

Teaching a Well-Informed Citizenry:

Introducing Learning by Hearings into Civic Education



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Two hundred years ago, as he worked to establish the country's free, public education system, President Thomas Jefferson said, "whenever the people are well informed, they may be trusted with their own government" (Thomas Jefferson Foundation, n.d.). Despite the importance of civic education to democratic self-governance, the data suggests that as a nation we are failing to equip our people with the knowledge and skills needed to participate as effective citizens. The Annenberg Public Policy Center's 2022 Civics Knowledge Survey revealed that only 47% of adults in the United States could name all three branches of the federal government, while 25% could not name any. Though partisan conflicts over civics and history education have recently attracted national headlines, this rancor only increases the urgency of answering the question: how do we teach young people about U.S. history and civics in such a deeply divided society (Parker, 2002)? The Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy hopes its new curriculum, *Learning by Hearings*, offers an innovative approach to engaging students with the American story and the opportunities and responsibilities of citizenship in our democracy.

Patrick et al. (2002) explains, "Civic education is a vital means by which our society transmits to the next generation the core knowledge, skills, and dispositions of democratic citizenship. It is what allows democratic societies to reproduce themselves across generations" (p. 93). This core knowledge extends well beyond the names of the three branches of government. Students must understand the purpose

of discussion and debate, engage with opposing viewpoints, and develop a curiosity about important social and political issues, according to Lintner (2018). He concludes, "[U]ltimately, the goal of such thought and action, as evidenced through structured discussion and debate, is to inform, enlighten, and embolden students to raise their hands or raise their voices both inside and outside of the social studies classroom" (p. 98).

Social studies teachers understand the importance of civic education, and oral discourse is a trusted learning tool utilized "to produce coherent language in response to a question of public policy" and put "disciplinary knowledge in a meaningful context, making it more likely to be understood and remembered" (Harris, 2002, p. 211). Dialogue also "reinforces the development of social perspectives" (p. 211), including tolerance, and requires critical thinking and reflection. The Levin Center has begun to develop lesson plans, classroom resources, and professional development materials for high school social studies classrooms that allow students to practice and advance these skills while engaging with historical material.

About the Levin Center

The [Carl Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy](#) is the nation's leading academic center devoted to elevating the theory and practice of bipartisan, fact-based legislative oversight. The late U.S. Senator Carl Levin founded the Levin Center in 2015 upon his retirement from the Senate with the goal of promoting bipartisan fact-based oversight

and civil discourse as fundamental pillars of our democracy. Headquartered at Wayne State University Law School in Detroit with an office in Washington, D.C., the Levin Center has trained hundreds of congressional staff and state legislative members and staff in the techniques of bipartisan, fact-based oversight. The Levin Center supports and conducts research and scholarship to improve understanding of how oversight works and how it can be strengthened, and it tracks and occasionally intervenes in important litigation related to the right of the legislative branch to obtain information. As the Center has expanded, we feel strongly that we can play a role in improving civic education across Michigan.

The Role of Lawmakers in the Public Square

Legislative oversight is essential to our democracy and fundamental to the job of the lawmakers we elect to represent us. Often, what we know about public matters emerges from the work of journalists publishing news and analysis and lawmakers conducting investigations, holding hearings, and issuing reports to reveal their findings. In recent years there has been a concerning decline in public trust in these and other institutions that have played a central role providing the factual predicate to our public discourse and political debates. Without shared facts about important issues and shared norms of civic truthfulness, our public conversations devolve into tribal contests, and the space for meaningful dialogue and compromise disappears.

As the US Supreme Court wrote 70 years ago, when Congress conducts oversight, it carries out its fundamental duty to serve as the “eyes and voice” of the people (*United States v. Rumely*). Because Congress and state lawmakers have unparalleled power to find facts that inform our debates and to make the laws we live by, legislators have a special responsibility to uncover important facts and share them with the public in good faith. Unfortunately, research from several leading media scholars suggests that misinformation and conspiracy theories are more likely to take hold in the public mind when they are embraced by leaders who hold a public trust (Benkler et al., 2020; Martin & Yurukoglu, 2017). Lawmakers, therefore, can use

oversight to advance good governance and democracy, or they can use their powers to undermine democracy and sow division among Americans.

Oversight, Civic Education, and the Educational Power of an Investigative Hearing

Civic education can play a vital role not only in preparing the next generation for the responsibilities of citizenship but also in educating future voters about holding their elected representatives accountable to norms of truthfulness responsibility in carrying out their oversight duties. With this in mind, the Levin Center embarked on a partnership with the YMCA’s Michigan Youth in Government (MYiG) model state legislature program in 2018 to incorporate an oversight hearing into the program. Under what we now call the *Learning by Hearings* (LbH) program, students experience an oversight hearing firsthand by playing a variety of roles, including committee member, witness, legal counsel, or journalist based on a fictional scandal or problem developed by the Levin Center. Together, participants uncover the scenario’s facts and enact the roles in the case study. The model oversight hearing concludes with a mock press conference laying out the committee’s findings and possible policy solutions.

Student participants and MYiG leaders consistently rave about how LbH gives students a unique opportunity to learn about state government and important issues and interact with their peers as they research the facts and hold a hearing to bring those facts to light. The Levin Center has continued to provide the LbH program to MYiG and has expanded the program to serve similar model student legislatures in Florida, North Carolina, Indiana and elsewhere. To hear students and administrators discuss the LbH experience, listen to our “Oversight Matters” podcast anywhere you listen to podcasts.

Classroom Resources

Faced with extreme polarization, our society struggles to equip people with the “civic virtues” that our country’s Founders recognized as essential to the perpetuation of democracy (McDermott, 2020). There is, therefore, an urgent need to deploy new tools in our classrooms and after-school programs that enable young people to engage with civics, and each other, in a constructive and enriching way. We believe *Learning by Hearings* does just that.

After several years of running the YiG program, the Levin Center realized that it had developed a powerful tool for enabling students to learn about history, government, and civics. By engaging in a mock investigative hearing, students gain knowledge about our history and government; acquire skills in research, analytical thinking, writing, and public speaking; and develop the confidence and empathy necessary to become effective citizens in our democracy. Oversight investigations offer a window into our governance system. What better way to immerse students in American history and civics than by having them study, re-enact, and thinking deeply about oversight hearings from pivotal moments in the American story?

As the catalog grows, *Learning by Hearings* will offer a library of resources to US Civics and US History teachers that includes guided readings, interactive role play scenarios, inquiry-based lessons, and discussion guides that align with both state standards and the expectations laid out in the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework. The carefully tailored materials enable students to engage with history and each other as they examine evidence and perform the roles of figures who participated in congressional investigations that changed American history. In some of the *Learning by Hearings* material, students are asked to play real historical figures, with whose opinions they may or may not personally agree. Introducing this element requires students to examine the facts from a different perspective, reflect on why this historical figure held that

position, and articulate their arguments accordingly. In other lessons, we apply the Inquiry Design Model (Grant et al., 2017) so that students can interact with complex primary sources and experience uncovering facts and truth firsthand. Each lesson plan includes the student material, supporting documents, and assessment.

In addition to the lesson plan materials, The Levin Center’s [“Portraits in Oversight”](#) are a substantial and constantly growing resource of historical Oversight Investigations and key figures in American History. We have begun to adapt these Portraits into shorter, classroom friendly versions called “Snapshots” that can be used to introduce complex material or give context for future lessons. These “Snapshots” are accompanied by a Comprehension Guide and a Discussion Guide for easy use in a classroom. Audio and Spanish versions of these Snapshots will be available on our website soon. An important aspect of our *Learning by Hearings* material is that it will remain free to all educators via our website. The Levin Center is dedicated to fact-based and equitable civic education for all students in our state.

Why Oversight Matters

Deliberative exercises in classrooms not only teach important civics lessons, but also improve reading, writing, and speech skills. In a survey of social studies and history teachers, 73.7% said that academic argumentation and debate activities had a “significant positive impact” on students’ abilities to “evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasons, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence” (Zorwick & Wade, 2016, p. 441). 26.3% of these teachers reported a “marginal positive impact,” and none reported “no meaningful impact” or negative impacts (p. 441). Similar positive impacts were reporting for students’ abilities to “cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of sources;” “determine central ideas and provide an accurate summary;” “evaluating an author’s premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information;” and “write arguments focused on discipline-specific content, with precise claims and counterclaims developed fairly and thoroughly” (p. 441). These

positively impacted skills are all incorporated into *Learning by Hearings* exercises.

While the Levin Center’s *Learning by Hearings* curriculum is rooted in historical examples, the issues raised in these legislative investigations contain many parallels to the political climate students are growing up in today. Legislatures across the country and at the federal level are still reckoning with America’s history of racism as they debate reparations for slavery, navigate police violence against people of color, and confront white supremacist violence, as Congress did during its investigation of the KKK in the Reconstruction era. Abuse of power was not limited to Joe McCarthy’s hunt for Communists in the 1950s, as shown by the recent resurgence of populism and authoritarianism. Congress’ numerous investigations into the Trump Administration and impeachment proceedings has reignited interest in the Senate’s investigation of the Watergate scandal and resignation of President Richard Nixon (Miles, 2021). These cases, thanks to plentiful government records on the subjects, provide additional opportunities for students to engage with primary sources such as hearing transcripts, investigative reports, and even video of the hearings.

In a poll of young voters conducted in fall of 2021, the Harvard Institute of Politics found that most youth surveyed (43%), regardless of political affiliation, would prefer that elected officials find compromise, even if it came at the expense of their preferred policies. Though an encouraging statistic, students must learn *how* these compromises can be accomplished if they are to pursue them in civic participation. Zorwick and Wade (2016) emphasize that “students can learn content in many ways, but understanding and applying that information requires experiences that make the content meaningful” (p. 442). *Learning by Hearings* provides a unique experience for students to navigate through real-world examples of congressional fact-finding and deliberation, practice applying what they know and articulating their positions, and reach a consensus with multiple stakeholders. Incorporated into the civics education curriculum, *Learning by Hearings* will help students develop a deeper understanding of how the American government operates and how they can meaningfully contribute to the political conversation, whether they find themselves in the halls of Congress or a member of a well-informed citizenry.

To follow along with the ongoing Civic Education work done by the Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy, please subscribe to our newsletter at bit.ly/LevinCivicEd or contact our Civic Education Specialist at ljasinski@wayne.edu.



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