

Exploring Evidence and Models for Experiential Civic Education Opportunities

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Acknowledgement and Series Note

In early 2024, the Resilient Democracy Data and Research Network was established as a collaboration between Australian researchers, civil society leaders and government agencies. The network is designed to encourage interdisciplinary, collaborative and actionable research seeking policy-relevant insights that measure, diagnose and assess pathways strengthening Australia's democratic resilience. The network is dedicated to sharing the analysis publicly, and to encouraging the use of these ideas to prompt future research collaborations and actionable policy.

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Abstract

This discussion paper examines the role of experiential civic education in strengthening Australia’s democratic resilience. While international and Australian evidence consistently links civic knowledge and participation to more robust democratic attitudes and behaviours, student outcomes in formal civics education have declined, and large gaps remain in how young Australians learn about democracy. Drawing on existing literature, national assessments, government programs and emerging models of civic learning, the paper evaluates the opportunities and limitations of experiential approaches—such as parliamentary visits, election simulations and site-based democratic learning—delivered through schools, government agencies and community organisations. It highlights significant inequities in access, especially for disadvantaged and regional schools, and identifies a major “evaluation gap” in understanding the short- and long-term impacts of these programs. The paper proposes a national research and evidence agenda to map participation, assess pedagogical approaches, integrate experiential learning with formal curricula, and expand opportunities across the civic life course. Strengthening experiential civic education represents a practical and scalable pathway to building democratic knowledge, trust and life-long engagement among Australians.

Introduction

Democracy is not a static construct, with each new generation comes the responsibility to safeguard and renew our democratic institutions and values. Around the world, these foundations are under growing pressure from a range of complex and intersecting challenges. At the heart of robust democratic systems lies the principle of collective decision-making, ensuring societies are organised to enable broad, meaningful citizen participation. Central to this, and critical for sustaining democratic resilience, is the ongoing development of civic awareness and the capacity for effective participation. This discussion paper explores these dynamics and the imperative of strengthening democratic engagement in the Australian context. Across the globe, in many democracies obstacles are being placed in the way of effective collective decision-making. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's 2025 report,¹ *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move*, reveals that 'In 2024, 94 countries—representing 54 per cent of all countries assessed—suffered a decline in at least one factor of democratic performance compared with their own performance five years earlier.'

Democracies face challenges such as restrictions on freedom of expression, widespread distrust in the legitimacy of elections, and eroding public confidence in democratic institutions. Australia is not immune to these trends (Cameron et al. 2025) and, while in a strong state, to maintain its democratic resilience, must prioritise strengthening the foundational elements that support democracy over the long term.

Evidence from around the world demonstrates a strong positive relationship between civic awareness and participation in democratic processes (Campbell, 2019; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Murray & Umbers, 2025; Print, 2023; Schulz, et al., 2024). Recent surveys by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC 2024) indicate that Australians who recall their civic education are more likely to express satisfaction with the country's democracy and to participate in civic activities later in life, including voting, volunteering, and political engagement. Civic education, which encompasses knowledge, skills, and the confidence to engage in democratic participation, is a key contributor to democratic resilience.

However, in Australia, the recent National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAPCC) data, currently the only standardised national measure of civics knowledge, reveals a decline in students' understanding of our democratic processes. While the limitations of this data will be discussed later, the broader trends raise important questions about how civic education is most effectively delivered.

The 2024 NAPCC report, released earlier this year, highlighted low levels of political knowledge and understanding among students. Only twenty-eight percent of Year 10 students met the proficiency standard, meaning roughly seventy-two percent of Australian Year 10 students lack sufficient understanding of our democracy and political system. This latest NAPCC report represents the culmination of a period of continual decline in student scores over the past two decades (attached graph). Yet, in just two years, without exposure to civic education in the formal curriculum, these Year 10 students will reach voting age. This shortfall is likely predicted by the limited opportunities to study civics in Australian schools (Print, 2023).

To address these issues in formal civic education in Australia, and contribute to a strengthening of democratic resilience, the recent report from the Commonwealth Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) recommended including civic education as a subject

¹ <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/global-state-of-democracy-2025-democracy-on-the-move?lang=en>

in the school curriculum, particularly for upper secondary students (JSCM, 2025). Similarly, the New South Wales Parliament's JSCM report advised that civic education be made both a stand-alone and mandatory school subject (NSW JSCM, 2025). However, these recommendations have yet to be implemented, and there has been no significant improvement in objective measures of students' knowledge of our democratic systems.

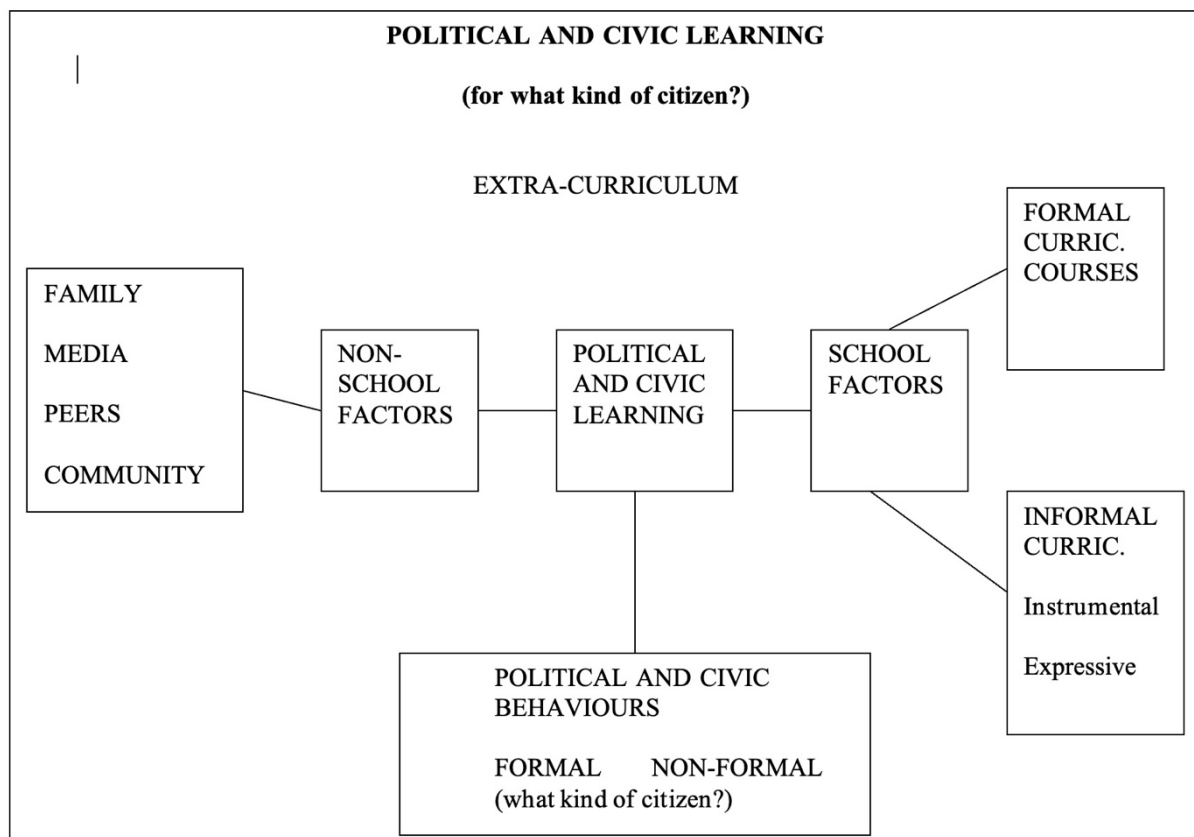
This builds on a wide field of literature assessing civic education models and evaluating their effectiveness. Civic education in school curricula is remarkably varied with few countries requiring students to study a separate subject called 'Civics' or similar. Many countries claim some civic education such as within existing subjects such as History, Social Studies or the like (Campbell, 2019; Niemi and Junn, 1998; Print, 2023; Schulz, et al., 2024). Could there be more to understanding how people might learn about democracy, government and civic engagement?

The APSC survey (2024) also revealed that more people recall their experiential civic learning, such as school visits to Parliament, than those who remember receiving formal classroom civic education. This finding prompts an important question: how do experiential civic education opportunities influence our overall understanding of and confidence in engaging with democracy? When reforms to the formal civic curriculum prove challenging, are there additional or potentially more effective ways to impart this knowledge through hands-on, experiential learning?

This question is particularly important beyond the formal school years. There is limited understanding of how people remain civically engaged throughout their lives. Mycock and Prosser (2025) suggest that viewing civic participation as a life journey can help continually build civic awareness and support access to opportunities that strengthen democratic institutions and values. It widens the lens on different models and approaches to encouraging civic education beyond the formal school years.

A model of political and civic learning in school contexts (Figure 1, from Print 2012) shows that students can acquire democratic understanding and build democratic resilience through the informal curriculum and extra curricula opportunities as part of their political and civic learning in becoming a citizen. The school curriculum, that is the learning students are exposed to, is composed of four parts: the formal curriculum, informal curriculum, extra curriculum and the hidden curriculum as in the model below (Print, 2012). Extra and informal curricula opportunities associated with schools, together with experiences through non-school factors, provide the basis for experiential civic education.

This paper focuses on what we know about experiential civic education for school-aged children, what we need to know, and how we can support existing offerings to support the next generation of student's confidence and knowledge of our democracy to make it more resilient. The paper starts to assess if expanding and effectively monitoring experiential civic education contributes to a more resilient democracy, not only building the next generation's knowledge and confidence in participating in our democratic system but deepening their trust and life-long engagement. This paper will help provide more structured thinking about the models for experiential civic education and how government and civil society can expand access and measure the impact.

Figure 1 A model of political and civic learnings in school contexts

Source: Print (2012)

Exploring Experiential Civic Education Approaches

One potentially significant source of learning about how democracies work and pathway to deepening trust in democratic institutions and values may be through experiential civic education, defined as the learning acquired by students through actively experiencing a close version of the reality of democracy. Typically, experiential civic education is provided by, or linked with, a school and with the school curriculum and as such reinforces classroom learning. Most experiential civic education would be located within the informal curriculum and especially extra-curricula learning as in the model above (Print, 2012).

While literature and research in experiential civic education is extremely limited, a recent report *Experiential Civic Learning for American Democracy* (Allen et al., 2025) indicates that well-structured experiential programs can advance excellence in civic learning amongst school students. However, despite the literature the research is limited and mostly of an opinion survey nature (Allen et al., 2025; Campbell, 2019; Print, 2023) exposing the need for rigorous future research.

Government agencies support schools across Australia to provide different forms of opportunities for this type of learning. Students to engage in democratic processes, such as election simulations and legislative role-playing. Programs like those at the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and Parliamentary Education Office (PEO), both based in Canberra, allow

students to vote, count ballots, and debate or pass bills in simulated settings, helping them gain firsthand knowledge, skills, and values about democracy.

Other government programs include Youth Advisory Groups (YAGs) where a small number of young Australians participate in advisory work with Departments. This is both experiential learning and youth participation in the democratic process.

This form of learning is clearly different from acquiring understanding in classrooms through a school subject even though there is evidence that the formal curriculum can contribute to building democratic resilience (Print, 2014; 2023). To be considered as experiential civic education the opportunity needs to provide *four core activities / learning outcomes*. These are:

1. offered on the identified site as a form of situated learning (such as a parliamentary building),
2. provided in realistic or active engagement conditions at that site (such as a law court),
3. provided in a standard or simulated form that is realistic and engaging for learners (such as voting in a simulated election), and
4. providing a learning experience combined with associated knowledge, skills and values.

Government and School Provided Civic Experiential Learning Opportunities

Canberra-based opportunities

Currently there are multiple opportunities for experiential civic education and learning opportunities for Australians in the primary and secondary school system. The most well-known is arranged with the support of the PACER program (Parliamentary and Civic Education Rebate) funded by the Australian Government to support student experiential learning in key sites including the PEO; AEC; Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD); and the Australian War Memorial. A second level of engagement for students includes educational visits to sites such as the Australian Constitution Centre (located in the High Court building), Government House, the National Archives, and the National Museum of Australia.

The PACER program is helpful but limited as the rebate is only \$30pp for Sydney students with an extra \$15 if the school has an Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) score of <1000 (considered disadvantaged) as estimated by the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA). Schools further from Canberra are eligible for a slightly greater reimbursement (per student), though for all of Victoria and most of NSW this is only \$45. Despite the rebate, the Canberra experiential civic education opportunity is still quite difficult for most low ICSEA schools given that private companies charge \$500 - \$1000 pp for a typical program of three days and two nights.

Despite these constraints, the Canberra experience witnesses large numbers of students participating in experiential civic education through their school's tour. MoAD, for example, regularly cites 75,000 annual school student visits, while the PEO claims more than 100,000 student visits annually. These appear to be successful examples of experiential civic education in practice for Australian school students, albeit examples that remain out of reach for many Australian schools and their students.

State/Territory based opportunities

Similarly, there are many state-based experiential civic education opportunities that mirror the many sites available in the ‘Canberra trip’. In NSW, for example, through the NSW Parliament the Parliamentary Education and Engagement Office provides similar experiential learning opportunities for primary and secondary school students and their teachers. Learning about the law through experiencing NSW Courts is offered by the Rule of Law Education Centre while other experiential civic education sites include Old Government House Parramatta, the Whitlam Institute and multiple environmental education centres supported by the NSW Department of Education. All these sites emphasize interactive, site-based learning experiences for students and teachers on related civic education topics that hopefully enable students to learn about Australian democracy and build democratic resilience.

What is unclear, however, is how many of these programs are connected to school curriculum modules, versus independent experiences. A question emerges if these are more impactful when paired with in-school learning, or if more stand-alone modules would be beneficial to overall learning.

As difficult as it is to understand coverage of basic access to these programs, there is an even greater gap in data and analysis on student knowledge acquisition, the sustainability of that student knowledge over time and the impact of these experiences, particularly on building democratic resilience amongst Australians across their civic life journey. While most major sites report positive exit data on levels of student and teacher interest and satisfaction at time of the experience, there is no longitudinal data available on sustained knowledge acquisition or behavioural changes. Alongside, equity gaps, there is a real evaluation-gap in experiential civic education.

Other forms of experiential civic education

There exist many different and perhaps unusual forms of experiential civic education that reflect the varied definitions of the concept. Defined more widely than the above, programs that contain elements of experiential civic education may include any experience that has some association with learning about civics and democracy knowledge, skills and values including leadership, teamwork, responsibility, resilience, voting, decision-making, volunteering and the like.

Examples of such opportunities associated with schools include school camps, excursions, school cadets, the Duke of Edinburgh program, school volunteering programs and school sports. Beyond the school environment, young Australians could learn elements of democracy through volunteering groups (such as Clean Up Australia; Kids Giving Back), community groups, hobby clubs, religious groups and even sports clubs. Tangentially young people may acquire experiential democratic knowledge, skills and values through local council activities and the many museums that offer experiential programs (Allen, et al., 2025).

These experiential activities would contribute to Robert Putnam’s concept of building social capital and the significant contribution social capital makes to healthy democracies (Putnam, 2000). More recently Putnam lamented at the decline in basic social connectedness and student experience in schools in his inciteful *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (Putnam, 2015). Many of the issues that he identified have become a stark reality in the modern American political landscape.

This analysis of the current situation on experiential learning has necessarily focussed on experiential civic education that is related to schools and the students in those schools and hence covers a restricted period in one’s life. However, at an even broader level, the work of Mycock

& Prosser (2025) explained a civic life journey through identifying a gap in what works collectively and cumulatively in civic engagement and democratic participation across a person's life course. Their paper outlined 'civic journeys', both as a conceptual and practical tool to better understand how, where and when life-long active citizenship could be best supported and enabled.

Overall, the current situation for experiential civic education reveals many opportunities for learning about democracy and potentially building democratic resilience. However, little is known about who and how many Australian students actually participate in experiential civic education activities. Further, extremely limited data exists on the impact of experiential civic education especially in Australia. Given its potential to impact young Australians positively and sustainably, experiential civic education requires further investigation.

What do we need to know?

To better understand and improve experiential civic education in Australia, it's helpful to organise our questions and needs to fill knowledge gaps. There are many opportunities for schools, communities and government-supported programs to build in experiential civic education opportunities, however how we design them and connect them to school curriculum remains unclear. The following research agenda outlines what we need to know, grouped under key themes:

1. Participation and Access

- Which students are currently accessing experiential civic education, and who is missing out, including those in schools and those not in education or employment training? Are there disparities across jurisdictions and demographics?
 - For example, can we use ICSEA and PACER data to help ensure programs are reaching enough schools that all students have fair access to these programs?
- Availability: Are there sufficient programs available outside of the school environment to foster civic knowledge beyond the electoral cycle?

2. Timing and Delivery

- Timing: When is experiential civic education most effective for students in schools, both year of education and times of year?
- Pedagogical Approaches: What teaching methods and delivery models have the greatest impact on learning outcomes? How does the pedagogy at experiential sites compare to classroom teaching, and how can student outcomes be improved?

3. Links to Curriculum

- Integration with formal education: How does experiential civic education reinforce or expand on formal civics curriculum? To what extent do programs like PACER support classroom learning, and how can we evaluate this relationship?

4. Impact on Civic Life Journey

- Short and long-term impacts: What evidence exists that experiential civic education builds civic knowledge, participation, trust, and democratic resilience both immediately and over time?
- Measurement and outcomes: How can we better track the impact of these experiences on students' knowledge, behaviour, and engagement as democratic citizens?

5. Post-School Civic Education Opportunities

- Beyond school years: How do civic education experiences influence trust, engagement, and resilience later in life for older generations?
- Non-traditional settings: What role do activities like school camps, volunteering, and community programs play in promoting civic values throughout one's life?

6. Role of Government and Non-Government

- How can government programs most effectively support and encourage experiential learning outside of classrooms?
- How can educators support community-based organisations, parent associations, sporting clubs, and other gathering sites?

To advance understanding of experiential civic education and its impacts, future research should focus on mapping participation patterns to identify where engagement and access gaps exist, evaluating pedagogical approaches across both school and community contexts, and investigating the relationship between experiential and formal civics learning. Longitudinal and experimental/quasi-experimental studies are needed to track how experiential civic education affects individuals over time, while further exploration is required to understand the role of civic experiences at different life stages. Together with ongoing programmatic trials and new experiential offerings, these efforts will help clarify the effectiveness and reach of experiential civic education throughout Australian society.

Emerging questions

Clearly there are many aspects to experiential civic education in school-related and non-school related contexts as well as over life cycles that we need to know. In the process of investigating these aspects it has become clear that recent developments in technology create opportunities, but pose emerging questions for democratic resilience. For example:

- How does experiential learning interact with digital media generally in terms of online civic life?²
- Can AI based simulations replicate experiential civic education to enable meaningful learning and what impact does it have on young learners relative to a real experiential civic education?
- How will teachers respond to providing AI replicated experiential civic education compared with real civic education experiences?
- How does social media, utilized as a source for experiential civic education by young people, affect their learning of trust and democratic resilience?
- What role can local councils, employers and cultural institutions play in providing civic education experiences beyond schools and to older generations?

What we can do next

1.Immediate actions for governments and civil society

Further work is required to assess the existing evidence of effectiveness for experiential civic education to bolstering democratic resilience and values. This has not been a focus of researchers in Australia to date, both the framing or the bespoke analysis, yet the practical benefits appear obvious in the ongoing programs. This would be the basis to determine what

² Examples of such programs are discussed in Dishon and Yafai (2022)

kind of national support might be needed to ensure every student has access to opportunities to participate in active learning about their civic institutions and our democratic practices.

To do this, first, a cross-sector group could develop a clear, working definition of experiential civic education and use this to map the many forms it takes across life stages and contexts. Next, using this framework we should aggregate a national inventory of current programs and their impacts by aggregating state-level opportunities and crowdsourcing data from educators, community leaders, organisations, and the media. This inventory could serve as an accessible tool for integrating civic education into existing activities, such as voting simulations and collective decision-making exercises in existing programs and additional sites, like sporting clubs or school clubs.

This could lead to a rapid assessment of shortfalls in national monitoring tools of civic knowledge and awareness, including considering NAP-CC limitations and subsequent surveys or measures.

Concurrently, there is an opportunity to design an applied typology of different forms of experiential civic activities, one which identifies key scope, sequence, and developmental factors, forming a conceptual framework for lifelong civic learning. To refine this framework and expand national coverage, convene a national workshop with stakeholders to review the typology, share current opportunities, and identify priority gaps. This collaborative process should produce programs and targets that ensure equitable access to experiential civic education for all Australians, at every stage of life and across every community sector.

2. Build an evidence network on civic education

If we set new goals for expanding access and use of both in classroom and experiential civics education offerings, this will likely require agencies and educators to have the tools and evidence to design and implement the programs. To design and deliver the appropriate and varied forms of experiential civic education offering for different contexts, sites, and age groups will require a set of tools and living evidence to support equally beneficial applications. This will include connecting evidence generating initiatives by inviting agencies and researchers to share program findings and pool data on their experiential civic education programs.

In preparing this paper it was clear that there is insufficient understanding of examples of experiential civic education outside a few limited examples. Creating an evidence network would further facilitate exchange and interaction between experiential civic educators and find unusual sites and partners to include experiential learning. This should be informed by sharing information on what works best and ways to measure impact.

There are some more short-term opportunities, both through government-research collaboration and through research networks.

The first is immediate analysis of program level data for PACER and data collected in AEC education programs. Working with state Departments of Education could also uncover state-level programs including Parliamentary visits and school-level deliberative or mock election programs. This could help answer the first wave of questions on access gaps to programs in Australia.

A second opportunity is to address a key gap in our current understanding of the long-term impact of experiential civic education programs. There is now an opportunity to analyse what students have learned, what knowledge they retain, and how their behaviours may have changed as a result. Establishing an evidence network—one that provides how outcomes are measured across different sites and encourages the sharing of data on civic learning—would deepen our insights into how trust and democratic resilience are developed. This would also support the

creation of proxy indicators for civic participation and trust. By linking this program data with existing longitudinal studies, such as The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey and the [Australian Institute of Family Studies \(AIFS\)](#) longitudinal research on education, social and economic participation, and life transitions, we could track the lasting relationship between civic education and other outcomes across life stages, family, school, and community contexts.

3. Shape a future research agenda

This paper has revealed a number of research needs to understand and improve experiential civic education for young Australians. A set of research priorities is required including critical questions about the long-term impacts of experiential civic education especially with its integration with civics education in the formal curriculum.

We need to identify specific research projects and raise critical questions on PACER-linked programs to identify levels of student democratic understanding, civic participation and trust building. These research projects need to be set in the context of building democratic resilience.

The clear and unequivocal reason for the deliberate focus on school-related experiential civic education is the dearth of formal curriculum civic education in school curricula at state level. But it is clearly feasible to learn about Australian democracy and what it means to be a democratic citizen in both the post-school years and in non-related school environments. Research needs to identify the nature and range of community programs that can contribute experiential education to civic participation and trust building across life stages and demographics. These studies could include community organizations, perhaps sporting clubs, volunteer groups and religious organizations.

In these research studies multiple opportunities exist for large-scale, cross-sector research on experiential civic education and its impact in building democratic resilience. This can build on existing related research identified in Biddle et al, (2025) and adjacent studies in civic engagement, civic education and social capital. The task of building and sustaining democratic resilience, especially amongst young Australians, through the vehicle of experiential civic education, is an exciting and necessary challenge.

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