

Civics Education in the TikTok Age

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The partisan arguments and legal boundary-pushing that seems to be endemic to today's politics has confused many Americans as to the basic rules of our democratic republic. Misinformation on social media compounds this confusion. Many despair over the lack of understanding of citizens about our constitutional structure, the principle of rule of law and the precious Bill of Rights that we inherited from prior generations.

It has amplified the cry for better civics education, both in the public schools and in society. If the public does not understand the value of democracy, personal liberty, due process and the separation of powers, the popular foundations of our nation are weakened. Lawyers depend on a basic understanding of the rule of law by their clients and juries.

This is reflected in a recent survey by the American Bar Association done annually in conjunction with Law Day that found that confidence in government was beginning to fail, with high confidence under 50% in all three branches of government. Survey takers were concerned about political partisanship. Around 20% favored more civics education.

That survey also tested recipients on 13 questions from the current U.S. naturalization test. Only 30% correctly answered that the U.S. Constitution along with federal statutes and treaties were the supreme law of the land. Barely half knew John Roberts was the chief justice of the United States; 44% did not. Four in ten erroneously believed that non-citizens could serve on juries and hold federal office.

The ABA's renewed interest in civics has coincided with recent and current Supreme Court justices' passion for the issue. Retired Associate Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has long promoted civics education, founding two organizations to promote it, and Chief Justice John Roberts has called for continuing civics education in almost all of his year-end reports on the federal judiciary since 2019.

The desire for civics education is also reflected in the popularity of bar association and library adult programming on the legal system. A recent "Law School 101" program by the Louisville Free Public Library in conjunction with the Jefferson County Public Law Library was extremely popular, attracting full rooms for presentations on landlord-tenant law, wills and probate, divorce and family law and criminal law.

General Resources

There are several online resources for groups trying to instruct the public on these issues. This article will highlight the organizations trying to organize civics education programs and review materials they provide on the American political system. In addition, I will reference some resources for civics educational programming on the political system of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

After retiring from the U.S. Supreme Court, Justice O'Connor founded **iCivics** (<https://vision.icivics.org/>) in 2009 as part of her mission to improve civics education. Aimed primarily at K-12 teachers, it provides free, high-quality educational resources, including curricula, lesson plans and interactive games, designed to promote informed civic engagement. (Many of the materials could be adapted to adult education.)

While iCivics provides resources for public school teachers, O'Connor's **Civics for Life** project (<https://civicsforlife.org/>) aims squarely at adults. Its "Civics 101" online course (<https://civicsforlife.org/civics-101/>) is "designed to provide every American with the civic knowledge necessary and fundamental for every citizen" in a series of 10-minute micro lessons.

Any adult civics programming would be benefited by reviewing the annual **Annenberg Public Policy Center's Civics Knowledge Survey** (<https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/political-communication/civics-knowledge-survey/>), which gauges the civics knowledge of Americans with a yearly survey that is released every Constitution Day (September 17). For example, since the 2024 survey found that 22% of Americans thought the First Amendment protected the right to bear arms, the Bill of Rights might be a point of emphasis.

The Kentucky Civic Education Coalition (KCEC), hosted by the Kentucky Council for the Social Studies (<https://www.kyssouncil.org/kcec.html>), seeks to "promote civic education and engagement in Kentucky by convening a broad range of stakeholders." It is focused on K-12 and has lesson plans and resources on "civic and political institutions; the roles and responsibilities of a citizen; civic virtues and democratic principles; processes, rules, and laws; Kentucky government; and current events."

The **Federal Judicial Center**, overseen by the federal judiciary, produces resources to teach its employees and the public (<https://www.fjc.gov/education/civic-education-about-courts>), using eLearning modules, monographs, guides, videos and podcasts. A useful federal publication is the *Journalist's Guide to the Federal Courts* (<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-JU10-PURL-gpo39434/pdf/GOVPUB-JU10-PURL-gpo39434.pdf>)

Kentucky Civics Resources

One subject of civics education is federalism, the principle by which those issues of national importance are delegated to the federal government and those subjects best dealt with at a more local level are delegated to the elected representatives of state governments. In the Commonwealth of Kentucky, these entities are the General Assembly, the governor and the rest of the executive branch and the Court

of Justice. In addition to the KCEC materials described above, there are several useful resources available to those seeking to inform oneself and others about these key parts of the state democratic process.

The **Kentucky Legislative Research Commission** (<https://legislature.ky.gov>), the administrative agency of the Kentucky General Assembly, has useful materials on the Kentucky Constitution, the legislature, state government and local government on its Publications page (<https://legislature.ky.gov/LRC/Publications/>).

Constitutions of the US and Commonwealth of Kentucky (informational Bulletin No. 210) has the texts of both the federal and state charters. It is available online and can be requested in book form.

The website is best at explaining the legislative branch. A chart, *The Road to Passage: How a Bill Becomes a Law*, gives a "Schoolhouse Rock" overview of the legislative process, while an excellent 48-page pamphlet, *Inside the Legislative Branch of Kentucky State Government*, describes the details in plain language.

The Informational Bulletins (IB) series covers other areas of interest, including a trilogy of pamphlets on local government: *Kentucky Municipal Statutory Law* (IB No. 145), *County Government in Kentucky* (IB No. 115) and *Duties of Elected County Officials* (IB No. 114).

The Executive Branch of Kentucky State Government (IB No. 171) is a good introduction to the state's multi-headed executive, where a governor of one party may have to co-exist with an elected attorney general of the other party.

The Legal Aid Network of Kentucky's *kyjustice.org* project was created to provide legal self-help resources but also has information useful for civics learners seeking information about Kentucky courts. Under Court Basics (<https://www.kyjustice.org/topics/court-basics>) there are videos on court procedure and guides like *Your Day in Court*:

A Guide to Representing Yourself Without a Lawyer.

Books for Advanced Students

Of course, the advanced students of Kentucky civics might benefit from pausing their scrolling to read a few books. The University Press of Kentucky has some appropriate titles widely used in undergraduate political science and history courses across the Commonwealth.

I highly recommend *Kentucky Government, Politics, and Public Policy* (2013). It begins with chapters by scholars on the Kentucky constitution, federalism and intergovernmental relations in Kentucky; the General Assembly, the executive branch and the Kentucky judicial system; then moves to topical chapters on subjects like campaign finance, Kentucky regulatory agencies, education reform and healthcare.

It is impossible to have a good civics education without an understanding of history. James C. Klotter and Freda C. Klotter's *A Concise History of Kentucky* (2008) provides readers with a readable survey of Kentucky's diverse history, integrating government, social life, cultural achievements, education and economic themes. Readers seeking more depth can try James C. Klotter and Craig Thompson Friend's *A New History of Kentucky* (2018).

As a solid civics education is a continuing education, these resources should be considered just a beginning.

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YOUNG LAWYERS SECTION

TABLE TALK:
LBA Young Lawyers
Networking Lunch

Thursday, August 7
noon - 1:00 PM
LBA Bar Center

Free for LBA Young Lawyers
\$25 for Non-LBA Members

Registration is required for lunch.
Register online at www.loubar.org.