



**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE**

Joel W. Solomon United States Courthouse
900 Georgia Avenue
Chattanooga, Tennessee 37402

WHAT IS THE PRICE OF DEMOCRACY?

Most United States citizens consider ourselves fortunate to live in a modern, mature democracy. We appreciate the great freedoms and abundant material things our democracy affords us. But while we all know the old adage that freedom is not free, neither is democracy. Our system depends on citizens' being in ultimate control of the government through a written constitution with checks and balances, frequent elections, term limits, free speech, free press, the right to petition the government, the right to bring lawsuits against the government, referendums, recalls, and more. Unfortunately, too few of us take the time to actively participate in our democracy. Which brings up another adage—you only get as much out of a thing as you put into it.

So, how much are we putting into our democracy? How much are we as a country investing in making sure our citizens are informed, knowledgeable, and prepared to fully participate in our continuing experiment in self-government?

Our Current Investment in Civics Education

Schools can help prepare our youngest citizens for their critical role in our democracy. In fact, public education in the United States historically had the three related purposes of preparing students to participate in life as citizens, to engage in adult work and careers, and to become functioning members of their communities.

The first goal is essentially civics education. What value do we place on achieving this goal today? Governments at all levels have given little support to developing civics education over the last thirty years, according to the March 2, 2021, "Educating for American Democracy" report sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the U.S. Department of Education. At the federal level, we spend five cents on civics education per student each year, significantly less than the fifty-four dollars per student for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education. Danielle Allen, Director of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University, discussed this disparity in an October 8, 2020, interview on Harvard EdCast titled "The Role of Education in Democracy." Her point was not that less money should be spent on STEM, but that the lack of support for civics education results in an inability for "young people to understand democracy, be motivated to participate in it, [and] to have the skills and tools they need to participate effectively" in democratic self-government.

The Cost of Neglecting Civics

In a wonderful, wide-ranging discussion sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies on April 14, 2021, titled “Civics as a National Security Imperative,” United States Supreme Court Justices Sonya Sotomayor and Neil Gorsuch discussed the importance of civics from their perspective as judges of the highest court in our country. Justice Sotomayor cited the wide disparity on STEM and civics spending discussed above. Both Justices discussed the troubling lack of knowledge about how our government functions, the low rate of participation in government, the surprisingly large number of people who disapprove of democracy, and how pervasive false information is in our society, especially as spread by social media.

The Justices identified these dangers as resulting from a lack of civics knowledge, which equips citizens to discern false information regarding our government and its functioning. Justice Gorsuch noted that more often in history, democracies fall not from external threat but from internal discord. He noted democracy is “not an automatic thing.” Recently, foreign enemies capitalized on our internal divisions and discord to further divide us, and Justice Gorsuch noted, “it is no surprise that a lot of the false misinformation spread on social media is deliberately spread by our enemies to sow disagreement internally in the country.”

Our democracy suffers when we as citizens are unable to fulfil our responsibility as the ultimate control of government. We have to make reasoned decisions at the ballot box and in the other means of exercising our power. We cannot fulfill this responsibility when we do not know how our government functions. As Justice Gorsuch stated, when we are uninformed, not only do we allow unresponsive and dysfunctional government, but we also allow foreign and domestic threats to endanger our democracy.

Among the strengths of the American legal system are civility, civil discourse, constructive disagreement, critical thinking, and respectful dialogue. Both Justices spoke of how society at large could use these principles, practiced every day in our courts, to bridge the divides we now face.

By failing to educate our young people and ourselves on our government and our civic responsibilities, we risk losing the freedoms we value so highly. We may have well-educated STEM students, but if we lose our democracy, in what kind of country will they live? In that event, we will all have to ask ourselves, did we pay the appropriate price for democracy?

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