

Civic Education in the Digital Age: A Scoping Review of Humanities-Based Approaches to Strengthening Democratic Engagement in the United States

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Abstract: Democratic participation among U.S. citizens is constrained by challenges such as political polarization, declining civic engagement, and digitally mediated misinformation. Yet, there exists limited studies that explore the potential of humanities-based approaches in strengthening democratic engagements in the digital era. This scoping review examined humanities-based and media literacy approaches to civic education, aiming to map pedagogical strategies and their contributions to democratic engagement. Eight studies encompassing qualitative research, systematic reviews, and conceptual analyses were reviewed and synthesized. Findings indicated that digital and popular media serve as critical spaces for shared learning, identity formation, and civic engagement, particularly among marginalized youth. Media literacy, equity-centred pedagogy, and active experiential strategies (e.g., simulations, service learning, and primary-source analysis) foster critical thinking, interpretive skills, and civic discourses. However, gaps exist in the implementation, evaluation, and long-term outcomes of these approaches. Nevertheless, humanities-based approaches offer promising frameworks to cultivate informed, critically engaged citizens prepared for participatory democracy in the digital era.

Keywords: Civic education, Democratic participation, United States, Digital age, Media literacy, Humanities-based approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is not an inheritance that is passed on from one generation to the other; rather, it is a practice that must be intentionally learned and strengthened across generations. Many democratic societies, like the United States of America, are faced with mounting pressures that undermine civic participation, trust in institutions, and the quality of public discourse (Darian-Smith, 2025). For instance, a recent survey revealed a steady decline in democratic engagements, with youth voter turnout in the 2020 elections ranging from 37% in the highest-performing states to just 13% in other states, revealing persistent inequities in young people's political participation (Olanrewaju, 2022). At the same time, ideological divisions between conservatives and liberals continue to widen, with polarization intensifying around national elections (McCoy & Somer, 2021). Research indicates that more than 50% of adults now obtain news from social media platforms, where algorithmic curation, misinformation, and fragmented information ecosystems deepen societal divides, further compounding these dynamics. Consequently, decreased electoral participation, intensified polarization, and a digitally mediated environment saturated with misinformation point to a fundamental crisis in democratic engagement (Maati *et al.*, 2024; Rattanasevee *et al.*, 2024). This raises urgent questions about whether current approaches to civic education are adequate for an era defined by digital technologies and algorithmically structured public life.

Civic education has historically played a central role in sustaining democratic societies by emphasizing the transmission of civic knowledge, institutional literacy, and shared democratic values through classroom-based instruction (Charest, 2021; Borhan, 2025). The digital media has progressively become an integral part of civic and political life, especially for the youth. For instance, youth-led engagement in movements like the Black Lives Matter and the DREAMer movement demonstrates this shift (Stone, 2024; Sotelo, 2025). Despite this transformation, civic education in the United States continues to rely heavily on traditional lecture-based and textbook-driven approaches. Meanwhile, research indicates that active and participatory instructional methods are more effective for developing the digital civic competencies required today (Saleh *et al.*, 2022; Peart *et al.*, 2022).

The use of conventional methods alongside the dynamic realities of digital civic participation reflects a major disconnection. For example, research has shown that digital platforms often obscure audience boundaries and amplify the reach and consequences of communication, thereby complicating the efforts of young people to navigate public discourse responsibly (Peters *et al.*, 2022). Research has further shown that the United States exhibits one of the widest age gaps in voter turnout among advanced democracies, and state-mandated civics test policies show little effect on youth electoral participation (Jung & Gopalan, 2024). This suggests that knowledge-

based approaches alone may not be sufficient to address modern-day democratic realities.

Humanities-based approaches to civic education, which are rooted in history, literature, philosophy, rhetoric, and cultural studies, have emerged in contemporary times as an effective approach to strengthening democratic engagements (Dosumbekova, 2024; Syafi'i & El-Yunusi, 2024). The humanities cultivate critical thinking, interpretive analysis, ethical reasoning, and perspective-taking, all of which are essential for navigating the complexities of digital civic life. Such capacities help young people understand how historical narratives shape political identities, recognize the constructed nature of digital information, engage with diverse and conflicting viewpoints, and develop the moral imagination needed for democratic deliberation in pluralistic societies. Despite these potential strengths, humanities-informed approaches remain underrepresented in empirical civic education research, and their unique contributions to fostering digital-age democratic engagement have not been systematically mapped (Lee *et al.*, 2023).

Considering the above gap, this study examines how humanities-based frameworks are being used to strengthen civic learning and democratic engagements in the United States. By systematically engaging the extant literature, the review seeks to provide educators, policymakers, and civic practitioners with evidence-based insights into how the humanities can support the development of informed, critically engaged, and ethically grounded citizens capable of sustaining democratic life in the digital age.

METHODS

This study adopted a scoping review methodology to map the landscape of humanities-based approaches to civic education in the United States,

with a focus on strengthening democratic engagement in the digital age. According to Arksey & O'Malley, (2005) scoping reviews are particularly appropriate for exploring broad research questions, identifying key concepts, and examining gaps in the literature across diverse study designs. We conducted a systematic search of peer-reviewed literature using electronic databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, with search terms combining civic education (“civic learning,” “civic engagement,” “democratic participation”), digital media (“digital literacy,” “media literacy,” “social media”), and humanities-based approaches (“history,” “literature,” “philosophy,” “cultural studies”). Studies were included if they focused on civic education or media literacy in the United States, applied or discussed humanities-informed frameworks or pedagogical approaches, and were published in English. Studies focusing exclusively on non-U.S. contexts, lacking discussion of civic outcomes, or non-scholarly publications were excluded. Titles and abstracts were independently screened by two reviewers, with full texts of potentially eligible studies assessed against inclusion criteria and discrepancies resolved through discussion. In all, a total of eight studies met the inclusion criteria. Key data extracted included authors, year, study type, population/context, focus of study, methods, and key findings, which were charted in structured tables to facilitate comparison across studies and identify recurring themes. A thematic synthesis approach was used to analyze findings across studies, focusing on pedagogy, media use, equity considerations, experiential learning, and engagement outcomes, enabling identification of key trends, evidence gaps, and implications for democratic civic engagement in the U.S. context (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

RESULTS

Table 1: Characteristics of Studies Included in Scoping Review

Author(s)	Year	Study Type	Population / Context	Focus of Study	Methods
Evans & Ezenna	2024	Qualitative empirical study	Black college students majoring in journalism (U.S.)	Role of popular media in connected learning, civic engagement, and critical media literacy among Black youth.	Semi-structured interviews (n = 28); thematic analysis.
Burth <i>et al.</i>	2024	Literature review	U.S.-based media literacy scholarship	Conceptualization and measurement of “impact” in media literacy education.	Review and synthesis of 300 articles (2010–2020)
Hobbs <i>et al.</i>	2022	Instrument development	Elementary and secondary	Scope and depth of media literacy implementation in	Scale development; cognitive pretesting;

		and validation study	education (Rhode Island, U.S.)	schools.	content validation; statistical validation.
Rubin	2022	Conceptual / theoretical analysis	U.S. news literacy education	Implications of misinformation (“infodemic”) for news literacy pedagogy.	Anthropological and metaphor analysis; policy and educational critique.
Share & McBride	2022	Conceptual chapter with illustrative examples	U.S. K–12 and higher education	Critical media literacy as a civic education framework.	Theoretical discussion with pedagogical examples.
Fitzgerald <i>et al.</i>	2021	Systematic review	U.S. civic education research (K–12 focus)	Civic education pedagogy, polarization, and youth participation.	Systematic review of empirical studies (2009–2019)
Halverson <i>et al.</i>	2025	Narrative review	U.S. social studies classrooms	Instructional strategies for civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions.	Review of pedagogical models and outcome evidence.
DiGiacomo <i>et al.</i>	2021	Qualitative case study	Teachers in a politically and racially diverse U.S. school district.	Teacher conceptions of civic education under polarization.	Interviews and research–practice partnership methods.

Table 2: Thematic Synthesis Studies

Theme	Description	Key Studies
Digital media as a site of civic learning	Digital and popular media function as central spaces where young people develop civic awareness, identity, and engagement	Evans & Ezenna. (2024) Share & McBride, (2022)
Media literacy as civic competence	Media and news literacy are framed as essential democratic skills, enabling critical evaluation, participation, and informed decision-making	Burth <i>et al.</i> (2024) Hobbs <i>et al.</i> (2022) Rubin, (2022)
Equity and culturally responsive civic education	Civic and media literacy practices are shaped by race, identity, and lived experience; equity must be centered in definitions of impact	Evans & Ezenna, (2024) Burth <i>et al.</i> (2024)
Active and experiential pedagogies	Instructional strategies such as discourse, simulations, service learning, and media production promote deeper civic engagement	Halverson <i>et al.</i> (2025) Share & McBride (2022)
Misinformation and institutional trust	The “infodemic” reframes civic education toward trust-building, behavioral outcomes, and responsible information use	Rubin (2022)
Polarization as a constraint on civic education	Political polarization complicates civic teaching, shaping educator practices and limiting institutional support	Fitzgerald <i>et al.</i> (2021) DiGiacomo <i>et al.</i> (2021)
Gaps in implementation and evaluation	Despite recognition of civic education’s importance, evidence on implementation consistencies and outcomes remains limited	Fitzgerald <i>et al.</i> (2021), Hobbs <i>et al.</i> (2022); DiGiacomo <i>et al.</i> (2021)

Results

One of the major themes identified across the reviewed studies was the role of digital and popular media as active platforms of civic learning. The review argues that, rather than operating as channels for information consumption, media platforms served as spaces where young people interpret social issues, negotiate identity, and engage in civic discourses.

For instance, Evans and Ezenna (2024), in their study, demonstrated how Black college students use the popular media to develop civic mindsets that are grounded counter counter-narratives, community pride, and racial justice. The finding underscores the relevance of acknowledging civic learning as culturally grounded and socially mediated. Thus, humanities-based approaches, particularly those rooted in cultural studies,

history, and critical discourse analysis, can be effectively positioned to help learners interpret media texts, interrogate power relations, and situate contemporary issues within broader historical and social contexts (Share & McBride, 2022).

Media literacy also emerged as one of the basic civic competencies in the digital age. Media and news literacy were consistently shown to be essential for informed participation in democratic life, especially in contexts characterized by information overload and misinformation (Burth *et al.*, 2024; Hobbs *et al.*, 2022; Rubin, 2022). The 6 E's (Evaluation Outcomes, Enquiry, Expression, Experiential Learning, Engaged Citizenship, and Equity) framework proposed by Burth *et al.* (2024) highlights a growing understanding that the impact of media literacy needs to be assessed through engagement, expression, experiential learning, and equity-oriented outcomes and not based on individual knowledge gains alone. This new direction aligns with a long-standing emphasis on critical interpretation, ethical reasoning, and reflective judgment (Share & McBride, 2022). However, it was revealed that conceptual clarity around "impact" remains limited, hence the need for a broader theoretical integration between media literacy and civic education scholarship (Burth *et al.*, 2024).

Equity and cultural responsiveness also emerged as a critical theme that shaped civic education and democratic engagement in the digital age. The literature highlighted that civic education is influenced by race, identity, and access to institutional support. For instance, Evans and Ezenna (2024) argued that racialized experiences shape how youth in particular engage with the media and understand civic responsibility. Similarly, Burth *et al.* (2024) argued for the need to focus on equity when defining media literacy's impact. These findings contest universalistic approaches to civic education and call for the need to highlight the importance of humanities-based approaches that foreground diverse narratives, lived experiences, and moral complexity. Thus, without this attention, civic education risks reproducing existing inequalities in participation and representation.

The results further highlighted the effectiveness of active and experiential pedagogies in promoting civic and democratic engagement. Teaching strategies like the use of primary-source analysis, simulations, service learning, and media

productions were shown to be consistently linked with deeper civic learning than traditional lecture-based pedagogies (Halverson *et al.*, 2025; Share & McBride, 2022). Such pedagogies motivate students to engage with civic issues as interpretive and ethical problems rather than static pieces of knowledge. What this implies is that humanities disciplines which focus on inquiry, debate, and interpretation provide a strong foundation for such pedagogical practices. This is because they have been shown to align with the realities of digital civic life, where participation often involves narrative construction, persuasion, and public reasoning (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2021).

Moreover, the review also identified significant constraints related to misinformation and political polarization. Rubin (2022) revealed how institutional responses to misinformation increasingly shaped trust-building and behavioral outcomes, sometimes at the expense of critical inquiry. While this approach may offer short-term benefits, it raises concerns about overlooking learners' agency and critical capacity. Consequently, humanities-based civic education can play a critical role in addressing this tension by encouraging learners to critically assess authority, evaluate competing claims, and engage ethically with contested information (Share & McBride, 2022).

Finally, the themes reveal notable gaps in implementation and evaluation. For instance, despite the widespread recognition of the importance of civic education, studies consistently note uneven institutional support, limited teacher preparation, and a lack of rigorous outcome-based research (DiGiacomo *et al.*, 2021; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2021; Hobbs *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, teachers operating in politically polarized contexts often face external pressures that constrain civic instruction, even as they recognize the growing need for civic skill development. While several of the studies highlighted promising humanities-based and media literacy approaches, few offered strong empirical evidence of long-term civic outcomes (DiGiacomo *et al.*, 2021; Evans & Ezenna, 2024.), which undermines the ability to assess scalability and policy relevance.

IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS FOR DEMOCRATIC CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The findings of this review underscore several implications for strengthening democratic civic engagement in the United States. First, the integration of humanities-based and media literacy

approaches has the potential to equip the youth with critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and interpretive skills, which are imperative for navigating complex, digitally mediated information environments. Additionally, the review indicates that culturally responsive pedagogy that acknowledges racial, social, and identity-based experiences has the potential to promote meaningful engagement among marginalized populations, ensuring that civic education does not reproduce existing inequities. Further, active and experiential pedagogies such as simulations, service learning, and primary-source analysis that provide practical mechanisms for translating civic knowledge into informed actions should be encouraged.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made for education and policy. First, the review recommends the expansion of Humanities-Based Curriculum that incorporates critical analysis of historical, literary, and cultural texts to enhance students' civic judgment and ethical reasoning in the U.S. Also, there is the need to develop programs that teach students to critically assess digital content, evaluate sources, and engage responsibly in online civic discourses. Additionally, the review recommends the design of civic education initiatives that are responsive to students' social identities and lived experiences, to help address systemic disparities in participation. Further, it recommends that future studies should conduct longitudinal and mixed-methods research to assess outcomes of humanities-informed civic education to identify scalable and evidence-based strategies.

LIMITATIONS

This review focused exclusively on studies conducted in the United States, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other countries or cultural contexts. Civic education practices, digital media use, and sociopolitical environments differ globally, and the effectiveness of humanities-based approaches may vary accordingly.

CONCLUSION

The paper has revealed that humanities-based and media literacy approaches show potentials for cultivating critically engaged and ethically reflective citizens capable of participating in contemporary democracy. Digital media, equity-centred pedagogy, and experiential learning collectively support civic knowledge, skills, and

dispositions, yet the findings reveal implementation and evaluation gaps. That notwithstanding, we argue that the integration of humanities-based approaches with media literacy frameworks can equip educators and policymakers alike to better prepare citizens, particularly the youth to navigate complex social and political landscapes, which contributes to a more informed, equitable, and resilient democratic engagement.

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