

ENLISTING A NEW GENERATION OF FLORIDA CITIZENS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JANUARY 2007

From the perspective of Florida's civic future, the big story of the 2006 elections was not that Democrats captured control of Congress, or that Bill Nelson was re-elected to the United States Senate, or even that Charlie Crist became our state's 44th Governor – but that the significance of these political developments may be lost on many Floridians. For all of the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on political advertisements and thousands of news stories aired or written about the candidates, too many Floridians still have little or no idea who represents their interests in Washington, Tallahassee, or even their own local communities – and even less idea how those interests are represented, or how they as citizens can influence and shape that representation.

The numbers tell a troubling story about Floridians' lack of engagement with civic leaders, institutions, and culture:

- Eligible Floridians exercise their vote far less often than citizens in other states. According to a 2006 report, Florida ranked 39th in average voter turnout for the 2002 and 2004 general elections.
- For the November 2006 general election, turnout in Florida was a disappointing 46.8%. In September 2006, primary election turnout was an abysmal 19.6%. Both figures were nearly 20% less than the historical average between 1954 and 2004.
- According to the 2006 report cited above, the same Florida that ranks 4th in population size rates a woeful 49th in rates of volunteering.
- A 2005 University of Central Florida survey of more than 1,600 Central Floridians found that two-thirds could not name either of Florida's two United States Senators – both of whom reside in Central Florida.
- A 2005 statewide Florida Bar survey revealed that more than 40% of Floridians could not correctly identify the three branches of American government – and that nearly 40% could not define the concept of “checks and balances.”

These statistics and others like them suggest two disturbing trends that threaten Florida's civic future: first, that many Floridians are not motivated to participate either in the political process or other aspects of our state's civic life; and second, that even if they had the necessary desire to participate, many Floridians would not know where or how to begin.

Florida's Youngest Generation at Risk

This lack of motivation and direction is particularly strong among Florida's youngest citizens, and it is the up-and-coming generation of Floridians that is the focus of this report. At present, more than 2.6 million students are enrolled in grades K-12 at public schools across Florida. If national percentages are any guide, nearly 1.9 million of these children either reached or will reach the fourth (4th) grade without being able to identify the Constitution as the document that sets basic rules for the federal government. Another nearly 2.4 million have reached or will reach the twelfth (12th) grade without being able to explain two ways that citizen participation in the political process benefits our democratic society. Even Florida's best and brightest high school civics students – those juniors and seniors enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. History and U.S. Government and Politics courses – lag behind students in comparable states in their understanding of those subjects.

Given Florida's unique demographic nature and the current state of civic education in our public schools, it is no surprise that Florida students fare poorly in these measures of civic connection. Among the states, Florida ranks 50th – dead last – in the number of residents who were born in-state. Conversely, our state is 4th in the percentage of its residents who were born in other countries, and fully one-fourth of Florida's population speaks a language other than English at home. The result is that many people who live in Florida still associate themselves with other states and nations. As *Florida Trend* Executive Editor Mark Howard noted in a March 2006 column, “people may move here, but getting them to transplant their core, heartfelt allegiances from ‘back home’ is often a tricky proposition.”

While these divided loyalties complicate efforts to strengthen Florida’s civic culture, they are not insurmountable. Unfortunately, our state dramatically under-utilizes the one institution capable of building civic virtue among young Floridians – our public school system. Indeed, public schools have their origins in our Framers’ desire for democratic education. President George Washington sought the creation of “institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge” so that public opinion on key governmental matters would be “enlightened.” Thomas Jefferson viewed the citizenry as the lone “safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society” and wished to “inform their discretion by education.”

Yet in multiple ways, Florida’s public school system has strayed far from this mission. First, because civics is not prioritized in the curriculum, schools spend relatively little classroom time focusing on social studies like history, government, economics, and geography. The Florida Legislature recognized this problem last year when it required middle schools to offer a semester of civics. But even when civics-related subjects are taught, state education standards emphasize basic knowledge – learning names, dates, and other facts – over the development of higher-level topics and skills. Put another way, our schools teach civics as a spectator sport rather than as a participatory sport. Second, though Florida students are held accountable via testing for their achievements in reading, writing, mathematics, and even science, Florida does not assess students in civics. Third, though thirty-three (33) colleges and universities in Florida offer certified teacher education, students who are learning to be teachers are neither mandated nor offered incentives to further their own civic education or develop the skills that would enable them to become effective civic instructors. Fourth, there are sound reasons to be concerned about the quality of civics textbooks used in Florida’s schools. Our rigid public school textbook adoption process may contribute to the problem. Both need to be carefully examined to insure that they facilitate a comprehensive, multi-skilled approach to civics education. Fifth, and finally, Florida currently has no state-wide infrastructure to support and help coordinate the enhancement of civics education around the state. Those students, parents, educators, elected officials, public

policy centers and advocacy organizations that are committed to transforming our students from children to citizens are too often on their own.

First Steps to Civic Progress

With these obstacles, it is little wonder that too many Floridians reach adulthood without the motivation, skills, and knowledge to be active and effective members of Florida's body politic. But with the proper reforms and guidance, our children and grandchildren can be motivated to engage in Florida's civic life and learn the skills and knowledge to participate effectively. In this report, we recommend the following steps to make civic education a priority:

- **MAKE CIVICS EDUCATION AN INTEGRAL PART OF OUR PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM:** Florida's current learning standards treat civics as an afterthought. We must utilize the scheduled 2007 revision of the Sunshine State Standards in Social Studies to update and strengthen those guidelines so that schools give students all of the skills they need to be effective citizens.
- **TEST CIVICS ON THE FLORIDA COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT TEST (FCAT):** Florida currently examines students on reading, writing, mathematics, and science – in short, every core academic subject *but* civics and social studies. Without assessment and accountability, civics will remain under-emphasized. We must add civics knowledge and skills to the subjects tested on the FCAT.
- **ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT THE TEACHING OF CIVICS IN FLORIDA'S K-12 SCHOOLS:** Students will not be transformed into active citizens without teachers who are properly trained and empowered. We must make civics instruction an essential part of teacher education at Florida's colleges and universities and help teachers already in the classroom enhance their civics teaching skills and methods.
- **LEAD THE NATION IN TEXTBOOK IMPROVEMENT:** Because of its strength in the textbook market, Florida has both an opportunity and a responsibility to improve instructional materials in civics as well as other core subjects. Educational policymakers must make use of Florida's unique influence to update academic standards, build instructional coalitions with other states, and review our own textbook selection process so that students in the state and across the country have the right learning tools.
- **ESTABLISH A STRATEGIC CENTER FOR FLORIDA CITIZENSHIP:** Civics education is currently championed by a diffuse and independent array of students, parents, educators, elected officials, public policy centers and advocacy organizations. We must establish and fund a center to support and help coordinate these efforts, monitor Florida's civic health, and keep us on track to produce educated and effective citizens.

The Mission Going Forward

In eulogizing the late Gerald R. Ford, former NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw described the former president as the quintessential member of the “Greatest Generation”, a group of Americans which, in Brokaw’s words, was “accustomed to difficult missions, shaped by the sacrifices and the deprivations of the Great Depression, a generation that gave up its innocence and youth to then win a great war and save the world.” But, as Brokaw noted, what best defined that generation was its commitment to citizenship:

When that generation came home from war, they were mature beyond their years and eager to make the world they had saved a better place. They re-enlisted as citizens and set out to serve their country in new ways, with political differences but always with the common goal of doing what’s best for the nation and all the people.

Floridians who care about serving our state, making it a better place, and doing what is best for its people have a similar mission – to enlist Florida’s youngest generation as informed citizens who not only vote but play active roles in shaping our government, building our communities, and securing our future. The recommendations in this report serve as a point of departure for this mission, but we hope they will inspire even more ideas – and a long-term commitment from well-meaning Floridians of every political, professional, and geographic background to recruit Florida’s future civic participants.