


Civic Engagement in America is organized in an atypical chronological order for a history course. Rather than starting at some distant point in time, we began with an inquiry into the present. We challenge our students to grapple in the first four weeks with the big questions of engagement today. What is civic engagement? How does it work? What strategies are employed? What are American values? (The word cloud above represents a recent set of answers.) What are the major issues for engagement right now? Our readings are current articles addressing concerns regarding civic engagement and civics education. It is during this portion of the course that our students develop compelling questions. They will use these questions for the next seven weeks to interrogate civic engagement in the past.

With this foundational base and understanding and their compelling question, we move on to a rigorous examination of civic engagement in American history. The “past” portion of our course challenges students to look at different aspects of civic engagement each week within its historical context. Most of the readings are primary documents, often representing two divergent views on the issue at hand or examples that span centuries. For example, our unit on protest during times of war encompasses not only the expected material regarding the Vietnam War but it also includes the diary of a Quaker conscientious objector during the American Civil War. When possible, we also insert readings from current events as well. In our unit on labor and civic engagement, students not only read pro and anti-union rhetoric from the late nineteenth century, they are also assigned an article about the current fight for an increased minimum wage. For each set of readings, the instructors provide a short lecture on the historical context of the readings, allowing students to focus on the underlying civic engagement themes and strategies in the materials.

Our section on the past concludes just as our students are beginning to enter fourth and eighth grade classrooms. With our students focused on the future and the civic engagement ideas of those elementary and middle school students, our readings also shift to the future. For these last few weeks of the semester, we introduce readings about ongoing problems. Unlike our readings from the past, these citizen-led engagement initiatives are in process. They read about high school students working to get a statewide ban on single-use plastics, elementary school students raising money to build wells to help with water shortages in Africa, and college students constructing straw bale homes in the city of Wilmington to provide low-income, environmentally sound housing. We then challenge students to connect the three time frames, to identify how the underlying themes and specific examples from their readings reveal what it means to be an engaged citizen-- in the present, in the past, and in the future.