

Trends: Close Up

February 2020



To make accessing the linked resources easier for those reading the print copy of Trends: Close Up, we have included QR Codes. (This one will take you to ncsc.org.)

iOS users: Open the camera app on your phone, center the code in your viewfinder, and your phone will scan the code. You will need to click to open the scanned site.

Android users: If your device is newer, you can use Google Lens to scan the code. Alternatively, your browser may be able to scan codes, usually using the URL box. Check your browser's instructions on how to use it to scan QR codes.

Growing Demand for Civics Education

Civics education has become a focus in recent years, with headline-making events from Rhode Island students suing the state over the lack of a civics education program to sufficiently prepare them for life as citizens, to reports that two-thirds of young Americans want high-school or college-level courses that will prepare them to be voters. Civics education, or the lack thereof, is on the minds of many Americans.¹ Americans are voicing their concern over the state of civics proficiency among the citizenry, and they should be, considering the startling numbers; Americans young and old are struggling with basic civics knowledge.

The 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress, the most current year for the survey, found 26 percent of eighth graders surveyed could not “identify the fundamental principles of American democracy and the documents that make up that foundation,” nor could they “understand the different rights and responsibilities U.S. citizens have.”²

About the Series



These special reports are part of the National Center for State Courts’ “Trends in the State Courts” series and serve as informative and timely updates for state court leaders. Any opinions expressed herein are those of the authors, not necessarily of the National Center for State Courts.

Adults have not fared much better than their younger counterparts. In an August of 2019 survey conducted by the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Public Policy Center, only 39 percent of adults could identify all three branches of government.³

The value of understanding the tenets of our system of government and why it functions the way it does isn’t limited to trivia apps or scoring well on surveys. Those who received courses in civics education are more likely to correctly answer constitutional questions and stay engaged with the news.⁴ The ability to correctly identify information as fact or fiction in the news, regardless of medium, is growing more urgent. Disinformation campaigns, including those operated by foreign governments, rely on an uninformed public to succeed.⁵ The issue has gained such momentum that Chief Justice of the United States John G. Roberts, Jr. is concerned with the growing trend of disinformation and the judiciary’s role in combating it.

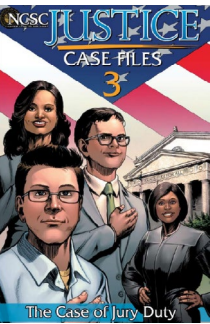
A Call to Action

In his 2019 end-of-year report, Chief Justice Roberts noted the judiciary, along with their partners, have an important role to play in providing civics education to protect the public from the dangers of rumor and false information.⁶ Lauding the work that has already begun in the area of civics education while calling for yet more to be done, Chief Justice Roberts highlighted the National Center for State Courts’ (NCSC) own *Justice Case Files* graphic novel series.

The head of the federal court system is not alone in calling for the courts to take an active role in civics education. In 2005 the Conference of Chief Justices (CCJ) identified the need for the judiciary to become involved in civics education and issued Resolution 33 In Support of Civics Education, which calls for the judiciary of each state to participate in the revitalization of civics education.⁷ NCSC heeded this call and has produced a number of resources to assist state courts in furthering civics education.

Civics Education Resources from the National Center for State Courts

Created to facilitate in the creation and sharing of civics education programs, the *Civics Education Resource Guide* contains an alphabetical list and brief description of civics education programs created by states and other organizations. The list is continually evolving, and NCSC encourages those with new programs to submit them for inclusion.



NCSC has also created its own civics education resources. The *Justice Case Files* series, first published in 2007, and the accompanying lesson plans, are one of the many ways civics education can be fun for the young and not so young alike. With six

published issues, the free series, available both on the NCSC website and on Apple Books, provides an entertaining way to learn not only about how our courts work, but also why citizen participation via the jury system is so vital.

NCSC’s Civics Education Essay Contest is another way to engage school children in civics education. The contest is open to 3rd through 12th graders, and focuses on core issues like free speech, the three branches of government, citizenship and voting rights. Winners receive cash prizes and the opportunity to have their essays featured on NCSC social media and marketing materials.

All three of these resources can be found on the [Civics Education page](#).



Another civics education resource is an interactive video on the [Constitutional Basics of Limited Jurisdiction Courts](#).

Created in partnership with the State Justice Institute, the video aims to educate members of the state and local executive and legislative branches, as well as the public, on the role and purpose of limited jurisdiction courts.

For those short on time, NCSC also offers many short videos to pique the viewer’s interest in various facets of civic participation and history.

From [Answering the Call for Jury Service](#)

to [What Is the Magna Carta?](#), there is something here for everyone to help them be a more informed citizen.



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Looking Forward

America’s system of government only works so long as her citizens remain informed and maintain their faith in the integrity of the system. The judiciary, like the other two branches, bears the burden of fostering education and faith or it risks losing its legitimacy. Thus, members of the judiciary, and their partner organizations, must take an active role in educating the public on the form and function of the judicial branch, including getting the public involved with the court system in a positive manner. As part of its mission to improve the administration of courts, NCSC continues to produce a variety of

resources to further the goal of fostering an informed and engaged citizenry. NCSC encourages all courts to heed the call of the Conference of Chief Justices and Chief Justice Roberts to proactively engage in civics education within your community.

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Endnotes

1 Campbell Streator, *Young Americans Demand Civic Education —for Good Reason*, THE HILL (July 20, 2019, 12:00 PM), <https://thehill.com/opinion/education/453923-young-americans-demand-civic-education-for-good-reason>.

2 Emily Cardinali, *What Your State Is Doing to Beef Up Civics Education*, NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO (July 21, 2018, 5:57 AM), <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/07/21/624267576/what-your-state-is-doing-to-beef-up-civics-education>.

3 *Americans’ Civics Knowledge Increases but Still Has a Long Way to Go*, ANNENBERG PUBLIC POLICY CENTER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA (Sept.12, 2019), <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-civics-knowledge-increases-2019-survey/>.

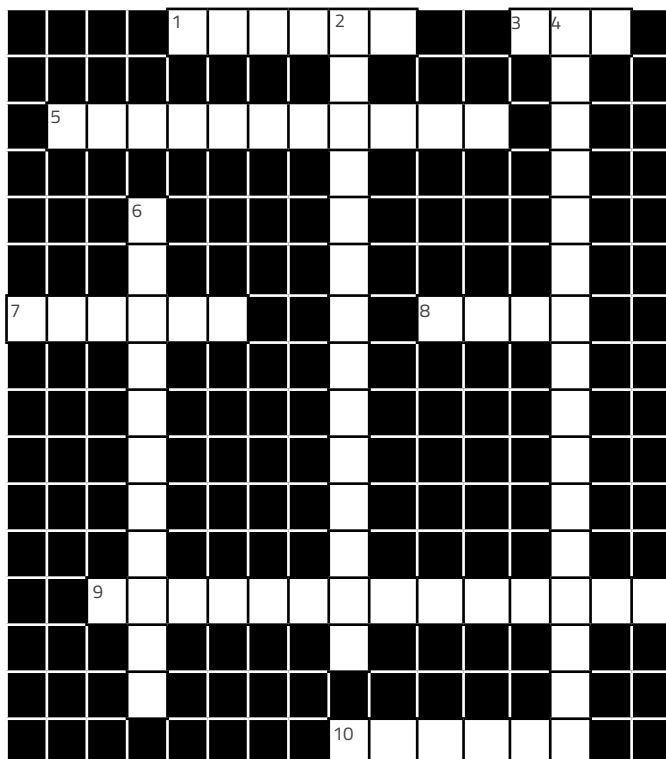
4 Katie Pearce, *Experts Explore the Value and Future of Civics Education in America*, HUB (Nov. 7, 2019), <https://hub.jhu.edu/2019/11/07/snf-agora-civics-education-forum-newseum/>.

5 Ashley Jeffrey and Scott Sargrad, *Strengthening Democracy with a Modern Civics Education*, CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS (Dec. 14, 2019, 10:00 am), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2019/12/14/478750/strengthening-democracy-modern-civics-education/>.

6 2019 *Year-End Report on the Federal Judiciary*, Chief Justice’s Year-End Reports on the Federal Judiciary, 2-3, (Dec. 31, 2019), <https://www.supremecourt.gov/publicinfo/year-end/2019year-endreport.pdf>.

7 *Resolution 33 In Support of Civic Education*, Conference of Chief Justices at the 28th Midyear Meeting (2005), <https://ccj.ncsc.org/~media/Microsites/Files/CCJ/Resolutions/01262005-Support-Civic-Education.ashx> (last visited February 4, 2019).

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Across

1. Two-thirds of young Americans want high school or college level courses that will prepare them to be ____.
3. The *Constitutional Basics of Limited Jurisdiction Courts* video was created in partnership with ____.
5. It's not "who you gonna call," it's what call you'll be answering.
7. Courts needs to get involved with ____ education.
8. The *Justice Case Files* series and the lesson plans are ____.
9. False information which is intended to mislead.
10. 26% of eight graders could not identify the ____ and responsibilities of U.S. citizens.

Down

2. The Conference of Chief Justices called for a ____ of civics education.
4. Judicial themed graphic novel series.
6. Percentage of adults who could identify all three branches of government.

Please visit the [Trends website](#) for the answer key.

