

Civic Education and Political Participation

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Anxiety about the civic attitudes and activities of young adults in America is nothing new, and its persistence is easy to understand. As far back as evidence can be found—and virtually without exception—young adults seem to have been less attached to civic life than their parents and grandparents. Nor is it difficult to find plausible explanations for this gap. Civic attachment is linked to such factors as professional interests (and self-interests), a stable residential location, home ownership, marriage, and parenthood, all of which are statistically less characteristic of younger adults. Not surprisingly, in every generation the simple passage of time has brought maturing young adults more fully into the circle of civic life. So are today's worries any more justified than in times past? Has anything changed?

The answer, I believe, is yes. The reason is to be found in the demographic distinction between cohort effects and generational effects. "Cohorts" represent a snapshot of different age groups at the same historical moment, while "generations" represent the same age groups at different historical moments. If we compare generations rather than cohorts—that is, if we compare today's young adults not with today's older adults but with young adults of the past—we find evidence of diminished civic attachment.

Some of the basic facts are well known. In the early 1970s, about one-half of 18- to 29-year-olds voted in Presidential elections. By 2000, fewer than one-third did. The same pattern holds for congressional elections—a bit more than one-fourth in the mid-1970s, compared to less than one-fifth in 2002.

Less well known are the trends charted by a remarkable UCLA study, conducted since the mid-1960s and involving 250,000 matriculating college freshmen each year. Over this period, every significant indicator of political engagement has fallen by about half. Only 33 percent of freshmen think that keeping up with politics is important, down from 60 percent in 1966 (though up a bit from the all-time low of 28 percent recorded in

2000). Only 16 percent say they frequently discuss politics, down from 33 percent in 1966. Not surprisingly, acquisition of political knowledge from traditional media sources is way down, and as yet not enough young people are using the Internet to fill the role newspapers and network TV news once played as sources of civic information.

But the news is not all bad by any means. Today's young people are patriotic, tolerant, and compassionate. They believe in America's principles and in the American Dream. They adeptly navigate our nation's increasing diversity. And, as has been widely reported and discussed, they are more than willing to give of

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themselves to others. College freshmen are reporting significantly increased levels of volunteering in their last year of high school, a trend that seems to be carrying over to their early college years. But only one-third of today's young volunteers believe that they will continue this practice once they enter the paid work force. And there is no evidence that such volunteerism will lead to wider civic engagement.

On the contrary, young people typically characterize their volunteering as an *alternative* to official politics, which they see as self-absorbed and unrelated to their deeper ideals. They have limited knowledge of government's impact, either on themselves or on those they seek to assist. They understand why it matters to feed a hungry person at a soup kitchen; they do not understand why it matters where government sets eligibility levels for food stamps or payment levels for

the Earned Income Tax Credit. They have confidence in personalized acts with consequences they can see for themselves; they have less confidence in collective actions (especially those undertaken through public institutions), whose consequences they see as remote, opaque, and impossible to control.

I do not intend this as a reproach. The blame (if that is an appropriate characterization at all) rightly attaches to older adults, who have failed in their responsibility to transmit workable civic norms; to provide practical contexts in which young people can develop civic knowledge, dispositions, and skills; and to conduct our politics in a manner that engages young people's aspirations and ideals. The surge of patriotic sentiment among young people in the immediate wake of September 11th has not yielded a comparable surge in engaged, active citizenship. And I am not alone in tracing this gap to the failure of our public institutions to offer enough meaningful venues for young people to put their civic impulses into practice. What is true of most people is especially true for young people: we tend to respond to concrete challenges and opportunities, in the absence of which we may not be motivated to translate our good intentions into action.

Why Does Civic Disengagement Matter?

I believe that the increasing civic detachment of the young cannot be regarded with equanimity. First, let me offer a truism about representative democracy: political engagement is necessary but not sufficient for political effectiveness. If today's young people have legitimate generational interests that do not wholly coincide with the interests of their elders, then those interests cannot shape public decisions unless they are

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forcefully articulated. We should be debating higher education finance, job training, and family policy as vigorously as we do the future of Social Security and Medicare. We aren't, and we won't, unless younger Americans become more engaged. The withdrawal of a cohort of citizens from public affairs disturbs the balance of public deliberation to the detriment of those who withdraw (and of many others besides).

Second, I would offer an old-fashioned argument from obligation. Most young Americans derive great benefits from their membership in a stable, prosperous, and free society. These goods do not fall like manna from heaven; they must be produced and

renewed by each generation. Every citizen has a moral responsibility to contribute his or her fair share to sustaining the public institutions and processes on which we all depend and from which we all benefit.

Third, I come to the relation between citizenship and self-development. Even if we agree (and we may not) on the activities that constitute good citizenship, one may still wonder *why* it is good to be a good citizen. After all, it is possible for many individuals to realize their good in ways that do not involve the active exercise of citizenship. Even if we accept Aristotle's characterization of politics as the architectonic activity, it does not follow that the development of civic capacities is architectonic for every soul.

Still, there is something to the proposition that, under appropriate circumstances, political engagement helps develop capacities that are intrinsically important. I have in mind the sorts of intellectual and moral capacities that de Tocqueville and Mill discuss or gesture toward: among them enlarged interests, a wider human sympathy, a sense of active responsibility for oneself, the skills needed to work with others toward goods that can only be obtained through collective action, and the powers of sympathetic understanding needed to build bridges of persuasive words to those with whom one must act.

These links between participation and character development are empirical, not theoretical, propositions, and we do not yet have the kind of evidence we need to sustain them against doubt. On the other hand, we do not have compelling reasons to doubt them, and we can at least advance them as a plausible profession of public faith—as long as we are not too categorical about it.

It may well be that, even as civic engagement has declined, it has become not less but more necessary for the development of the human capacities just sketched. Underlying this conjecture is the suspicion that, as the market has become more pervasive during the past generation as organizing metaphor and as daily experience, the range of opportunities to develop nonmarket skills and dispositions has narrowed. For various reasons, the solidaristic organizations that dominated the US landscape from the 1930s through the early 1960s have weakened, and the principle of individual choice has emerged as our central value. Indeed, citizenship itself has become optional, as the sense of civic obligation (to vote or to do anything else of civic consequence) has faded and as the military draft has been replaced by all-volunteer armed forces. When the chips are down, we prefer exit to voice, and any sense of loyalty to something larger than ourselves has all but disappeared. In this context, the experience of collective action directed toward common purposes is one of the few conceivable counterweights to today's hyperextended principle of individual choice.

If civic engagement is more necessary than ever, our manifest failure to foster it among young adults looms all the larger. The formative mechanisms and mobilizing arenas of civic opportunity are many. For example, evidence presented in *The Civic Mission of Schools*, a national report jointly produced by the Carnegie Corporation and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and made public recently, demonstrates the impact of parents and faith-based institutions on the civic life of young people. In the remainder of this article, I will focus on the most traditional of these mechanisms and opportunities—our public schools—and on the most old-fashioned of their efforts to encourage political engagement: namely, civic education.

The Current Failure of Civic Education

The evidence that we have failed to transmit basic civic knowledge to young adults is now incontrovertible. In our decentralized system of public education, the closest thing we have to a national examination is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is devised by teams of subject-matter experts and then carefully field-tested and revised in a process directed by the National Assessment Governing Board. The NAEP is administered biennially in what are deemed “core academic subjects.” Unfortunately, civic education has not yet achieved that exalted status, and we are fortunate if civic knowledge is assessed once a decade. For each subject, four different achievement levels are defined: “below basic,” which means little if any demonstrated knowledge of the subject, “basic,” which indicates partial mastery; “proficient,” which is the level representing a standard of adequate knowledge; and “advanced.” These achievement levels represent absolute thresholds, not percentiles. In principle, every student could reach the level of proficiency.

The results of the most recent NAEP Civics Assessment were released three years ago. They were not encouraging. For fourth-, eighth-, and (most relevant for our purposes) twelfth-graders, about three-fourths were below the level of proficiency. Thirty-five percent of high school seniors tested below basic, indicating near-total civic ignorance. Another 39 percent were at the basic level, demonstrating less than the working knowledge that citizens need.

When we combine these NAEP results with other data from the past decade of survey research, we are driven to a gloomy conclusion: whether we are concerned with the rules of the political game, political players, domestic policy, foreign policy, or political geography, student performance is quite low. And this is puzzling. While the level of formal schooling in the US is much higher than it was 50 years ago, the civic

knowledge of today’s students is no higher than that of their parents and grandparents. We have made a major investment in formal education, without any discernible payoff in increased civic knowledge.

Several state-by-state analyses of civic education, the most recent of which, *Educating Democracy: State Standards to Ensure a Civic Core*, was released by the Albert Shanker Institute in the spring of 2003, help explain these unimpressive results. While most states endorse civic education in their constitutions and declaratory policies, only half the states have even partially specified a required core of civic knowledge, fewer have made a serious effort to align their civics-related courses with challenging standards, and only a handful administer exams focused exclusively on civic topics. In many states, certification requirements do not ensure that teachers called upon to teach civics will have the education and training needed to do the job. Other studies indicate that a significant percentage of history and social studies teachers, who typically end up leading civics classes, have little formal preparation for that task (or indeed for teaching history and social studies).

In addition, school-based civic education has been in decline over the past three decades. According to *The Civic Mission of Schools*, most high school civic education today consists of a single government course, compared with the three courses in civics, democracy, and government that were common until the 1960s. Unlike the traditional civics course, today’s government class analyzes and describes politics as a distant subject matter, often with little explicit discussion of citizens’ rights and responsibilities. Nor is the decline limited to high school. In just one decade, between 1988 and 1998, the proportion of fourth-graders who reported taking social studies daily fell steeply from 49 percent to only 39 percent.

The causes of this decline are multiple and not easily summarized. Let me mention just two. First, many teachers, principals, and school boards fear criticism—or even litigation—if they address topics that some parents or other members of the community may consider inappropriately controversial or political. In response, many school systems have backed away from civic education. Second, the push for high-stakes testing in core academic subjects can come at the expense of subjects not considered to be part of the core, as civics usually is not.

Does Civic Knowledge Matter?

It is easy to dismiss these findings as irrelevant to the broader concerns with which I began. Who cares whether young people master the boring content of civics courses? Why does it matter whether they can identify their representatives or name the branches of

government? Surprisingly, recent research documents important links between basic civic information and civic attributes that we have good reason to care about.

- Civic knowledge promotes support for democratic values. The more knowledge we have of the workings of government, the more likely we are to support the core values of democratic self-government, starting with tolerance.
- Civic knowledge promotes political participation. All other things being equal, the more knowledge people have, the more likely they are to participate in civic and political affairs.
- Civic knowledge helps citizens to understand their interests as individuals and as members of groups. There is a rational relationship between one's interests and particular legislation: the more knowledge we have, the more readily and accurately we connect with and defend our interests in the political process.
- Civic knowledge helps citizens learn more about civic affairs. Unless we have a certain core of knowledge, it is difficult to acquire more knowledge. Moreover, the new knowledge we do gain can be used effectively only if we are able to integrate it into an existing framework.
- The more knowledge we have of civic affairs, the less we have a sort of generalized mistrust and fear of public life. Ignorance is the father of fear, and knowledge is the mother of trust.
- Civic knowledge improves the consistency of citizens' views as expressed on public opinion surveys. The more knowledge people have, the more consistent their view over time on political affairs. This does not mean that people do not change their views, but it does mean that they know their own minds.
- Civic knowledge can alter our opinion on specific civic issues. For example, the more civic knowledge people have, the less likely they are to fear new immigrants and their impact on our country.

Doing School-Based Civic Education

As recently as a decade ago, the conventional wisdom (backed by academic research from the 1970s) was that school-based civic education was doomed to ineffectiveness. However, the most recent research points in a more optimistic direction. While there is no magic bullet, there are a number of effective approaches to civic education. *The Civic Mission of*

Schools summarizes their shared characteristics as follows:

- a deliberate, intentional focus on civic outcomes, such as students' propensity to vote, to work on local problems, to join voluntary associations, and to follow the news;
- explicit advocacy of civic and political engagement, without advocating a particular position or partisan stance;
- active learning opportunities that offer students the chance to engage in discussions of relevant issues and to take part in activities that help put a "real-life" perspective on classroom learning; and
- an emphasis on the ideas and principles that are essential to constitutional democracy, such as those found in the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, and on how they influence education, religion, the workplace, and government at every level.

In addition, this report stressed the importance of school environment and culture to the acquisition of civic skills and attitudes. The most effective programs occur in schools that:

- consciously promote civic engagement by all students, with special attention to those who might otherwise remain disengaged;
- give students opportunities to contribute opinions about school governance—through student governments and other forums such as all-school assemblies and small working groups—and to understand how school systems are run;
- collaborate with the community and local institutions to provide civic learning opportunities;
- provide teachers with access to professional development in civic education; and
- infuse a civic mission throughout the curriculum, offer an array of extracurricular activities, and provide a school climate that helps students put what they learn about civic education and democracy into practice.

The Importance and the Challenge

While the importance of effective civic education is perennial, several trends combine to make it especially urgent today: the US must integrate an unprecedented wave of immigrants into the mainstream of civic life; left unchecked, troubling inequalities in the civic participation of different socioeconomic and ethnic groups could exacerbate undesirable political and policy

WAR AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

What are the limits of justified retaliation against aggression? What actions are morally permissible in preventing future aggression? Against whom may retaliation be aimed? These questions have long been part of the debate over the ethics of warfare. They all took on new meaning after terrorists hijacked four US airliners on September 11, 2001.

War after September 11 considers the just aims and legitimate limits of the United States' response to the terrorist attacks. Six essayists from the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland pair off to discuss ethical questions such as, What are the moral challenges posed by terrorism? Can modern terrorism be addressed within the existing paradigms of just war and international law? Should the U.S. respond militarily or by some other means? Taken together, the essays in this volume ask the fundamental question: How should the United States use its power to combat terrorism?

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trends; and civic education is one of the few forces that can resist the rising tide of materialism in US culture that numerous surveys have documented.

The difficulty of this task at least matches its importance. Not only do community-level disagreements about controversial policies continue to pose problems for teachers and school administrators, but also, at a deeper level, Americans do not wholly agree about the kind of citizenship we want our schools to foster. The question we face is whether there is enough agreement on some basics to allow us to proceed in spite of these differences. The experience of recent efforts to find common ground, spearheaded by such groups as the Center for Civic Education, the National Commission on Civic Renewal, and the joint Carnegie/CIRCLE project, points in an encouraging direction. The ultimate test, however, will occur on the ground, if and when every state decides to address this challenge in a serious and sustained way.

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