

Civic Education and Political Participation

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The current condition of civic engagement

Anxiety about the civic attitudes and activities of young U.S. adults is nothing new, and its persistence is easy to understand. As far back as solid evidence can be found, and virtually without exception, it appears that young adults 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 factors such as professional interests (and self-interests), stable residential location, home ownership, marriage, and parenthood, all of which are statistically less characteristic of younger adults. In every generation, not surprisingly, 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 key 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 18-29 year olds voted in presidential elections. By 1996, fewer than one third did. The same pattern holds for congressional elections--about one third in the 1970s, compared to less than one fifth in 1998.

Less well known are the trends charted by the remarkable UCLA study involving 250,000 matriculating college freshmen each year, conducted since the mid-1960s. Over this period, every significant indicator of political engagement has fallen by at least half. Only 26 percent of

freshmen think that keeping up with politics is important, down from 58 percent in 1966. Only 14 percent say they frequently discuss politics, down from 30 percent. Not surprisingly, acquisition of political knowledge from traditional media sources is way down, and relatively few young people are using the Internet to replace newspapers and network TV news as sources of political information.

To be sure, 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 a third of today's young volunteers believe that they will continue this practice once they enter the paid workforce. And there is no evidence that it will lead to wider civic engagement. On the contrary, young people characterize their volunteering as an alternative to politics, which they see as corrupt, untrustworthy, 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 no 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 category 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.

Why does civic disengagement matter?

I do want to suggest that the increasing civic detachment of the young cannot be regarded with equanimity. Let me begin with a truism about representative democracy: political engagement is not sufficient for political effectiveness, but it is necessary. If today's young people have legitimate generational interests that do not wholly coincide with the interests of their elders, those interests cannot shape public decisions unless they are forcefully articulated. For example, Congress is moving with unaccustomed speed to repeal the earnings penalty long imposed on the benefits of Social security recipients between 65 and 69. In the abstract, there is much to be said for this change. But the members of Generations X and Y will have to pay for it. I doubt that enough of them will raise their voices to affect the legislative outcome, or even the debate. The withdrawal of a cohort of citizens from public affairs disturbs the balance of public deliberation, to the detriment of those who withdraw (and 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. When all the subtleties and quibbles are stripped away, the arguments of the Laws to Socrates retain their force; so too the Rawlsian injunction to do one's fair share to uphold reasonably just institutions, and the communitarian conjoining of responsibilities to rights.

I come, third, to the perplexed 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. I find it impossible to endorse a strong version of civic republicanism; it is possible, I believe, 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, I think there is something to the proposition that under appropriate circumstances, political engagement helps develop capacities that are intrinsically (not just instrumentally) important. I have in mind the sorts of intellectual and moral capacities that 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 towards goods that can only be obtained or created 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 as Prof. Mansbridge has rightly insisted, 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 they can at least be advanced as a not-implausible profession of public faith--as long we are not too categorical about it.

I said a bit earlier that political engagement tends to develop desirable human capacities "under appropriate circumstances." My surmise is that when a political system is distorted by concentrated oppressive power, one engages with it at considerable peril to one's soul. In such circumstances, only those with unusual moral insight and strength (Havel and Sharansky come to mind) can figure out how to engage in ways that enhance their human powers, while the rest of

us tend to be brutalized, or at least coopted and corrupted. (Look at the millions of ordinary East Germans who ended up enmeshed in the operations of the Stasi.) Of course, the distinction between those political regimes that are conducive to the good of the soul and those that aren't presupposes some non context-dependent account of intrinsic human goods and virtues, a premise that may trouble philosophical liberals who think of themselves as principled anti-perfectionists. But that is a long story best left to another occasion.

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 non-market skills and dispositions has narrowed. For various reasons, the solidaristic organizations that dominated the U.S. 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 for that matter 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 encourage it among young adults looms all the larger. The formative mechanisms and mobilizing arenas of civic opportunity are multiple. In the remainder of my remarks, 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. Along the way, I will even have something good to say about the much-reviled classroom civics courses against which my generation understandably, but in the end counterproductively, rebelled.

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), devised by teams of subject-matter experts, and then carefully field-tested and revised, 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"--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 1998 NAEP Civics Assessment is the fruit of nearly a decade of intellectual spadework, starting with the nationwide consensus-building process that led to the promulgation in 1995 of national standards for civics and government. These standards served as the basis, first, for the official "framework" within which the NAEP Civics Assessment was developed, and then

for the specific questions within each category. The result may not be perfect, but it is better than its predecessors, and close to the best possible.

The results of the 1998 NAEP Civics Assessment were released a few months ago. They were not encouraging. For fourth, eighth, and (most relevant for our purposes) twelfth graders, about three-quarters were below the level of proficiency. 35 percent of high school seniors tested below basic, indicating near-total civic ignorance. Another 39 percent were at the basic level, 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. This raises a puzzle. The level of formal schooling in the United States is much higher than it was fifty years ago. But the civic knowledge of today's students is at best no higher than that of their parents and grandparents, know no more than they did. We have made a major investment in formal education, without any discernible payoff in increased civic knowledge.

A recently issued 50-state analysis of civic education helps explain these unimpressive results. While most states endorse civic education in their constitutions and declaratory policies, fewer have made a serious effort to align their civics-related courses with challenging content standards, and only three 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).

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 congressman 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.

1. Civic knowledge promotes support for democratic values. The more knowledge we have of the working of government, the more likely we are to support the core values of democratic self-government, starting with tolerance.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. Civic knowledge helps citizens learn more about civic affairs. Unless we have a certain basis of knowledge, it is difficult to acquire more knowledge. The new knowledge we do gain can be effectively used if we are able to integrate it into an existing framework of knowledge.
5. 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.

6. Civic knowledge improves the consistency of the views of people as expressed on public opinion surveys. The more knowledge people have, the more consistent their views 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.
7. 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.

The conventional wisdom ten years ago was that civic education is bound to be ineffective. But this is no longer the case. Careful research confirms the intuitively obvious: done right, civic education can significantly increase civic knowledge. In the light of this, the bipartisan National Commission on Civic Renewal made the following recommendations in its 1998 report to the nation:

1. Age-appropriate civic education should be offered at every level of public education. Taking as our baseline the classic texts of American civic history, the commission believes that all students should become conversant with the basic documents and basic pieces of history that define our civic existence.
2. The commission reviewed research showing that regular newspaper reading is a very important source of civic information and civic knowledge and recommended that regular reading of a quality newspaper become part of the regular classroom experience for students.
3. Over time, as school systems and states adopt higher standards and assessments, every state should move toward having students demonstrate basic civic mastery as one of the conditions for high school graduation.

Civic skills

Thus far I have focused on civic knowledge. What about civic skills? There is considerable agreement

about the basic sorts of skills that citizens need to function competently in the various roles that they may be called upon to play, starting (but not necessarily ending) at the neighborhood and community level. Here are some suggestions about what public schools can do to promote the acquisition of civic skills.

The first is to make experience in public speaking a requirement for all students. The ability to stand up in a group and to speak one's mind clearly, persuasively, and respectfully is at the core of effective civic engagement. It used to be that training in public speaking, even addressing an assigned topic with no notice, was an important part of the curriculum. Such training should not be reserved, as it typically is today, for the handful of students who participate in debate clubs.

The second suggestion involves student government. Though we tend to laugh at student government, academic research suggests that, other things being equal, participation in student government offers important civic preparation. No school--elementary, middle, or secondary--should be without an active student government, and students should be encouraged to participate in it.

Third, schools everywhere should participate in programs organized by such groups as the Center for Civic Education and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship. In these programs, students are encouraged to look at their local neighborhood, community, or school, to select a particular local problem, define its dimensions, and through a team effort, recommend solutions and work for their implementation.

Some states have mandated community service as a requirement for high school graduation. The evidence on the effectiveness of this strategy is fragmentary at best. But if service projects are thoughtfully integrated with classroom reflection, they offer great potential to enhance civic skills.

Civic virtues

I turn now to the third classic aim of civic education--civic dispositions, AKA civic virtues. I have argued elsewhere, as have others, that it is possible to develop a compact list of dispositions that are functionally related to democratic citizenship. I will presuppose, without repeating, some version of that thesis here. But there is a further problem that threatens to doom this enterprise: with all the diversity and all the divisions in our country, is there enough common ground to make civic education for democratic virtue possible?

Let me offer an optimistic answer. I have spent considerable time examining survey data on public attitudes

toward moral values. There are many, many values that enjoy 90 percent or more support as both good and appropriate to be taught in public schools. Not too long ago, Alan Wolfe, published a book, *One Nation, After All*, in which he summarizes the results gleaned from four years interviewing hundreds of average families in middle-class or working-class communities around the country. He talked with liberals, conservatives, religious modernists and fundamentalists. He found much more agreement than disagreement on basic moral principles and values. It turns out that most contemporary Americans are what I call "tolerant traditionalists." They have a core of traditional moral beliefs about how individuals, families, neighbors, and citizens ought to behave toward one another in a diverse democratic society. At the same time, most are leery about using the coercive power of government to impose their moral beliefs on others. While they accept formative civic education for the young, they are tolerant in that they don't think government should force adult dissenters to behave virtuously.

It turns out that it is possible to turn this partial consensus into workable pedagogy. For example, an organization called Character Counts! undertook a very interesting national consensus-building activity and emerged with a list of six core civic virtues which have gained considerable support around the country as a basis for moral education. The organization has developed curriculum materials and activities that are used in public schools, and it has worked with entire communities to mobilize civic activities and discussions that reinforce school-based moral formation.

There are two additional strategies that public schools can employ to promote civic virtue. If we compare our education system with those of other nations, we discover that American students are asked to assume relatively few responsibilities in their schools. In Asian schools, the students from their earliest years are held responsible, at least in part, for maintaining discipline in their classrooms and cleanliness in their corridors. Working with their teachers, Japanese students do much of what we pay janitors to do. While this precise strategy may not be feasible in the United States, every superintendent and principal can find ways of giving students more responsibilities and making them understand themselves as citizens of their school community.

Second, Americans like to think of themselves as believers in equal opportunity, the idea that if you work hard and persevere, you can get ahead and achieve your dreams. When we compare the beliefs of most Americans with those of parents, teachers, and students in other countries, an amazing result emerges. Compared to Asians, we are significantly more likely to believe that our school achievement and adult role in life are determined by innate

ability-what we are born with-and much less likely to believe that character traits such as hard work and perseverance are what make the difference. We are more inclined to believe in genetic determinism than are people in these other countries.

It goes almost without saying that these beliefs are highly detrimental to the development of character in U.S. students. If they get the message that schools are sorting them out based on what they bring into school, and not according to their effort and perseverance, this tends to undermine the development of the sense of responsibility and empowerment that is at the heart of good civic character. Our schools must reexamine the signals their practices are sending about the importance of effort, perseverance, and hard work.

Equal educational opportunity

Thus far I have confined my remarks to formal civic education. The second question I want to discuss is the civic significance of equal educational opportunity and higher educational attainment. It turns out that there is a strong correlation between overall educational attainment and active civic involvement. When students drop out of school, they tend to drop out of civic life as well. While civic participation has declined in the country as a whole during the past generation, it has not declined evenly through all sectors of the population. Those who tend to drop out the most are those with the least education. This is particularly true for those who have not finished high school. These persons are much less likely to join neighborhood or civic organizations and much less likely to vote. This is bad news for our country, because widened economic inequality has been joined by rising civic inequality.

The National Commission on Civic renewal examined these issues and responded with a number of recommendations:

1. The well-known report *A Nation at Risk*, published in the early 1980s, warned of a rising tide of mediocrity. To turn the tide, it proposed that schools define a new basic curriculum that includes specific requirements in basic subjects such as English and mathematics. When this report was published, 14 percent of students nationwide were fulfilling the terms of this new basic curriculum. Today, that figure has tripled to 42 percent. But this leaves 58 percent who are still not being exposed to this new basic curriculum.

2. Recently the Department of Education reported that nationwide, 36 percent of all public school teachers have no formal academic preparation in their major teaching fields. When considering the fields of history and civics, the figure rises to 59 percent. This suggests the importance of reforming schools of education, with the goal of increasing their emphasis on content preparation, even at the expense of fewer courses in such areas as education theory and techniques.
3. We may never adopt a binding national curriculum or national test. But we do need to take seriously the movement toward voluntary national standards that states and localities can adapt to their particular needs. The same is true regarding tests and assessments that stand in a rational relationship to these content standards. We also need ways to make this information available to parents, teachers, school administrators, and communities in an easy-to-use format. In this way those who are responsible for a school system, as well as those affected by such decisions, are able to make reasonable citizen judgments and family choices.
4. An important part of citizenship is being able to make informed, meaningful choices. The movement toward increased parental choice within the public education framework is important and positive. School districts should experiment with broader family choices within and even outside school districts. Although the charter school movement is not without flaws, on balance it represents a mobilization of new civic energy within the system of public education.
5. The high level of high school dropouts is a major problem in our country. This has both economic and civic consequences. We need a crash program to address the pockets of high school dropouts. There is both good news and bad news on this issue. The good news is that last year, for the first time in our history, high school graduation rates for blacks and whites were the same. Given that thirty years ago the difference was about 40 percent, this is good news. The bad news is that the gap between the rates for blacks and whites and the Hispanic rate is 30 percent; 87 percent for blacks and whites, 57 percent for Hispanics. And this at precisely the moment when the number of Hispanic children and youth has drawn even with that of African Americans for the first time in our history

Schools as social glue

The final issue I want to pose is this: can public schools become part of the social glue that helps bind neighborhoods and communities together? A few years ago, when I was in the White House, I convened a meeting of those who were pioneering so-called “community schools.” These schools typically throw open their doors to a range of activities involving parents and communities, both before the beginning of the traditional school day and in the late afternoon and evening. People may enter the school buildings several times each week for activities in which they are involved as community members, or in support of their children's education. Many immigrant parents and native-born parents whose memories of school are negative feel enabled to set aside their fears and participate in school-base activities. It is as though the school day becomes the grain of sand around which the pearl of community involvement forms. Given these promising civic developments, it would make sense for government at every level to join forces with foundations and neighborhood organizations to make community schools possible in every district.