

The Hoover Institution's Working Group on Civics and American Citizenship seeks to craft and communicate policies and practices that develop and strengthen good citizenship in the Constitutional democracy that we inhabit—policies and practices that support the beliefs, principles, character traits, understandings and associations on which liberty depends. While nonpartisan and dedicated to quality research, our work is anchored to what Tocqueville called "reflective patriotism" — an affirmative attachment to the distinctive nation that Lincoln termed "the last best, hope of earth." The principles of the Declaration of Independence guide us, as do the best of our Constitutional traditions. Our goal is to widen understanding and appreciation of the essential elements of good citizenship in 21st Century America, including not only the rights and obligations of citizens, but also knowledge of the country's history and core principles, familiarity with its government(s), productive engagement with its governance as well as the vital organs of its civil society, and dedication by its schools and colleges to the promotion of civic understanding and good citizenship. We aim both at today's adults and at tomorrow's.

Citizenship is automatic for native-born and naturalized Americans, but good citizenship is never automatic. It's something that one achieves, ordinarily with the help, inspiration and example of one's parents, teachers and neighbors, the organizations that one participates in and the experiences that one has while growing up. It is then reinforced—or should be—during adulthood. A good citizen has a positive attachment to the core principles and institutions of their nation and is dedicated to bettering the various communities to which they belong.

Yet innumerable surveys show declining faith in America's future, diminishing trust in one's fellow citizens, plummeting confidence in government and those who lead it, and widening misbehavior, even as fewer Americans actually understand how government works, how the nation has developed over time, and why its ideals, principles and best traditions deserve admiration and support.

Despite much recent attention to civics education, few of today's U.S. schools and colleges successfully impart to their students the essentials of good citizenship—and few students successfully learn those things. Though formal education alone cannot create good citizens, it must do far better within its realm. America will lack a sufficiency of such citizens tomorrow if it fails to develop them today. Yet present-day Americans need attention, too. Too few have a solid grasp of the country's history, institutions and core principles, too few engage in practices associated with good citizenship at community, state or national levels, too many appear apathetic if not

alienated, and the pursuit of private interest frequently clashes with the “pursuit of happiness” by others.

The Working Group engages in three broad categories of activity: Research, Deliberation, and Communication/Advocacy. Our research includes empirical, historical and applied work, engaging other centers and research organizations as we identify strategies and “points of entry,” both in the education sphere and in the adult community. Our initial project, undertaken with YouGov in mid-2023, was a major survey of the state of citizenship in America today. Going forward, we are interested, for example, in the fact that residents of some communities appear to be more civically engaged and community minded than in others. “Social capital” is more robust in some places than others. Can we ascertain why this is and what might be done to encourage replication? Similarly, the students of some schools (and states) are somewhat more knowledgeable about history and civics than in others. Can we determine what contributes to such differences?

Our deliberations include documentation, formulation, perhaps disputation, followed by many forms of persuasion. Our numbers will grow as mounting interest in the challenges facing good American citizenship, plus evidence of the value of our work, draw others in, and as outreach and networking efforts seek the engagement of others who share our concerns and our determination to address these issues.

Our communications and advocacy are vigorous and varied. They seek through diverse forms and formats to inform, persuade and encourage. Our goal is not primarily “books on shelves,” although in time we’ll create some of these for purposes of lasting influence. In the nearer term, our studies, analyses and essays are widely disseminated, including articles, commentaries, videos, podcasts, social media, op-eds, conferences, symposia and briefings. We strive to build networks with the many organizations and individuals—as well as a growing number of educational institutions, both K-12 and postsecondary—that are taking this topic seriously.

Our goal is to foster and inform a renaissance of good citizenship in the United States, a renewed commitment to the nation’s core principles and democratic institutions, and deeper understanding of its history and governance as well as the rights and responsibilities of its citizens. Toward that end, our primary target audiences are leaders and influencers across government (national, state, local), K-12 and higher education, the media and the economy. We seek to deepen their understanding of the challenges the nation faces in the instruction and incubation of good citizens, and we intend to catalyze effective public policies and educational practices.

Our mission naturally incorporates the essential elements of civics and civic understanding—and the obligation of its educational institutions to impart these successfully to their students. But it extends far beyond what occurs in classrooms. It embraces also the examples set by adults for children, by teachers and professors for students, by parents for their daughters and sons, and by the leaders of institutions and organizations for their members and participants.

All of this is particularly salient because we're fast approaching an historic anniversary—the nation's semiquincentennial. On July 4, 2026, we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, a suitable target and milestone for the renewal of citizenship.