

## **True democracy requires us to be engaged in society**

By Richard Gephardt

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This week marks the anniversary of the signing of the United States Constitution, the covenant that forms the backbone of our democracy and that has inspired the constitutions of democracies across the globe. As we commemorate the work of our Founding Fathers, I often consider how the challenges they faced compare to those of reformers in new democracies worldwide.

One such reformer is my Russian friend Grigory Yavlinsky, one of the pro-democracy leaders in that nation. I once asked him to name the greatest challenge they faced, and he cited the lack of active citizens. Even before he mentioned the challenge of rebuilding a government after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he lamented that citizens were not engaged in democracy.

Although Russia had a wealth of physicists, chess players and ballet dancers, it had few active citizens because generations of Russians had been raised under totalitarian regimes that denied citizens the right to participate.

This challenge is not unique. In the past century, as democracies emerged around the world from Ukraine to South Africa to India, the development of a democratic culture often has been slow and sometimes painful.

We should be immune to many of these challenges here in the United States. The framers of our Constitution emerged from Independence Hall 221 years ago with the document that has guided our democracy ever since. As the longest lasting and most prosperous democracy in the history of the world, it would be easy to assume that the question of active citizenship is obsolete.

But just as citizens in new democracies are not born prepared for the demands of democracy, Americans, too, need to be educated for civic and political participation. Therefore, our education system — which directly touches the lives of more Americans than any other institution public or private — should focus not only on educating a future work force but also on educating our future citizenry.

Twentieth-century education pioneer John Dewey believed that democracy could survive and thrive only if it were supported by an education system. "Democracy must be reborn in every generation," wrote Dewey, "and education is its midwife."

Until the 1960s, American schools largely fulfilled their civic mission, but over the past 40 years we've witnessed a steady decline in civic learning. High schools that once required three civics courses now often offer only a single course, and even that sometimes is optional. The current focus on mandatory testing in reading and math also forces schools to cut back on time spent on other subjects, including civics.

The decline in civic learning has resulted in a decline in civic knowledge. On the 2006 National

Assessment of Educational Progress, two-thirds of students were less than proficient on the civics section of the test. Fewer than one-third of eighth graders surveyed could identify the historical purpose of the Declaration of Independence, and fewer than one-fifth of high school seniors could explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.

Because our youngest citizens are not taught how political participation benefits democracy, it should be no surprise that too many citizens take those benefits for granted. In the presidential primaries in March, two-thirds of voting-eligible Missourians declined to vote. And that was a high-water mark in recent memory; past elections have witnessed even lower voting rates.

Moreover, true civic engagement requires much more than voting. It means understanding crucial public issues and discussing them with friends, neighbors and colleagues. It means being active in community groups. It means knowing how to effect change in local, state or federal public policy and having the desire and knowledge to do so.

Just as there is an achievement gap in public education, so is there a civic achievement gap. Schools that serve students from upper-income families and schools in which the majority of students are white consistently provide more civic-learning opportunities than their predominantly minority and lower-income counterparts.

We all have a role to play in promoting civic learning. Schools can include civics in their mission statements, districts can ensure that teachers understand their responsibility to be civic educators and government can provide the funding, institutional support and flexibility necessary for civic learning to flourish.

We cannot afford to sit back and admire the U.S. Constitution as if it were some dusty artifact. Democracy challenges us to stay engaged in our communities, to see our own stake in each other's futures and to be worthy guardians of the liberties the Constitution guarantees us. Only if future education reforms embrace the civic mission of schools can we ensure the continued success of American democracy.

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