

TEACHER INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

The American Civics Project (ACP) provides teachers with a new way to teach civics. It improves on programs that simply chronicle our history and explain how our civic and government institutions work. Even before the Declaration of Independence, people from around the world flocked to America to build a good life. We now enjoy remarkable levels of personal, economic, and political freedom coupled with general prosperity. Measured against most of the world, even our poor are comparatively rich. But *why*? ACP helps students see for themselves how we became the freest and the richest people on earth who also do the most good on earth. It provides a moral case for our way of life, which is something woefully lacking in conventional civics.

ACP covers all of the traditional content of American civic education while also explaining why our national story actually begins long before America. Our thriving free market democracy and constitutional republic arises from the evolution of ideas, beliefs, institutions, rights, and political economic systems driven by the competitive advantages of becoming an ever more cooperative society. ACP therefore provides the best possible approach to teaching and learning civics because it enables students to understand all of the pieces of the story and how they work together to produce America—the place where the most effective cooperation ever achieved emerged and continues to this day.

NARRATIVES

1. *Why civic education is so important*

Even before Aristotle and Plato, Thucydides, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, described the efforts of Sparta to cultivate the character traits of good citizenship. As city-states experimented with increasingly formal democracy, it became obvious that immediate self-interest would lead to disaster, so some kind of effort was needed to provide a consistent understanding of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and how that should inform public acts or civic action. In early Rome, the Latin word *civicus* appears, the root of the modern word civics.

In a true democracy, citizens can change anything. Part of being a good citizen is doing one's civic duty not just by voting, but by also being an informed voter. To echo many of the American Founders, our free market democracy and constitutional republic is only as stable as the quality of the judgment and moral character of the citizens. This fact was understood by the ancients and echoed again and again throughout history by great thinkers.

Thomas Jefferson stressed the importance of widespread education as key to sustaining our freedoms. A free market democracy and constitutional republic whose citizens do not possess self-reliance might expect the government to fulfill their every desire. Such a republic will not last long.

Democracy is a great achievement and can provide a peaceful means of collective decision making and a powerful bulwark against tyranny, but those who

love democracy must recognize that only a very large investment can sustain it. In each and every generation, democracies must ensure that citizens know why our system produces the good life by understanding how it works and therefore how easily it can be abused. Plato predicted this problem and its likely consequence: growing democratic dysfunction leads to growing popular support for rule by a tyrant.

Our way of life is made possible by liberty, prosperity, and voluntary cooperation, which in turn allow us to produce works of artistic beauty and devote ourselves to charity and the common good. These are not merely products of luck or guile. They are made possible by our culture, institutions, and a political economic system that fuels our thriving free market democracy and constitutional republic. Since we aren't born with this knowledge, civic education constitutes an investment by each generation into the next.

In America, this investment into our civic culture did more than produce stable democracy out of good citizenship. It also gave rise to the freest thinking minds in human history. The Founders recognized this and worked hard to preserve it. A culture of free thinking gave rise to a constitution and government designed to protect and promote it, not the other way around. This strong culture catalyzed by strong institutions quickly led to the unprecedented level of cooperation and the proliferation of intermediary institutions that was so well described in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

2. *What's wrong with existing civic education*

Civic education in America has been increasingly compromised for at least three reasons.

First, it lacks economics. The basic concepts and tools of economics provide us with adult understanding of the pervasive nature of scarcity that makes it necessary to make difficult choices between competing moral ends. It also provides us with an understanding of how the price system works automatically to promote social welfare without coercion. Serious civic education is impossible without equipping students, as early as possible, with foundational economic concepts.

Second, in American civics there has been a shift away from *civic education* toward *civic action*. Civic action has quickly become an end in itself. But civic action is not inherently good; it depends on the ends to which it is directed.

Most civic action is justified as an effort to promote social justice by “giving back.” But this concedes a false premise, which is that we are all indebted to the society that has already provided for us. Our nation’s true economic system is the opposite: when we work with other citizens within the bounds of ethical conduct, we cooperatively *create* the wealth we use to buy goods and services for ourselves. It is true that we couldn’t have done so without the help and infrastructure of present and past cooperators, but in a free society they are (and were) fully compensated.

Third, specific courses in civic education were once common, but now civic education is distributed over the social studies curriculum. This approach would seem to be a prescription for dissonance. But a popular narrative has emerged that produces consonance through a thread that connects all the moral premises and moving parts of modern civic education.

According to this narrative, the rise of the West and America is largely a tragic story of ever more effective oppression of the weak by the strong. This false narrative has become so deeply embedded in our institutions that we are now largely unaware of it. As a result, we advance social justice in order to reverse this supposedly unjust outcome and to rebalance this asymmetry of power, income, and wealth. If left unchallenged, these societal pressures might very well unravel what is known historically as “the American experiment.”

This “oppression hypothesis” is wrong. Common sense logic, economic theory, history’s facts, and abundant statistical evidence show why. But this hypothesis thrives because it taps into our hardwired predilection for tribalism and our disgust for injustice. This provides a *moral case against* our way of life that has gone largely unchallenged by any competing hypothesis. As a result, efforts to rebut it can be dismissed as efforts to combat advancing social justice out of a desire to protect the status quo—protecting the oppressors.

There are several new civic education programs that combat these trends. But they do not incorporate economics in a deep way to create citizen competence. They also fail to address the oppression hypothesis by making a positive moral case for our free market democracy and constitutional republic.

3. *Why ACP is different*

First, ACP incorporates economics. The decisions government makes have economic effects that profoundly affect our quality of life, so it is crucial that citizens understand economics and how economic systems function. ACP introduces basic economic concepts from the very first lesson, laying the foundation for understanding the free market economic system.

TEACHER INTRODUCTION

A democracy is no more stable than the economic wisdom of its citizens. Citizens need to possess good judgment informed by knowledge of economic history and command of economic reasoning. When either of these is lacking, citizens can be seduced by political opportunists who promise something for nothing. Moreover, to sustain our way of life citizens must have faith in it. That faith is best derived from a deep understanding of how our political economic system works as a whole. This is a very important innovation.

Second, ACP teaches over the timeline of history. The curriculum begins well before prehistory, with our hunter-gatherer ancestors. It therefore begins with something common to us all, since we are all the descendants of hunter-gatherers and possess their genes.

To best understand why our political economic system does so much good one has to understand how a number of factors coevolved through time. The evolution of rights, the rule of law, and an entrepreneurial culture fueled by morally respectable competition are all deeply connected with one another. ACP shows students how this coevolutionary process also produced free-thinking minds in early America.

A great way to understand the nature of something is to understand how it came to be. Teaching through the timeline also presents the easiest content first. The increasingly complex parts of the modern free market democracy are only introduced after the necessary foundations are understood.

Third, ACP makes the moral case for our way of life. It does this by offering a competing hypothesis to the oppression hypothesis. It explains why the rise of the West and America is largely a story of the evolution of ever more effective cooperation catalyzed by ever better market systems filled with ever freer citizens. We call this the Cooperation Hypothesis.

The ultimate driver of all socially positive behavior is cooperation. For this reason, cooperation is taught in the first module. Our story is how all the other moving pieces of civic education derive their value and their durability in America through directly or indirectly unlocking cooperation. This is a fascinating story that is positive, life affirming, and optimistic. It is, in a word, thoroughly American.

Cooperation occurs through morally laudable behavior. Cooperating therefore brings out the best in us, and even helps to bring about a sense of us. Cooperation works best when it is freely directed, so liberty fuels cooperation. But since cooperation helps to build comity and mutual respect as we come to depend on each other voluntarily, it builds respect for the rights of others. In this way cooperating increases freedom's practical value.

Cooperation does not obsess on dividing the economic pie, but instead on doing everything required to increase the size of the pie and ensure that it continues to grow. Cooperation therefore creates conditions where all benefit concurrently. For this reason, it is the secret to lifting all boats and, when conducted in a context of honest competition, it does just that.

Cooperation is highly dependent on trust and stability, so it thrives best in the context of the rule of law. It is therefore the foundation of the positive moral case for our way of life. It is easy to have civic pride in America when one understands that what makes America distinctive is that it was able to unleash the unfathomable power of cooperation more successfully than any other nation. Cooperation is the key organizing idea that is left out by all other civic education programs. ACP makes it central.

Fourth, ACP helps students see the power of societal evolution arising from the free thought, free acts, and voluntary association of citizens. This is in stark contrast to systems that rely on central planning to effectuate a particular utopian design for society. Such designs are a natural consequence of a lack of sufficient faith in our free market democracy and constitutional republic to evolve an ever better quality of life over time.

This evolutionary approach is not just good science. It is also the secret to having the fullest realization of liberty. As philosopher Robert Nozick famously pointed out, a society can strive toward a particular utopian plan if it wants to, but in doing so it will have to give up on liberty. This is because behavior will have to comport with fulfilling the plan. Conversely, a society can strive to maximize liberty, but in doing so it will have to abandon having a utopian plan. Plans are not possible if behavior is girded rather than scripted.

But the price of liberty is that citizens will have to accept the wild ride that is society's evolution into the future. This can be unsettling, of course, but in most cases it has proven rewarding. Americans used to unthinkingly endorse progress knowing full well they couldn't possibly know where it was taking us. This reflected strong trust in the system.

So what has been the price of America focusing on liberty? We know from history that a great irony of *Sapiens* is that a great deal of avoidable misery can be traced to efforts to effectuate some flavor of utopia at the expense of liberty. In America, in contrast, the price tag has been that liberty has stoked cooperation which has made it possible for even the poorest Americans to not suffer from material deprivation while remaining free.

4. *How we proceed*

Through the nobility of cooperation we make the moral case for our way of life. ACP is not just traditional civic education with better arguments against intellectual fads that threaten our way of life. That will only give us something to oppose. Instead ACP gives children and adults something to support, which is the free society within which we effectively cooperate for everyone's benefit.

America was built up over a long period of time, long before the European discovery of North America. For adults to understand the rights and responsibilities of good citizens, and to resist foolish ideas that threaten to undermine our way of life through poor public policy, they must have a deep understanding of how our society works, and for that they must have a deep understanding of our story.

To foster this understanding, we begin with life in the hunter-gather band, where the value of cooperation is easily perceived. Elements of our civic culture and institutions are added bit by bit as they appear in the timeline. This natural history approach is pedagogically sensible and highly engaging. Our curriculum is presented like a multipart PBS series that imbues scientific understanding through narratives of human social evolution through time. Our modules cover content from prehistory, Western civilization generally, and the story of America in particular. But a unifying thread connects them all, which is that America has produced the fullest evolution of cooperation the world has ever seen.

Since we teach along the timeline of history, this grades 6-12 program can be compressed or stretched to accommodate the needs of individual schools or school districts. This would not be the case if the material were topically organized because this has the effect of forcing a choice on the level at which the material is covered.

More and more citizens are demanding the impossible and are advocating to change our political economic system to one that has been shown, repeatedly, theoretically, and in terms of abundant historical and economic evidence, to produce far less freedom and far less general prosperity. This failed social experiment would have been impossible if our children and young adults had been getting the kind of civic education we envision for ACP.

Children naturally primarily value their material and physical safety and they implicitly trade freedom for the alleviation of responsibility. This predilection exists in all of us and has no reason to disappear unless removed or displaced by something else. The cooperation hypothesis displaces this view by showing young adults how we can take care of each other by taking care of ourselves within the political economic system that is a free market democracy and constitutional republic. In doing so, it displaces the oppression hypothesis that produces citizens who do not understand and thus do not value our way of life.