



Third Way Civics: Educating Undergraduates for Democracy

What is Third Way Civics?

Third Way Civics—or 3WC—is an effort to infuse civic inquiry, civic identity-formation, and civic capacity-building into what most Americans consider the core function of higher education: undergraduate teaching and learning.

“Third Way Civics” is so named because it seeks to transcend the highly polarized “history and civics wars” engulfing the academy, media, and local communities. These debates pit those inclined to see the American experiment as essentially triumphant against those who see it as irredeemably tragic, while also pitting those conceiving civics as a body of *knowledge about* American politics and institutions against those who think of civics as *preparation to change* them.

3WC does not force instructors or students to choose sides. It is not an ideology. Instead, 3WC employs a non-partisan, depolarizing *pedagogy*, developed to transcend the binaries of the history and civics wars while building student capacity to think, learn, and work with others, even across deep differences.

3WC is a sophisticated curricular intervention, but its essential elements are simple:

- **Teach with primary sources.** Students should engage directly with the record of American political development, rather than relying on lectures, textbooks, or other secondary works. After all, we want them to make decisions about their own life and times without relying on others to filter information and think for them.
- **Present a cacophony of voices.** There has never been a clear consensus on what the American experiment is or ought to be. Instead, Americans—at their best—have learned to understand one another’s divergent perspectives and collaborate on shared goals despite other differences. To prepare students for such civic work requires not just presenting diverse views but also resisting the urge to privilege any single view as authoritative.
- **Put students—individually and collectively—at the center of knowledge creation.** The reflections, interpretations, confusions, and disagreements of students responding to texts and to one another should be the primary ingredients of whatever knowledge they take from the class. *If carefully structured and facilitated*, a course putting students at the center of knowledge creation in this way will produce *fewer* “unfounded” conclusions and foster stronger thinking, listening, and course-correcting skills than a course focused on teaching students the “right” answers.

What does Third Way Civics accomplish?

3WC fosters three broad competencies that every civic-ready and career-ready graduate needs. These competencies are:

- 1) *information literacy*, i.e., capacity to evaluate empirical and normative claims critically, to hold conflicting perspectives in tension, and consider the impacts on diverse communities of the actions such perspectives imply;
- 2) *civic literacy*, i.e., familiarity with major historical and contemporary features of American politics, ability to connect personal interests to public interests, capacity to empathize with the interests and worldviews of diverse others, and appreciation for the importance of democratic institutions and norms to building and sustaining a humane society; and

- 3) *civic agency*, i.e., capacity and disposition to identify connections among personally and publicly meaningful goals, formulate contextually appropriate strategies for achieving them, and collaborate across differences to execute, refine, and adapt such strategies while keeping the goal of communal learning and thriving uppermost in mind.

Previous research and our own pilots suggest that intentionally fostering such competencies among students will advance the democracy-building work of higher education in four crucial ways:

- 1) *reducing polarization* among students and those they influence through their speech and actions;
- 2) *promoting civic and career readiness*, as students develop the critical, creative, adaptive, and collaborative skills that political communities and business enterprises depend on;
- 3) *supporting stronger communities*, as graduates go on to catalyze the creative and productive capacities of their fellow citizens; and
- 4) *advancing equity*, as students and faculty learn to value cultural and intellectual difference, support diverse ways of knowing and working, and appreciate the contributions of marginalized individuals and groups both to campus life and to the larger quest for a just and thriving society.

Is Third Way Civics just a theory?

No. With support from the Teagle and Lumina Foundations and the National Endowment for the Humanities, 3WC has been piloted in thirteen classrooms spanning seven institutions across Minnesota, Florida, and Indiana, including seven classrooms spanning six institutions in Minnesota. In 2023-24, 3WC will be taught in eighteen classrooms spanning fourteen institutions across Minnesota, California, Florida, Indiana, and Missouri, including ten classrooms across seven institutions in Minnesota.

Results from these early trials are heartening. They indicate measurable student gains in content knowledge of US history and government. More striking, they indicate significant increases in students' dispositions to participate in public life, not only through voting and political speech, but also through listening to those with whom they disagree and seeking ways to collaborate on shared problems and goals despite other deep differences.

Student and instructor enthusiasm for the 3WC approach has prompted multiple institutions to expand the offering, make it permanent, or both. Some have incorporated 3WC into their general education offerings, some require it for specific majors, and a few are planning versions of an MHC-designed "Civic and Career Readiness Certificate" with 3WC at its foundation.

Is Third Way Civics sustainable?

An investment in 3WC pays dividends long into the future. 3WC is designed to be sustainable: Once the period of curricular co-creation and faculty professional development is over, the elements of the program are woven into permanent courses serving some additional purpose (a first-year experience, a general education or core requirement, etc.) while also being built into the everyday pedagogical practices of faculty. In gardening terms, 3WC is perennial. After a period of careful planting and cultivation, it can sustain itself so long as it is not uprooted or starved.

How do I learn more about joining the Third Way Civics initiative?

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