

# Embracing Civic Power

Eric Liu

Earlier this year, I was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, where I'm co-chairing a new Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship. I learned something there that moved me. When the Academy was founded in 1780, the Revolutionary War had not even been won yet but John Adams and the other Academy founders were already looking to the future, when a fragile republic would need new sources of useful ideas.

Consider the audacity of that. It's the same audacity that led President Lincoln to sign the Morrill Act, creating land-grant colleges across the land, even as the bloodiest battles of the Civil War were yet to come. It's the same audacity that led to the founding of the National Council for the Social Studies in 1921—and has made it now the largest professional association in the country devoted solely to social studies education.

I am inspired by all that audacity. And

I believe that we who are working to support and expand the teaching of social studies and civics will be remembered as part of a Great Civic Awakening in the United States: a revival of a culture and practice of citizenship.

## Strengthening Our Fragile Democracy

You could be forgiven for being less hopeful than I am. The same John Adams who created the American Academy also

warned a quarter century later, in 1814, that “there was never a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.”

Our democracy today is not quite suicidal. But it is definitely in a state of self-inflicted fragility that would have disturbed the founding generation. This crisis, this sickness of the American body politic, did not come upon us overnight. It is the result of 40 years of rising inequality, relentless concentration of wealth, erosion of common purpose under leaders of both parties, and the devaluation of public education in general and of civic education specifically.

I know that the purpose of social studies educators is to teach students the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfill-



Teachers pack the state Capitol rotunda to capacity, on the second day of a teacher walkout to demand higher pay and more funding for education, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, April 3, 2018. REUTERS/Nick Oxford

# Teaching for Democracy

The Teaching for Democracy Alliance, of which NCSS is a member, was convened to strengthen student learning about elections and informed voting. The Alliance has created the following Teaching for Democracy Self-Assessment Matrix for teachers, schools, and districts.

Teaching about Elections & Voting Self-Assessment Matrix						
	Voter registration or pre-registration opportunities are widespread	Voting and timely election-related content in the classroom or as homework (any elected office)	Media literacy skill development embedded with elections and voting topics	Classroom Discussion with a commitment to all voices, creating space for disagreement	Action Civics and other Experiential Learning	Teacher Support and Resources
<b>Teacher</b>	Provide concrete registration information & opportunities in the classroom; bring in League of Women Voters or other non-partisan voter registration organization to support this work.	Study history of voting rights; follow news about the election (at any level); assign students to watch debates and discuss; assign games that simulate real life elections or campaigns	Use an activity that meshes media literacy skill development and election/voting content in various formats, such as youth media creation that includes print, visual, audio, or digital elements	Assign and facilitate discussion and deliberation of local or national issues or ballot initiatives; teach students about deliberation.  Seek opportunities for training in controversial issue discussion.	Enable student to work or observe polls on election day; register and mobilize voters; support non- or bi-partisan campaigning; invite candidates to speak with students.  Advise/support start a club that facilitates student involvement in school governance and/or community issues and/or share information with students	Share instructional resources about elections and voting with other teachers.  Participate in professional learning experiences about elections and voting.
<b>School</b>	Offer concrete information and opportunities to register for all those eligible (more than a blast email and forms in the main office).  Explicitly support efforts to register students to vote.	Include elections-related content and activities in all social studies and ELA classes and support these activities school wide.	School leaders ensure that teachers are aware of resources that support student media literacy application relative to elections and voting  Amplify media created by youth in support of election engagement and voting	School leaders explicitly support classroom discussion ("support" is defined broadly).  Provide training on classroom discussion for teachers;  Provide discussion activities in all social studies classes about timely material or connecting history to today's election topics.	Actively seek out ways in which students can meaningfully participate or have a voice in school governance, through student council, school newspapers, and others.	Distribute resources on teaching about elections and voting to all social studies and ELA teachers;  Dedicate a PD day to best practices;  Train social studies and ELA teachers on discussions of current controversial issues.
<b>District</b>	Provide all students who are eligible with concrete information and opportunities to register (more than a blast email and forms in the main office) in every high school in the district.	Include elections-related content and activities in all social studies classes or in a combination of social studies and ELA or other classes district-wide.	Create avenues for students to post student-created media items and share throughout the district.	Explicitly support classroom discussion with resources when appropriate and potentially accompanied by letter of support.	Support and, if needed, establish opportunities and systems for student participation in district governance (e.g., student advisor to the school board) and policies (e.g., student evaluation of teachers).	Leaders show explicit support for teachers talking about elections and voting; distribute resources on teaching about elections and voting to all social studies and ELA teachers; offer training on discussion for social studies and ELA

*This matrix is based on research about best practices for high quality civic education in the K-12 context.*











Visit the website, [www.teachingfordemocracy.org](http://www.teachingfordemocracy.org), to find classroom resources, along with research on youth civic engagement and activities that correlate with youth political engagement.

ing the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy. And to provide leadership, service, and support for their fellow social studies educators. To make every school a school of democracy. And to make every teacher a teacher of citizenship.

As Justice Sandra Day O'Connor often says, compulsory public education was instituted in this country to create citizens—not wage-workers, not customers, not capitalists, but citizens capable of governing themselves and their country.

### Defining Citizenship

When I speak of citizenship, I'm not talking about documentation status. I'm talking about a bigger ethical notion of how to be a contributor to community, a useful member of the body. As we know, there are many people in this country who lack the documents but live like citizens—and plenty more who have the documents, but don't.

To define citizenship, I often use a simple equation:  $P + Ch = Ci$ . Power plus character equals citizenship.

Let me unpack each element.

Power is the capacity to ensure that others do as you would like them to do. I'm sorry to be so blunt and impolite. Actually, I'm not the least bit sorry. Neither are the teachers who walked out in West Virginia, or the ones who went on strike in Oklahoma and

Kentucky. They're not sorry. They're rather pleased to be rediscovering that they have more power than they thought. They're tickled to learn that while power compounds and justifies itself, it is always possible to break out of a rigged status quo by remembering that power is *infinite*. It is possible to generate brand-new power where it previously did not exist, through the magic act of organizing.

Power is a literacy, as much as reading and writing. What does power literacy mean? It means understanding the sources of power in civic life—people, money, ideas, social norms, state action, force. It means being able to read and write a map of power—who has it, who doesn't, where it is concentrated, where it is hidden, and where it is flaunted. It means being able to ask why the map looks that way. And then it means being able to rewrite that map, which is to say, to rearrange the landscape of institutions and narratives and other conduits of power.

Power *illiteracy* is corrosive to freedom and conducive to authoritarianism. And it afflicts tens of millions of Americans today. That's why if you aren't teaching power, you are committing professional malpractice. If you aren't teaching power, you are sending young people into the world utterly unready to face the world, much less change it.

In the Marine Corps, there is an ethic that's captured in the motto, "Every Marine a rifleman." Which means, whatever your job in the Marines—cook, recruiter, pilot, supply officer—you are expected to have good marksmanship and to be fluent in basic infantry tactics. Why? Because the point of the Marine Corps is infantry combat.

When I say, "Every teacher a civics teacher," I mean something akin to that. Whether you teach middle school math or elementary school music or English as a second language, you should be expected to teach civics. In an American school, there should be no such thing as *not* teaching civics. Because the point of schooling is citizenship.

### Cultivating Civic Character

The students from Parkland who organized the March for Our Lives may have been unusually eloquent and capable, but it was not an accident that they were so prepared to act after the gun massacre there. They were the products of years of bipartisan investment by the state of Florida in robust, practical civics education. When tragedy and fate called, they were ready to organize, mobilize, advocate, and act. They are proving themselves far more fluent in power than many of the adults around them.

But while literacy in power is necessary, it is never sufficient. If all you have is mastery of the tactics of power, unteth-

## The Better Arguments Project

American politics has never been more polarized. Our democracy is at risk unless we learn how to come together. But that doesn't mean having fewer arguments; it just means having better ones. That's why Facing History and Ourselves, the Aspen Institute, and Allstate created the Better Arguments Project, which aims to equip Americans to reach across political, cultural, and economic divides to have arguments that bring us closer together instead of driving us further apart.

The more communities can have arguments rooted both in history and in best practices of constructive communication, the healthier our country will be. Educators have an essential role to play in this movement. To find out how to adapt the Better Arguments Project for your classroom, join Facing History and Eric Liu for a hands-on workshop at the 98<sup>th</sup> NCSS Annual Conference in Chicago, where Eric Liu will also be a keynote speaker.

*The Better Arguments Project is a partnership between Facing History and Ourselves, the Aspen Institute's Program on Citizenship and American Identity, and The Allstate Corporation.*

THE  
**CHOICES**  
**PROGRAM**  
BROWN UNIVERSITY

## Curriculum to Foster Civic Engagement

Choices' inquiry-based approach to controversial issues—past and present—prepares students to succeed in a complex and changing world.



**Textual Analysis**  
**Critical Thinking**  
**Multiple Perspectives**  
**Global Awareness**  
**Civic Literacy**



[WWW.CHOICES.EDU](http://WWW.CHOICES.EDU)

ered from any ethical sense or moral core, then you are just a highly skilled sociopath.

Remember:  $P \text{ plus } Ch = Ci$ . Let me say a word now about the second half of that equation: Character.

I know that some people recoil at the word “character” in the same way they are allergic to the word “power.” And I admit that talk of character often comes from moralizing hypocrites. But that fact does not absolve us as citizens or teachers from the cultivation and practice of character. In fact, it compounds our responsibility.

When I say character, I speak not of individual personal virtues like diligence or perseverance or grit, important as those are. I mean character in the collective: how to live constructively in a community. I mean ethics like reciprocity and mutual aid. Compassion. Justice. Shared responsibility. Contribution before consumption.

I mean a recognition that in a networked society there is no such thing as someone else’s problem—that society becomes how *you* behave. I mean a disposition not to hoard advantage and privilege but to circulate it—and to do so not as a selfless altruistic sacrifice but out of a savvy realization that we’re all better off when we’re all better off. True self-interest is mutual interest.

Every day’s news offers a lesson plan in civic character—and how character relates to power. What is the meaning of the #MeToo movement? What is the moral core of Black Lives Matter? What is the ethical significance of the way Facebook has abused our trust? It’s not as simple as “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” That’s too deterministic. It removes free will and moral responsibility from the picture. In my view, power does not so much corrupt as it *reveals character*. Lincoln, at the height of his bloody powers, embodied forgiveness. It is possible to practice power with character, and it is necessary to highlight those who do.

## The Resurgence of Civic Engagement

Let me tell you why, despite the fragmentation we are experiencing, I am hopeful. In part, it is because of the man who now occupies the presidency: After all, he alone has sparked the greatest surge of civic engagement this country has seen in half a century.

Millions of Americans—progressives, libertarians, conservatives, and independents—are stepping off the sidelines and participating. Record numbers of women and scientists and young people are running for office. Record numbers of people are showing up at town meetings and registering to vote. There are unremitting waves of marches. Civic entrepreneurs are starting new ventures to teach organizing and advocacy. People are swarming to airports to defend refugees and the rule of law.

The immune system of the body politic is kicking in. But the goal now cannot be the status quo ante. Going from acute illness to chronic illness isn’t enough. The goal now must be civic renewal, revival, and awakening. That requires a community of practice: a web of relationships and obligations that keeps you from checking out or burning out. Most Americans, unfortunately, lack such a network of mutual aid and moral purpose. But you who are part of the NCSS family are blessed. You are awash in civic and social capital and know-how. *You* are why I am hopeful.

Democracy, like teaching, is an act of faith. It is an agreement to believe. Believing that self-government is possible helps make it possible. Our choices then decide the matter. We have chosen to teach the values, the knowledge, and the skills that make a people free. Let’s make that choice contagious. 🌐

**ERIC LIU** is the Executive Director of the Aspen Institute’s Citizenship and American Identity Program and the CEO of Citizen University. This article was adapted from the Phyllis L. Kossoff Lecture Liu delivered at Columbia Teachers College in April 2018.