

MORE THAN KNOWLEDGE: HOW CIVIC LITERACY SHAPES POLITICAL TOLERANCE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Florida State University's Institute for Governance and Civics previously conducted two nationally representative surveys that asked respondents eight civic literacy questions as well as how willing they would be to interact with people who hold opposing views. In this report, we analyze the connection between civic literacy and political tolerance. The results show a clear and consistent pattern: people with stronger civic literacy are also more open to engaging with those who see politics differently. What is more, the effects of civic literacy on political tolerance are even greater than the effects from a general education. These results suggest that policymakers should consider further supporting efforts to improve civic literacy.

- **Civic literacy strongly relates to political tolerance**

Respondents with high civic literacy scored 16 points higher on our 0–100 tolerance scale than those with low civic literacy. On this scale, 0 means “not willing” to interact with people who hold opposing views, 50 means “prefer not to,” and 100 means “willing.” In practical terms, this gap reflects a shift from being hesitant to being clearly willing to interact across political lines.

- **Civic literacy matters more than general education**

The effect of civic literacy on tolerance is two to five times larger than the effect of general educational attainment.

- **The effects of civic literacy on tolerance vary by relational intimacy**

Civic literacy makes the biggest difference for tolerance in less personal settings—like commerce, schooling, and recreation—where willingness to engage rises by 15–18 points. The effect is smaller, but still visible, in more personal contexts such as marriage or dating.

INTRODUCTION

A healthy America requires more than free and fair elections. It requires citizens who understand how their government works and who can live peacefully alongside one another—even when they hold divergent views. American requires

civic literacy, a knowledge of the nation's history, institutions, and democratic principles.

We analyze two nationally representative surveys the Institute for Governance and Civics conducted

in 2025—one of 2,414 voters and another of 1,004 adults. Both surveys included questions on civic literacy and political tolerance, giving us a rare opportunity to study how the two are connected.

Taken together, the findings underscore an important insight: strengthening civic education is not simply about teaching knowledge for its own sake, but about fostering civility—building trust, easing division, and reinforcing the democratic fabric of the country.

POLITICAL TOLERANCE MEASURES

We measured political tolerance by asking respondents whether they would be willing to engage in different types of personal, educational, and economic interactions with someone from the opposite political party or political disposition. These questions, shown in Table 1, ranged from more personal situations (such as dating or having a family member marry someone with opposing political views) to less personal ones (such as buying or selling goods). Both the February 2025 national voter survey and the May–June 2025 national adult survey included the same set of questions, with the latter adding an item on dating.

We created a tolerance index based on the six questions common to both surveys (excluding the dating item, which was only asked in May–June). Each

response was coded as 0 (“Not willing”), 0.5 (“Prefer not to”), or 1 (“Willing”). We then averaged across the six items for each respondent and rescaled the index to run from 0 to 100, where higher scores indicate greater tolerance. On this scale, average tolerance was 73 in the February 2025 voter survey and 78 in the May–June 2025 adult survey.

CIVIC LITERACY IS CONSISTENTLY LINKED TO POLITICAL TOLERANCE

The central question of this report is whether greater civic literacy is linked to higher levels of political tolerance. At the Institute for Governance and Civics, we view civic education as a cornerstone of a healthy democratic republic—equipping citizens not only with knowledge of government, but also with the skills to live and work alongside people who see politics differently.

We measured civic literacy with eight multiple-choice questions on U.S. history, government, and constitutional principles. These questions mirror items that often appear on the U.S. citizenship test and reflect the kind of basic knowledge citizens need to understand how America works.

In our more recent May–June 2025 national survey of 1,004 adults, large shares of respondents answered each question correctly, though performance varied by item. At the top end, 95% correctly identified George Washington

Table 1: Political Tolerance by Survey Sample

When it comes to people of the opposite political party or political disposition, would you be willing to...			
Date them...?	% No	% Prefer not to	% Yes
National Voters (February 2025)	--	--	--
National Adults (May–June, 2025)	30	29	41
Have them marry a member of your family...?			
National Voters (February 2025)	21	28	51
National Adults (May–June, 2025)	14	33	52
Have them teach members of your family at school...?			
National Voters (February 2025)	22	25	52
National Adults (May–June, 2025)	16	32	52
Send members of your family to school with them...?			
National Voters (February 2025)	14	18	67
National Adults (May–June, 2025)	9	19	72
Engage in a social or recreational activity with them...?			
National Voters (February 2025)	14	17	70
National Adults (May–June, 2025)	7	20	73
Buy something from them...?			
National Voters (February 2025)	17	17	66
National Adults (May–June, 2025)	10	17	73
Sell them something...?			
National Voters (February 2025)	14	12	74
National Adults (May–June, 2025)	9	11	80

as the father of the country, and 92% knew Abraham Lincoln wrote the Emancipation Proclamation. Knowledge of the First Amendment was also strong, with 91% able to name at least one right or freedom it guarantees. Ninety-one percent also correctly answered why

some states have more Representatives than others. Eighty-five percent could identify “checks and balances” as the constitutional safeguard against concentrated power, and the same share recognized the Constitution as the supreme law of the land. Somewhat

fewer respondents could name all three branches of government (78%) or identify the legislative branch as the one that writes laws (78%), though these still represent large majorities. We then summed how many correct answers each respondent gave.

We simplify the 0–8 scale into three categories for easier interpretation. Respondents with five or fewer correct are classified as having low civic literacy, those with six or seven as medium, and

those with all eight as high. As shown in Table 2, across both surveys, 16% fell into the low category, 36% into medium, and 47% into high. Compared with the May–June adult sample, the February 2025 voter sample had a larger share with low civic literacy (19% vs. 11%) and a smaller share with high civic literacy (44% vs. 55%), which mirrors the item-level and overall differences reported in Tables A1–A2 of the Appendix.

Table 2: Civic Literacy Levels by Survey Sample

Civic Literacy Level	National Voters	National Adults	Pooled Sample
Low (≤ 5 correct)	19%	11%	16%
Medium (6–7 correct)	37%	35%	36%
High (All 8 correct)	44%	55%	47%

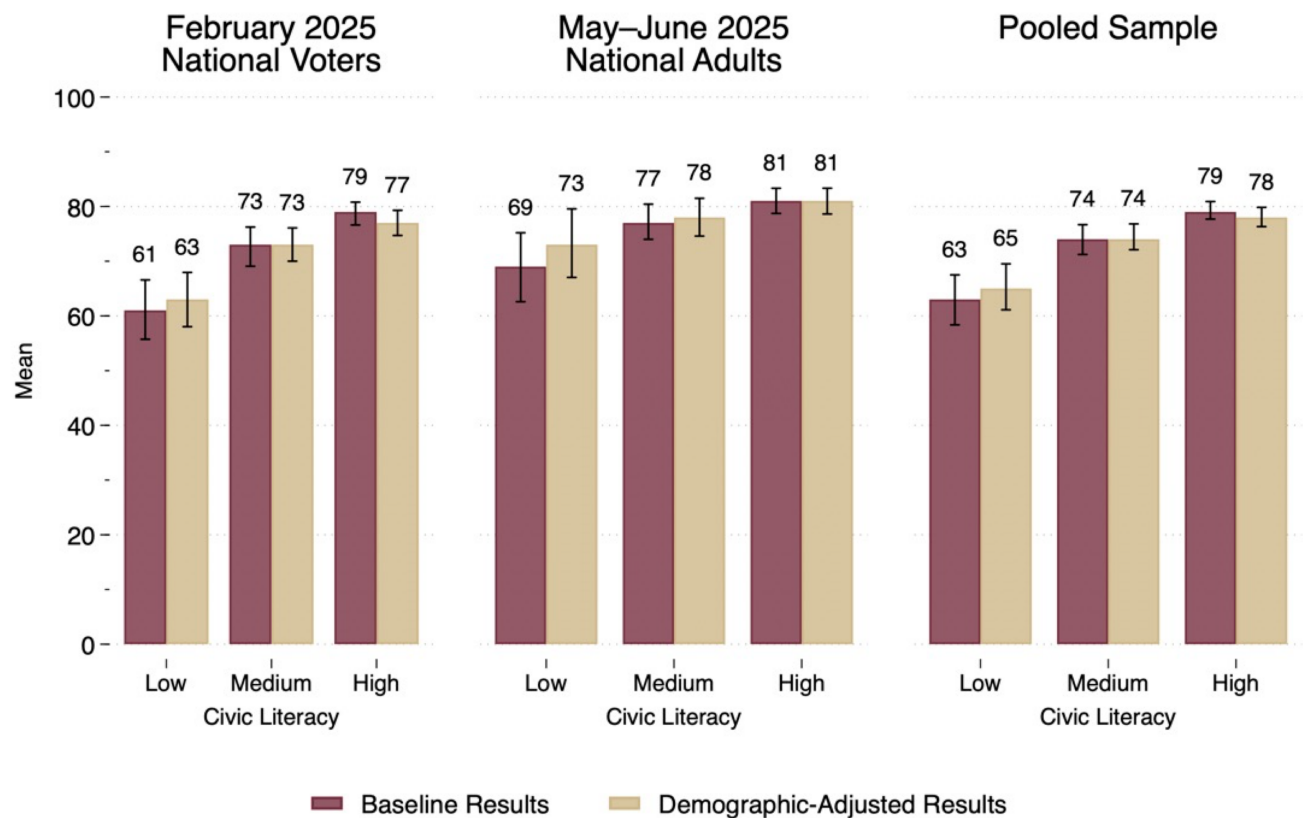
This leads to the main question of the report. Does civic literacy track overall tolerance? The data suggest yes.

Moving from low to high civic literacy corresponds to a 16-point increase in tolerance—enough to shift the average respondent from leaning reluctant to clearly willing to engage across political lines.

As shown in Figure 1, political tolerance rises steadily with civic literacy. On the 0–100 scale, respondents with low civic literacy average 63 points—closer to an overall “Prefer not to” stance than

“Willing.” Those with medium civic literacy average 74, and those with high civic literacy average 79, much closer to “Willing” than “Prefer not to.” Moving from low to high civic literacy corresponds to a 16-point increase in tolerance—enough to shift the average respondent from leaning reluctant to clearly willing to engage across political lines. Adjusting for demographic and political characteristics produces virtually the same results. This positive relationship appears in both surveys, with only modest differences in the size of the gaps between literacy groups. Greater civic literacy is strongly

Figure 1: Average Political Tolerance Scores by Civic Literacy Level



Note: Error bars show the 95% confidence interval for each estimate—that is, the range within which the true value is very likely to fall. The political tolerance index runs from 0 to 100, where 0 means “Not willing,” 50 means “Prefer not to,” and 100 means “Willing.” “Baseline” results adjust only for survey sample. “Demographic-adjusted” results also take into account respondents’ sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, income, parenting status, region, metropolitan status, ideology, and party. In all models except the pooled one, the estimates also account for the possibility that the relationship between civic literacy and tolerance differs by survey sample.

associated with greater political tolerance.

CIVIC LITERACY SURPASSES EDUCATION AS A DRIVER OF TOLERANCE

To put the role of civic literacy in context, we compare it with formal education—a factor that studies often link to political tolerance. Figure 2 shows how much tolerance increases when the civic literacy score moves from low to high, versus when formal education level

moves from high school or less to a college degree. Estimates adjust for demographic and political factors.

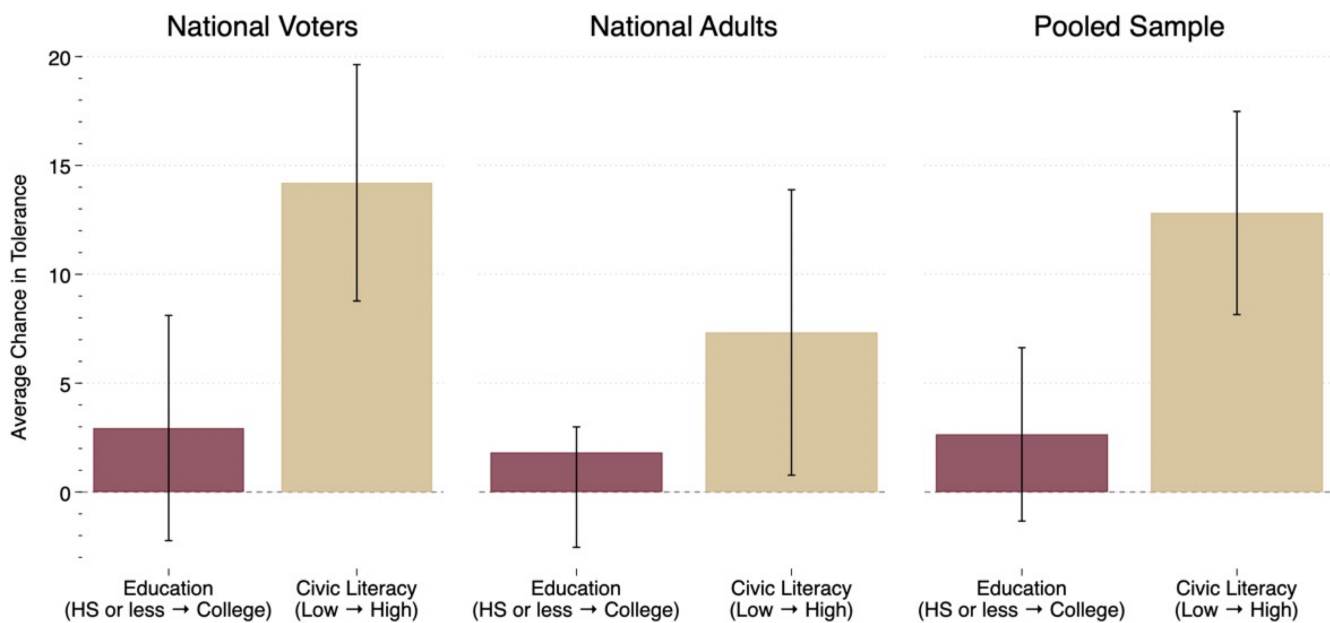
Civic literacy has a stronger and more consistent link to political tolerance than education alone.

In both surveys, as well as in the pooled sample, the positive effect of civic literacy on political tolerance is

consistently larger than the effect of education on political tolerance. Specifically, civic literacy's effect is about five times larger than education's in the voter and pooled samples, and about

four times larger in the adult sample. Further, once civic literacy is included in the analysis, the effect of education is no longer statistically meaningful, while civic literacy remains important in every case.

Figure 2: Effects of Civic Literacy vs. Education on Political Tolerance



Note: Error bars show the 95% confidence interval for each estimate—that is, the range within which the true value is very likely to fall. The political tolerance index runs from 0 to 100, where 0 means “Not willing,” 50 means “Prefer not to,” and 100 means “Willing.” Bars show how much average tolerance changes when comparing people with a high school education or less to those with a college education, and when comparing people with low civic literacy to those with high civic literacy. Estimates account for differences in sex, age, race/ethnicity, income, parenting status, region, metro status, ideology, and party. In all models except the pooled one, we also account for the possibility that the relationship between civic literacy, education, and tolerance differs by survey sample.

These findings show that civic literacy is not simply “standing in” for education. On average, a respondent with “only” a high school education who places in the highest civic literacy category is about 7 points higher in political tolerance than a college graduate who places in the lowest civic literacy category. This difference

narrows to roughly 5 points and is no longer statistically meaningful when accounting for demographic and political factors, but the broader pattern is clear: civic literacy has a stronger link to political tolerance than education alone.

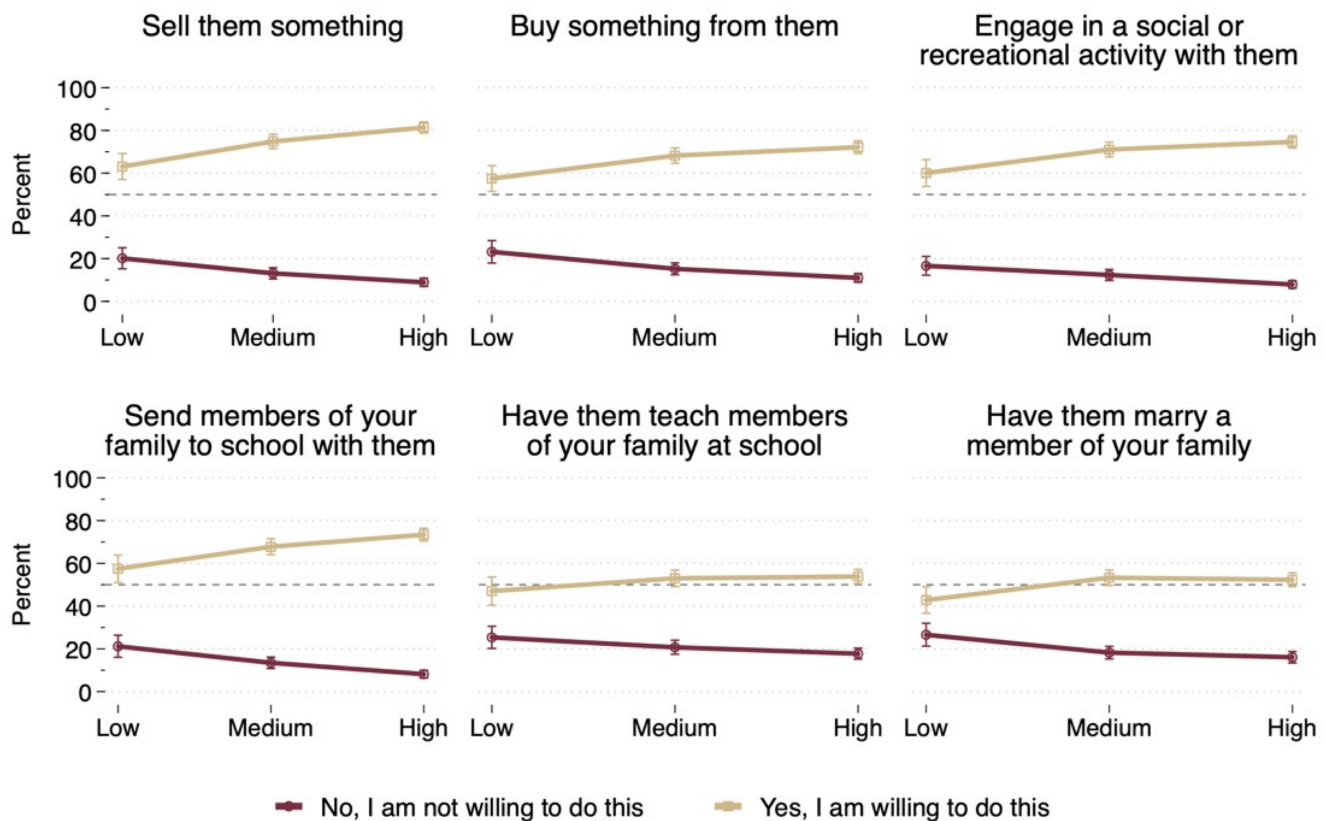
THE EFFECTS OF CIVIC LITERACY ON TOLERANCE VARY BY INTIMACY

Having shown that civic literacy is strongly linked to overall tolerance, we next examine whether the pattern holds across different kinds of relational intimacy. Figure 3 shows the results for

the pooled sample, comparing the share of respondents who said they were willing (gold line) or unwilling (garnet line) to engage in each activity, by level of civic literacy.

Across all six situations—from more transactional settings like buying or

Figure 3: Tolerance by Relationship Context and Civic Literacy (Pooled Sample, Adjusted for Demographic and Political Covariates)



Note: Error bars show 95% confidence intervals, meaning the range within which the true value is very likely to fall. Estimates come from pooled-sample logistic regression models that take into account sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, income, parenting status, region, metropolitan status, ideology, and party. “Prefer not to” responses were included in the analysis but are not displayed in the figure.

selling goods, to more personal ones like having a family member marry someone with opposing views—willingness rises, and unwillingness falls, as civic literacy

increases.

The size of these differences, however, depends on the type of relationship. In public or less personal contexts—selling,

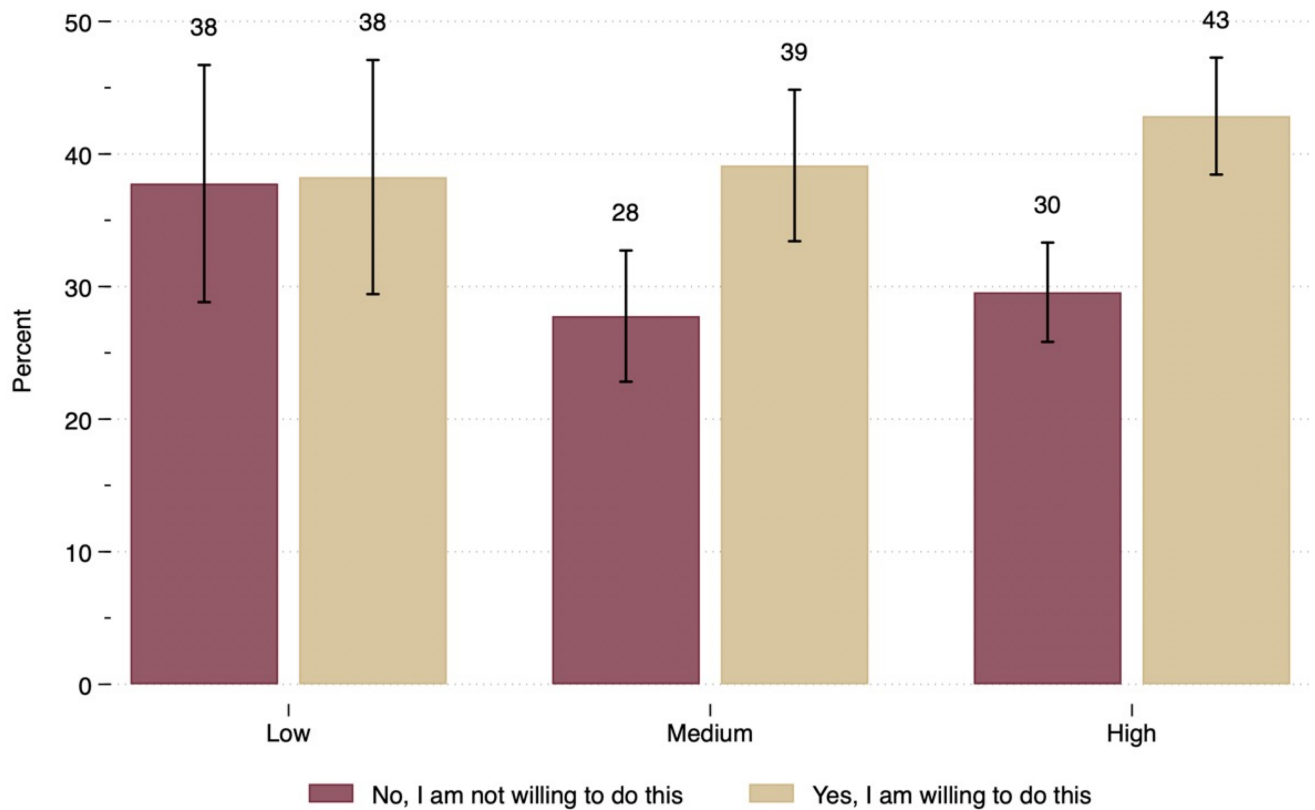
buying, joining in social or recreational activities, or sending children to the same school—the gap in willingness between low- and high-literacy respondents ranges from 15 to 18 points, while outright unwillingness drops by 9 to 13 points. By contrast, in closer personal settings, such as having the person teach one’s family members or marry into the family, the increases in willingness are smaller, at 8 to 11 points, and the declines in unwillingness are also smaller at 7 to 9

points.

The influence of civic literacy declines as the relationship becomes more personal and intimate.

As shown in Figure 4, the effect of civic literacy is also weaker when it comes to dating someone with opposing political views—an item asked only in the national

Figure 4. Willingness to Date People With Opposing Political Views Among Adults by Civic Literacy Level (Adjusted for Demographic and Political Covariates)



Note: Error bars show 95% confidence intervals, meaning the range within which the true value is very likely to fall. Estimates come from pooled-sample logistic regression models that take into account sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, income, parenting status, region, metropolitan status, ideology, and party. “Prefer not to” responses were included in the analysis but are not displayed in the figure.

adults survey. Here, high-literacy respondents (43%) are just 5 points more likely to say they would be willing to date such a person than low-literacy respondents (38%), and about 8 points less likely to say they would be outright unwilling (30% vs. 38%). This fits the broader trend: the influence of civic literacy declines at the relationship becomes more personal and intimate.

Taken together, these results show that civic literacy is a consistent and powerful influence on political tolerance—stronger even than education, which is often seen as a key driver of tolerance. While the size of the effect varies—larger among national voters than adults, and smaller in close personal relationships—the pattern is clear: higher civic literacy is reliably linked with greater willingness, and lower unwillingness, to engage with people who hold opposing political views.

CONCLUSION: INVESTING IN CIVIC LITERACY TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY

The findings in this report suggest that civic literacy plays an important and independent role in fostering political tolerance—one that, in our data, is even stronger than the influence of education level. Across a wide range of settings, people who understand how American government works are more willing to interact with those who hold opposing political views.

But the effects of civic literacy are not the same everywhere. They are strongest in public and less personal settings, such

as commerce or shared schooling, and smaller in close personal relationships like marriage or dating. Yet even in these intimate areas, civic literacy still matters: respondents were more willing to accept an in-law with opposing political views and less likely to reject the idea of dating across partisan lines. In today's polarized environment, that is no small thing.

Of course, these analyses cannot prove cause and effect. For instance, it's possible that the link between civic literacy and tolerance reflects other influences not captured in our data. Still, the fact that the relationship remains strong even after accounting for education, income, ideology, and partisanship suggests that if another factor is driving it, it is not among the usual demographic or political explanations.

Strengthening civic education at all levels has the potential to cultivate habits of mutual respect and coexistence, including among those who do not pursue higher

Overall, the results underscore a simple truth: a healthy republic requires more than formal schooling or professional success. It requires a shared civic language and a basic knowledge of institutions, rights, and responsibilities—tools that help citizens see political opponents not as enemies but as fellow participants in self-government. Without

this foundation, the social bonds that hold a diverse democracy together weaken, and opportunities for cooperation narrow.

Crucially, because civic literacy predicts tolerance regardless of education level, its benefits extend beyond college graduates. This means strengthening civic education at all levels has the potential to cultivate habits of mutual respect and coexistence, including among those who do not pursue higher education.

For us at the Institute for Governance and Civics, the implications are profound. Our mission is not only to expand knowledge of American democracy but also to strengthen the civic habits that allow diverse communities to flourish. By investing in civic literacy, we do more than teach facts—we help create the conditions for civil, democratic life to thrive. In a time of rising division and mistrust, these findings support the value of civic literacy as a foundation for a more tolerant society.

Poll Information

This study uses data from two separate surveys. The first survey, which was conducted online by Hunt Research between February 7 and February 12, 2025, consisted of 2,002 U.S. voters and an oversample of 412 Florida voters. The second survey was conducted online between May 21 and June 3, 2025 by Social Science Research Services (SSRS) using a Probability-Based Opinion Panel. The sample consisted of 1,004 respondents age 18 or older. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-3.4% at the 95% confidence level. See Table 3 on the next page for weighted demographic characteristics of each survey sample.

Table 3: Descriptive Characteristics by Survey Sample

Category	National Voters	National Adults
Sex		
Male	51%	51%
Female	49%	49%
Age		
18 to 29	15%	20%
30 to 49	29%	34%
50 to 64	28%	23%
65 or older	28%	23%
Race/Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic White	70%	61%
Black	12%	12%
Hispanic	11%	18%
Asian	4%	7%
Other	3%	3%
Income		
Less than \$40,000	18%	35%
\$40,000-\$99,999	56%	37%
\$100,000-\$249,999	22%	25%
\$250,000 and over	4%	3%
Education		
Less than HS	1%	9%
HS Graduate	27%	29%
Some college	30%	26%
BA Degree	25%	20%
Postgrad / Prof. Degree	17%	16%
Parent Status		
K-12 Parent	78%	70%
Not a K-12 Parent	22%	30%
Stated Party		
Democrat	38%	31%
Republican	36%	29%
Independent/ Something Else	26%	40%

Appendix

Table A1: Performance on Civic Literacy Questions by Survey Sample

Question	Percent Correct	
	National Voters	National Adults
Who is the Father of our country?	95%	95%
Who wrote the Emancipation Proclamation?	89%	92%
What is one of the rights or freedoms listed in the First Amendment to the Constitution?	81%	91%
Why do some states have more Representatives than other states?	87%	91%
In the U.S. Constitution, what is the most important factor that stops one branch of the federal government from becoming too powerful?	82%	85%
What document is the supreme law of the land in the United States?	78%	85%
What are the branches of the federal government?	64%	78%
Which branch or part of the federal government writes and passes federal statutes?	66%	78%

Table A2. Number of Correct Civic Literacy Answers by Survey Sample

Number Correct	National Voters	National Adults	Pooled Sample
8	44%	55%	47%
7	24%	24%	24%
6	13%	11%	13%
5	8%	5%	7%
4 or less	10%	6%	9%