge gained from classroom lectures.

David Weber, a veteran of more than 35 years of teaching at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, suggests that demonstrating examples of how rights are relevant in today’s society can bring alive the Bill of Rights and teach civics as a living exercise.³

Weber promotes the classroom use of case studies with selected primary sources. In his view, students “...need to understand the history of

¹ “A Dramatic Call for Improved Civic Education,” *Third Branch: Newsletter of the Federal Courts* (June 2009) http://www.uscourts.gov/ttb/2009-06/article01.cfm?WT.cg_n=TTB&WT.cg_s=June09_article01_coverStory_fullStoryLink and Tony Mauro, “Souter: Republic Lost Unless Civic Education Improves,” *The BLT: The Blog of Legal Times* (May 20, 2009) <http://legaltimes.typepad.com/blt/2009/05/souter-republic-is-lost-unless-civic-education-improves-.html>

² Kenneth S. Stroupe, Jr. and Larry J. Sabato, *Politics: The Missing Link of Responsible Civic Education* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Center For Politics, 2004), pp. 1-8. <http://www.centerforpolitics.org/pubs/reports.htm>

³ Facebook message of July 6, 2009 from David Weber after the author requested via Facebook that his 600 friends there consider suggestions for improvements to civics education.

the collisions between the founding ideals and the times when the actualities have been pretty ugly.”⁴

The Changing Face of Virginia

Virginia is in a period of political change as its population becomes more diverse, more foreign-born and full of new and expanding cultural identities. The state’s evolving demographics alone help justify increasing and improving civics offerings in schools as well as in after-school or other community settings. An increasingly mobile and growing population means there are more people to familiarize with the basics of how government works.

Half of Virginia’s residents were born outside the state, including a full 10 percent of the population born in another nation.⁵ No matter where they were born or where they went to school, Virginians have a better chance of improving life in the commonwealth the better they understand the civic life of their state and nation.

The top five countries of birth for foreign-born Virginians are Mexico, El Salvador, India, Korea, and Guatemala.⁶ Breaking this down further, some 40 percent of the Virginians born abroad came from Asia, 36 percent from Latin America, 13 percent from Europe and 9 percent from Africa.⁷

The voters of Virginia’s present and future increasingly bring political traditions and predispositions with them from other states and nations. Some of the highest state-to-state immigration contributors include Maryland, New York, North Carolina, California, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Texas.⁸

Whether Virginians were born in Korea, India, New York or Richmond, they should know, for example, how Virginia’s George Mason contributed to the Bill of Rights. His work helped shape the constitutional guarantees they enjoy today. As another example, Thomas Jefferson promoted the religious freedoms they have. These are rights that everyone in the state and the nation enjoys in daily life.

The Role of Civic Education in a Democracy

Our system of representative democracy depends upon reasoned debate, negotiation and compromise. Success depends on the involvement of individuals who choose to participate in a political process that can bring about changes if enough people have the faith and understanding to make it work.

There is no better place for citizens to become involved than in state and local governments because they affect citizens most directly. In turn, people can affect those levels of government more directly. With this as a starting base, they can better understand the national government and ways to participate in that.

Civil and bipartisan policy discussions work best when good faith, respect for others and understanding of how the process should work are shared as broadly among citizens as possible.

Virginia and the nation have enough problems to solve without the misunderstanding and paralysis that can result when people lack the faith or knowledge to make government work.

Recognizing this, in its recent session the General Assembly prolonged the life and mission of a commission on civics education that had been created in 2005.

The Virginia Commission on Civics Education

The commission has already helped rewrite state Standards of Learning (SOLs) in social studies for kindergarten through 12th grade to emphasize understanding and participation in state and local government and has provided Virginia specific chapters to be used in middle school civics courses and a required 12th grade government course.

The commission’s charge from the General Assembly is broad and challenging as the legislature instructed it this year to:

- Develop and coordinate outreach programs in collaboration with schools to educate students on the importance of understanding that (i) representative democracy is a process dependent on reasoned debate, good faith negotiation, and compromise; (ii) individual involvement is a critical factor in community success; and (iii) consideration of and respect for others must be shown when deliberating, negotiating and advocating positions on public concerns.

- Identify civics education projects in the commonwealth and provide technical assistance as may be needed to such programs.

- Build a network of civics education professionals to share information and strengthen partnerships.

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⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Qian Cai, “Who’s Moving to Virginia,” *Numbers Count: Analysis of Virginia’s Population*, Cooper Center for Public Service, (January 2007), p. 1. <http://www.coopercenter.org/demographics/sitefiles/documents/pdfs/numberscount/migration.pdf>

⁶ Qian Cai, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, “Virginia’s Foreign Born Population.” Presentation to the Virginia Association of Realtors’ Relocation Conference, March 6, 2008. p. 16. <http://www.coopercenter.org/demographics/sitefiles/documents/pdfs/presentations/var.pdf>

⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

⁸ Qian Cai, “Who’s Moving to Virginia,” p. 2.

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- Develop, in consultation with entities having representatives on the commission and others as determined by the commission, a clearinghouse that shall be available on the Department of Education's website. The electronic clearinghouse shall include, among other things, (i) a database of civics education resources, lesson plans and other programs of best practices in civics education; (ii) a bulletin board to promote discussion on and exchange of ideas relative to civics education; (iii) an events calendar; and (iv) links to civics education research.

- Make recommendations to the Board of Education regarding revisions to the Standards of Learning for civics and government.

- Submit to the governor and the General Assembly an annual report. The chairman shall submit to the governor and the General Assembly an annual executive summary of the interim activity and work of the commission no later than the first day of each regular session of the General Assembly. The executive summary shall be submitted for publication as a report document as provided in the procedures of the Division of Legislative Automated Systems for the processing of legislative documents and reports and shall be posted on the General Assembly's website.⁹

Now in its fifth year, the Virginia Commission on Civics Education this year became a legislative commission and is newly charged with helping strengthen the teaching of civics in schools and communities across Virginia. Civics education in and outside of schools is adding a new focus on citizen involvement in state and local government, according to a discussion at a recent meeting of the commission in August 2009.

The commission will sponsor a civics education summit for teachers September 24 in Richmond at the Capitol to provide additional resources to help teach active engagement in civics, including new media tools to assist teaching and new websites to aid teachers.

The 18-member body appointed mostly by the state legislature has decided to take an inventory on what Virginia students are learning in civics and history taught in schools across the state. Members were told that in grades 9, 10 and 11 there is a "civics strand" taught in some history courses that incorporates civics lessons and exercises even in the grades where civic education and government are not separate and distinct course offerings or requirements.

Conclusion

The state's politics have undergone significant change in the first decade of the 21st Century as the Old Dominion evolved from a Republican-leaning state to a swing state marked by highly competitive and increasingly expensive statewide elections.

Now that Virginia is once again in the center of the national political spotlight, let us bring back the spirit of Mason, Jefferson and Madison to inform and guide new generations of residents in the balancing act that is a government of, by and for the people.

As a newly appointed member of the Virginia Commission on Civics Education, who is well acquainted with its members, I find them to be serious about a desire to give civic education a more useful role in the lives of Virginians. This, in turn, can improve the lives of people through participation in the decisions that state, local and federal governments make.

The commission cannot be effective in a vacuum or without the assistance of many in Virginia who value the rights and responsibilities of citizens and wish for a restoration of civil responsibilities and fuller exercise of civic rights.

I would urge anyone with useful ideas and examples to further this mission to please submit them to me or to the commission.

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⁹ <http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?091+ful+CHAP0859>

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