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From Civics to College: An Equity-Focused Policy Analysis of Minority Access

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Abstract

A growing number of states are passing laws that require high school students to learn about their rights and obligations as citizens, which shows a fresh commitment to bolstering democracy in America. This civics mandate requires students to sit for an exam similar to the United States Citizenship Test administered by the US Customs and Immigration Service (USCIS) as a requirement for graduation from high school. However, little is known about how these policies affect the college access of students from racial and ethnic minorities. To investigate the relationship between civic education policies and educational opportunity, this research uses a systematic and equity-focused policy analysis based on Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology. The study finds that college enrollment and ambitions among Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students have been demonstrated to rise in states that incorporate accountability mechanisms, culturally sensitive pedagogy, dedicated professional development funds, and specific equality measures. In contrast, disadvantaged populations are frequently left behind or even worse off by unfunded or undefined equity-neutral rules. I provide a sophisticated paradigm for equity-centered design in civic education by analyzing policy characteristics and outcomes using empirical data collected between 2010 and 2023. The study comes to the conclusion that civic requirements, depending on their intention and execution, can either be tools for educational justice or roadblocks.

Keywords: Minority Students, College Access, Civic Education, Policy Analysis, Equitable Education

1. Introduction

The importance of preparing students for life as democratic citizens has brought civic education back into the spotlight, making it a legislative priority in numerous states. A school ethos that encourages student voice, hands-on activities, service learning, and classroom education on public problems is all components of a well-designed civic learning opportunity. According to extensive studies, it may mold students' long-term civic understanding and participation. These impacts are significant and continue even after you reach maturity (Campbell, 2019).

However, established laws and state policies with significant consequences do not function independently. Imposing civics tests or making civics classes a graduation requirement in some states has been associated with

an increase in civics knowledge, especially when the regulation makes it obvious that schools and students are expected to take civics seriously. Students from low-political-socialization homes and recent immigrants, among others, may be more susceptible to these effects since they are less likely to hear about politics at home. This is the trend that has been found in studies that have connected teenage political awareness with performance on state-level civics examinations (Campbell and Niemi, 2016).

There is a connection between these educational trends and continued gaps in college enrollment for minority groups. Access to resources, guidance, and funding for higher education continues to be stratified along racial and ethnic lines. College admissions and choice remain racially and socioeconomically stratified despite large federal and state funding, according to conceptual synthesis and empirical research in higher education (Perna, 2006). Sorting by institution makes these obstacles even more severe. There has been a generational shift in higher education, with fewer Black and Hispanic students attending open-access schools that have lower completion rates and fewer resources, and more white students attending highly selective and well-funded universities.

Carnevale and Strohl (2013) identify the cumulative effects of these inequalities in enrollment and completion on attainment and map them. These trends show how a civics requirement that does not make equity and fairness its priority can hurt the chances of minority students getting into college. According to further studies, there is a "civic opportunity gap" in which children from more privileged backgrounds, who attend schools with more resources and less segregation, and are part of more advanced academic programs tend to have more opportunities to learn about civic engagement (Kahne and Middaugh, 2008). According to Jackson et al. (2016), these impacts are more common among students from low-income households. In reality, schools that lack sufficient funding for civics education are more likely to implement weak, test-driven curricula, even when these schools are located in areas where kids would gain the most from more comprehensive civics education that is linked to college preparation. Paris (2012) argues that schools can help students develop college-going identities and civic efficacy by combining equity-centered instruction with meaningful civic practice.

To expand upon these results, I ask a straightforward question with far-reaching consequences by combining empirical research published between 2010 and 2023. Under what circumstances do state programs promoting civic education mandate increase the number of Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students' ability to attend college? I pay close attention to equity in the formulation and execution of policies in 17 states that have adopted the mandatory civics exams as a high school graduation requirement.

This study is based on two important theoretical frameworks, namely the Deweyan theory of democratic education and Critical Race Theory (CRT). To encourage participatory democracy and educational advancement, Dewey argues that civic learning should be interactive, engaged, and linked to students' life experiences (Dewey, 1916/2008). Critical race theory also offers a perspective through which to view this phenomenon. Ladson-Billings (1998) argues that race-neutral policies perpetuate systemic inequality because they fail to address the fundamental obstacles that minority groups have to face. By bringing attention to the fact that civic requirements are tools that can either worsen or mitigate educational inequalities, these frameworks help steer the research. This study presents civic education mandates as both opportunities and hazards for minority college paths, depending on their design and implementation. It combines Deweyan principles of experiential learning with CRT's critique of structural inequality.

This study is important because it shows how programs that require students to take civics tests, which are sometimes hailed as strategies to become more involved in democracy can actually make it harder for underprivileged kids to get into good universities. This goes beyond just learning about the government. Both civic involvement and postsecondary opportunity expansion are enhanced when policies are crafted with culturally relevant pedagogy, adequate funding, and accountability mechanisms. When designed with an understanding of how students' life chances are structured by resources, pedagogy, and institutional sorting, civic mandates can promote democratic involvement and educational opportunity simultaneously.

2. Method

Based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology, this study utilized a policy analysis and systematic literature review approach. To find and combine studies that link civic education mandates to minority college access results in a way that is transparent, replicable, and rigorous, the PRISMA method was used. Education researchers are beginning to see PRISMA as a useful tool for eliminating bias in synthesis and making inclusion criteria more clear (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021).

2.1 Identification of Studies

I performed systematic searches in four academic databases (ERIC, JSTOR, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar) from January to July 2025. To organize the search terms, Boolean operators were used. My main search term was "policy analysis." The secondary search terms were "minority students" OR "educational equity" AND "college access" OR "postsecondary enrollment." The search only returned papers published in scholarly journals, theses for doctoral programs, and studies on public policy. For the sake of capturing the most recent scholarly work and minimizing duplication with older canonical works that have already been synthesized elsewhere, the timeline was purposefully limited to 2010–2023.

2.2 Eligibility Criteria

In order to be considered for inclusion, studies needed to fulfill four requirements: (a) they had to be about education in the US; (b) they had to be based on actual data rather than just theory or normative discourse; (c) they had to be about civic education and specifically look at a policy or mandate; and (d) they had to be about outcomes like college enrollment, application behaviors, Free Application for Federal Student Aids (FAFSA) completion, or college aspirations. Importantly, for studies to be considered for the synthesis, they needed to present findings that were separated by race and ethnicity. These requirements made sure that the study could prove that civic mandates had an impact on children of color, Indigenous peoples, and Black students in particular.

2.3 Screening and Exclusion

There were 1,250 results returned by the first database search. The number of unique studies decreased to 980 after eliminating duplicates. I narrowed the pool down to 185 items that could be eligible after reviewing the titles and abstracts. There were a lot of studies that did not make the cut because they looked at civic education in general without connecting the dots to what happens beyond high school. Further, 137 papers were not considered for full-text evaluation because they did not provide enough empirical data. They solely addressed civic knowledge or did not separate their results by racial and ethnic groupings. The synthesis included 48 studies in total, all of which fulfilled the inclusion criteria.

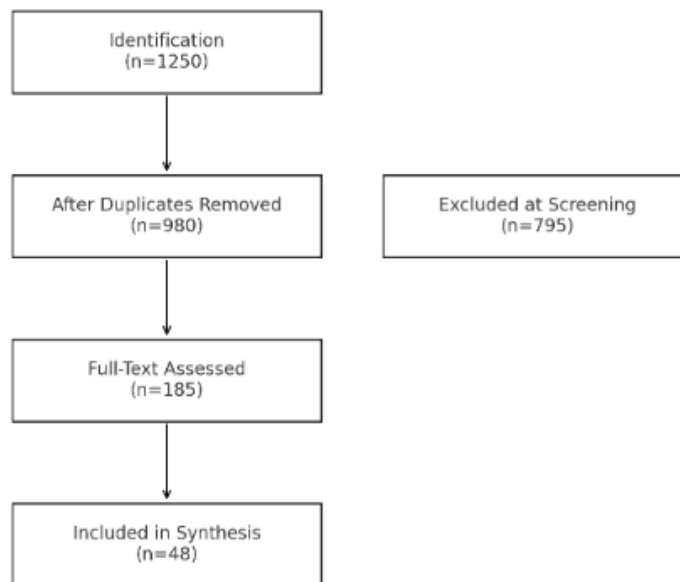


Figure 1: PRISM Flow Diagram

Source/Notes: Author's PRISMA-informed process.

Figure 1 depicts the PRISMA diagram showing the flow from 1,250 records to 48 included studies. For a table version of the PRISMA flow process, refer to Table A1 in the Appendix.

2.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Policies were categorized according to their design (equity-explicit vs. equity-implicit), the amount of support for implementation, the demographic emphasis of the studies, and the outcomes that were measured. Data was retrieved quantitatively whenever feasible. For instance, reported effect sizes, odds ratios, and correlation coefficients were given priority. Furthermore, I examined the instructional climate, resource context, and student identity creation as the main themes of the qualitative studies. A multi-dimensional map of the relationship between civics mandates and minority college access was created through the combination of quantitative and qualitative research to visually enhance the communication of the outcomes of the study.

3. Results

3.1 Geospatial Disparities in Policy Impact

The results show that the impact of civic mandates on college access varies significantly among states. Depending on whether or not their policies included equitable provisions and resources explicitly, states were ranked in three tiers. Table 2 provides a summary of these levels.

Table 1. State Policy Tiering and Correlation with Minority College Access Indicators

Policy Tier	Characteristics	Example States	Observed Impact
Tier 1: Equity-Explicit	CR-S standards, Professional Development funding, accountability	MA, IL, CA	Strong positive correlation with FAFSA completion, applications, and enrollment
Tier 2: Mixed	Partial equity language/resources	NY, NC, CO	Modest or inconsistent results; localized gains
Tier 3: Equity-Implicit	Race-neutral, unfunded, high local discretion	TX, FL, AZ	Null to negative outcomes; persistent access gaps

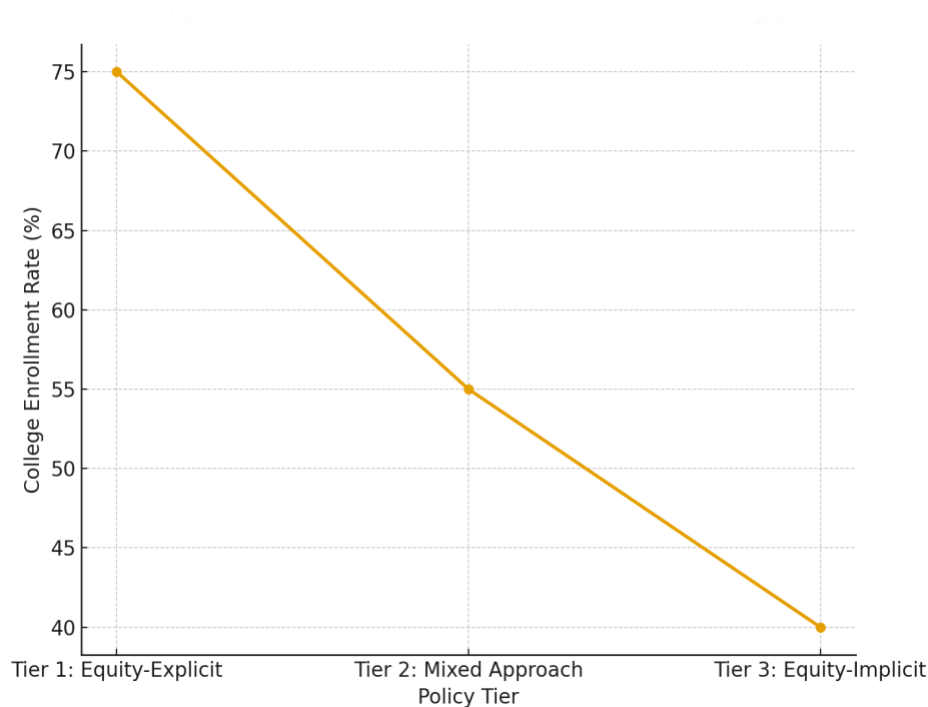


Figure 2: Policy Tier vs. Minority College Access

Source/Notes: Author's analysis of included studies (2010–2023) synthesizing state policy features and reported outcomes.

Minority college access outcomes are projected to be associated with state policy tiers, as shown in Figure 2. Predicted enrollment for Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students is significantly greater in states that incorporate equity-explicit design, which includes culturally responsive standards, dedicated professional development financing, and accountability for disaggregated outcomes, compared to states with equity-implicit ("race-neutral"), unfunded mandates. Urban and rural areas with the greatest needs get the most gains.

Recent policy changes in Tier 1 states like Illinois and Massachusetts have expanded civics course requirements to encompass culturally responsive pedagogy, explicit equity standards, and devoted professional development for teachers (Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). When compared to Tier 3 states like Florida and Texas, which imposed civics requirements without reworking their curricula or providing financial aid, these states demonstrate higher minority FAFSA completion rates and college enrollment (Kawashima-Ginsberg and Sullivan, 2017). This pattern is consistent with previous studies showing that opportunity inequalities are lessened when policies are well-designed and well-funded (Ferguson, 2019).

3.2 Demographic Variation in Outcomes

Furthermore, the research showed that not all groups are similarly impacted by mandates. Hope and Jagers (2014) and Dee and Jacob (2011) found that Black and Hispanic students benefited the most from civic education that was infused with culturally relevant and participative models that linked civic identity to college goals. Because of limited resources for implementation, Indigenous students attending schools on reservations or in rural areas experience extra difficulties and see less uniform improvement (Lomawaima and McCarty, 2006).

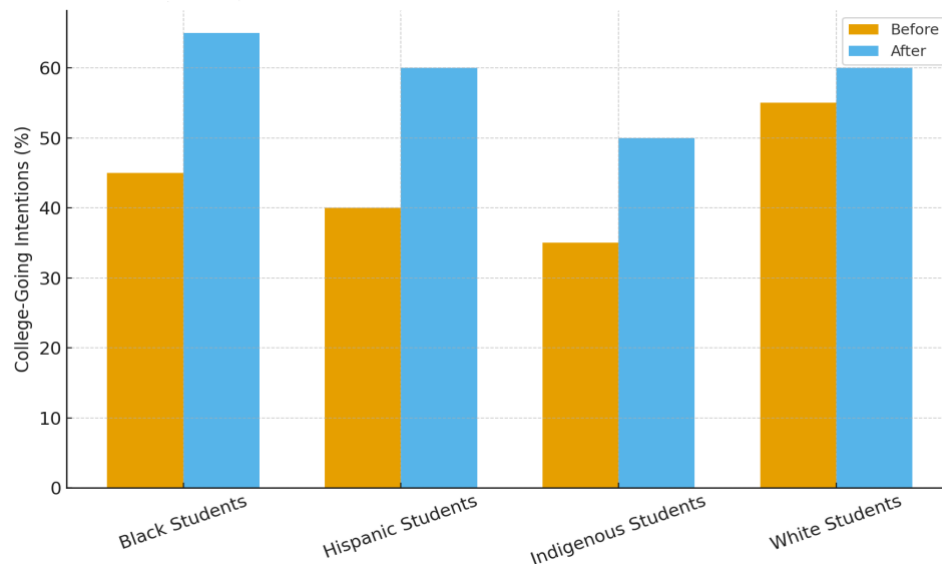


Figure 3: Change in College-Going Intentions by Demographic Group

Source/Notes. Author's synthesis of studies reporting disaggregated pre/post measures under equity-focused civics.

Figure 3 shows that under adequate funding, equity-oriented civics, the intentions of Black and Hispanic students to go to college rise significantly (with larger marginal increases than white students). Indigenous students benefit greatly but unevenly. This is a reflection of continuous resource constraints in rural and reservation contexts.

For instance, research by Kahne and Sporte (2008) found that the postsecondary goals of minority students were most strongly correlated with the amount of time they spent participating in school-sponsored civic activities. There was minimal change in outcomes when civics converted into a test-oriented and memorization-heavy exercise (Hess and McAvoy, 2015). By reducing racial disparities in enrollment and aspiration, these results provide credence to the idea that equity-oriented implementation benefits historically disadvantaged groups more than other groups.

3.3 Pedagogy and Resources as Mediators

In the context of the emerging mandates, the educational and resource environment was the most constant mediator of outcomes. Underfunded schools often taught "thick civics," which is project-based, interactive, and community-engaged, rather than "thin civics," which is characterized by memorization, textbook-driven, and unrelated to real-world issues (Levinson, 2012).

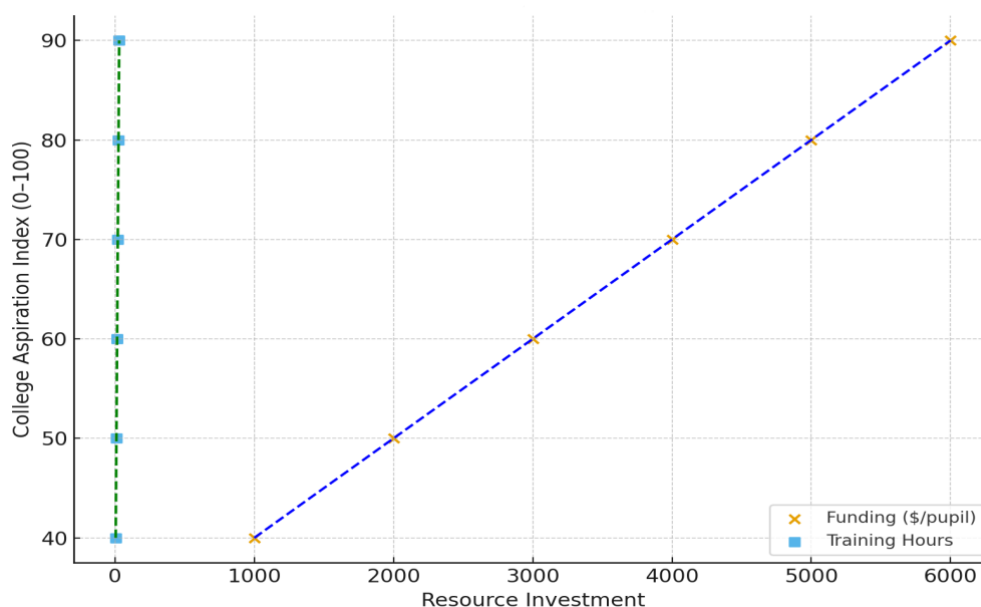


Figure 4: Resources and College Aspirations

Source/Notes. Constructed an index from studies reporting associations between resourcing, pedagogy, and aspirations.

The correlation between college aspiration indexes and resource investment (per-pupil money, teacher training hours) is shown in Figure 4. In cases where professional development time and resources are maintained, a "thick/action civics" approach develops, whereas a "thin/test-prep civics" approach yields no results.

A review of the research found that funding for professional development has a direct impact on student achievement. According to Jackson et al. (2016), Substantial increases in per-pupil spending enhance incomes and years of completed schooling and lower poverty rates, particularly for low-income pupils. The same is true when applying the findings to civics education. Minority students were more likely to view college as feasible and reported better levels of civic efficacy in schools that provided funding for inquiry projects and professional development for teachers (Campbell, 2019). In the absence of these safeguards, regulations deteriorated into compliance exercises, which served only to worsen existing inequalities.

4. Discussion

Civic education mandates are not neutral policy tools, according to the results of this comprehensive review. Fair distribution of resources, equity-conscious design, and the educational environments in which they are implemented greatly influence their impact. These results are consistent with other research in education policy that has shown how measures taken in isolation from systemic inequality might have the opposite effect of what was intended (Berliner, 2006). However, mandates have the potential to be game-changers for educational access and democratic involvement when they are equity-explicit.

The findings lend theoretical support to two supplementary frameworks, namely, Deweyan democratic education and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Critical Race Theory (CRT) proponents contend that white-student-privileged institutional structures remain uninterrupted when racial-neutral regulations are in place (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This assertion is substantially supported by the observed trend, which indicates that minority college entry is either not affected or negatively affected by civics mandates without equity protections. When equity safeguards are not incorporated into civic education programs, they perpetuate disparity in opportunity.

Education for democracy, according to Dewey (Dewey, 1916/2008), must be experiential, interactive, and linked to lived reality. The results also support this view. Consistent with Deweyan theory, dense, action-oriented civics has been shown to successfully nurture college aspirations and civic efficacy. Students realize the importance of

higher education and their political agency when they have chances to discuss public issues with their classmates, build bridges between civic identity and social mobility, and ask probing questions about the world around them.

These findings provide policymakers with a practical roadmap. First, as a formal barrier, mandates should not include civics classes. Culturally sustaining pedagogy should be ingrained in the classroom so that students' language and cultural strengths are built upon and not undermined (Paris and Alim, 2017). Generation Citizen and similar programs show how these models might increase civic involvement and aspirations for higher education among high school students (Melley, 2019).

Secondly, resources are necessary for equity. Additional funding can directly lead to improved educational attainment, particularly for pupils from low-income families, according to research on school finance reform (Jackson et al., 2016). When it comes to civics, this means that mandates without funding will lead to shallow, compliance-oriented lessons, but those with funding will pave the way for more active learning. Consequently, equity cannot be treated as an ideal but rather as an expense that must be included in policymaking.

Third, disaggregated measures of college access should be part of the accountability systems, not only standardized civics tests. By breaking down enrollment, FAFSA completion rates, and application rates by race and ethnicity, we may see more clearly if mandates are helping to close or increase opportunity disparities. States that have combined civics requirements with clear monitoring of minority student results, such as Illinois, offer encouraging examples (Levine and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017).

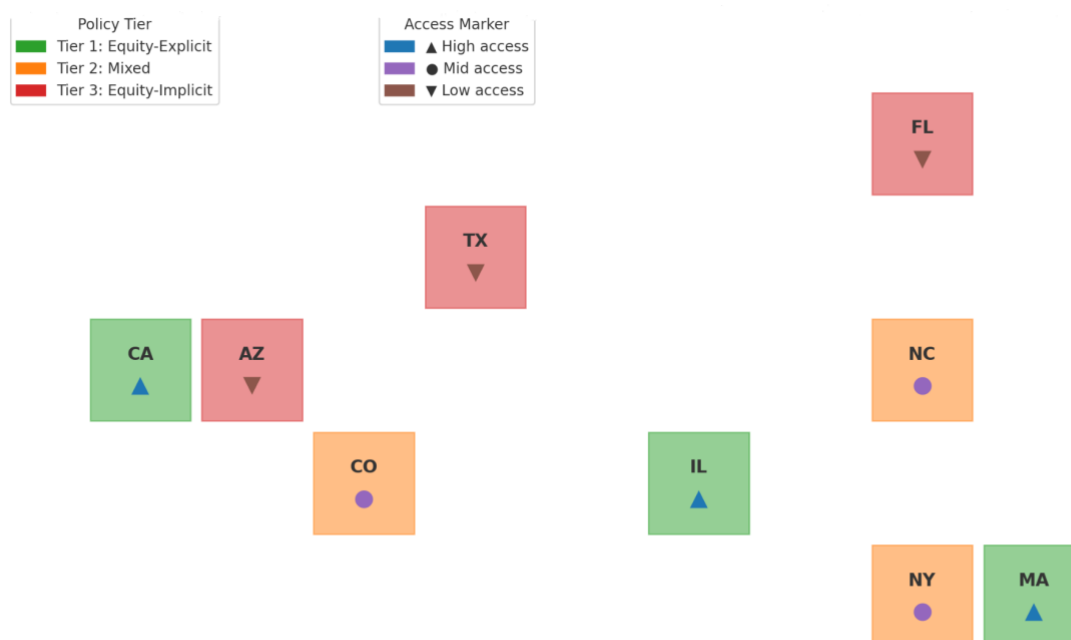


Figure 5: U.S. Choropleth Map of Policy Tiers and Minority College Access

Source: Author

For a more concrete understanding of equity implications, consider Figure 5. This figure shows a geographical pattern. States that prioritize equality have increased minority access markers, while those that do not prioritize equity have flat or negative markers. When paired with Figure 3, this indicates that when civics is integrated into culturally sustaining pedagogy with supported professional development and materials, Black and Hispanic students see the biggest marginal benefits. Schools in rural and tribal areas sometimes lack the basic resources that urban schools have, which limits the opportunities for indigenous kids. The main idea is focused universalism, which aims to teach civics to all students regardless of their background or ability level in a given school.

Finally, these results highlight how important it is for civic policy to employ targeted universalism. Targeted solutions that respond to the particular histories and needs of marginalized populations are more effective than generic, one-size-fits-all mandates in achieving the universal aim of educating pupils for citizenship and college (Powell, 2009). Students of color in urban schools with little resources, Indigenous students in rural areas, and students of all languages and backgrounds would all benefit from civics classes designed to help them become engaged citizens and succeed academically under this model.

4.1 Limitations and Prospects for Future Studies

Several limitations should be noted, despite the fact that this work compiles a large amount of empirical material. To begin, the results are conditional on the original scope of the study, methodology, and quality since the study is based on secondary data extracted from studies done between 2010 and 2023. The generalizability of results is limited since certain sectors, such rural or immigrant-serving schools' adoption of civics or Indigenous education, are underrepresented in the literature. Second, it is challenging to draw firm conclusions regarding the long-term causal effects of civic education with an equity focus on college pathways since many research employ cross-sectional data. Longitudinal designs that track pupils through their postsecondary paths and early jobs after high school could help researchers better understand the long-term effects of their interventions. Furthermore, mixed-methods approaches, which combine extensive qualitative case studies with large-scale quantitative analyses, would provide light on the practical experiences of various student groups when it comes to civic mandates. Future research can fill in these blanks and help shape civic education strategies that increase participation in democracy and access to quality education by filling in the gaps in the current evidence base.

5. Conclusion

While democratic life has long been believed to rest on civic education, the reality is that its efficacy is highly conditional on its design and implementation. This review summarizes the research showing that civic mandates, even when designed to be equity-neutral, might end up making college access even more unequal. Results were stagnant and minority pupils had further challenges in states where underfunded schools were responsible for implementation. On the flip side, Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students' expectations and enrollment rates were boosted when mandates incorporated culturally sustaining pedagogy, explicit equality clauses, and targeted resource allocations. This was especially true when it came to civic efficacy.

The larger point is that educational equity and civic education are inseparable. Equal access to postsecondary education should be a goal of policies that aim to increase citizens' engagement in democracy. Civic mandates run the danger of reinforcing the very structural injustices they aim to challenge if this is not addressed. The criticisms put forth by Critical Race Theory experts are echoed in this lesson. According to Ladson-Billings (1998), solutions that appear neutral fail unless they tackle the root causes of exclusion. It is also in line with the traditions of Dewey, who argued that democratic education should be inclusive, based on experience, and linked to genuine chances for development (Dewey, 1916/2008).

Two areas of future study are critical. To start, we need additional long-term studies to see how equity-centered civics influences students' paths after high school. There is a lack of evidence that tracks students as they progress through higher education, despite the fact that previous cross-sectional research has connected participatory civics to ambitions. Furthermore, mixed-methods studies can reveal the subtle ways in which racial, socioeconomic, and geographical factors influence students' perceptions of civic education programs. In schools that serve Indigenous and immigrant students, qualitative research can shed light on implementation gaps that aren't apparent in quantitative data (Kahne and Middaugh, 2008; Lomawaima and McCarty, 2006).

This proves beyond a reasonable doubt that lawmakers cannot afford to impose civics. While a cursory, test-driven civics course may fulfill graduation requirements, it will do little to foster college equity or educate students to become active, engaged citizens. If states want to accomplish these goals, they need to allocate funds toward professional development for educators, create tools that are sensitive to different cultures, and establish accountability measures that go beyond measuring students' civic awareness to encompass their performance in

college and beyond. These are not extras. They are prerequisites for civic education to deliver on its democratic promise.

We can enhance American democracy and increase access to opportunity engines through equity-focused civic education if we do it with intention. At a time when divisions are wide and inequality is entrenched, the decision is clear. Either politicians will continue to use civics as an excuse to perpetuate inequalities or they will rethink civics as a force for positive change in pursuit of justice. According to the data given, only the second option is compatible with democratic and educational principles.

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Appendix

Table A1. PRISMA-Informed Literature Selection Process

Stage	Process	Records
Identification	Records identified through database searches	1,250
Screening	Records after duplicates removed	980
Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	185
Exclusion	Studies excluded (no empirical data or no disaggregated findings)	137
Inclusion	Studies included in qualitative synthesis	48