

Board Charge to NAEP Civics Assessment Framework Panel

May 2026

Goals

The goal of this session is to discuss and take action on the proposed draft Board charge to the Civics Framework Development Panel to formally launch the process of updating the 2032 NAEP Civics Assessment Framework.

Overview

Since its creation by Congress in 1988, the National Assessment Governing Board oversees and sets policy for NAEP in several congressionally mandated areas, which include determining the content to be assessed by NAEP. For each NAEP assessment, the Board conducts a framework development process resulting in a NAEP assessment framework that outlines what is to be measured and how it will be measured. The framework development process also results in assessment and item specifications with more detailed guidance for NCES in operationalizing the assessment.

The NAEP Assessment Schedule that the Board anticipates adopting at the upcoming May Board meeting indicates that the Board will update the [NAEP Civics Framework](#) for administration of the assessment in 2032 and beyond. In order to meet NCES' operational timeline for implementing the framework, all documents associated with the civics framework must be adopted by the Board no later than fall 2027. This would require that the 2032 NAEP Civics Framework be adopted at the August 2027 quarterly Board meeting, with action on the Civics Assessment and Item Specifications taken concurrently with the framework action or shortly thereafter. Adoption of a Board charge to a Civics Framework Development Panel would formally launch the process of conducting a substantive update to the NAEP Civics Framework.

Background

The current civics framework was adopted by the Board in 1996 and implemented beginning in 1998; no updates (besides very minor editorial changes for accuracy) have been made since then. The framework covers grades 4, 8, and 12; grade 8 assessments have been administered approximately every 4 years through 2026, while grade 4 and 12 assessments were last administered in 2010. Additional details for operationalizing the framework are included in the [Civics Assessment Specifications](#).

The Board policy on [Assessment Framework Development](#) describes the comprehensive, inclusive, and deliberative process to determine and update the content and format of all NAEP assessments. The Board has discussed and refined this policy several times during the past decade, most recently in March 2025. All framework

development activities are carried out in accordance with the Board policy, monitored by Board staff and the Assessment Development Committee. The full Governing Board has the sole authority to make decisions on the assessment frameworks. The official role of the Governing Board in the framework development process is summarized in the policy statement (See Principle 6: Role of the Governing Board).

The Board policy indicates that a Content Advisory Group (CAG) comprised of approximately 10 content and policy experts shall be established in each NAEP content area to maintain knowledge of current issues in the field and provide advice to the Board on whether and when updates to assessment frameworks are recommended. In spring 2024, a Social Studies Content Advisory Group was established to review and discuss issues related to the NAEP Civics and U.S. History Assessment Frameworks. This group met virtually several times between June 2024 and January 2025 and concluded that a substantive update to both frameworks was advisable. Additional details about the composition of this group and the key takeaways related to the civics framework are included in the next section. NCES also provided feedback to the CAG and the Board about operational challenges that they and their contractors have experienced implementing the current framework (included in subsequent section).

The Board policy calls for seeking public comment at the beginning of any anticipated process to make substantive updates to frameworks. The purpose of seeking initial public comment on whether and how a NAEP framework should be changed is to surface a wide range of perspectives and provide Board direction on important policy issues upfront to the extent feasible. The Board sought public comment on the current NAEP Civics Framework between February 13 – March 27, 2026. Thirty-eight submissions were received from a variety of organizations and individuals. All comments recommended some level of revision for the NAEP Civics Framework, although the extent of proposed changes varied. A summary of comments, along with the full set of comments, is included in a separate attachment.

The Board policy states: “With consideration of the policy and assessment issues in a content area, the Board shall develop a charge to articulate the need for an update to a framework and to specify policy guidance, constraints (including but not limited to those imposed by the NAEP legislation), and any specific tensions to resolve in the development of framework recommendations” (Principle 2e). The policy also notes that the charge shall be informed by recommendations from the CAG and initial public comment, and that the charge should explicitly indicate whether framework updates are intended to be minor or substantive. Finally, Principle 2h notes, “The Board charge for substantive updates shall explicitly articulate whether maintaining trends with assessment results from the previous framework should be prioritized above other factors, recognizing that the initial judgment is evaluative and the ultimate determination will be made based on empirical analyses.”

Initial Guidance from Social Studies Content Advisory Group on the Civics Framework

ADC and Board leadership agreed to a staff proposal for convening a Social Studies Content Advisory Group (CAG) on a short-term basis beginning in spring 2024 to serve as a proof of concept of the updated framework development policy that was subsequently adopted in March 2025 and to provide advice to Board staff and members on preparing for potential updates of the NAEP Civics and U.S. History Frameworks. This group provided input on what information and research to gather to inform the framework updates and how to navigate content, policy, and other issues. ADC Chair Patrick Kelly facilitated and participated in most of the group's virtual meetings that took place between June 2024 and January 2025.

The Social Studies CAG was comprised of ten consultants with expertise in United States history and/or civics, some of whom have previous experience working with NAEP frameworks and/or assessments in these subjects. Members represented a range of perspectives, demographic characteristics, and experience at the elementary and secondary levels. Individuals were invited to participate in the Social Studies CAG following review and discussion by the Assessment Development Committee and the Executive Committee.

The NAEP Social Studies Content Advisory Group consisted of the following individuals:

Paul Carrese, Arizona State University; The Jack Miller Center

Louise Dube, iCivics

LaGarrett King, University of Buffalo, Center for K-12 Black History and Racial Literacy Education

Peter Levine, Tufts University

Freda Lin, YURI Education Project; National Council for History Education Board of Directors

Connie López-Fink, University School of Nashville; Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Amber Northern, Thomas B. Fordham Institute; Virginia State Board of Education

Francis O'Malley, University of Delaware; CCSSO Social Studies Collaborative

Alex Red Corn, The University of Kansas; Kansas Association for Native American Education

Sharon Thorne-Green, Katy Independent School District; National Council for Social Studies Board of Directors

The Social Studies CAG discussed issues related to both the NAEP Civics and U.S. History Frameworks. Key takeaways for the civics framework from this initial work are largely based on, but not limited to, discussions with the Social Studies CAG; other sources of information include discussions with Board staff and NCES staff; research reports, and other publicly available information.

1. Current state of the NAEP Civics Framework and assessments

The framework documents were created in the 1990s and do not reflect some aspects of current Board policy/procedures and contemporary best practices; for example:

- There is a lack of specificity in frameworks (instead, many critical details reside only in the specifications documents)
- There is a lack of focus on assessment design (including sample items) and reporting (including contextual variable recommendations)
- The front matter/introduction/overview does not include some (largely boilerplate) background on NAEP, nor does it contain explicit definitions of achievement in civics for NAEP

The contrast between the structure of the NAEP Civics Framework and the NAEP frameworks in other subject areas is stark. The civics framework is relatively short, largely because it is missing key details needed to operationalize the assessment. Instead, the assessment specifications document contains much more detail on what could be assessed but consists of such long lists that it is only possible to cover a small proportion of this content on any given assessment. For example, the specifications include 26 pages of specific content covering knowledge, skills, and dispositions that could be measured just for grade 8; the assessment cannot possibly cover anywhere near that amount of content, even if there was only one item targeted to each statement.

The current approach to frameworks and assessments in other NAEP subjects is to include substantial detail in the framework about what should be assessed (e.g., content statements describing assessment targets for each area and grade level), with additional elaboration on boundaries and clarifications provided in the specifications document. For example, the 2028 NAEP Science Assessment Framework indicates the following physical science disciplinary concept for grade 4: “P4.2: Many materials can be solid and liquid depending on temperature.” The 2028 NAEP Science Assessment and Item Specifications add the following boundary to this concept: “Gas is not assessed at this grade level.” Although some subject-specific variation is expected, a general principle is that the framework should contain sufficient information to communicate to the public what concepts are assessed, while the specifications contain additional details to help guide item developers.

The lack of information about assessment design and sample items (including an absence of description about key features of items) also contributes to a situation in which NCES and their item developers are left to fill in the gaps about what is intended by the frameworks.

Another outdated aspect of the current framework documents is a lack of focus on reporting, including an absence of recommendations for contextual variables¹ (now part of the Board policy on framework development). In addition, the front matter and introductory chapters lack some (now largely boilerplate) background on NAEP and do not contain an explicit definition of achievement in civics for NAEP.

Although the framework and specifications documents have largely remained unchanged over a long period of time, the assessments have evolved in several ways that are not reflected by the framework documents, such as:

- For grade 8, the civics assessment transitioned from paper to digital with the 2018 administration (along with the rest of the NAEP program) but the framework was not updated to reflect digital item types
- The framework documents include several elements that were unable to be operationalized for various reasons (see feedback from NCES) but the framework was not updated to remove or revise elements that were not feasible to implement

Therefore, changes to the structure and details of the framework documents are likely needed just to reflect the current state of the assessments, before even taking into account any changes to the assessment content that may be needed.

2. Current state of standards, assessments, and instruction in civics across the country

Unlike in other subject areas assessed by NAEP (i.e., math, reading, and science), there is much less convergence among state social studies standards, instruction, and assessment. Many state standards in social studies are intentionally general and non-specific in terms of content (with more of a focus instead on skills) to allow for local variation and to attempt to avoid controversy. States are not required to assess students in social studies under ESSA, and those that do opt to assess may do so at limited grades and areas (e.g., a citizenship test as a graduation requirement). It is not particularly surprising that federalism may lead to more variation across states and local jurisdictions in civics as compared to other subject areas. In addition, states typically have not invested in social studies education at anywhere near the levels of funding for research and practice that is provided for math, reading, and science.

¹ The introduction to the NAEP Civics Framework (p. 4) does reference two supporting documents in addition to the Specifications: *Recommendations for Background Questions* and *Reporting Recommendations* – but these documents could not be located and it is now Board policy to include this information in the framework itself.

One of the lessons learned from the recent update of the NAEP Science Assessment Framework is that reliance on a consensus document (i.e., the NRC Framework for K-12 Science Education) as a foundation for specific content to include in a framework can be very helpful when feasible, but there is not quite an analogous document for civics. (Recent consensus efforts such as the Educating for American Democracy Roadmap do contain important lessons for NAEP but do not detail specific content expectations at the level necessary for building an assessment.)

3. Larger context of civics, including what can be learned from key tensions and debates and other consensus efforts

The field of social studies education has experienced several recent debates, including: (1) the extent to which social studies instruction should focus on national shortcomings versus achievements; (2) skepticism versus support of patriotism; (3) the roles and experiences of diverse peoples in the growth of the nation; (4) the extent to which instruction should focus on inquiry and taking action versus acquiring factual knowledge; and (5) the roles of bias and misinformation in civic discourse.

Some lessons can be learned from how these debates were navigated by a recent consensus effort, the Educating for American Democracy (EAD) Roadmap (2021). The EAD Roadmap was produced by a cross ideological team of more than 300 historians, political scientists, educators, and many others who provided input and grappled with key debates and challenges to reach compromise and consensus. For example, the articulation of the design challenge of “civic honesty, reflective patriotism” asks, “How can we offer an account of U.S. constitutional democracy that is simultaneously honest about the past without falling into cynicism and appreciative of the founding without tipping into adulation?”

A recent bipartisan effort conducted by the Fordham Institute, The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History in 2021, produced a list of review criteria that delineates essential knowledge, content, skills, and dispositions in each subject area for elementary school, middle school, and high school. There are many parallels between the EAD Roadmap and this evaluation of standards, and the review criteria may serve as another helpful resource to the framework panel when evaluating what should be included in the NAEP framework and in particular deciding how to navigate potentially controversial issues.

The EAD Roadmap is intended to inform instruction in history and civics rather than assessment, and the document consists of open-ended questions rather than some of the potential answers that might inform assessment development. However, the guiding principles and terminology included in the EAD Roadmap have particular relevance for NAEP to the extent that they represent consensus on key debates and tensions in the

field. The following terminology from the EAD Roadmap may be especially relevant for inclusion in the NAEP Civics Framework: reflective patriotism; constitutional democracy, republic and democratic republic (rather than democracy); civil disagreement and civic friendship; unity and diversity, and *e pluribus unum*.

In accordance with the NAEP assessment framework development policy generally, it will be particularly important to ensure that any updates of the civics framework are conducted in a way that is nonpartisan and ensures compromise, consensus, and transparency throughout the process. The framework must reflect balanced views and multiple perspectives. Any updates to the introductory chapter of the framework should reflect important consensus principles that undergird the subject area.

The Social Studies CAG discussed the importance of the introductory chapter of the framework laying out why civics is essential. For example, the framework could put forth that the purpose of civics education is to prepare citizens for sustaining American's constitutional republic. Revisions of the introductory chapter could weave in essential principles such as: informed and committed citizenship in the American constitutional order means defining and addressing public problems and building a more perfect society along with people who are different and who may disagree; the forging of *E Pluribus Unum* as the basis of sustaining popular consent of the governed; preparing for citizenship by understanding the values, principles, and governmental forms upon which the nation was founded, continues to be guided, and has attempted to honor; understanding and practicing reflective patriotism (seeking to preserve and improve the principles of our constitutional republic) and civic honesty (acknowledging difficult realities in trying to live up to these principles); and understanding balanced views and multiple perspectives, along with how to evaluate the credibility and validity of sources of information.

On the debate between assessment of content knowledge and skills/dispositions, the Social Studies CAG was in agreement that content knowledge should be centered in the framework, with the skills/dispositions representing the application of that content. That is, "content free" skills and dispositions should not be included in the frameworks or assessments (this is consistent with the consensus reached in both the NAEP Mathematics and Science Frameworks, where practices are assessed only in conjunction with content knowledge and as a way of demonstrating application of factual knowledge).

The Social Studies CAG also was in agreement that representation of American Indians and tribal nations is important for the NAEP Civics Framework. The current framework repeatedly references, "federal, state, and local government" but neglects "tribal government," which is also important to include. There are many states (including Arizona, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, New

York, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, and Washington, among others) with specific efforts to better represent American Indians and tribal nations in their standards, and we can learn from those efforts in addition to research reports and consultation with expert individuals and organizations such as the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) and the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).

4. Initial recommendations for priority revisions

It is important to note that the Social Studies CAG felt that much of the existing content is still sound; although some important updates are needed, the necessary revisions generally have been characterized as an effort in “weeding and seeding” rather than a wholesale overhaul of the framework.

The bulleted list below of priority revisions for the NAEP Civics Framework deriving from the work with the Social Studies CAG are as follows:

- Structural changes to framework and specification documents to better align with current Board policy and practice, such as: general principles that undergird civics, additional background on NAEP generally, more detail on assessment design and sample items, recommendations for contextual variables and reporting, and more explicit information about what content should be assessed at each grade level (with some “weeding and seeding” from what currently appears in the Specifications)
- Revisions to terminology, to better reflect current consensus
- Increased representation of American Indians and tribal nations
- Explicit attention to media and information literacy
- There is an overemphasis on national governance and too little on federalism (to include state constitutions, tribal sovereignty, and other governing authorities).
- In general, the framework needs a better balance between (a) appropriate focus on the US Constitution and its governmental forms and (b) understanding the complexity of American politics and government after three centuries of legislative, political, and social development; e.g., that not all executive branch functions and agencies are similar, and not all forms of speech and press fit easily in traditional First Amendment categories (there are huge practical differences between the CIA and the EPA, and between newspapers and social media).
- There is an overemphasis on government in general as opposed to civil society, community, service, and community solutions. More content that is needed in this area includes questions about various entities other than the government (associations in civil society, companies, parties, unions, social movements, media platforms).

- There is no adequate representation of our digital democracy and the impact of media and influence, specifically with regard to digital technology. This is no longer feasible. Students need to have media/information literacy, civic online reasoning (including “Stimulus Materials” that mirror the digital online interfaces that students interact with). There is a lack of any coverage of redefinition of “media” in modern American society.
- There is an underemphasis on pluralism and tolerance as civic virtues embedded in our system; civil disagreement, civic reasoning, and civic friendship across divergent views should be articulated as civic virtues.
- The current framework is out of balance between the two parts of civic knowledge: (a) understanding forms of government and institutions and (b) working toward a more perfect union. The latter is currently underplayed.
- The list of participatory skills seems miscellaneous and some are dated. For instance, we now need social media skills. Consider three larger skill constructs: forming and maintaining effective groups; analyzing institutions to understand how people can work within and affect them; and deliberating with people who disagree.
- Reflective patriotism (appropriately defined) should be included in the dispositions, and in general “skills” and “dispositions” language should be alternated with phrasing about “civic virtues.”
- Knowledge of positions on the political spectrum should be included, i.e., core differences between the “left” and “right.”
- The framework should include appropriate ways to craft communications to policymakers.
- There is a need for greater emphasis on the mechanics of elections; e.g., the role of citizens, role of parties, differences in election systems across institutions (Congress v President) and across states (primaries v caucuses, majoritarian v plurality, etc.).

The contract supporting the initial Social Studies Content Advisory Group ended in January 2025. A new contract will be established this summer to support a Civics Content Advisory Group. It is expected that some of the same members will continue to serve, while others may be better suited for a U.S. History Content Advisory Group.

NCES Operational Challenges with Implementing the NAEP Civics Framework

In December 2024, NCES Branch Chief for National Assessment Operations Holly Spurlock described challenges experienced implementing the current civics and U.S. history frameworks. The four issues identified for the civics assessment are:

1. Writing items across a wide range of difficulty

The Civics Assessment Specifications instruct that “a comprehensive range of item difficulties will be maintained” (p. 12), a general principle of sound measurement. NCES indicated that it has been challenging to build a balanced pool of items; the average item difficulty for the civics assessment tends to be considerably higher than the center of the student ability distribution. The civics framework and specification documents do not contain any guidance for managing item difficulty, and several requirements in the current documents tend to result in a greater number of difficult items and fewer less-difficult items. NCES has requested more explicit guidance in a revised framework to ensure that they can produce items with a wide range of item difficulty to accurately measure all students.

2. Writing distracters for selected-response items

The Civics Assessment Specifications suggest that a useful source of distracters is “common misinterpretations” (p. 26). NCES indicated that research on students’ “common misinterpretations” of civics is very limited in comparison to mathematics, reading, and science. NCES pointed out that test development staff have generally not struggled to write plausible, effective distracters for the NAEP civics items based on student uncertainties about pertinent facts, explanations, or interpretations. However, it is difficult to claim that distracters represent “common misinterpretations” given the lack of an established evidence base in this area. Therefore, the reference to “common misinterpretations” being a source of distracters could be removed from the specifications to more accurately reflect current research and practice in this area.

3. Implementing subscales

The Civics Assessment Specifications recommend reporting scores for the assessment overall and for subscales based on the five content areas (p. 13). Given the distribution targets across the content areas and the total number of items at each grade level, the civics assessment was implemented with a univariate scale and subscales have never been produced. (While there is no technical documentation on the decision to report a univariate scale for Civics instead of reporting separate content subscales as called for in the NAEP Civics Assessment Specifications, it is likely that this decision was made due to resources and budget constraints at the time.)

4. Use of stimuli

The Civics Assessment Specifications require that “each exercise will contain a specific stimulus” (p. 22) and provide guidelines for selecting both text-based and graphic stimulus materials at each grade. NCES expressed concern that the framework’s demand for a significant number of items measuring “Identifying and Describing” skills combined with the fact-based nature of much of the civics content included in the

specifications, means that adding a stimulus in many cases would make the item longer, increase the cognitive load, and possibly increase difficulty, all without necessarily improving construct measurement. Absent additional guidance on the purpose and use of stimulus material across all the content and intellectual skills objectives, NCES has indicated that test development staff have struggled to meet the 100 percent stimulus target. Over multiple grade 8 assessments, approximately 55 percent of the items have been based on a stimulus.

Development of the Board Charge

The charge is intended to reflect any policy guidance for which the Board has sufficient information to reach consensus at the outset of the process; it is not intended to be comprehensive of all policy issues that might emerge throughout the process nor to reflect guidance for which content expertise is necessary.

The initial Board charge is not the only opportunity for the Board to provide direction to the framework panel. Board staff will be closely involved in all stages of implementing the framework update process, including attendance at panel meetings. Updates will be provided from the panel to the Board throughout the process, with additional opportunities for the Board to update existing guidance based on new information or provide guidance on new issues.

The following elements were included in the charge in accordance with the Board policy, based on standard procedures; discussions with the Social Studies Content Advisory Group, NCES, and ADC; and feedback from initial public comment:

- Reference to the Board’s legislatively-mandated roles and responsibilities for framework development (standard practice)
- Reference to the key steps in the process delineated by the Board policy on framework development (standard practice)
- Reference to consideration of state standards and assessments (standard practice)
- Categorization of the framework update as substantive (versus minor) (required by Board policy)
- Reference to the need to update the framework structure to reflect current practice for NAEP frameworks while taking care to not include unnecessary text that makes the document less accessible and potentially more prone to political ideology
- Commitment to maintaining trend by avoiding unnecessary changes to the current framework (required by Board policy)

- Reference to the need for considering feasibility of recommendations (standard practice)
- Guidance on centering content knowledge and incorporating skills/dispositions/practices as the application of that content knowledge
- Guidance on including and balancing traditional and contemporary civic contexts
- Guidance on ensuring that the framework can support the development of assessment items to measure a wide range of student performance

The Board charge is not meant to focus on content recommendations; information collected during this initial stage in the process (including input from public comment and the Social Studies Content Advisory Group) will serve as a critical resource for the Civics Framework Development Panel as they formulate recommendations on the revised framework for the Board's consideration.

Next Steps

Following adoption of a Board charge, the procurement process is expected to be completed this summer to secure contractual support for a Civics Content Advisory Group and revision of the NAEP Civics Framework (including convening a Civics Framework Development Panel). The Board will conduct a nominations process for framework participants, and nominees will be reviewed by ADC and Executive Committee members in accordance with the Board policy.