



Opinion  
Daniel Pink

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# Why not require a civics test as a rite of passage for all Americans?

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One morning this January, Yulia Wardani stepped into a small office in downtown Newark to change her identity.

Across the desk was an officer of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, who began posing questions from the USCIS naturalization civics test.

*Name the U.S. war between the North and the South.*

*What do we show loyalty to when we say the Pledge of Allegiance?*

Twenty-seven years earlier, Wardani, born and raised in Jakarta, Indonesia, had married an American man. They had built a happy life together: two kids, a house in the Jersey suburbs, a cluster of close friends. But she had never become a U.S. citizen, because doing so meant relinquishing her citizenship in Indonesia, where much of her family lives. This year — her trips to Asia becoming less frequent, her American children now young adults — she decided it was time.

To pass the test, applicants must correctly answer six of 10 questions. Wardani nailed the first six in a row like Caitlin Clark draining jump shots. By early afternoon, she stood in an auditorium, right hand raised, to recite her citizenship oath. Moments later, she was posing for family photos, waving a miniature American flag.

For Team USA, adding Wardani to the roster is a huge win. I know that for sure. Because Yulia is my sister-in-law. And now she — Yulia Wardani Pink — is my fellow American.

For more than 100 years, the United States has used a civics test as a gentle screen for naturalizing new citizens. The idea behind the brief exam is straightforward: To participate fully in the life of the republic, newcomers must first evince some knowledge of the values and mechanics of that republic.

Sensible enough, right? It's an ideal whose clear logic and simple implementation make it easy to support. But watching a close relative navigate this process got me thinking.

Why not deploy a civics test more widely — as a modest hurdle other Americans must surmount before enjoying some of the many privileges of U.S. citizenship?

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The 14th Amendment holds that anyone born on U.S. soil is a citizen. Neither a jackbooted federal marshal nor a well-meaning newspaper columnist can revoke that status or force you to renew it by passing a quiz.

But citizenship is more than a legal category. It carries a broader significance that the United States' 24 million naturalized citizens inevitably consider, but that native-born Americans rarely ponder.

“We ask a lot of immigrants. We ask them to think about what their duty is in joining our community,” Sara Wallace Goodman, a political scientist at the University of California at Irvine, told me. “But we don't turn that lens around.”

Inserting a basic civics test into a few corners of American life might reposition that lens.

For example, every year, about 3.5 million Americans graduate from high school, crossing the threshold into adulthood. Why not require a civics test for graduation, as some states already do, to remind young people that their new status brings both opportunities and obligations? Goodman would go further and ask graduates to take the oath of citizenship as an additional rite of passage and a signal of their fresh civic responsibilities.

Or consider another domain, like naturalization, where the bureaucratic and the patriotic briefly twine. Today, a record 48 percent of Americans have a passport, according to the State Department. Why not offer a voluntary civics test as part of the application process — with the incentive that the applications of those who pass will be expedited? After all, when Americans travel abroad, we act as citizen ambassadors, representing Americanness overseas.

We could also install the test as a speed bump on the road to public office. We already require senators, House members, judges, military personnel and many others to repeat an oath of fealty to the U.S. Constitution. Why not ask people running for office, from county auditor to U.S. president, to sit for a test that verifies their understanding of that foundational document?

Whatever the exact approach, the aim isn't exclusion. It's the opposite.

The USCIS test isn't very difficult. Although a 2018 poll found that only 1 in 3 Americans could pass, actual applicants receive the 100 possible questions in advance. Eighty-eight percent of aspiring citizens pass on the first try. All but 4 percent pass by the second attempt. (Want to give it a go? Here's a sample quiz.)

The real value is in the preparation, not the performance. Test-takers review the questions and practice their answers. Family members quiz them around the kitchen table. They read. They learn. The exercise demands they carve out space to stop and think.

“Rituals prompt reflection on shared values,” Michael Norton, a Harvard Business School professor, told me. As he explains in a forthcoming book on the topic, rituals enhance our lives and deepen our emotions by transforming behavior from “automated” to “animated.”

Citizenship is a concept rich with meaning. It confers rights, imposes responsibilities, establishes identity and promotes belonging. But most Americans seldom stop and think about it. For us, citizenship is automated. A ritual like a civics test might animate it.

And if a lot more people experience this ritual, a few more might tackle topics that now are easier to sidestep.

How should our system of government work? Whom should it serve? Which rights are inalienable and which duties are inviolable? What do we owe one another? And, ultimately, what does it mean to be an American?

That final question is one our country has confronted many times — during the Civil War, amid the waves of European immigration in the early 20th century, and now again with a U.S. population that each day becomes more racially, religiously and ethnically diverse. As pride in being American has fallen, and as some challenge who really is an American, the matter has become more urgent.

What does it mean to be a citizen of this beautiful, complicated, sprawling nation of 336 million people?

My sister-in-law — my fellow American — had to contend with that question in ways I was never required to. That ought to change. Maybe the point of a citizenship test should not be to keep some of us out, but to keep all of us together.

### **What readers are saying**

The comments reflect a strong consensus on the importance of civics education, with many advocating for its reintroduction as a mandatory subject in schools. There is significant support for requiring a civics test for high school graduation and for political candidates,... [Show more](#)

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