

**Chieppo & Gass: Civics poll shows state has much work to do**



The U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. A recent poll of civics knowledge in Massachusetts found that only 52% of respondents knew the Senate has 100 members, while just 55% knew that a senator’s term is six years. (Dreamstime/TNS)

By [**CHARLES CHIEPPO AND JAMIE GASS**](https://www.bostonherald.com/author/charles-chieppo-and-jamie-gass/)

October 27, 2023 at 12:30 a.m.

With wars raging in the Middle East and Ukraine — not to mention the recent conflict in the Republican caucus of the U.S. House of Representatives — it has rarely been more important that American voters have the knowledge they need to make wise choices in upcoming federal elections. Unfortunately, after decades of civics being marginalized in public schools, the data show that such knowledge is sorely lacking.

Massachusetts is one of the best-educated states in the country, the only one in which more than half the workforce holds a bachelor’s degree or better. Yet when Pioneer Institute commissioned and Emerson College Polling conducted a survey that asked state residents some of the questions immigrants must answer correctly to gain U.S. citizenship, the responses earned those voters a cumulative grade of 63, or a “D.”

State residents got a failing grade on two basic questions about the U.S. Senate. Only 52% knew the Senate has 100 members, while just 55% knew that a senator’s term is six years.

The questions most often answered correctly were one in which respondents were given a list of places and asked which is a U.S. territory, and one about the month in which federal elections are held. Eighty-five percent identified Puerto Rico as a territory and 76% knew federal elections are held in November. This means the best grades Massachusetts residents could muster are a “B” and a “C.”

There wasn’t a lot of difference in how well respondents did based on party affiliation, but registered voters scored higher than those who aren’t registered. Unaffiliated voters scored best, getting 69% correct. They were followed by Democrats and Republicans, each at 62%. Those who aren’t registered to vote earned a failing grade, getting the correct answer just 46% of the time.

It’s not surprising that those with more education did better, but perhaps the most troubling parts of the poll are the breakdowns based on respondents’ age and how many civics classes they have taken. Those over 65 did best in the poll, getting 75% of the questions right. They were followed by those ages 55-64 (68%) and ages 45-54 (65%). The three youngest age ranges did the poorest — ages 18-24 (58%), ages 35-44 (55%), and ages 25-34 (52%).

Performance was correlated with the number of civics classes taken. Respondents who took multiple civics classes in middle or high school got an average 69% of the questions right, while those who took one class averaged 65%, and those who didn’t take any averaged 58%.

The poor performance of younger people on the exam and the correlation between performance and the number of civics courses taken highlight the near-disappearance of civics from Massachusetts public school curricula in recent decades. As public education has increasingly come to be thought of as little more than workforce development, teaching civics has become less and less of a priority.

America’s Founding Fathers weren’t perfect, but they possessed wisdom that was far ahead of their times. They saw the primary role of public education at the state and local levels as preparing young people to be active participants in our democracy. At a time when our nation faces staggering challenges and much of the public lacks even the most rudimentary civic knowledge needed to choose between different approaches to confronting those challenges, we may be about to learn — the hard way — just how right the founders were.

*Charles Chieppo is a senior fellow and Jamie Gass is the director the Center for School Reform at Pioneer Institute, a Boston-based think tank.*