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CENTER FOR GOVERNMENTAL STUDIES
Northern Illinois University

issue: *Illinois Public Education Undermines Democracy*

James M. Banovetz and Gary D. Glenn

That which contributes most to the preservation of a form of government...is the education which is proper to its constitution; for there is no benefit...unless the citizens have been...educated in the spirit of their constitution...Aristotle, The Politics

Illinois' high schools, colleges, and universities pose what may well be the greatest threat to democracy in Illinois during the 21st century. Indeed, one of the greatest internal threats to the nation's democratic system will come from the American system of public education.

Why is education important to democracy?

Leading American statesmen have always considered a formal education essential to democracy. They viewed citizens who are enlightened, politically aware, and competent to be the cornerstone of democratic government.

In his Farewell Address, George Washington urged Americans to "promote (government) as an object of primary importance...In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened."

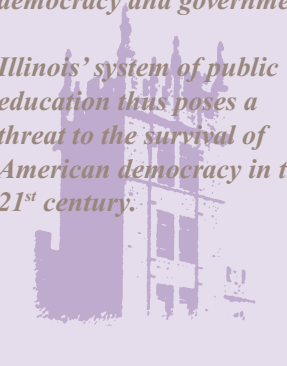
Thomas Jefferson recommended that his University of Virginia should teach both "the general principles of liberty and the rights of man" as taught in John Locke's Two Treatises of Civil Government and Philip Sidney's Discourse on Government. He also thought it essential to teach the "distinctive principles" of the United States government as contained in the Declaration of Independence, the mean-

ing of the Constitution as described by the founders in the The Federalist Papers, and Washington Farewell Address.¹

John Quincy Adams, 50 years after George Washington's Inauguration, argued the "stability and duration" of free government "was to depend upon the stability and duration in the hearts and minds of the people of those principles proclaimed in the Declaration and embodied in the Constitution of the United States."²

Abraham Lincoln also held this view. He argued that the "perpetuation" of the nation's democratic institutions depended on "the attachment of the people to them." He therefore urged that attachment "be taught in schools, in seminaries and in colleges" by teaching "a reverence for the constitution and laws."³ And at Gettysburg, in perhaps the greatest political speech in the English language, he argued that an enlightened appeal to the principles contained in the Declaration of Independence, could inspire "a

- *Citizen education in the theory, structure, and operation of democracy is essential to a successful democratic system of government.*
- *Illinois' public high schools, colleges, and universities do not require that their students learn or know anything about the governmental system of the United States and of Illinois.*
- *Illinois' public universities, with few exceptions, make no attempt to comply with their statutory obligation to require that their students have some minimum knowledge of government.*
- *Illinois' public colleges and universities operate on the presumption that an 8th grade education provides all that college graduates need to know about American democracy and government.*
- *Illinois' system of public education thus poses a threat to the survival of American democracy in the 21st century.*



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new birth of freedom,” so that “government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

What does this mean for the public schools and colleges?

Horace Mann, the 19th century “Father of the Common Schools” argued that internal political strife could be avoided only if “the majority of a self governing people are sober-minded, enlightened, studious of right, capable of comparing and balancing opposite interpretations of a fundamental law, or opposite views of a particular system of policy.” If, on the contrary, the people are “ignorant, fickle, averse to or incapable of, patient inquiry, prone to hasty decisions from plausible appearances, or reckless from prejudice or passion” then demagogues would control and undermine the democratic system.⁴

Further, Mann thought it would not be difficult to tell which of these types of citizens constitute a majority of a democratic people. “Let the spirit and tone of our congressional and legislative speech-makers, and the language of the political press throughout the country, decide the question, which of the above described classes they consider themselves as addressing.”

Mann thought that it was especially up to the school teachers whether the people became the former or the latter. If Mann was right, then the facts readily indict Illinois’, and the nation’s, schools: U.S. elections increasingly turn on advertising rather than rational persuasion, on 15 second sound bites rather than Lincoln-Douglas type extended and substantive debates, on how candidates look on television rather than their knowledge of anything politically relevant, and on

the size of their “war chest” rather than on their worthiness of public confidence. Worse still, despite the extension of voting opportunities to women, minorities, and 18 year old citizens, the percentage of voters actually voting has been on a steady decline.

Hasn't American democracy been well served by American education?

One can reasonably argue that the nation’s educational system is a primary reason why its democratic system of government has survived for over two hundred years—longer than any other democratic system of government. American education may also be a major reason why American democracy was so successful in the 20th century that it became the model against which all other systems of government are now compared and judged. It provided the intellectual foundations that enabled American democracy to survive challenges from totalitarian governments on both the right (Nazi Germany) and left (the Soviet Union).

But, as is so often noted in the world of investment, past records of accomplishment offer no guarantee of future success. Indeed, even in this first decade of the 21st century, the survival of U.S. democracy is threatened externally by international terrorism and internally by political pressures to compromise civil rights to further the fight against terrorism.

Why is the educational system a threat to democracy?

Its threat comes from the failure of the nation’s high schools, colleges, and universities to require an adequate education

in what is often called “civics,” the study of both the ideas which articulate American democratic government, the institutions which embody them, and the processes which implement them.

Recent changes in school curricula have downgraded or eliminated required civics education. The results have been disastrous. According to the congressionally authorized National Assessment of Educational Progress, student performance on civic assessment exams showed that fewer than 75 percent of the nation’s 4th, 8th, and 12th graders tested at the basic level of achievement, fewer than 25 percent tested at the proficient level of achievement, and only four percent of 12th graders tested at the advanced achievement level.

How specifically is Illinois' system of education failing?

The formal civic education “required” today in Illinois’ high schools and universities is almost nonexistent. Like much of the rest of the nation’s education system, Illinois’ schools and universities, following the lead of federal government money since the advent of the “Sputnik” era (post 1957), have emphasized education in the hard sciences—mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and geology—while de-emphasizing education in the subjects essential to a healthy democracy. Illinois, for example, funds a special school—the Illinois Math and Science Academy—and Illinois’ high schools routinely offer special, advanced courses in the hard sciences to challenge the brightest students. There are fewer if any similar courses to challenge the best students to study courses focusing on the nation’s democratic governing system.

Worse still, Illinois' high schools and universities blatantly ignore their explicit statutory obligations in the field of civics education. This is what makes contemporary education in Illinois the greatest threat to democracy in the 21st century.

What civics education is required in Illinois?

A state law (known as Senate Bill 195) requires that all graduates of Illinois public high schools, colleges, and universities must demonstrate a knowledge of the U.S. and Illinois constitutions.⁵

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) further sets forth, in its Illinois Learning Standards adopted in 1997, a set of learning objectives designed to enable students to “Understand political systems with an emphasis on the United States.” It explains the importance of this goal by saying,

The existence and advancement of a free society depends on the knowledge, skills, and understanding of its citizenry. Through the study of various forms and levels of government and the documents and institutions of the United States, students will develop the skills and knowledge that they need to be contributing citizens, now and in the future. (p. 45)

The standards elaborate on this goal by dividing it into six components and listing general requirements for each level that should be provided by early elementary, late elementary, middle/junior high school, early high school, and late high school levels of education.

Unfortunately, these civics education requirements are inadequate, circumvented, and unenforced. In short, as applied by the schools and universities, they are not accomplishing their intended purpose. Further, the Illinois General Assembly's express statutory directive is (1) not being enforced by any state agency and (2) being ignored by the state's education leaders.

Not only are the requirements set forth in the statutes and in the state's learning standards not being met, but even the range of elective courses offered in the field of civics is severely limited.

The paucity of relative high school courses can be demonstrated by the adoptions of the only text available on Illinois state and local government. Written by public school teachers and published as a public service by the University of Illinois, Springfield, the text has been used at some time in only 46 Illinois public high schools since it was first published in 1994. Currently, only eight public high schools are using the text's third edition published in 2002.

There is little evidence that Illinois' high school students are required to learn about the ideas on which democracy is based—the very ideas which the statesmen cited above believed to be the content of the education upon which free democratic government would stand or fall.

Indeed, the decline of teaching ideas is widespread across higher education, not only regarding civic education. Recently John A. Flowers, former President of Cleveland State University, characterized as “both a national disgrace and a disaster” the fact that “the millions of first-generation undergraduates now in

mass-market state institutions, like regional state universities and community colleges, have had little to no exposure to the power of thought...these students desperately need the influence of the proven great thinkers of the past. They are not getting it.”⁶

Multiple-choice tests, based on facts or “information,” are not calculated or intended to achieve George Washington's proposal that “public opinion should be enlightened.” Enlightenment is not learning information. Nor is such mass, idea free, teaching and testing a means for achieving Horace's Mann's prescription for educating citizens who are “sober-minded, enlightened, and...capable of comparing and balancing opposite interpretations of a fundamental law, or opposite views of a particular system of policy.” Educating to political facts without political ideas, notably “the proven great thinkers of the past,” educates a public to be “ignorant, fickle, averse to or incapable of, patient inquiry.”

The “Father of the Common Schools” predicted that the failure of proper civic education would produce “a warfare, destructive in the end alike to victors and vanquished.” And that this war would be waged when politicians, the political press, and the people engaged in “the vindication and eulogy of fellow partisans, however wicked, and the defamation of opponents however virtuous.” The venomous vituperation directed at the last two U.S. presidents bears strong witness that Horace Mann's warnings about the consequences of inadequate civics education have come true.

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How are Illinois' civics requirements inadequate?

Under these requirements, Illinois schools need not provide any education in the “structures and functions” of Illinois’ 6,000 units of local government beyond elementary school, and none in Illinois state government after middle/junior high school. The standards require that students be taught “the importance of fundamental concepts expressed and implied in major documents including the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution and the Illinois Constitution” at the “Late Elementary” level. Functionally, in many school districts in Illinois, this education is delivered at the 4th grade level. The topic is revisited in terms of constitutional provisions at the Middle/Junior High School.

In short, *the Standards require no instruction of high school students in the topics deemed most important to democracy by the nation's founders, by past political leaders, and by the founder of the nation's public school system.*

The national Center for Civic Education recommended in 2001 that there be a “Full-year course (120 hours)” in “Applied Civics/Participation in Government” at the twelfth grade level.⁷

Commenting on the Illinois requirements, a study⁸ of *The Civic Education of American Youth* conducted by the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas in 1999 reported that, “It is not easy to find civics within these standards. The closest reference is in ‘State Goal 14: Understand political systems, with an emphasis on the United States,’ but even here the teacher would have to interpret this to mean civics.” (p. 261)

The Senate Bill 195 requirement is similarly flawed. It only requires that students be tested on their knowledge. As the LBJ School study noted,

Successfully addressing all components of civic education requires statewide civics assessment tools that are more comprehensive than just a bubble-test on basic civic knowledge. Being an effective citizen demands much more than simply knowing when the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed or how many votes are needed to override a presidential veto. (p. 149)

How are these requirements circumvented?

Notwithstanding the inadequacy of the statutory civics education requirement, Illinois’ public schools and colleges respond to them by providing as little civics education as possible.⁹

Illinois’ public schools, for example, typically respond to the Senate Bill 195 requirement by requiring that several (2-6) weeks of the required eighth grade American history course be devoted to the study of the U.S. and Illinois constitutions. Students are then tested on this knowledge within the regular structure of their course requirements. Middle school students who have passed such a test then are certified as having met the Senate Bill 195 requirements.

Table 1 (on the next page) shows that Illinois community colleges almost all evade the requirement, although all but three of the 46 community colleges (94 per cent) acknowledge its existence. This acknowledgment makes it look like they either recognize the need for politically educated citizens, or are following the

law, or both. However, looks are deceiving. All but 3 (94 per cent) accept the Illinois high school transcript as fulfilling the statutory requirement!¹⁰

Table 2 (on page 6) shows that Illinois’ senior universities do even less to comply with statutory requirements. Many simply ignore the requirement altogether. Only 4 (33%) of the 12 Illinois public universities even acknowledge the statutory requirement. Of the 33%, one follows the community college evasion tactic of accepting the Illinois high school transcript as sufficient, thereby effectively gutting the requirement of any higher education substance; one requires a “constitution exam” but no course; and two require either a course or a “constitution exam.” Since these last two seem to be making an effort, they deserve mentioning by name: Illinois State University and Northeastern Illinois University.

In short, despite the statutory mandate, Illinois high schools, colleges, and universities make, on the whole, little effort to require any civics (citizenship) education of their graduates. Beyond the 8th grade, they mostly make no effort to require citizenship education of their students.

Even worse, Illinois community colleges and Western Illinois University operate on the de facto principle that an elementary school education in civics sufficiently prepares university graduates for effective citizen participation in a democracy.

table one Illinois Community Colleges Civic Education Requirements

	Civic Requirement	Exam	Course	IL HS Transcript
City Colleges of Chicago				
Harold Washington College		*	*	*
Harry S. Truman College	Y	*	*	*
Kennedy-King College	Y	*	*	*
Malcolm X College	Y	*	*	*
Olive-Harvey College	Y	*	*	*
Richard J. Daley College	Y	*	*	*
Wilbur Wright College	Y	*	*	*
Illinois Community College Board				
Black Hawk College	Y	*	*	*
Carl Sandburg Community College	Y	*	*	*
College of DuPage	Y	*	*	*
College of Lake County	Y	*	*	*
Danville Area Community College	Y	*	*	*
Elgin Community College	Y	*	*	*
Heartland Community College	Y	*	*	*
Highland Community College	Y	*	*	*
Illinois Central College	Y	*	*	*
Illinois Valley Community College	Y	*	*	*
John A. Logan Community College	N			
John Wood Community College	Y	*	*	*
Joliet Junior College	Y	*	*	*
Kankakee Community College	Y	*	*	*
Kaskaskia Community College	Y	*	*	*
Kishwaukee Community College	Y	*	*	*
Lake Land Community College	Y	*	*	*
Lewis and Clark Community College	Y	*	*	*
Lincoln Land College	Y	*	*	*
McHenry Community College	Y	*	*	*
Moraine Valley Community College	Y	*	*	*
Morton College	Y	*	*	*
Oakton Community College	Y	*	*	*
Parkland Community College	Y	*	*	*
Prairie State Community College	Y	*	*	*
Rend Lake Community College	Y	*	*	*
Richland Community College	Y	*	*	*
Rock Valley College	Y	*	*	*
Sauk Valley Community College	Y	*	*	0
Shawnee Community College	Y	*	*	*
South Suburban Community College	Y	*	*	*
Southeastern Illinois College	Y	*	*	*
Spoon River College	Y	*	*	*
Triton College	Y	*	*	*
Waubonsee Community College	Y	*	*	*
William Rainey Harper College	Y	*	*	*
Illinois Eastern Community College System				
Frontier Community College	Y	*	*	*
Lincoln Trail College	Y	*	*	*
Olney Central College	Y	*	*	*
Wabash Valley College	Y	*	*	*
Other Illinois Community Colleges				
Lincoln College	N			
Midstate College	N			
Totals	46	43	41	43
Percentages	94%	94%	89%	94%

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tabletwo Illinois Public Universities
Civic Education Requirements

	Civic Requirement	Exam	Course	IL HS Transcript
Chicago State University	Y	*		
Eastern Illinois University	N			
Governor's State University	N			
Illinois State University	Y	*	*	
Northeastern Illinois University	Y	*	*	
Northern Illinois University	N			
Southern Illinois University- Carbondale	N			
Southern Illinois University- Edwardsville	N			
University of Illinois at Chicago	N			
University of Illinois at Springfield	N			
University of Illinois at Urbana- Champaign	N			
Western Illinois University	Y	*	*	*
Totals	4	4	3	1
Percentages of Y in column 1	33%	100%	75%	25%

tablethree Importance of Civics Education

Question: Teaching students about government, about the principles upon which our democracy is based, and upon how our national, state, and local governments work. Would you say this is very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important?

Value Label	Value	Frequency	Percent
Very important	1	940	77.8
Somewhat important	2	248	20.5
Not very important	3	14	1.2
Not at all important	4	2	.2
Don't know	7	5	.4
		1209	100.0

Who is responsible for enforcing statutory requirements?

The statute does not assign responsibility for its enforcement. General oversight responsibility for the operation of Illinois' public schools is vested in the Illinois State Board of Education (IBSE). Responsibility for oversight of the operations of the state's colleges and universities is vested in the governing boards of each of the state's community colleges and universities.

Do Illinois residents and voters support civics education?

Despite declining voter turnouts in recent elections, available data suggests that Illinois public support for civics education is very high. In 2002, the Illinois policy survey conducted annually by Northern Illinois University's Center for Governmental Studies asked two questions to measure public attitudes toward civics education. The first asked about the importance of civics education. As noted in Table 3, civics education was thought to be important by 99.7 per cent of the respondents.¹¹

The survey also asked respondents how much time they felt should be devoted to the study of civics in the course of a high school education. Over 70 per cent of the respondents believed that students should spend either a full semester or a full school year studying civics; less than 11 per cent of the respondents felt that six weeks or less, the amount of time currently devoted to the subject in most middle schools, was adequate. Less than one half of one per cent believed that the current, common high school curriculum of not covering civics at all was adequate. This data is reported in Table 4 (on page 7).¹²

table*four* Curriculum Time That Should Be Devoted to Civics

Question: How much time do you think high school students should spend learning about American democracy and the way American governments work? Would you say:

Value Label	Value	Frequency	Percent
No time at all	1	8	.7
6 weeks	2	121	10.0
Half a semester (8 weeks)	3	209	17.3
One semester	4	421	34.8
A full school year	5	415	34.3
Don't know	7	35	2.9
		1209	100.0

Taken together with Senate Bill 195, the data in the two tables suggests that there is a substantial gap between what the law requires and the public expects, on the one hand, and, on the other, what Illinois' educational leadership is willing to deliver.

How does Illinois' record compare to other states?

Illinois is listed in the LBJ School study as one of 27 states that mandate instruction in civics and also as one of 29 states that mandate a high school civics course be required and taught, but the civics content described by early statesmen and recommended by Horace Mann is required by the state's standards only at the middle school/junior high school level. Further, despite statutory requirements to the contrary, student failure to fulfill the civics requirement does not, according to the LBJ School study, prevent either promotion or graduation in Illinois' public schools. Illinois has no statutory requirement for general instruction in civics, requires no specific courses in the subject, and has no other statutes on civic education. Few states have all of these provisions, but some have several.

Over-all, based on the LBJ School report, Illinois' public school education is marginally comparable with what appears to be a very weak record of national commitment to civics education in the nation's public schools. But at the university level, Illinois' statutory civics requirement is functionally ignored by most of the state's universities, including the University of Illinois.

table*five* Illinois Voting Turnout in Presidential Elections

Election Year	Illinois Voting Turnout	National voter turnout by state			Compared to other great lakes states, Illinois turnout was:		
		High	Range	Low	Higher	Same	Lower
1960	76%	80%		25%	Michigan New York Ohio Wisconsin	Indiana	Minnesota
1980	58%	70%		41%	New York Ohio	Indiana	Michigan Minnesota Wisconsin
2000	52%	67%		41%	New York Indiana		Michigan Minnesota Ohio Wisconsin

Sources: [http://geocities.com/katerenajb/compsci/an%";](http://geocities.com/katerenajb/compsci/an%) <http://www.uselectionatlas.org/USPRESIDENT/frametextj.htm/>

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Does lack of civics education in the public schools affect voting behavior in Illinois?

Low voting turnout is a major concern in today's American political culture and it is clear that, despite heavy voter registration efforts through such tools as motor voting registration and registration in the schools, voting behavior in the 18 to 21 year old age group has been, and continues to be, very low. Many anecdotal commentaries on the problem also cite evidence that young voters are both disinterested and uninformed about governmental matters. To this lack of interest and information on the part of young voters, Illinois' and the nation's public schools contribute very little or nothing at all. Illinois' universities do even less.

Even more disturbing is the prospect that, as the younger, uninformed, low percentage turnout voters age, and as the older, higher percentage voting population dies, over-all voter turnout in elections may continue to fall. Table 5 (on the previous page) shows that is precisely the trend that Illinois is experiencing. It also shows that, compared to other states bordering on the Great Lakes, Illinois has moved in the last forty years from having one of the highest presidential election turnouts to having one of the lowest.

The lack of civics education may or may not be responsible for the steady decline in voter turnout in Illinois, but the state's high schools and universities would be hard pressed to demonstrate that they are doing anything in their classrooms to counter that unwanted trend.

This study began by reporting the opinion of the "Father of the Common Schools" that school teachers have a central responsibility for the civic education of democratic citizens. In Illinois, however, the teachers themselves are not even expected to have any knowledge of civics or the American system of government. As of 1995, Illinois' public universities were no longer obligated to require any sort of civic education instruction for those preparing to teach in Illinois public schools. The ISBE even abolished, by administrative action, even the requirement that Illinois teachers must have passed the inadequate "Constitution test."

What can be done to change the situation?

There are really two separate problems to be addressed. The first is the inadequacy of current requirements. Senate Bill 195 is deficient in that its requirements can be met with a simple factual test. The real need for citizenship education, as the founders and Horace Mann make clear, is for students to have an education in the ideas underscoring the nation's system of democracy. Equally significant is for students to understand the processes through which the American system is operated. The need for citizenship education can not be met with simple knowledge of facts about historical experience and institutional arrangements.

Related to this problem is the failure of the state's public schools and universities to require teaching of at least the letter, let alone the intention and spirit, of Senate Bill 195's requirements. That

failure lies wholly with the members of the Illinois State Board of Education and of the governing boards of the state's universities.

Remedying these problems will require amending the statute and that, in turn, requires action by the governor and the General Assembly. If this is attempted, careful attention should be given to two aspects of how the aims of civic education discussed here might be accomplished: 1) developing alternative strategies for delivering civics education which take account of prevailing indifference and even hostility to it, especially in higher education and more especially in colleges of liberal arts and in departments of history and political science; 2) developing effective monitoring, inducement and enforcement mechanisms.

The second problem is found in the inadequacy of the provisions governing civics education in the ISEB's Illinois Learning Standards. That, too, is a problem that requires action by the members of the ISEB and the ISEB staff.

The state's political and education leaders can choose either to address their responsibility for the future health of Illinois and American democracy; or they can continue allowing the decline of civics education with the foreseeable adverse consequences for democracy described herein, consequences already manifesting themselves in Illinois' political culture.

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Endnotes

1. Minutes of the Board of Visitors, University of Virginia, March 2, 1825
2. Jubilee Discussion of the Constitution, April, 1839.
3. Speech on the "Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions: Address before the Young Men's Lyceum," Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838. Lincoln used the word "seminaries" in this context, not as the word is used today, but rather to refer to special schools established to prepare persons for specific professions.
4. "Go Forth and Teach: Oration Delivered Before the Authorities of the City of Boston, July 4, 1842" in *Life and Works of Horace Mann*, 5 Vol. (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1891) Vol. 4, pp. 372-373.
5. See 105 Compiled Illinois Statutes (ILCS) 5/27-3.
6. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 23, 2003.
7. Center for Civic Education, Calabasas, California, http://www.civiced.org/campaign_proposal.html
8. Kenneth C. Tolo, *The Civic Education of American Youth: From State Policies to School District Practices* (Austin, TX: The Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, Policy Research Project Number 133, 1999).
9. This discussion focuses on required civics education in the public schools and colleges. Many, if not all, of the public schools offer elective courses on civics or related matters. These are not taken into account here, especially because students are under no obligation to take them and most do not. Rather this essay deals with the education both required and actually provided to students.
10. Tables 1 and 2 are compiled by Megan Kerr, graduate student in political science at Northern Illinois University. The sources are the college catalogs which are online at www.collegesource.org/search/pdfindexsearch/query.asp and through www.iecc.edu/catalog.
11. The data in Table 3 are summarized in Cynthia Nelson, *The 2002 Report on the Illinois Policy Survey*, (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Center for Governmental Studies, 2002).
12. The data in Table 4, although not reproduced in the publication noted in note # 10 above, was gathered in the same NIU Center for Governmental Studies.

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