Constructing Civic Virtue
[a symposium on the state of American citizenship]

Keith Bybee
Marijke Cornelis
William Galston
Rogan Kersh
Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn
Suzanne Mettler
James Murphy
Rik Pinnock
Robert Rubinstein
Jim Sleeper

Is our sense of civic responsibility on the wane -- and if so, what can be done to bolster it?

These commentaries were prepared for a symposium held by the Campbell Public Affairs Institute in November 2002. Written by leading specialists, the commentaries address three questions: Whether policymakers are right in diagnosing an unhealthy decline in civic responsibility; whether actions by government can be effective in remedying the problem; and what values or principles should be central to the conception of civic virtue that would be promoted through such policies.

The Campbell Public Affairs Institute is a research center of the Maxwell School of Syracuse University. Its aim is to promote better understanding of contemporary challenges in democratic governance.

Campbell Public Affairs Institute
The Maxwell School of Syracuse University
306 Eggers Hall
Syracuse, New York 13244
(315) 443-9707
http://www.campbellinstitute.org
CONSTRUCTING CIVIC VIRTUE

A SYMPOSIUM ON THE STATE OF AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

Campbell Public Affairs Institute
The Maxwell School of Syracuse University
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PREFACE

The commentaries included in this book were prepared for a symposium held at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs on November 1, 2002. The symposium was organized by the Campbell Public Affairs Institute, a research center within the Maxwell School that aims to promote better understanding of contemporary challenges in democratic governance.

Commentaries by six leading researchers address a critical subject – the state of American citizenship. The discussion has two main parts. Are we still committed to values and principles that are essential to the functioning of a vibrant liberal democracy? And if we believe that civic virtue is on the wane – that our commitment to core values is wavering – what actions can be taken to reverse the trend?

As a supplement to these commentaries, we add a contribution by three researchers on a similar debate over the state of citizenship in the European Union.

This project was undertaken with a practical goal: we hope that these commentaries will contribute to the ongoing debate about the need for, and design of, policies to promote good citizenship.

This practical bent is typical of the Institute’s work. The symposium is one of several activities the Institute has undertaken to link academic research to important policy discussions.

The Institute is named in honor of Alan K. Campbell, dean of the Maxwell School from 1969 to 1976. “Scotty” Campbell had a distinguished career in academia, state and federal government, and the private sector. Through its work, the Campbell Institute honors his lifelong commitment to effective government; full and equal citizen participation; and incisive, policy-relevant research.

The Institute is grateful to the contributors for their commitment to this
The success of the symposium is largely due to the skill and effort of Bethany Walawender, assistant director of the Institute, and Kelley Coleman, our office coordinator. The Information and Computing Technology Group of the Maxwell School did an outstanding job of webcasting the symposium. Production of this book was led by Bethany Walawender with the assistance of our editor, Alyssa Colonna.

We also wish to thank the Citizenship and Governance SPIRE Committee, a Committee of the Academic Plan of Syracuse University, which provided support for the symposium and this book.

We appreciate your comments on this book. Our e-mail address is info@campbellinstitute.org. An electronic version of this book – and other books and comments published by the Institute – can be downloaded from our Web site, http://www.campbellinstitute.org.

Alasdair Roberts, Director
Campbell Public Affairs Institute
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
AND NATIONAL BELONGING

Rogan Kersh

In his essay “All Community is Local,” political scientist William Schambra urges that researchers and activists “direct our gaze away from the failed project of national community and focus once again on the churches, voluntary associations, and grass-roots groups that are rebuilding America’s civil society one family, one block, one neighborhood at a time.” Schambra’s is a rather extreme version of a view expressed by many theorists of citizenship, as well as by political figures from both right and left: that the nation is too distant from most people’s lives (or its governing officials too impersonal or corrupt) to inspire a sense of shared purposes or civic spirit. Only intense local involvement yields rightly-constituted citizens, and small communities are the likeliest realm for realizing the public good.1

This essay suggests instead that any project promoting responsible citizenship must address issues of national belonging in explicit detail. Throughout U.S. history, from the Confederation period through crises of nullification and civil war, and on to more recent struggles over civil rights, the foundations of civic life have been rooted in citizens’ conscious participation in (and appeals to) a national community.2 Membership in the nation is “a matter of dignity” for individual citizens, writes Liah Greenfeld. “It gives people reason to be proud.”3 Without the sense of shared purposes accompanying citizens’ self-conception as belonging to a greater whole – to the nation – the “civic” component of local engagement can dwindle to the point of meaninglessness.

This study comprises two sections. First is a discussion of localism’s appeal in the United States in the past and present and of problems asso-
associated with a primarily local approach to nurturing civic virtue. Second is a consideration of ways to foster a spirit of national belonging, in keeping with one theme of this symposium. My concern throughout is how best to ensure that the contemporary emphasis on local forms of civic virtue and political connection does not erode inclusive ideals of national citizenship.

LOCALISM AND AMERICAN CIVIC LIFE

Intellectuals and political officials promoting a stronger spirit of civic responsibility among diverse, pluralist modern Americans (or other democratic peoples) have a ready prescription: encourage citizens to organize in local, usually face-to-face associations to pursue shared goals. Through cooperative activities as varied as bowling leagues, PTA meetings, and volunteer service, people form interpersonal ties that create “social capital” – the basis for active civic involvement and political participation. As promoted by a wide range of thinkers, this perspective is long on specifics about local activity. Robert Putnam, whose work is at the center of the recent civil-society revival, investigates rotating credit associations, social norms like reciprocal trust, and a host of other immediate sources of civic engagement in his investigation into successful democratic citizenship. Putnam chooses the bowling alley, “a community-based institution if there ever was one,” as the emblem of declining civil society. His overwhelming emphasis on local activity is widely shared, both in relevant scholarship and government efforts at policy devolution. How is this localist standpoint justified? Most often by reference to history. Accounts of the eighteenth and nineteenth century are a common staple in writings on U.S. civic renewal, found both among theorists of civic republicanism and popular works’ praise of “the general store of de Tocqueville’s America.” Let us then first investigate historical claims about the predominantly localist foundations of civic engagement in the U.S. polity.

Spurred in part by Putnam’s assertion that “the historical roots of the civic community are astonishingly deep,” political historians locate the basis of American civil society in the distant past. Three claims are commonly advanced in this context. First, the United States once featured intensely localistic politics, carried out by relatively avid citizen-participants gathered in autonomous “island communities.” Second, Tocquevillian voluntary associations were the principal locus of civic life. Third, the feeble American national state offered little help (or resistance) to this collection of self-governing towns. Together, these claims depict the United States until the early twentieth century (or the New Deal, or the Civil War, or LBJ’s administration: attempts to date the onset of modernity are radically variable) as a collection of flourishing localities replete with associational exchanges and, in Stephen Skowronek’s summary, such “innocuous” central-government activity as to “make it seem as if there was no state in America at all.”

All of these historical claims – of vigorous civic participation at the local level, and of widespread, virtuous associational life free of national-state involvement – appear considerably overstated. On the first assertion: against a pastoral image of sturdy citizen-farmers and merchants organizing politics in communal ways, one may counterpose a series of alternative portraits. Consider: the constitutional framers’ hand-wringing over local governments’ mismanagement and malfeasance; Daniel Webster and other prominent nineteenth-century senators’ resistance to state legislators’ efforts to turn them into spokesmen for local interests; the rude justice prevailing in lower courts, inspiring assertions on behalf of Supreme Court superiority from John Marshall forward; Abraham Lincoln’s rebuttals of “squatter sovereignty” and “states’ rights” in his 1858 Senate campaign debates with Stephen Douglas; or Progressive reformers’ attempts to dismantle the notoriously corrupt, ward-based machines that dominated local politics in much of the country into the early twentieth century. Even leaving aside the fact that up to three quarters of American residents were formally barred from voting and related activities into the twentieth century, white males were neither as civic-minded nor participatory as has been advertised. Historians recently have trained a critical eye on the putative golden age of American political participation, the mid-nineteenth century, and found reality very different from the popular picture today.

As for voluntary associations, an important distinction is apparent in their past operation. Sociologist Jason Kaufman has demonstrated empirically that most nineteenth-century local associational activity in the U.S. was directed not to building social capital, but to “sectional
rent-seeking behavior.” When past associations did pursue civic ends, they generally did so through a federalist-style organization. As Theda Skocpol demonstrates, most “local” civic groups well back into the nineteenth century drew strength and resources from participation in a broad network of like-minded assemblies, united under a national parent organization. In each of a variety of social realms, from military veterans to mothers’ groups, Skocpol identifies a “classic three-tiered voluntary civic association, with tens of thousands of local posts, whose members met regularly, plus state and national affiliates that held big annual conventions.”

Kaufman and Skocpol together may be read as confirming Madison’s Federalist argument that local “interests, parties, and sects” tended towards narrow factionalism, while on the national level a majority coalition of individual groups “could seldom take place on any other principles than those of justice and the general good.”

The notion that America, through much of its early history, was essentially a multiplicity of civil societies governed with scant involvement by national institutions, likewise is unsupported by past evidence. The national state and related organizations such as political parties were essential to fostering exchanges among citizens, from affective bonds to more instrumental economic ties, and in providing resources to develop local activity into associational networks across state and regional borders. Though limited in its infrastructure and many other respects, the early state was an animating source of local political participation, aiding rather than abrading Americans’ development of civil society.

From the Jacksonian era forward, presidents and Congress provided institutional support for national civic awareness in various ways, including expanded communication links via the post office and later, telegraph; subsidized printing of national journals and congressional speeches; and ambitious programs of internal improvements carried out with government funding. Harper’s correspondent Henry Loomis Nelson, writing in 1892, noted that by the 1830s:

The Federal sovereignty was present everywhere – in the post offices, in the harbors, in the custom-houses. Its councils became the most interesting in the country, and ambitious public men worked through service to the State for promotion to Washington. Moreover, the government, which was organized as the common agent for the 13 States…soon came to be a creator of States.

This and other contemporary observations fit poorly into modern accounts of a pre-New Deal “national state [that] barely existed.”

If conventional descriptions of local engagement and its political benefits in the U.S. past require rethinking, the recent turn to an ardently localist orientation is even less defensible. As the country becomes more diverse along various dimensions and potentially more fragmented, efforts to develop sources of overlapping cohesion seem urgently necessary. Since associational activities usually are organized within group boundaries, they can lead to significant weakening, rather than strengthening, of a highly pluralistic political order. In the extreme case, a polity featuring robust autonomous associations decoupled from collective ties can become dangerously divided, as Sheri Berman persuasively has argued occurred in Germany during the years leading to National Socialist rule. Berman writes:

The vigor of civil society activities continued to draw public interest and involvement away from parties and politics, further sapping their strength and significance….Instead of reconciling the interests of different groups or creating a sense of national unity, therefore, [associations] reflected and deepened the divisions within German society.

This is not to compare the contemporary United States to 1930s Germany. Rather, my purpose is to suggest that the present equation of civic renewal with local involvement is incomplete and misleading, in part because its putative historical basis is shakily founded. In fact, American history suggests a more plausible way of retaining the many benefits of localist activity while hedging against attendant dangers. Past U.S. practice prominently featured attempts by national actors to set local policies and exchanges in a broader context: “the Union,” in nineteenth-century terms.

Some contributors to the literature on revitalizing citizenship (such as Schambra, discussed above) openly exhibit contempt for efforts to encourage a stronger sense of national belonging among citizens. As frequent, however, are assertions that local activity ultimately will enhance individuals’ commitment to collective ends. Writes Michael Sandel, for example: “Practicing self government in small spheres…impels citizens to larger spheres of political activity as
Skocpol is one of several scholars who recently have treated the institutional foundations of a thriving civil society in impressive detail. I therefore concentrate instead on a fuzzier but, I believe, vitally important concern: engendering a spirit of national purpose and belonging among Americans. When connected to the sorts of neighborhood civic activity already amply urged, this combination – “think nationally, act locally,” to adapt a phrase – seems a powerful source of inspiring active, engaged citizens.

Several components are involved in promoting an ethic of collective belonging. These include: fostering citizens’ sense of national engagement, while seeking to minimize the fervor often accompanying strong fraternal expressions; building closer connections between Americans of diverse class, racial, and regional backgrounds; and generally identifying opportunities to bind people together as fellows in a common enterprise. Following are a series of suggestions as to how these goals might be approached. They are intended less as recommendations than as ruminations, meant to suggest that promoting a spirit of national identity can help realize good citizenship and a good polity alike. I draw throughout on representative examples from U.S. history, in part from a neo-Whig conviction that the past is a useful guide, and also to answer localist champions of civic renewal on the historical ground they so often occupy.

The logical starting place is education, but I bypass that topic here, in part because other contributors to this volume (William Galston, Suzanne Mettler, and James Murphy) cover this ground in detail, and also because whatever civic habits are inculcated in school must be reaffirmed in later years. In seeking other means of stimulating a stronger sense of national belonging among citizens, I begin with Tocqueville. He is, of course, the patron saint of “community is local” adherents, but Tocqueville also manifestly had a national perspective in view. Religion and patriotism, he wrote in Democracy in America, were “the only two means to move men towards a common national goal.”

Past generations of American leaders found these to be important sources of citizens’ sense of national citizenship; along with inspecting earlier views, let us consider them as present-day phenomena.
Civil Religion

Modern academic analysts, most of whom are wary of religious influences in public matters, might do well to recognize and build on the long tradition of intertwined religious invocations and American national purpose. The extraordinary popular currency of American ideas of national unity from the late eighteenth century forward derived from the religious overtones that terms like “community” and “union” evoked, as cultural leaders like Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Ralph Waldo Emerson well knew. None of these men advocated a holy crusade to achieve closer ties among Americans; indeed, each kept his personal religious views mostly private. But all three drew on Biblical rhetoric and divine sanction to advance their visions of a more united citizenry. Encouraging people to imagine themselves as meaningfully connected to one another is always difficult in any large, heterogeneous nation. The American “civil religion,” comprising a set of principled beliefs that the vast majority of residents share, was a fruitful basis for such encouragement as early as the colonial period.

Similar effects of a qualified promotion of religious values in political culture are discernible today. Efforts to build solidarity across a host of dividing lines invite extended attention to religion, which remains a vibrant source of mutual bonds on a broad level. Among African-Americans, many of whom have been understandably suspicious of appeals to national solidarity at least since Reconstruction, the principal agents of inclusive mobilization have been religious themes and leaders — Reverend Martin Luther King is a prominent example. Observers and activists concerned with the worst-off in society and the effect of inequality on social solidarity owe serious investigation to this articulation of the good as the holy.

One promising guide for such an understanding is Abraham Lincoln’s example. As chronicled in numerous studies, Lincoln sought to infuse national sentiment with a moral standing that legitimized, or at least made it more difficult to ignore, African-Americans’ equal rights. Though Lincoln’s attempts to link equality and national purpose in the public mind were unfulfilled, as Reconstruction policies gave way to “redemption” and a resumption of Jim Crow policies, historians con-
Patriotism

While common religious values are a potential basis of bonds among citizens, patriotic sentiment provides a more direct means of politically linking individual and national aspirations. Most commentary acknowledges that some kind of patriotic feeling among the citizenry is integral to a well-ordered polity. Yet, as with religion, active attempts to foster such sentiment result in deep uneasiness among many thinkers and activists. “In its very nature,” summarizes Kai Nielsen, patriotic feeling “cannot but be xenophobic, authoritarian, exclusivist, and, where it has the opportunity, often expansionist as well.”

So-called “liberal nationalist” adherents have attempted to answer such criticisms by conceiving a collective solidarity that does not require residents’ supreme commitment to the nation or the trampling of individual and group rights. Support exists in U.S. history for such an orientation, as many prominent Americans rejected ancestry or ethnicity as meaningful qualifications for membership in the U.S. national union (though racial exclusions long remained a norm). Influential spokesmen such as Daniel Webster and James Madison promoted voluntary national solidarity without resorting to ethnocentric advocacy, advising merely that citizens should participate in the broad culture that underlies fellow-feeling. Such figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman went further, recommending that Americans strive to create a distinctive national culture through contributions from diverse elements. This is an important tradition to recall today, when cultural and ethnic sources of mutuality routinely are treated as synonymous and are criticized in similar terms. Nielsen insists in response that it is a “mistake” to “equate ‘ethnic nationalism’ with ‘cultural nationalism,’” an error which is “unfair and indeed politically dangerous.” U.S. history provides at least some concrete evidence that such a distinction may be drawn usefully, and that a “mature” patriotism may be a genuinely promising basis for a sense of national citizenship.

Consider in this vein James Madison’s framework for a restrained sense of patriotic sentiment among Americans. Madison’s unionist vision, I have argued at length elsewhere, was largely free of the ethnonationalist impulses then as now coloring patriotic expressions in societies around the globe. Instead, Madison relied on three primary sources of national unity: American territory, affective ties, and institutionally protected bonds between citizens and their political leaders. Taking each of these in turn, let us investigate how they might be adapted to enhance a spirit of national belonging among modern-day U.S. residents.

Territorial sources of citizenship

The elemental source of citizens’ love of country, in Madison’s conception, was abiding affection for the land. Such an ethic could be advanced through means such as territorial acquisition, agrarian labor, and internal improvements to encourage settlement and commerce. Most of these are archaic policies today – indeed, one recent writer views the very notion of unified national territory as “passé.” But specific means of enhancing citizens’ sense of national belonging through ties to the American land still are identifiable. Three sources that come to mind are environmental awareness, expanded property ownership, and public investment.

Though individual Americans’ attachment to the land has waned with urbanization, many of the beneficial effects realized by older policies are approachable through a modern substitute: the environment. The purpose here is not to call attention to ecological hazards (numerous “green” groups attend to such concerns already) but to encourage love of the country, in a literal sense. If this sounds far-fetched, consider two related points. First, public opinion surveys of cherished national feature – such as a 1996 Field Poll on the “most valuable U.S. quality or possession” – routinely rank national parks and wildlife at or near the top. Second, authorities in other countries, as American leaders once did, explicitly attempt to invigorate civic spirit through care for the “homeland.” Israeli officials, for example, adopted in the late 1960s a policy of “enhancing the familiarity of the Israeli citizen with the country’s landscape and by inculcating patriotism through nature activities....The country should be beautiful not because this was a primary ecological imperative but because this goal advanced the nation’s fulfillment of [citizenship] ends.” Tying conservationist concerns to notions of “preserving the nation” could serve both environmental and national-citizenship goals.

As for owning property: since the founding period, many have viewed
the “freeholders of the country” as, in Madison’s words, “the safest depositories of republican liberty.” Property ownership apparently translates into a stronger sense of belonging to the whole; for that reason policies designed to facilitate ownership among people in lower economic strata seem (in addition to their other aims) a legitimate basis for civic sentiment. Immigrants to the United States frequently receive similar benefits. In one expert’s words, “ Owning a home signifies that an immigrant family has attached its well-being to the fate of the country.” And land holding among a wider range of Americans seems a means to greater equality of status, an important source of mutuality across boundaries. Regarding one another as fellow owners inspires, as David Miller has written, “an active congregating sort of politics.”

American policymakers recognized early in the country’s tenure that owning a piece of the land gave citizens a literal stake in the nation’s future, deepening new landholders’ inclination to connect their destiny to that of the whole. Bruce Ackerman and Anne Alstott confirm that expanded property ownership promises individual benefits (“ creating a certain space for civic reflection in millions of lives now dominated by economic anxiety”) and collective ones as well (“Broadening the property base enhances the stability and the quality of political life of the republic”). Though property ownership is primarily a local concern, decisions to enable more people to purchase homes, through means ranging from mortgage tax deductibility to subsidized conversions of public housing for low-income residents’ ownership, are made at the federal level. Similarly, matters of public investment in U.S. territory are in national administrative hands. The term “internal improvements” is now a political anachronism, but well into the nineteenth century it marked a prominent achievement of numerous Congresses. Building roads, canals, and bridges – expanding possibilities for communication across geographic boundaries – was undertaken for economic reasons, but also for interpersonal ones. The United States has a far more advanced communications network today, of course. Yet much of the national infrastructure is in woeful disrepair, a fact that demonstrably affects citizens’ sense of pride in landscapes both urban and rural. A modern program of public investment – in parks, beaches, national forests, and other features of the American land, as well as the roads, rail lines, and bridges which get people there – seems long overdue. Like its predecessor the W.P.A., such a program could employ many disaffected people, increasing the possibility that they would feel more connected as citizens. It is not farfetched to imagine a political agenda that features a plank on “internal improvements” successfully resonating with the citizenry.

**Affective bonds: Horizontal ties**

In an essay for the fledgling *National Gazette*, Madison urged in 1791:

> A consolidation should prevail in [the people’s] interests and affections...the greater the concord and confidence throughout the great body of the people, the more readily must they sympathize with each other, the more seasonably can they interpose a common manifestation of their sentiments.

Madison rested his account of national unity in vital ways on the expectation of affective ties among Americans, a view ... theories today: as noted above, civic or other connections between people usually are considered in a local context.

Yet legitimate concerns exist about the exclusionary nature of many local associations and their members’ propensity to pursue purely self-interested ends. Inspiring more genuinely national interpersonal exchanges can help to diminish the problem of ascriptively based ties within groups, while promoting connections between communities divided along class, racial, and other lines. At the same time, existing bonds between residents of North Carolina and North Dakota, or New York City and upstate New York, are tenuous at best. Following are two outline sketches of how these might be bolstered, focusing on national service and strengthened links between local and national associations.

**National service**

Ideally, as described by sociologist Robert Wuthnow, national service work can “set in motion a series of relationships that spreads throughout the entire society.” The AmeriCorps project started early in the Clinton Administration was conceived in part to realize such a vision. Two of AmeriCorps’ announced aims are directly related to promoting...
civic activity (and, perhaps, sense of national belonging, though Oliver does not attempt to measure this) declines markedly. More evaluation is needed before strong conclusions can be reached about the integrative benefits of national service programs like AmeriCorps, but initial results are positive.

Associational linkage

“Association” in current vernacular calls to mind local organizations: a garden club, the Jaycees, a neighborhood civic group. But an old American practice of uniting across town, state, and regional lines to pursue shared interests suggests that the evolution of local associations into national organizations is eminently worth upholding. Skocpol’s current research into nineteenth-century associations, as noted earlier, suggests that the conventional portrait of isolated local activity is mistaken. Instead, connections across geographic borders were habitually effected in successful civic bodies. Skocpol concluded: “Local community involvement and an intense commitment to national identity have historically gone hand in hand in American democracy.” Such a pairing likely contributes to individuals’ sense that they are valued members of an enduring social whole, helping stave off the alienation that underlies political apathy.

With respect to bridge-building across region, race, class, age, and other dimensions, AmeriCorps’ accomplishments are clearer. Corps members are chosen with at least a partial eye to diversity, and are deliberately divided into “teams” of participants from varied backgrounds, along the lines noted above. With an eye to the gains in integration achieved by the U.S. military, AmeriCorps’ original designers sought to ensure that individual corps members would cohere around their shared professional focus, rather than merely discuss issues of diversity and identity. This insight appears to be upheld in practice, as members working toward common, tangible goals report high levels of personal connections with colleagues. Similar programs that focus on particular needs such as teaching (“Teach for America”) or preventive health care (the proposed national “Health Service Corps”) seem more beneficial still, by tying civic activity to volunteers’ preferred areas of interest.

Conceiving regional, ethnic, and other forms of diversity as sources of, rather than disincentives to, national unity is a much-disputed position, to be sure. An emerging school of analysis contributes some empirical support for the view that heterogeneity can stimulate civic involvement. In one striking example, political scientist Eric Oliver recently has shown that as neighborhoods become more homogeneous, residents’ civic exchanges among Corps participants: “enhancing the civic ethic” of members (as well as beneficiaries of service) and “building bridges between classes and races.” A brief look at each advertised feature follows.

Outside evaluations of AmeriCorps indicate that members demonstrate a strong sense of civic responsibility, at least partly as a result of their service activities. (No studies of which I am aware examine similar effects on beneficiaries of the program, though the results could be encouraging.) Definitive conclusions about the civic benefits of Corps membership still are pending, however, as some studies warn that “AmeriCorps’ constituency early in its implementation are individuals with an already well-developed civic ethic…members may not be so easy to transform because they are already highly motivated to serve.” For this essay’s purposes, it seems safe to conclude that AmeriCorps provides even those members whose neighborly civic spirit may be relatively well-developed with a national focus, a net benefit in terms of boosting collective belonging.

The value of multi-level connections within an associational network also is apparent in an example from the recent past. Weir and Ganz trace part of the decline of progressive politics in the 1970s to organizers’ suspicion of centralized activity, ironically resembling the “devolutionist” outlook of many conservative activists today:

[Associations] on the left had only weak ties linking national, state, and local politics, creating a political configuration of headless bodies and bodiless heads….These divisions fostered an advocacy system that promoted distinctive national strategies for each set of interests and spurred the formation of thousands of local groups that largely abandoned efforts to influence national public policy directly. This is one reason that progressive politics seems to be far less than the sum of its parts. Connections among local associations and the consequent development of national networks are established features of U.S. political culture.
subtreasury bill, grandly concluded:

[I]f I am born for any good, in my day and generation, it is the
good of the whole Country.....So far as depends on any agency of
mine, they shall continue united States, united in interest and
affection; united in everything in regard to which the Constitution
has decreed their union.49

Political leaders in the past quarter-century, perhaps in response to their
plunging ratings in public-opinion polls, have begun to reiterate themes
of national belonging or cohesion. One indicator of this change in
emphasis comes in David Ericson’s content analysis of U.S. presidents’
inaugural addresses. From 1941 through 1976, Ericson shows, only two
of nine inaugurals included appeals to national unity. Even Franklin
Roosevelt’s wartime address in 1945, a ripe occasion for spirited civic
invocation, featured no calls to unite all Americans. But since 1977, all
seven inaugural addresses prominently featured national unity as a
theme. A “flowering of patriotism” among some significant portion of
the citizenry during the same period has been linked directly to these
and other prominent addresses.50 The possibility of inspirational lead-
ership is inherent in this oratory.

Vertical bonds of belonging

Modern advocates of civic renewal emphasize horizontal bonds among
neighbors, centered on local associational activity.47 Though the perspec-
tive is less familiar today, American advocates of national citizen-
ship once strenuously promoted vertical ties connecting citizens and the
national whole. I explore two modern adaptations of this view below:
representative leadership, as an inspiration for individuals’ sense of
belonging to the collectivity, and national provision of social insurance.

National leadership

A primary reason for Madison’s emphasis on virtuous leaders was their
ability to attract public esteem, contributing to individuals’ affinity for
the nation. Political elites as a source of inspiration for unionist senti-
ment can appear an unlikely, even absurd ideal today, given widespread
mistrust of government officials and other opinion leaders (due, inter
alia, to so many disappointing examples in practice). Symptomatic is
the frequency with which Brecht’s Galileo is cited in modern American
letters: “Pity the nation which has no heroes,” says one character; responds another, “Pity the nation that needs them.”48

Yet a glance at the past reveals national figures, such as the constitu-
cional framers, nineteenth-century leaders like Andrew Jackson and the
great Whig orators Daniel Webster and Henry Clay, and Progressive-era
notables like Theodore Roosevelt, all of whom publicly encouraged –
with some apparent success – Americans of varying backgrounds to
consider themselves as united. Most of these leaders deliberately
sought to identify themselves with the notion of national unity.
Webster, for example, during an otherwise routine 1838 speech on a

Social insurance

When leaders’ virtue was lacking, Madison’s Federalist Paper No. 10
famously advocated institutional means of inspiring (and channelling in
positive ways) Americans’ patriotic outlook. Certain administrative
programs serve as potential sources of vertical ties between citizens and
the national whole today. Especially vital in this respect is maintaining
national provision of social-welfare benefits. Independent of debates
over what types and level of benefits should be provided, it is important
to assure a national basis for these, rather than ceding programmatic and
funding responsibilities to local authorities or, as some have proposed,
to the market.

The original “we’re all in this together” spirit underlying, for example,
Social Security and Medicare helped forge broad commitment to these
programs. A less-noted corollary gain: beneficiaries’ participation
enhances their sense of connection to the national whole, as studies of
these programs show. The economist Jeff Faux summarizes a related
argument about the results of privatization or otherwise shifting the collective basis of social-welfare programs to individual provision: “If our success in adjusting…is left up to us individually, politics becomes less relevant to our lives, and the notions of solidarity and community of interests with our fellow citizens ring hollow.”

Ackerman and Alstott reaffirm this insight in their bold (though, in the present, politically improbable) proposal that every American should receive an $80,000 stake upon graduating from high school. The authors’ advertised central aim is not to combat specific ills such as poverty or inequality, but to bolster a spirit of civic belonging. Their proposal would, the authors claim, “inspire a serious politics of mass engagement, which would give renewed meaning to American citizenship in this time of drift…and serve as an enduring source of civic identity for our children and our children’s children.” Whatever one makes of the merits of their “stakeholder society” idea, the underlying recognition that national programs best attract collective spirit is a timely one.

CONCLUSION

As American officials increasingly coordinate policies with other national governments, relinquishing portions of national sovereignty in areas like environmental accords, international peacekeeping, and so forth, some observers of this movement towards “globalization” express concern for a dwindling sense of national purpose. The same instinct applies to the present trend towards valuing local over national citizen engagement. As policymakers, pundits, and academics conceive projects to build social capital, we must also keep in mind the collective level. A strong sense of national belonging, I have argued at length, is a core component of the spirit necessary to strong citizenship. Such a spirit is a surprisingly fragile entity in an age when the continued viability of nation-states is called into doubt. All the more so when, as Thomas Franck notes, “personal loyalty and identity now tend to cluster around other magnets: the civil society, the transnational corporation, the global religion, a Socialist International, even the Internet.”

Such a climate begs for practical efforts to advance individuals’ sense of collective belonging, inasmuch as an engaged, mutual-minded American citizenry appears desirable. Also necessary are thinkers’ awareness of such a need. As David Miller writes, “the progressive liberal concedes…his attachment to a [national] community with reluctance and shame.” Against a predisposition to diminish the importance of national unity and the bonds it engenders, these sentiments’ benefits should be lauded, with appropriate qualifications. This is not merely an “academic” proposition; normative theorists’ inclinations about what issues to emphasize, particularly in a debate that has reached a wide political and activist audience, affect public policy orientation and agenda-setting.

The actual associational life of civil society will remain at a local level, of course; people live in neighborhoods and associate with families, friends, and colleagues. But the theoretical and programmatic emphasis on autonomous communities and hostility toward national actors and ideals must be redirected. Local and national once were conceived as mutually supporting, even mutually-constitutive realms. A similar outlook is desirable today. For those who deem the nation too dangerously illiberal as a source of civic renewal, the response is that some popular appeal is essential to any ideal’s widespread purchase. Political theorists who instead construct “ideal speech communities,” or spin lapsarian tales of golden fraternal ages past, do little to inspire stronger bonds among actual citizens – and meanwhile, as countless episodes in the nation’s history testify, those bonds are constructed by others, often in cruelly ascriptive ways.

NOTES


2 For sustained commentary on this point see Rogan Kersh, *Dreams of a More Perfect Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).


8 “Island communities” was coined by Robert H. Wiebe; see The *Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

9 Thomas Bender variously dates historians’ separate claims about the “breakdown of local community” in the U.S. to “the 1650s, 1690s, 1740s, 1820s, 1850s, 1880s, and 1920s.” Idem., *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1978), pp. 50-51. Michael Sandel’s account places the shift more recently still, during the 1970s: see Democracy’s Discontent, pp. 294-97.


23 For specific details see Kersh, Dreams of a More Perfect Union, chs. 2, 4-6.


25 Wolfe, One Nation, p. 5. Wolfe’s own surprise at these findings is chronicled at ibid., pp. 58-61.


30 Nielsen, “Cultural Nationalism,” p. 49. No less a liberal thinker than J.S. Mill saw a version of cultural nationalism as integral to a well-constituted polity: see idem., Considerations on Representative Government (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), pp. 310-18. My short discussion here gives inadequate space to the well-chronicled tension between nationalism or patriotism and other cherished values. Perhaps it will suffice to say here that concerns about nationalist excesses are well founded, but that tension always requires keeping constituent elements in rough balance. This task, given overwhelming contemporary attention to localism as well as such other forms of pluralism as diversity and group rights, demands more inquiry into encouraging national sentiment—not less.

31 The term “mature patriotism” is defined and substantiated in Wolfe, One Nation, pp. 133-79. See also Erica Benner’s discussion of a “democratic” national doctrine, in “Is there a Core National Doctrine?” Nations and Nationalism 7 (2001), pp. 160-162.


37 See, e.g., the extensive study of U.S. national infrastructure underway at the Bush School, as detailed at http://bush.tamu.edu/Research/ISTPP/research/infra.stm (most recently accessed December 18, 2002).

38 William T. Hutchinson et al., eds., Papers of James Madison (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979), vol. XIV, pp. 138-9. See also Madison’s speech in Congress on binding the western territories to the whole by “a common affection” (ibid., XII, p. 377); or ibid., vol. XVII, pp. 307-8, 347-50.


47 Robert Hefner points out that “[a]n often-heard argument in recent years is that horizontal or lateral social ties are the key to a healthy civil polity; vertical linkages, by contrast, are undemocratic.” Idem., “Civil Society: Cultural Possibility of a Modern Ideal,” Society 35 (1998), p. 26.


52 Ackerman and Alstott, Stakeholder Society, pp. 190-91.


UNSCHOOLED:

DEMOCRATIC LIFE IN THE ABSENCE OF A MORAL CULTURE

Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn

It surely appears, and it might well be, foolish to waste time and energy trying to think seriously about virtue at a time in which we seem to have all but abandoned it. It surely goes against the contemporary grain. Except in the work of a small number of social critics and students of ethics, virtue as a word rarely even makes an appearance today. In this age of retro, it does not even have the appeal of nostalgia or kitsch: we are so removed from the language of virtue that it merely sounds remote.

Why should a concept that once had such wide use and great importance — in nothing less than the founding of this nation — have fallen out of use? Certainly it is not because we have no need for it. Just the recent newspaper headlines about the shootings in Washington, D.C., Oklahoma, and Arizona, together with an exorbitant violent crime rate, indicate that society has frayed to the breaking point. I agree with the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre, who argues that the reason we have such trouble with the notion of virtue and the larger range of moral terms and concepts is that we lack a coherent framework of any kind that would make sense of its smaller components. Instead, we are left with separate remnants that do not necessarily make sense outside of any larger context.¹ By this logic, we not only lack the intellectual framework that would make moral concepts intelligible, but we also operate in the absence of a larger culture that buttresses a moral outlook.

In fact, contemporary American culture actively works against even those remnants we might have of a moral view of life — a view most early theorists of democracy deemed crucial for democracy itself.
debate and advocates governmental paternalism in inculcating morality, despite her criticism of the dependent welfare state. These shortcomings aside, she eloquently reminds us of the crucial role the family plays in promoting good civic character. The family is the:

‘seedbed of virtue,’ the place where we receive our formative experiences, where the most elemental, primitive emotions come into play and we learn to express and control them, where we come to trust and relate to others, where we acquire habits of feeling, thinking and behaving that we call character – where we are, in short, civilized, socialized, and moralized.4

Civic or character education programs can be mere bandaids given that the formation of the self begins very early in life, and it is out of the proper combination of parental love and discipline that the moral conscience emerges. If this is the case, then the massive family disruption that has occurred with divorce revolution since the 1960s, the turn to full-time daycare for even very young infants as a response to the increased number of mothers in the workforce, and other such problems might be interfering with the earliest conditions necessary for individual moral understanding.

Yet, even when families go against the odds, staying together and laying the foundation for children’s exercise of virtue and responsibility, the invasive popular culture works directly against them. It is urgent that we fully appreciate the ways the market, the culture of celebrity and entertainment, and our wholesale adoption of technology not only get in the way of the formation and exercise of morality but also work directly against them. To take one example, advertising has proliferated at an astonishing rate in the last generation, now dominating nearly all network and cable television stations, the computer screen, and children’s movies and programs. Enola Aird, director of the Motherhood Project, a grassroots organization that formed to fight what it sees as the commercialization of children’s lives, laments the incursions of the advertising industry:

We’ve got this incredible external force out there that has some of the smartest people in the world working for it, using the greatest technology, and telling my children things that are diametrically opposed to what I’ve been telling them since I brought them into

Recently, social scientists – for instance, Robert Putnam in his well-known study *Bowling Alone* – have paid much attention to what they see as the erosion of civic life. The assumption is that if we have more participation in this intermediate sphere – more bowling in leagues, more volunteering, more church going – we will have a more virtuous, responsible, and political citizenry. But, as Amitai Etzioni and others have pointed out, association alone can produce malevolent and undemocratic results as often as it produces good ones. The KKK and other hate groups, which have proliferated with the help of Internet communication (held out by many as the great new hope for democratic association and participation), are perfect examples. Etzioni stresses the need for a vision that emphasizes the good society, at which moral discussion aims, rather than merely civil society, with its emphasis on participation alone.3

Gertrude Himmelfarb also has emphasized the need for a re-moralizing of civil society. Like other conservatives, she assumes morality as a given to be imposed rather than a subject of ongoing discussion and debate and advocates governmental paternalism in inculcating morality, despite her criticism of the dependent welfare state. These shortcomings aside, she eloquently reminds us of the crucial role the family plays in promoting good civic character. The family is the:

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Historian James Kloppenberg writes that the generation of writers and thinkers that led the American revolution and founded the new republic drew from three major ways of looking at civic virtue: religious, republican, and liberal. Despite their differences, these traditions shared a similar emphasis on individual freedom and autonomy that made sense only in a context of commitment to a higher moral end: the greater good of the community, the notion of the good life (a life well-lived), or service to God. Over the course of the nineteenth century, virtue was recast as a matter for the private realm – a “label for bourgeois propriety or feminine purity,” a corrective to the increasingly brutal public world of competitive capitalism. Individual independence “lost its identification” with benevolence and responsibility, allowing the public sphere to revolve around uninhibited self-interest.2

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this world . . . Somebody else is trying to raise my children and being pretty successful at it. They aren’t evil; they are just trying to make a buck – but by competing with me to raise my child.\(^5\)

Recent debates have brought to light the deeply disturbing lyrics of many rap and heavy-metal songs, as well as violence in movies, television, and video games. One such video game, called “Grand Theft Auto: Vice City,” a PlayStation 2 game, allows players “virtually” to steal drugs and beat and kill people. Senator Joseph Lieberman understates the problem when he calls the game “a tutorial in bad behavior” that goes beyond celebrating violence to rewarding it.\(^6\)

Advertisements reveal deeply anti-social attitudes, as they convey a world in which everyone hates and envies others for the things they own (and that is good) people appear as objects and material items are more important than people. On highways, the old rules of the road have fallen away as a new ethos of radical individualism underpins drivers’ decisions to engage in ever more dangerous maneuvers. In NFL football, in which a player can legally maim or kill another person, violence is endemic. Today’s practice of niche marketing encourages businesses to cater to any and all impulses, however bizarre or perverse. These are issues that involve much more than just bad manners, but a lack of a larger vision of society, why we live together, and how.

It is this vision that the notion of virtue once implied. The moral universe in which virtue was considered both a duty and a privilege is long gone. What has replaced it is a culture of “dog-eat-dog” individualism in which others’ lives seem increasingly irrelevant to ours. By tolerating this brutish social and cultural life, we pave the way for the demise of democracy. Self-government has no future in a society in which citizens are pitted against one another.

Sociologist Philip Rieff argues that a long-term cultural shift has changed the entire basis of modern society to that of a therapeutic sensibility – a commitment to a sense of personal well-being – replacing religion as the dominant way of understanding the world and eroding any sense of moral authority external to the individual. Culture gives us a set of “permissions and restraints,” understood as distinctions between right and wrong. Self-sacrifice and restraint of impulse are necessary for collective life, and sublimation leads to cultural activity, “directing the self outward, toward those communal purposes in which alone the self can be realized and satisfied.” What is more, culture helps us replace our unlimited innate desires with “fixed wants.” But instead of a culture of this sort, we now live by an “anti-culture,” based on an “ethic of release.” A therapeutic mentality atomizes individuals and frustrates their basic need for meaning and common purpose. Lionel Trilling described this cultural shift as the rise of the “boundary-less” self.\(^7\)

When we talk about restraining this selfish individualism, we almost always talk about how private citizens need to restrain their appetites and self-interest. In response to the moral crisis of late twentieth century life, we now turn to character or virtues education and other curricular changes to try to instruct citizens in civic participation. But these measures sidestep the way in which the market and the government – through its wholesale embrace of the corporate marketplace – actively promote the boundary-less self. Consumerism has come to rely on it. The addiction to high profit levels at any cost has led businesses to encourage ever-expanding definitions of our needs and desires, uninhibited self-expression, and self-gratification as an end in itself. Why not subject corporations and government, which are made up of individuals who presumably also could learn to exercise moral virtue, to the same moral standards as the rest of us?

Although virtue is the preserve of individuals and originates in private life in family upbringing, government itself could have a huge role in the restoration of the conditions in which virtue might have a chance of winning out, however occasionally. We have seen how the welfare state, although essential for common decencies of aid in the case of poverty, disability, or old age, has helped erode patterns of self-help, individual responsibility, and dignity, and in so doing, has buttressed the therapeutic mentality. But instead of seeing the alternative to modern welfare-state liberalism as free-market libertarianism (which actually amounts to government protection of corporate interests), a government by the people could begin with some of the old-fashioned tenets from an earlier stage of progressivism that helped tame the ferocious incursions of industrial capitalism in the early twentieth century: governmental regulation. Strict regulation of the large corporations with CEOs who are making obscene profits from our culture – steeped as it is in anti-social attitudes and violence – certainly would be a good start.
Regulation of the amount of time advertisers can take up, a basic standard of civility and decency for media fare, and the outright ban of some materials all are possibilities.

The problem is deeper than advertising and violent fare, however, and it goes to the very root of the major institutions in American life. As long as we allow celebrity, entertainment, and market culture to be models of achievement and to set the values and tenor of public life, no amount of talk about civic virtue will make a difference. Similarly, as long as public officials continue to cross the boundaries of propriety, morality, and legality themselves, it is a moot point to discuss how to increase the public’s trust in government. Government itself clearly has suffered from the same loss of moral bearings that is prevalent everywhere else we turn.

Civic education plans, as the main way to address the crisis in democratic citizenship, have at least four major limitations that need to be taken into account before rushing toward implementation. First, they fail to address the overwhelming forces working directly against civic virtue, because they nearly always fail to address the damage done by the market and market values. There is a limit to what school curricula can do as a counterbalance to a culture that teaches the opposite. Second, civic education plans assume the problem is mainly one involving the behavior and character of private individuals and not one involving the behavior and character of major institutions (and the people in them). The corruption, misuse of power, and bad judgment of many at the helm of leading institutions are at least partly responsible for the shrinkage of civic participation and knowledge. Third, such plans assume our problem is about technique—the technique of instilling virtue in the populace—and not about content or substance. We need to question the assumption that if people know more about government they will automatically participate more and have more trust in the system. It begs the questions of what government and business might do to inspire more trust and invite more participation and what kind of knowledge results in better citizens. Understanding the workings of government without any sense of history or the humanities more broadly can just as easily lead to crass manipulation of the system rather than behavior rooted in ethics and integrity. Rather than set an ideal of the informed citizen, we might better set our sights on the good citizen. And fourth, civic education plans assume that the conclusions are clear, and morality simply needs to be passed on to those who do not have it. Morality is not as static as this, and certainly in a political setting, it must be discussed and debated on an ongoing basis. The potential for political abuses perpetrated in the name of instilling virtue is well known and must be avoided at all costs.

A moral culture is one in which decisions take into account considerations of good and bad, right and wrong, just and unjust. Without the support of such a culture, which helps us assess the behavior of ourselves, other people, and institutions, enhanced civic participation in inadequate. But moral culture is not about inculcating a static and predetermined set of virtues, nor is it about the direct intervention of religious interests into politics. Instead, it is about ongoing discussion and debate of policies and actions in light of transcendent moral goals, a life well-lived, the common good, a just society. The only way to begin to find such a culture is to retrieve a space in American life, both in private and in public, that is untouched by the marketplace. With its current power and influence and the kinds of messages it purveys, the market elevates the boundary-less self, which works directly against civic virtue. Thomas Jefferson wrote that “self-love” is “the sole antagonist of virtue, leading us constantly by our propensities to self-gratification in violation of our moral duties to others.” It is no mystery what he would think of the “I, me, mine” times in which we now live. But it remains a question what will become of the democracy he helped create, given the anti-social behavior of our times and the wholesale support such behavior currently receives from our market-dominated culture.

NOTES


3 Amitai Etzioni, “Communitarianism and the Moral Dimension,” in


Although the United States is a stable constitutional democracy, worries about the condition of U.S. civic life are widespread. Scholars, elected officials, and ordinary citizens are concerned about the apparent weakening of civil society as well as documented declines in political activities such as voting. The major political parties are moving toward agreement on responses to this situation, including an increased emphasis on civic education, volunteerism, and national service.

The purpose of this article is not to advocate specific public policies, but rather to summarize what is known about the condition of civic life in the United States, and to suggest one area in which efforts to improve civic life might be focused. For analytical purposes, I will begin by summarizing current research on civic beliefs and knowledge and then consider current research on civic behavior. Throughout the summary, I rely on survey data as the principal support for my conclusions. I analyze both the population as a whole and young adults (ages 15 to 25), whose attitudes and behaviors may help us predict future trends.

After canvassing what is known about the condition of civic life in the United States, I devote specific attention to the importance of civic knowledge. I argue that the decline in civic knowledge is not simply a symptom of the overall decline of American civic life. On the contrary,
I contend that civic knowledge directly affects civic competence, character, and conduct. Recent research shows that if we want to revitalize and sustain democratic citizenship, working to raise levels of civic knowledge and information would be one effective strategy, and a sensible place to begin.

In this vein, this article concludes by considering recent research on the pedagogy of civic knowledge. Although there has long been a scholarly consensus that classroom civic education has no effect on civic knowledge, I will demonstrate how recent findings challenge this consensus. Thus, I will suggest that formal education may well hold the key to the erosion of civic life that troubles so many thoughtful people.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT AMERICAN CIVIC BELIEFS AND KNOWLEDGE?

The “American Creed”

The citizens of the United States remain deeply committed to what many call the “American creed”: an amalgam of constitutional democracy in politics, equal opportunity in the economy, and freedom in society. According to an often cited survey conducted by the University of Virginia’s Post-Modernity Project, support for the basic elements of the creed runs in excess of 90 percent in the population as a whole and in key subgroups. Decades before the events of September 11, 2001, and continuing into the present, overwhelming majorities have consistently expressed pride in their country.

There is evidence, however, that young adults are somewhat less committed to the American creed than are their parents and grandparents. Through the 1990s, surveys suggested that young people were significantly less likely to say the United States is the greatest country, that its system of government is the best possible, that they are proud to live under that system, or that they would rather live in the United States than in other countries.

Today’s high school seniors are less likely to agree that, “Despite its many faults, our system of doing things is still the best in the world” than was the previous generation. In 1977, two-thirds of high school seniors agreed with this statement; by 2000, agreement had fallen significantly, to only 55 percent. While numerous surveys have shown a surge in patriotism among young people in the wake of September 11, the most recent evidence suggests that this phenomenon may be short-lived.

Moral Evaluations of the United States

There is evidence that increasing numbers of Americans perceive their society to be suffering a moral decline. A half century ago, more than 50 percent of Americans responded affirmatively when asked, “Do you think people in general lead as good lives – honest and moral – as they used to?” As recently as the mid-1960s, more than 40 percent agreed. By 1998, that figure had declined to 28 percent. By 2002, it had fallen even further, to only 21 percent.

This perception of moral decline is especially pronounced in citizens’ evaluations of young people. When asked, “Do you think that young people today have as strong a sense of right and wrong as they did, say, 50 years ago?” Fifty-seven percent answered affirmatively in 1952, and 41 percent as recently as 1965. Today, that figure has bottomed out at only 19 percent.

Attitudes Toward Government

Over the past two generations, Americans’ trust in the national government has declined sharply. In the early 1960s, about three quarters of U.S. citizens trusted the national government to do what is right all or most of the time. By the mid-1990s, only one quarter did. In the second half of the 1990s, trust in government increased modestly, to nearly 40 percent, before the Clinton scandals knocked it down again. September 11 produced a surge in that trust, which has since subsided, although trust remains significantly higher than before the terrorist attacks. Trust in the legislative and executive branches declined about equally, while trust in the judiciary remained stable. Trust in state and local government also declined, but is consistently higher than trust in the national government.

Through the past decade, scholars in the United States have debated the cause of this historic shift. The most comprehensive exploration reached the following conclusions:
Trust in Other People

Americans’ trust in one another has declined during the past generation, although less sharply than trust in government. From a high of 54 percent in the early 1960s, trust declined to only 34 percent in the late 1990s. There is evidence that young people are significantly less likely to trust others than are older citizens (See Graph 2).

As recently as 1975, high school students trusted other people at the same rate adults did; by the late 1990s, a gap of nearly 15 points separated high school students from other adults. Younger, less trusting Americans make up a larger share of the population.

There is no consensus among scholars about the causes of diminished trust in other people. The most plausible hypotheses include: (a) value changes in attitudes toward authority and social restraints in general, (b) economic destabilization stemming from technological change and globalization, (c) changes in the political process that weakened political parties and increased the perceived distance between elites and the public, and (d) a more consistent negative stance by the press toward government as well as other key institutions.

There is no systematic evidence that younger Americans are more (or less) likely to trust government than are older Americans. In some respects, however, their attitude toward government is more favorable than that of other age cohorts. For example, 18- to 25-year-olds are least likely to see government as inefficient and wasteful, or to believe that the federal government controls too much of Americans’ daily lives. If these youthful attitudes persist over time, they could provide a basis for renewed government activism in areas of national need such as health care (see Graph 1).

Trust in Other Key Institutions

Governmental institutions in the United States were hardly alone in experiencing declining public trust during the past generation. Other major institutions that suffered that fate were labor, the legal profession, educational institutions, the media, and even organized religion. Confidence in business and corporations, which increased during the second half of the 1990s, collapsed in the wake of recent highly publicized financial scandals. Only the police and the armed forces have managed to gain increased trust during this period.

Graph 1: Pro-Government Responses to Questions

There is no consensus among scholars about the causes of diminished trust in other people. The most plausible hypotheses include: the sharp increase in rates of crime and violence between the mid-1960s and the early 1990s; the disruption of family stability, evident in soaring divorce

Trust in Other People

Americans’ trust in one another has declined during the past generation, although less sharply than trust in government. From a high of 54 percent in the early 1960s, trust declined to only 34 percent in the early 1990s, where it remained with minor oscillations for the rest of the decade. Unlike trust in government, there is evidence that young people are significantly less likely to trust others than are older citizens (See Graph 2). As recently as 1975, high school students trusted other people at the same rate adults did; by the late 1990s, a gap of nearly 15 points separated high school students from other adults. Indeed, most, if not all, of the overall decline in social trust since the 1960s can be explained by the changing composition of the population. Older Americans are no less trusting than they were 30 years ago, but younger, less trusting Americans make up a larger share of the population.

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about 40 percent said it was important to become well off financially (see Graph 3). By the beginning of the twenty-first century, these sentiments reversed: 73 percent of college students said it was important to become well off, versus only 42 percent who felt that way about developing a meaningful philosophy of life. Not surprisingly, this trend was different among age cohorts. Toward the end of the 1990s, young adults reported significantly higher interest in money and self-fulfillment than did other Americans, as well as much lower levels of patriotism. (Here as elsewhere, it remains to be seen whether the changes produced by the events of September 11 will be temporary or long-lasting.)

Other important attitudinal shifts during the past generation include: increased racial, ethnic, religious, and gender tolerance and the increased value placed on unfettered individual choice as the central norm of U.S. social life.

The events of September 11 appear to have increased trust in government (at all levels), in other institutions, and in other people. Civic behavior has changed much less than civic attitudes, however. Robert Putnam asks whether behavior will follow attitudes. If not, “the blossom of civic-mindedness after September 11 may be short-lived.”

Other Key Attitudes

During the past generation, there has been a gradual shift towards materialism. Nowhere has that change been sharper than among young adults. In the mid-1960s, nearly 90 percent of college students believed it was very important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life, while
of themselves as liberal, 23 percent conservative, and 30 percent moderate.\textsuperscript{21}

**Political Knowledge**

Americans today know about as much about political institutions and events as they did 50 years ago. This stability is remarkable, given that education tends to increase political knowledge; and the median amount of formal education has risen by four years during the past half-century. It turns out that today’s college graduates know no more about politics than high school graduates did 50 years ago, and today’s high school graduates are no more knowledgeable than were the high school dropouts of the past.\textsuperscript{22}

Equally disturbing is the developing generation gap in political knowl-
edge. From the 1940s through the mid-1970s, young people were at least as well informed as were older Americans. This pattern has shifted drastically, starting with the baby boomers and has accelerated with their children. As Robert Putnam summarizes the data, “Today’s under-30’s pay less attention to the news and know less about current events than their elders do today or than people their age did two or three decades ago.” Here, as elsewhere, the events of September 11 evoked an increased interest in political events among all Americans, and especially younger Americans. But current indications are that this surge represents a temporary “spike” rather than a sustained shift toward interest in politics and current events.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT AMERICAN CIVIC BEHAVIOR?

Voting

A central indicator of civic behavior is the citizens’ willingness to go to the polls on election day. Remarkably, there is no generally accepted method for measuring voter turnout in the United States; every existing method is significantly flawed. Nonetheless it is possible to examine broad trends over time with confidence.

For much of the twentieth century, voting rates in the United States were well below those of other democracies. There were substantial variations within that period, however. Overall participation rose to a post-World War II peak in the early 1960s and declined significantly thereafter. Between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s, turnout dropped by about 10 percentage points; it has declined much more slowly since then, by about 4 percentage points.

Recent scholarship has sought to explain this decline. The most persuasive attempt focuses on three factors: resources, interest, and mobilization. According to this thesis, increasing economic inequality has deprived large numbers of poor and undereducated Americans of the resources they need to participate, while the decline of American political parties as grassroots organizations has diminished voter mobilization. Meanwhile, events have tended to depress interest in politics among Americans born after the civic-minded Depression/World War II generation. While it has long been the case that the frequency of voting (and other forms of political activity) tends to increase with age, careful analysis suggests that in recent decades, differences among generations have become more important in explaining voting behavior.

For nearly a century after the Civil War, African Americans were systematically denied the right to vote. The great legal and constitutional amendments of the 1960s began to change that. Today, African American voting rates are close to those of white Americans. (Indeed, once education is taken into account, they are somewhat higher.)

Hispanics make up the most rapidly growing sector of the U.S. electorate. For various reasons, however, their electoral participation has not reflected their increasing weight in the population. On average, Hispanics are younger, poorer, and less educated than other population groups – factors that generally depress turnout among voters. In addition, substantial numbers of Hispanics are not yet citizens and are therefore ineligible to vote in most jurisdictions. Still, the voting rate among Hispanics who are U.S. citizens remains lower than that of other groups in the electorate.

There are signs that this may be changing now, however. Many Hispanics interpreted anti-immigrant legislation enacted in California in the mid-1990s as hostile to their ethnic group. Changes in federal welfare legislation reinforced that view. The result has been highly visible Hispanic voter mobilization, especially in large cities where Hispanics now hold the balance of political power and where promising Hispanics candidates for mayor and city council are coming forward.

An important change occurred in 1972, when for the first time Americans as young as 18 were allowed to vote throughout the nation. At first, they participated in substantial number: in the presidential election of 1972, 52 percent of eligible voters aged 18 to 25 cast ballots. Over the next 30 years, the rate of participation in the age group fell sharply; by the 2000 presidential election, only 37 percent of young Americans bothered to vote, a decline of roughly one-third. Similar trends are apparent for congressional elections held during non-presidential years. In 1974, 26 percent of Americans aged 18 to 25 voted for congressional candidates; in 1998, the most recent non-presidential
election year, only 17 percent cast their ballots — again, a decline of roughly one-third (See Graph 5).26

Levels of education affect voter participation in the entire U.S. population, but their effect on younger voters is especially pronounced. In the presidential election of 2000, only 21 percent of young Americans with less than a high school education voted, as compared to 69 percent of college graduates.27 In the overall population, by contrast, 86 percent of college graduates voted, but so did 47 percent of high-school dropouts. Over the past three decades, rates of voter participation have dropped significantly in every education cohort except college graduates.28

Other Forms of Participation in Official Politics

Americans participate in politics in many ways other than voting — for example, writing to their elected representative, signing petitions, and attending rallies. The conventional wisdom is that while Americans have below-average voting turnout, they are very active by international standards in other aspects of political participation. This belief is less true than once was. Between 1973 and 1994, the Roper organization conducted an annual survey of political participation that examined trends in 12 different activities. During those two decades, every participation indicator declined significantly. The decline was especially steep (between 34 and 42 percent) for those activities that required working with others in public settings. (By contrast, the more solitary political activities — writing one’s congressman or senator, signing a petition, writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper — experienced smaller declines.) Overall, there was a decrease of 25 percent in the share of Americans who participated in at least one of the 12 activities during the prior year.29

Like voting, participation in these other political activities is strongly influenced by wealth, education, and social position. Participation increases steadily as income rises, and citizens in the top income quintile are roughly five times as likely as those in the bottom quintile to engage in a political activity.30 (This ratio has fluctuated between four and seven over the past quarter-century, with a mean of roughly five.31)

Age also affects political participation. Young people are least likely to
participate, but engagement tends to rise steadily through middle age before falling again among the elderly. In addition, today’s Americans at every age level are less likely to participate than were Americans of the same age in previous generations.\textsuperscript{32}

Putnam’s analysis shows that this process of declining participation has contributed to the polarization of American politics. Individuals who identify themselves as moderate, centrist, or middle-of-the-road have been disproportionately likely to drop out of politics, while those who are more ideologically extreme have tended to remain active. This helps explain an apparent paradox: while an increasing fraction of the U.S. electorate identifies itself as moderate (rather than very liberal or very conservative), fewer and fewer elected representatives are moderates.\textsuperscript{33} Political parties have learned that ideologically committed voters are more likely to vote, donate money, and participate in grassroots organizing, so campaigns are increasingly aimed at mobilizing this intense base of support, which further alienates moderates, and so forth, in a vicious circle.

Voluntary Organizations

Since at least the publication of Tocqueville’s \textit{Democracy in America}, Americans have seen themselves (and have been seen by others) as unusually likely to address social and political problems by forming voluntary organizations. While there is much truth to this view, recent scholarship has pointed to some disturbing trends. Since 1995, Robert Putnam has argued that the fabric of American civil society has been fraying over the past generation. With the publication of his comprehensive book in 2000, even the skeptics were forced to concede that there is substantial evidence of decline.

Putnam was able to show, for example, that membership in major national organizations has declined, as has active participation in local clubs and groups. Union membership has fallen from almost 35 percent of the workforce to less than 15 percent. Even church attendance appears to have fallen off, though less steeply than participation in secular groups. In the main, organizations that have grown in the past generation have tended to be “checkbook” organizations that use direct mail to raise funds for the support of national headquarters and professional advocacy rather than face-to-face activities among local citizens.\textsuperscript{34} One might suppose that participation in civil society is less influenced by income and status than is participation in official politics. But in fact, we observe much the same influence of socioeconomic standing in civil society. Once again, there is a linear relation between social position and group membership; those at the top are three times as likely as those at the bottom to participate.\textsuperscript{35}

The major exception to this generalization is religion. There is no relationship between social position and attending religious services or meetings. Individuals of all income levels are equally likely to participate, and this equality has persisted virtually unchanged over the past 30 years.\textsuperscript{36} The mobilization of religious Americans over the past generation represents one of the few tendencies toward political and civil equalization during this period. As Brady, Schlozman, Verba, and Elms remark, “It is ironic that, even though many religious institutions are hierarchically governed and democracy is supposed to provide a level playing field on which all citizens are equal, it is religious activity that has consistently been distributed relatively equally across socioeconomic groups.”\textsuperscript{37}

Giving and Volunteering

Closely related to membership in civil society organizations are the activities of giving (charitable contributions) and volunteering in neighborhoods and communities. Here trends are mixed. Charitable contributions peaked at about 2.2 percent of national income in the mid-1960s and have fallen fairly steadily ever since, to about 1.6 percent today.\textsuperscript{38} (Measured in real dollars per capita, charitable giving rose during this period, reflecting the large increase in per capita income. But most scholars believe that it is more meaningful to measure contributions in relation to individual, family, or national income.)

Volunteering is the principal exception to the general pattern of weakening civic involvement. Over the past quarter-century, volunteering by the average American has risen from six times per year to nearly eight times. Much of this increase has occurred among older Americans, who are enjoying longer, healthier, more prospererous retirements than ever before. (Volunteering is up remindable 140 percent among Americans over the age of 75.) We also observe significant increases among college students and young adults (See Graph 6). Only among American
years have been a golden age for social movements.

The evidence suggests, however, that few of these movements have achieved sustained mass mobilization. Today, most consist of small cadres of professional advocates sustained by large numbers of citizens whose main mode of participation is writing checks. It is doubtful whether this mode of civic engagement builds social capital, especially at the local and community levels. 41

THE CENTRAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CIVIC KNOWLEDGE

The portrait of civic life that I have painted provides good reason to worry. It also suggests a question: if we are interested in reversing the decline in civic life, are there particular factors on which we should focus our attention? A part of the answer, I believe, is to emphasize the acquisition of civic knowledge.

Admittedly, it may seem implausible to argue that basic civic knowledge is central to democratic citizenship. Why should it matter whether young people can identify their senators or name the branches of government? Yet, surprisingly, recent research suggests important links between basic civic information and civic attributes we have good reason to care about. 42 The major findings may be summarized as follows:

1. Civic knowledge helps citizens understand their interests as individuals and as members of groups. The more knowledge they have, the better we can understand the impact of public policies on their interests, and the more effectively they can promote their interests in the political process. Political knowledge fosters “enlightened self-interest” – the ability to connect personal/group interests with specific public issues and to connect those issues with candidates who are more likely to share their views and promote their interests.

2. Civic knowledge increases the consistency of views across issues and across time. There is a strong linear relationship between political knowledge and the stability of political attitudes, and more knowledgeable voters display much higher levels of ideological consistency.

Social Movements

Social movements would seem to be a conspicuous exception to the broad pattern of declining civic engagement summarized in this paper. After all, since the early 1960s, U.S. society has been transformed by movements for civil rights, feminism, environmentalism, gay and lesbian rights, and many others. Many activists believe that the past 40

aged 30 to 50 has volunteering stagnated or declined since 1975. 39

The explanation of the increase in volunteering among young people is contested. Anecdotal evidence suggests more and more young people are required to volunteer by their schools as a condition of high school graduation, or by colleges and universities as a condition of admission. When questioned, however, young people deny that these requirements are a major factor. Rather, they claim they volunteer because someone asked, because it makes them feel good, or because they want to make a difference. Nearly a quarter of all young Americans see volunteering as an alternative to participation in a political system they regard as remote, unresponsive, and beholden to special interests. 40

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among issues (as measured along a unidimensional liberal-conservative axis) than do the less well-informed.

3. Unless citizens possess a basic level of civic knowledge — especially concerning political institutions and processes — it is difficult for them to understand political events or to integrate new information into an existing framework. (By analogy, imagine trying to make sense of the flow of events in a sports competition for someone who does not know the rules of the game.) Popkin and Dimock distinguish between “personal character” and “political character” (conduct judged in the specific context of political roles, institutions, issues, and responsibilities). Low-information citizens are much more likely to judge officials according to their perception of officials’ personal character rather than their stance on key issues.

4. General civic knowledge can alter our views on specific public issues. For example, the more knowledge citizens have, the less likely they are to fear new immigrants and their impact on the U.S. economy and security.

5. The more knowledge citizens have of civic affairs, the less likely they are to experience a generalized mistrust of, or alienation from, public life. Ignorance is the father of fear, and knowledge is the mother of trust. More knowledgeable citizens tend to judge the behavior of public officials as they judge their own — in the context of circumstances and incentives, with due regard for innocent oversights and errors as well as sheer chance. By contrast, less knowledgeable citizens are more likely to view public officials’ blunders as signs of bad character. Moreover, low-information citizens encountering vigorous political debate with its inevitable charges and countercharges are more likely to conclude that there are no white knights and adopt a “plague on both your houses” stance. For those who understand politics, debate can be as clear as a tennis match; for those who do not, it more closely resembles a food fight.

6. Civic knowledge promotes support for democratic values. For example, the more knowledge citizens have of political principles and institutions, the more likely they are to support core democratic principles, starting with tolerance. Knowledge of specific constitutional rights and civil liberties increases tolerance for unpopular minorities.

7. Civic knowledge promotes political participation. All other things being equal, the more knowledge citizens have, the more likely they are to participate in public matters. Political knowledge affects participation, not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively. For example, more knowledgeable voters are more likely to vote on the basis of national economic conditions as well as personal economic circumstances. Political knowledge makes it more likely that citizens will ask not only, “How am I doing?” but also, “How are we doing?”

**CAN CIVIC KNOWLEDGE BE TAUGHT?**

So in the end, there is not compelling reason to doubt that civic knowledge affects civic competence, character, and conduct. But what affects knowledge?

For three decades the scholarly consensus has been that formal classroom-based civic education has no significant effect on civic knowledge. Recent findings challenge this consensus and begin to provide insight into both the overall effects of civic education on political knowledge and specific pedagogical strategies that effectively foster political understanding.

Some of these findings reflect evaluations of individual civic education programs. For example, several research studies conclude that We the People . . . The Citizen and the Constitution, a nationwide program of civic education administered by the Center for Civic Education, is especially effective at improving the civic knowledge of elementary, middle, and high school students relative to students in comparison groups. In addition, participants develop a stronger attachment to democratic attitudes and principles and an enhanced sense of political interest and effectiveness.

Other research is broader-based. In a study of political socialization of young people in four communities, Pamela Johnson Conover and Donald Searing explore the role of high schools in fostering civic understanding and practice. They focus on four elements of the school experience: the sense of the school as a community, the students’ level of civic engagement in school and extra-curricular activities, the
level of political discussion in school, and the formal academic curriculum. They find that all four elements significantly affect young people’s civic consciousness and practice, albeit in different ways. Remarkably, the informal civic education that occurs in non-civics courses such as English literature may be more effective than civic education as currently taught.

In a major study based on data from the 1988 NAEP civics assessment, Richard Niemi and Jane Junn find significant effects from the amount and timing of civic course work, the variety of topics studied, and the frequency with which current events are discussed in class. These course effects are independent of background variables such as gender, ethnicity, and home environment as well as interest in government and academic aspirations. Classroom effects are smaller for Hispanics than for white students, and smaller for African Americans than for Hispanics (class discussion is the only classroom variable that yields significant results for African Americans). Differences between girls and boys are small, although boys are more strongly affected by their classroom experiences and home background. While formal classes are significant for all dimensions of civic knowledge, not surprisingly they have somewhat smaller effects in areas such as citizens’ rights, in which non-school sources are likely to provide relevant information. (Young people’s familiarity with the details of suspects’ Miranda rights is stunningly high.)

Niemi and Junn offer an explanation for the divergence of their findings from those of scholars a generation ago, best exemplified by the work of Langton and Jennings. In the first place, Langton and Jennings did find some effects of civic education on knowledge, which they downplayed in an analysis heavily weighted toward attitudinal items. Second, they did not take into account the grade in which students took civics education classes; Niemi and Junn show that 12th-grade classes have more impact than classes taken earlier. Third, they did not include discussion of current events in their analysis, and there are good reasons to believe that these discussions are more likely to provide civic knowledge than are other classroom activities.

Finally, a comprehensive study of 90,000 14-year-olds in 28 countries found that school-based civic education does make a significant difference in developing civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Among the most notable findings from this study:

- A classroom climate that encourages respectful discussions of civic and political issues fosters both civic knowledge and engagement.
- An explicit focus on learning about voting and elections increases the likelihood that young people will participate in elections when they reach voting age.
- Participation in student organizations (including student councils) promotes a sense of civic efficacy.

CONCLUSION

My summary of recent research indicates that there is a solid empirical basis behind the growing concern about American civic life. Whether one looks at civic beliefs or civic behavior, there have been marked declines in the qualities and characteristics that we associate with successful democratic government—declines that are especially prominent and troubling among young adults.

Yet, if recent research demonstrates the depth of the problem, it also points toward possible solutions. Among other promising findings, current studies demonstrate that civic knowledge is an important determinant of civic capability and character. Moreover, recent findings suggest that formal, classroom-based civic education provides an effective means of teaching civic knowledge. Contrary to a longstanding scholarly consensus concerning the dim prospects for civic education, the recent wave of research furnishes a basis for hope and a guide for action. A key to halting and even reversing the negative trends that have weakened our public life may well be found in the school house, a central dimension of the complex process through which young people develop civic awareness and motivation.
NOTES


7 “Americans Struggle with Religion’s Role,” Question 3.


11 Ladd and Bowman, Chapter 6.


13 Putnam, Bowling Alone, pp. 140-141.


15 “Youth Civic Engagement: Basic Facts and Trends” (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), University of Maryland, Jan. 9, 2002), p. 3.

16 Rahn, “Americans’ Engagement with and Commitment to the Political System.”


18 Putnam, Bowling Alone, p. 36.


21 “Short-Term Impacts, Long-Term Opportunities: The Political and Civic Engagement of Young Adults in America,” Lake Snell Perry & Associates/The Tarrance Group, Inc., analysis and report for the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), March 2002.

22 For all this and much more, see especially Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

23 Putnam, Bowling Alone, p. 36.

24 For a discussion of these difficulties, see “Youth Voter Turnout Has Declined, by Any Measure” (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), University of Maryland, 2002).

25 Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady, “Civic Participation and the Equality Problem,” in Theda Skocpol and

26 “Youth Voter Turnout Has Declined, by Any Measure,” p. 9.
27 “Youth Voter Turnout Has Declined, by Any Measure,” p. 10.
28 Calculations by Mark Lopez, CIRCLE Research Director; copy on file with the author.
29 This survey is summarized in Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p. 45.
31 “Who Bowls?,” Figure 10-2.
36“Who Bowls?,” Figure 10-5.
37 “Who Bowls?” (end).
38 This trend is summarized in Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, p. 124. Figure 31 on that page also shows that the mid-1960s peak represents a remarkable increase from the roughly 1.5 percent characteristic of the 1930s. This raises the question whether the Depression/World War II generation should be regarded as an aspirational norm or rather an unusual exception to typical social patterns.
41Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, pp. 154-166. As Putnam rightly observes, the movement of religious conservatives constitutes a major exception to this generalization, a fact that helps explain important developments in American politics over the past quarter century.
BRINGING GOVERNMENT BACK INTO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT:

CONSIDERING THE ROLE OF PUBLIC POLICY

Suzanne Mettler

Amid contemporary debates about the causes, manifestations, and possible cures for America’s fraying civic life, one factor is typically conspicuous by its absence: government itself. The predominant discourse portrays citizenship as a commodity generated solely and voluntarily by society as a function of associational activity and collective values. This is illustrated by the work of Robert Putnam, who explores why Americans are receding from civic activity by probing societal factors such as mobility and suburbanization, the changing role of women, the rise of divorce, and television viewing.¹ Such analyses contain only brief references to government action and depict it merely as a remote and eventual target of civic involvement; the functions that law and public policy themselves might play in affecting the vibrancy of citizens’ involvement remain unexplored.

Conversely, others place the blame for the demise of civic life squarely at the feet of government. They argue that public programs – especially social policies – have undermined civil society by presumably displacing voluntary forms of activity. On an individual level, they assert, the bestowal of social rights itself is responsible for making citizens lose awareness of their civic obligations.² Hence, these critics depict welfare state development as a force antithetical to civic engagement as they criticize social policies for fostering dependency on the state and

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undermining participation. Such claims generally are presented, however, in the absence of empirical inquiry.

Surprisingly, despite the fact that government spending constitutes one-third of the gross domestic product in the United States and citizens' lives are deeply influenced by political decisions, scholars have only recently begun to consider the ways public policies affect the degree and form of civic involvement and the well-being of American democracy generally. Contrary to prevailing assumptions, what we know so far suggests not only that interaction with government makes a difference for civic engagement, but furthermore, that such experience almost always prompts citizens to become more engaged in public life. The degree to which beneficiaries obtain a civic boost appears to vary, however, with program type. An authoritative study of voting found that farmers vote with far greater regularity than other citizens, presumably because agricultural subsidies elevate "their sense of the personal relevance of politics." Participation scholars Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady discovered that beneficiaries of a wide range of non-means-tested social programs – including veterans' benefits, Social Security, Medicare, and student loans – became active in related political issues by joining organizations, contacting officials, or making contributions to campaigns. Among less-privileged Americans, those who received means-tested benefits – all else being equal – participated at a higher level in politics. Similarly, those with school-age children – presumably mobilized to push for better public schools – became more active than childless members of their cohort group.

How might we explain such effects? As political scientist Theodore Lowi has long argued, policies, once established, act as institutions: they create a framework in which certain resources, rules, and norms are imposed upon citizens. Hence, policies reshape the political realm itself. More specifically, Paul Pierson pointed out that policies have both resource effects, by providing resources and incentives that shape the costs and benefits associated with particular political strategies and thus affecting political behavior, and interpretive effects, by acting as sources of information and meaning with implications for political learning. The precise design features of public policies – including the type and extent of resources, the rules and procedures governing eligibility and administration, and the overall structure of the program – are likely to have particular effects, as social scientists have begun to recognize.

How might the resources conveyed through public programs matter for civic engagement? At the least, they appear to prompt beneficiaries to become more involved in related issues, presumably acting on their self-interest to preserve and extend program benefits, as the studies noted earlier attest. Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen suggest a slightly more complex dynamic: Social Security beneficiaries may become more active inasmuch as their status prompts politicians to treat them as a distinct constituency and to mobilize them in the course of campaigns. Examining the value of benefits in individuals' lives, Andrea Campbell finds that the higher level of dependence on Social Security among senior citizens with lower incomes prompts them to become especially active politically. This dynamic counters the typical determinants of political participation, in which privilege – in terms of income, level of education, and other factors – typically explains who is most involved. Thus, Social Security enhances American democracy, not only in socio-economic terms – by lifting more than half of the elderly population out of poverty – but also, in political terms, by prompting greater participation among those who are less advantaged in the prerequisites for participation.

The interpretive effects of public programs have been even less well appreciated. Over the past decade and a half, political scientists have begun to recognize that policies offer beneficiaries an "operational definition of citizenship" or "a civic teaching." Through specific features of program design, as Helen Ingram and Anne Schneider observe, they convey important messages to citizens about, "what people do, which citizens are deserving or undeserving, and what sorts of participation is appropriate in democratic societies." Investigating such dynamics, Joe Soss found that citizens derive broad lessons from their experiences with public agencies, leading them to new understandings of both external political efficacy – meaning governments' responsiveness to people like them – and internal efficacy, or their own ability to make a difference politically. Though claimants of Social Security Disability Insurance encountered a complex bureaucracy, still they received responses to their complaints and appeals and subsequently concluded that the political system generally is open and democratic; welfare beneficiaries, by contrast, faced non-responsive agencies and extrapolated from their experiences that government pays little heed to
people like them. Interestingly, however, despite their negative experiences, public assistance claimants still gained a greater sense of their own political abilities, consistent with Schlozman, Verba, and Brady’s finding that such individuals become more engaged in politics than comparable non-beneficiaries. Similarly, scholars find that African Americans’ negative encounters with the police in traffic incidents contribute to their overall assessment of the justice system as unfair; negative encounters with the police even stimulate poor people to become more active politically as they seek to change the system.

These examples suggest that public programs – by virtue of their coverage, degree of resources, and treatment of different social groups – may have vast implications for the widely disparate levels and forms of civic activity among American citizens at any given point in time. Citizens included in generous programs in which they are treated with dignity and respect are especially likely to become empowered politically; those relegated to more miserly programs and handled with scrutiny or surveillance will lose faith in government’s responsiveness to them. Given that civic engagement has varied considerably over time and by generation, we might assess what difference broad patterns of public policy historically have made for civic engagement.

Robert Putnam argues that one of the chief explanations for the decline of civic engagement over recent decades is the gradual disappearance of the “civic generation,” those who were born in the 1920s, grew up during the Great Depression, served the nation in World War II, and went on to become the active, engaged citizens of the twentieth century. His only explanation for their public spiritedness, however, is the bonding experience of the Depression and war. Does it make any difference that this generation of Americans came of age at a time when the national government was becoming more involved in citizens’ lives than ever before? When I ask my undergraduates to interview their grandparents about public policies that affected their lives, they return with stories of families that could not have survived the hard times of the 1930s without government assistance, and of individuals who would never have gone to college had it not been for the G.I. Bill of Rights. Indeed, a host of New Deal and postwar programs combined with technological change and economic growth to make the mid-twentieth century a far more egalitarian period than the earlier decades of the century. The far-reaching effects of public policy facilitated wage compression and the development of a middle class, thanks to the advances won by labor unions, finally sanctioned by the National Labor Relations Act; the vast social welfare measures included in the Social Security Act; new wage and hour laws assured by the Fair Labor Standards Act; the vocational training and higher education provisions of the G.I. Bill; and the low-interest mortgages backed by the Veterans Administration and Federal Housing Authority loans. It is not reasonable to assume that such measures and the egalitarianism they wrought would have contributed to citizens’ senses of civic belonging and obligation to the larger community? Might the record levels of participation by those who grew up witnessing such a clear, visible, and positive role of government in their lives be less than a coincidence?

My research on the effects of the G.I. Bill on civic engagement among World War II veterans suggests that this public policy played a powerful role in stimulating the soaring levels of participation in membership organizations and political activity during the postwar years. Any veteran who served at least 90 days and had a discharge other than dishonorable qualified for one year of education or training paid for at government expense, with an additional month for each additional month of service. The program financed tuition at any college, university, or vocational training program that accepted a veteran through normal admissions procedures; veterans received stipends for themselves, their spouses, and dependent children. More than 50 percent of all veterans – 7.8 million individuals – used the educational provisions, with 2.2 million attending colleges and universities and the remainder obtaining vocational, on-the-job, or on-the-farm training. Given the well-established relationship between education and civic participation, certainly we would expect that any educational policy would have positive effects on such involvement; the question guiding this study, however, was whether the experience of the program itself, rather than simply the education it facilitated, boosted civic involvement.

I evaluated the effects of these educational provisions for civic engagement through extensive surveys with several hundred veterans nationwide. Regression analysis revealed that veterans who used the G.I. Bill for their education became significantly more active in a wide range of civic organizations and political activities and groups. Comparing veterans identical in overall level of education, standard of living in childhood and adulthood, parents’ educational level, and various other deter-
minants of participation, but differed in G.I. Bill usage, the program user joined 50 percent more civic organizations and engaged in 40 percent more political activities during the 1950-64 period than the non-user.

Paired with the survey data, in-depth interviews with 30 veterans around the country helped me to make sense of this startling finding. Some G.I. Bill users became more active in civic life because they felt grateful for what they perceived as a highly generous and life-transforming benefit that changed the subsequent course of their lives. In other words, the resources extended by the program were perceived to be highly valuable, and were clearly traceable to government. A “reciprocity thesis” thus explained why some veterans, especially those who spent the greatest number of years using the G.I. Bill, became more active in public life. Even more powerful were the dynamics of incorporation fostered by the program among veterans who came from less privileged backgrounds. Use of the G.I. Bill increased participation among these veterans at an especially high and persistent rate. Here the interpretive effects of program rules and administrative arrangements came into play. Through the standardized, routinized procedures used in program delivery, veterans who had grown up in low to moderate socio-economic backgrounds experienced inclusion in the political community as respected first-class citizens. Such treatment contrasted sharply with their views of targeted programs for the poor, which many had experienced in childhood and which they understood as bearers of stigma. They responded to G.I. Bill usage by becoming far more active in public life than their demographic profiles would lead us to predict. Like Social Security, therefore, the G.I. Bill mobilized citizens in a manner that in large part countered the usual patterns of reinforcing privilege.15

The scope of the G.I. Bill’s probable effects on civic engagement among the renowned “civic generation” bears mention. Among American men born in the 1920s, 80 percent were military veterans, and about half of them advanced their education through the G.I. Bill. Those born early in the decade served in World War II; those born later were sent to Korea, and when they returned home, more than 40 percent took advantage of educational or training provisions through the renewed G.I. Bill. The example of the G.I. Bill suggests that the positive role that government played in the lives of this generation is critical to understanding why they had such a strong sense of commitment toward public life.

How might patterns of policymaking in recent decades, in the post-New Deal regime, have affected those of us in subsequent, less civic-minded generations? Over the past 20 years, amid growing inequality of income and wealth, policymakers have scaled back some aspects of the welfare state, while building upon those that are less visible to citizens generally. Indeed, upper-middle-class citizens benefit more than ever from home mortgage interest deductions, child care deductions, and a host of other “tax expenditures,” but it is unlikely that citizens experience these hand-outs for what they are: generous forms of social provision. The same may be true of the Earned Income Tax Credit, despite the fact that expansions in the 1990s render it a highly significant social program for the working poor. Similarly, both student loans and tax breaks on college tuition obscure the success of public policies in aiding those who pursue higher education. With the government’s role in promoting social opportunity so well hidden, might we be relinquishing means of conveying to citizens a sense of public life and our common bonds to one another as citizens?

Increasingly, policymakers seek to shift responsibility for social provisions from government to the private sector, denigrating public solutions and opting for market-oriented alternatives. The failure to enact national health care reform in 1994 left this fundamental aspect of citizens’ well-being to the vagaries of market forces and seemingly impenetrable private industries, unaccountable to public control. Thus, for their health care as well as most retirement savings, middle-class Americans rely primarily on programs that are regulated by government, but are channeled through their employers. Now, the Bush Administration plans to solve the problem of escalating prescription drug costs for the elderly by granting subsidies to private insurance companies on the questionable assumption that they will in turn offer policies. Current reform proposals for Social Security opt to fully or partially privatize the system, and in some cases to develop separate tiers of beneficiaries – those who can afford to invest in the stock market versus those who cannot. Many policymakers favor school choice, introducing marketplace mechanisms into the school system and allowing parochial and private schools to “compete” with public schools. While scholars have yet to investigate the effects of such market-oriented solutions, it is fair to assume that they will act to imperil further our already fragile civic life. Most obviously, they threaten to reinforce rather than ameliorate socio-economic inequality – already at levels
unsurpassed since the 1920s – by treating Americans as members of distinct castes on the basis of employment status, income, and wealth. Also, they convey messages that we are separate individuals, workers, and competitors in the market, rather than citizens joined through government into a shared project of democracy. Such policy approaches are likely to destroy further our fragile sense of social trust and fading willingness to engage in civic organizations and political activities.

Policymaking and civic engagement are deeply related, joined through a complex set of mechanisms that emerge through the seemingly arcane minutia of policy design. Public officials must subject any new policy proposals – as well as efforts to replace or alter existing programs – to a vigorous civic assessment. We need to ask such questions as: what will be the impact of a policy choice on our shared sense of solidarity as citizens? On individuals’ sense that they are honored and respected members of the polity, equal to others? That government matters in their lives, and provides them with equal opportunity to live the American dream? In contemporary policymaking, these questions too often are muted by the rhetoric of economic efficiency and effectiveness. We ignore them at our peril; the well-being of democracy itself hangs in the balance.

NOTES


AGAINST CIVIC EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

James Bernard Murphy

SEPTEMBER 11 STRIKES THE SCHOOLS

The anniversary of September 11 has provoked a fierce debate about civic education in American public schools. Many liberals and conservatives, though they disagree strongly about which civic virtues to teach, share the assumption that such education is an appropriate responsibility of public schools. They are wrong: civic education aimed at civic virtue is at best ineffective, and often subversive of the moral purpose of schooling. Moreover, the attempt to impose these partisan conceptions of civic virtue on our students violates the civic trust that underpins vibrant public schools.

Here is how the recent debate has unfolded and what we might learn from it. In response to demands from teachers about how to deal with the messy emotional, racial, religious, and political issues occasioned by the September 11 attack and its aftermath, the National Education Association (NEA) offers a Web site titled “Remember September 11” full of materials about how to counsel distressed students, how to place September 11 in some kind of historical, cultural, and international context, and what moral lessons might be drawn from the attack. The moral lessons range from “Remembering the Uniformed Heroes at the World Trade Center” to “Tolerance in Times of Trial.” Similarly, the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) offers lesson plans for 9/11 on its Web site: these materials range from “The Bill of Rights” to “My Name is Osama,” the story of an Iraqi-American boy taunted by his peers because of his name and Muslim customs. Although the materials these organizations offer vary widely, their pervasive theme is well articulated by the president of the NCSS: “We need to reinforce the
ideals of tolerance, equity, and social justice against a backlash of antidemocratic sentiments and hostile divisions.”

Conservatives quickly attacked the generally liberal civics lessons offered by the NEA and the NCSS for promoting an unprincipled tolerance, for focusing too much on America’s flaws, and for failing to impart a proper knowledge and love of American institutions and ideals. A group of distinguished conservative educators and commentators published a set of its own civics lessons emphasizing love for our nation and its ideals, the heroism of the rescuers of 9/11, and the need for better knowledge of our history and institutions. These sharply divergent views of proper civics lessons led a New York Times news article to note that the anniversary of September 11 threatened to bring the culture wars back into classrooms. Even leading political pundits could not resist entering the civic education fray. Thomas Friedman offered his mildly liberal “9/11 Lesson Plan” in which he championed our democratic government while admitting that the United States is not perfect and that its conduct abroad causes dismay even among our friends. William J. Bennett offered a more conservative lesson by insisting that “American students should be taught what makes this nation great….Even with its faults, America remains the best nation on earth.”

The strident polemics we frequently find in these civics lessons might lead one to think that liberals and conservatives can find no common ground. Broadly, one might say that liberal responses to 9/11 emphasize the need to resist jingoism and to consider why hatred of America might be justified in some ways, while conservative responses emphasize our national virtues and the need for resolve to defend them in times of danger. Some liberal civics lessons amount to little more than preaching unprincipled toleration even of the intolerable, while some conservative civics lessons amount to little more than preaching unprincipled patriotism and triumphalism. The liberal and conservative agendas for civic education, however, acknowledge that a principled respect for other nations is perfectly compatible with a principled love of one’s own nation, just as a frank acknowledgement of America’s shortcomings is perfectly compatible with a forthright defense of its institutions and ideas.

Beneath the fierce polemics, liberals and conservatives agree that students need better instruction in both civic knowledge and in civic virtue. But they differ on what kinds of knowledge and what kinds of virtues to emphasize. Liberals emphasize learning more about other nations and religions while conservatives emphasize learning more about our own history and institutions. These different aims are in no way incompatible, though they may compete for scarce instructional resources. Moreover, the best proposals for civic education insist that students need more than mere information and skills in order to become good citizens. After all, even the most informed and skilled citizen might use his civic knowledge merely for selfish or even treasonous purposes. We expect good citizens not only to possess civic knowledge and skills, but also to possess civic virtue that is, a disposition to act conscientiously for the good of the nation. No doubt liberals and conservatives emphasize different civic virtues: tolerance of legitimate differences, respect for human dignity, and national humility on the one side, and love of country, respect for democracy and the rule of law, and resolve to defend these virtues on the other.

Both liberal and conservative advocates of civic education rightly agree, then, that civic education must impart civic virtue. Unfortunately, they also agree that schools are the proper place for imparting civic virtues. Although it is true that civic virtue is the proper aim of civic education, schools turn out to be wholly inept instruments for such civic education. Schools may be able to impart some civic knowledge about the structure and functions of government, but they cannot be expected to impart a disposition to respect human rights or to love one’s country. What is worse, even if, contrary to all experience, schools could somehow be transformed into effective teachers of civic virtue, schools would thereby compromise their inherent moral purpose of promoting genuine knowledge.

Given the nearly universal consensus across the political spectrum that public schools ought to promote civic virtue, it seems almost perverse to argue that public schools should not. Indeed, the history of public schooling is inextricably intertwined with the history of civic education. Universal publicly funded schools were first proposed by French philosophers during the eighteenth century precisely for the purpose of inculcating republican civic virtue to counteract the moral and political influence of the Roman Catholic Church. The Netherlands was the first nation to implement the radical new French ideas in the early nineteenth
century, also with an explicit mission of imparting republican civic virtues. During the 1830s, French liberals also instituted universal public schools with a liberal and republican civic agenda. In America, Jefferson and his followers, inspired by the French radicals, proposed similar schools for the express purpose of training democratic citizens. Indeed, the Jeffersonians took the civic mission of schools so seriously that they often denied schooling to non-citizens, such as women and blacks. Later, Horace Mann and his contemporaries were inspired and influenced by the civic education program of François Guizot and other French liberals.

American public schools always have attempted to impart American civic virtues, and most states require all high school students to study some kind of civics curriculum. But we must note here that American public schools also have an equally long and entrenched history of attempting to impart Protestant Christian moral and religious virtues. Reciting the Lord’s Prayer and reading the Bible are as integral to the origins and history of American public schooling as any civics lesson. So the mere fact that civic education always has been integral to American public schooling does not constitute an argument that it ought to be.

To understand the broad appeal of civic education in schools today, we must look at the fate of other kinds of religious and moral education in our public schools. Although an ecumenical and non-denominational Protestantism appeared to be an appropriate religious and moral basis for common schools in early nineteenth century America, the arrival of large numbers of Catholics and Jews called into question that understanding. Most educators have long agreed that sectarian religious education, even of the ecumenical Protestant variety, violates the civic trust that underpins public support for common schools. How can Catholics and Jews, for example, be expected to financially support common schools that teach a non-denominational Protestantism? Today, debates about moral education in schools are following much the same pattern as did earlier debates about religious education. Liberal and conservative moralists argue that their brand of moral education is uniquely ecumenical, and, hence, appropriate for common schools. Liberal moralists ask: who can be opposed to students learning to become morally autonomous? Conservative moralists ask: who can be opposed to students learning to become honest, courageous, temperate, and just? But one person’s moral ecumenism is another person’s moral sectarianism: liberals are suspicious of conservative moralism just as conservatives are suspicious of liberal moralism.

Proposals for moral education in public schools thus have become yet another front of the broader culture wars, and many educators are coming to the conclusion that both liberal and conservative moralism violate the civic trust that underpins common schools. Each of us arguably sends his or her own children to common schools with the expectation that none of us gets to impose his or her own sectarian religious or moral values on our schoolchildren. In other words, in our deeply pluralistic society, there is little agreement about the proper aims of moral education so that any particular proposal for moral education in schools appears unacceptably sectarian to some parents.

Yet without any religious or moral education, public schools seem to lack any compelling moral purpose. Surely schools must aim higher than merely providing the information and skills associated with the three R’s? Herein lies the special appeal of civic education today. In civic education, many educators believe they have found the one truly ecumenical kind of moral education. Since our common schools are publicly funded and governed by means of democratic political processes, how can anyone object to civic education in such schools? Why would democratic citizens pay for common schools if those schools did not train future democratic citizens? Since every American citizen has an interest in promoting civic virtue in the next generation of citizens, who can legitimately object to civic education in public schools? In civic education we seem to have found a way to cut the Gordian knot of sectarian religious and moral controversy and to provide a kind of moral education that respects the deep pluralism of our society. Indeed, several leading contemporary political theorists argue that civic education ought to be not just one proper aim of public schooling, but the primary aim.

Unfortunately, civic education turns out to be no more truly ecumenical than was non-denominational Protestantism. Political theorists cannot agree about the proper aim and methods of civic education: some insist that democratic citizens must be taught to think critically about the values of their own family and faith, while others insist that even unexamined religious and moral commitments are perfectly compatible with
good democratic citizenship. Some theorists insist that democratic citizens must express genuine tolerance and respect for religious and moral differences; others insist that considerable intolerance and disrespect (within the bounds of law and civility) are fully compatible with civic virtue. These debates among political theorists presage the public debates over the civic lessons of September 11.

In practice, then, as well as in theory, we simply cannot agree about the proper aims and methods of civic education in public schools. In the face of such deep and seemingly intractable divisions, making the education of our children hostage to culture wars over civic education seems imprudent at best. But even if we all could agree about the proper aim of civic education, schools would remain the wrong place for such education for two reasons: first, because schools are ineffective instruments for imparting civic virtue, and second, because the attempt to impart civic virtue subverts the inherent moral purpose of schools to lead students to love genuine knowledge.

CIVIC EDUCATION OR CIVIC SCHOOLING?

Mark Twain was admirably clear about the difference between school and education when he bragged that he never let school interfere with his education. Sound thinking about both education and schooling is impossible unless we clearly distinguish the broader agencies of education from the specific instrument of school. Unfortunately, advocates of civic education are rarely clear about this fundamental distinction. It does not help that we frequently use the word “education” to mean merely “schooling,” as when we refer to the cost of education or the education budget. Advocates of “civic education” usually mean by that expression only “civic schooling.” By implying that civic education requires civic schooling, arguments for civic education in schools acquire great rhetorical force. Who can be against civic education? As advocates of civic education frequently point out, since the civic virtues are not innate, they must be learned. And from this true premise, they then falsely conclude that civic virtue must be learned in school.

If we understand education to refer broadly to all kinds of learning experiences, then it becomes clear that little of what we learn takes place in school, compared to what we learn at home, among peers, from the media, on the job, at the library, and in church. Even if we understand education to refer more narrowly to deliberate instruction, then we still can see that school teachers are only one of many types of teachers in our lives: clearly our parents are teachers, as are our ministers, coaches, and doctors; our friends often act as teachers, as do journalists, employers, judges, and scout leaders. Therefore most of our learning is not in school, and most of our teachers are not school teachers. We cannot begin to think clearly about education until we consider the proper role of the school in the context of all the other important modes of education. We then might be able to ask and perhaps answer the questions: of all the places in which we learn, what kind of learning is best suited to the formal school? Of all the things different people teach us, what kinds of things should school teachers teach? Rather than just assume that civic education must take place in schools, we then are liberated to consider many other contexts in which one might learn civic virtue and the many other teachers who might lead us to it.

Because of what our empirical research tells us about the effectiveness of schools, we will need to think creatively about other modes of civic education. Since our public schools have a long and pervasive history of engaging in civic education, political scientists over the past five decades have attempted to answer basic questions such as: where do citizens acquire their civic knowledge, skills, and virtues? What role do schools play in that acquisition? And, in particular, what role do high school civics courses play? There is a widespread consensus among researchers that civic knowledge, skills, and virtues are not acquired by mainly children in schools, but by adults in churches, unions, civic organizations, and workplaces. Moreover, when schools do have an effect on civic knowledge and attitudes, it is mainly quite indirect. For example, schools tacitly categorize students into various socioeconomic groups, each with varying degrees of civic participation. Since higher socioeconomic groups are more politically savvy, success in school fosters civic involvement while failure in school does not. In other words, schools sort students into various social classes, each with its own distinctive political knowledge, skills, and virtues. Schools also can deliberately foster civic knowledge and virtues, not by teaching civics directly, but by encouraging students to volunteer in extracurricular organizations and to participate in student government. The informal culture of schools can sometimes foster certain political atti-
Most states in the nation require public schools to teach civics courses. Since advocates of civic education in public schools strongly support such courses (though they differ widely about their proper content and style), we might ask: what role do civics courses play in fostering desirable political knowledge, attitudes, and conduct? After a series of studies in the 1960s, Kenneth Langton and M. Kent Jennings published a very influential study of the effects of high school civics courses on a range of political knowledge, attitudes, values, and interests. They found that the high school civics curriculum has very little effect on any aspect of political knowledge or values: “Our findings certainly do not support the thinking of those who look to the civics curriculum in American high schools as even a minor source of political socialization.” In 1974, Langton, Jennings, and Niemi revised and enlarged their original study; this time they found that the educational level of a child’s parents and the amount of political discourse at home have much greater impact on his measured knowledge and values than do high school courses. Where high school civics courses have any effect, it is only on those students who are just finishing those courses, their study shows. A subsequent study by Paul Allen Beck and Jennings confirmed the impotence of civics courses but found that participation in extracurricular activities, both in high school and beyond, fosters later political participation in young adults. These and other studies created a lasting professional consensus that the scholastic curriculum in general has some effects on students’ knowledge, but little or no effect on their values, of students and that civics courses in particular have very little effect on political knowledge and less on values. Richard Niemi and Jane Junn challenge this consensus in their major new study, Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn. They analyzed data that enables them to study the effects of different kinds of civics courses on students’ political knowledge and attitudes. They hypothesize that certain kinds of teaching methods might significantly add or subtract from learning about politics. They found that, although the civics curriculum affects political knowledge and values much less than the home environment does, civics courses do matter. In particular, civics courses that were taken quite recently, had a large variety of topics studied, and included discussion of current events foster significantly greater political knowledge. As with earlier studies, they found that although the curriculum has some effect on political knowledge, it has virtually none on political attitudes. It is too soon to tell whether this new study will alter the existing consensus that civics courses do not matter; some early reviews suggest that that consensus is likely to prevail.

We should not be surprised by the evidence that children do not acquire civic virtue in school. After all, our contemporary political scientists have ratified the wisdom of the greatest political philosophers, ancient and modern, who insisted that civic virtue is acquired only by adults from active participation in public affairs. Plato’s guardians, for example, must wait until they are 35 years old to begin their 15 years of civic education, which takes place, not in school, but in direct participation in governmental affairs. Aristotle also is clear that “a youth is not a suitable student of political science” because, although the intellectual virtues can be taught, the moral virtues result from habit. For Aristotle, civic education is the legislator’s responsibility, not the teacher’s: the legislator uses law to educate citizens by ensuring that they acquire the right habits as they grow up. Once citizens have grown up with the right civic virtues, then, as mid-career politicians, they might benefit from Aristotle’s teaching about politics. Tocqueville beautifully captured the ancient view that schools foster academic knowledge just as politics fosters civic virtue: “The institutions of a township are to freedom what primary schools are to science; they put it within the reach of the people; they make them taste its peaceful employ and habituate them to making use of it.” What we find, then, in Plato, Aristotle, and Tocqueville are very sophisticated analyses of the various agencies of civic education and a conception of civic education that does not rely on the institution of the school.

Both political philosophers and political scientists seem to agree that deliberate instruction aimed at inculcating civic knowledge and virtue is strikingly ineffective. Civics courses might teach some knowledge of the structure and functions of government, but not proper civic attitudes, such as a desire to contribute to the common good, a respect for democratic values, a love of country, or toleration of opposed views. Yet advocates of civic education in schools insist that it must aim not...
only at knowledge but also at civic virtue. Naturally, advocates of civic education are free to insist that although existing methods of teaching civic virtue in schools are ineffective, some new and better kind of civics might work. Still, in the face of existing research, to advocate civic education in schools is the perfect triumph of hope over experience. At the same time, those of us who object wholly to the endeavor of using public schools as instruments of partisan civic indoctrination may take some comfort in the near total failure of that endeavor.

CIVIC VIRTUE OR INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE?

Curiously, leading contemporary advocates of civic education in schools admit that it is ineffective. What drives the passion for civic and other kinds of moral education is not the conviction that they are effective, but the conviction that without civic and moral education, schooling lacks any compelling moral purpose. It is no accident, then, that advocates of civic education in public schools all share the fundamental assumption that purely academic education consists only of the acquisition of skills and information and thus lacks an inherent moral dimension. If academic education involves merely the acquisition of amoral information and skills – if it is only about the three R’s – then we might well ask, “Why should any society make a fundamental and expensive public commitment to common schools?”

Immanuel Kant powerfully expresses this view that academic education involves merely the acquisition of amoral information and skills. Because academic instruction aims only at amoral skills, says Kant, no amount of academic learning can contribute to moral goodness. Kant argues that it would be immoral simply to arm students with powerful intellectual weapons with no guidance about their use, so he insists upon the need for a supplemental moral education, so that information and skills are put to good moral ends. Kant, by creating a moral vacuum of academic education, has created an urgent need for a compensatory moral education. Ever since Kant, most modern pedagogues have argued over the relative importance of information and skill in academic education, but almost all describe it solely in these amoral terms. Today, for example, Howard Gardner emphasizes the acquisition of disciplinary skills while E.D. Hirsch, Jr., emphasizes the acquisition of a shared body of information; neither of these leading pedagogues describes the moral virtues of academic schooling.

If academic education intrinsically lacked a compelling moral purpose, then I would agree that our students need a compensatory moral education – and in a pluralistic democracy, an education in the civic virtues might well be the most apt kind. However, as every good teacher knows, mere information and skills cannot be the aim of academic education, because apart from a virtuous orientation toward truth, information and skills are mere resources and tools that can be put into the service of sophistry, manipulation, and domination. Only when the acquisition of information and skills is combined with a proper desire for true knowledge do we begin to acquire intellectual virtue, which may be defined as the conscientious pursuit of truth. My developmental hierarchy begins with the virtues of intellectual carefulness such as single-mindedness, thoroughness, accuracy, and perseverance. Students acquire these virtues in elementary school. They then must learn how to resist the temptations of false beliefs by acquiring the virtues of intellectual humility, intellectual courage, and intellectual impartiality. Finally, adults should strive for coherence in what they know and for coherence between their knowledge and their other pursuits by acquiring the virtues of intellectual integrity and ultimately, wisdom. John Dewey thought the aim of academic pedagogy was the inculcation of certain traits in students, among them open-mindedness, single-mindedness, sincerity, breadth of outlook, thoroughness, and responsibility. Dewey insisted that these academic or intellectual virtues “are moral traits.”

Once we grant that academic education is itself a limited kind of moral education, the question we face is not whether to pursue moral education in schools. The question is rather: what kind of moral education is appropriate for the institution of the school? Schools seem apt instruments for some, but not all, kinds of moral education. Is civic education compatible with the intrinsic moral aim of academic schooling, namely, the conscientious pursuit of true knowledge? As we shall see, civic education, both in theory and in practice, subverts the intrinsic moral purpose of academic schooling.

What happens to academic education in the context of schools committed to civic education? Whether we look to the history of civic educa-
tion or to the ideas of civic educators, the answer is quite certain: the academic pursuit of knowledge will be corrupted through a subordination of truth-seeking to some civic agenda. The history of civic education in the United States is a cautionary tale indeed. Some historians have analyzed systematically the civic values taught in public school civics, literature, history, and social studies courses. It should be no surprise that in order to teach civic values, American textbooks in every epoch have sanitized, distorted, and falsified history, literature, and social studies in order to inculcate racism; nationalism; every manner of religious, cultural, and class bigotry; Anglo-Saxon superiority, American imperialism, Social Darwinism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-intellectualism.  

An early text from 1796 warns of the danger posed by the importation of French ideas and persons: “Let America beware of infidelity, which is the most dangerous enemy that she has to contend with at present...”; the author goes on to teach school children that Native Americans lack all science, culture, and religion, that they are averse to labor and foresight, and that “the beavers exceed the Indians, tenfold, in the construction of their homes and public works...”  

Later, in the wake of large-scale Irish immigration, school texts began a massive campaign of slander and calumny against Roman Catholicism. Textbooks not only describe Catholicism as an anti-Christian form of paganism and idolatry, they even blame the Church for the fall of the Roman Empire. One speller asks: “Is papacy at variance with paganism?” Historian say no theme in school texts before 1870 is more universal than anti-Catholicism; according to these texts, Catholicism has no place in the American past or future.  

In the period after 1870, religious bigotry gave way to racial bigotry, and all non-Anglo-Saxon peoples are described as permanently and impermissibly inferior due to their intellectual, moral, and physical degeneracy. Beginning in 1917, many states began to pass laws forbidding any instruction in public schools that might be disloyal to the United States, including the teaching of the German language; at the same time, many states also passed laws requiring all public schoolteachers to be American citizens and to swear an oath that they will teach patriotism.  

Nor is this subordination of knowledge to civic uplift a relic of the past. In many states, creationism is taught in place of biology and geology because of the perceived moral dangers of Darwinism. And many states continue to require American history to be falsified in order to promote patriotism. The Texas Education Code provides that “textbooks should promote democracy, patriotism, and the free enterprise system;” this provision is still employed to sanitize the teaching of history in Texas.  

The New York Board of Regents was found to have falsified, on moral grounds, most of the literary texts used in its exams; here classic literature was bowdlerized in the interests of political correctness. A systematic study of current history textbooks finds extensive evidence of how American history is now distorted, twisted, and falsified in order to emphasize the previously neglected contributions as well as the victimization of women and minorities. Although Anglo-Saxon triumphalism now frequently gives way to multicultural victimization, nothing has changed in the American passion for subordinating truth-seeking to moral and civic uplift.  

No one should be surprised that American school books, like any form of human knowledge, often prove mistaken and misguided. But textbooks do not go astray merely because their authors are fallible human beings sincerely seeking true knowledge; rather, these texts go astray because their authors deliberately subordinate the pursuit of knowledge to an agenda for civic education. Textbooks often are explicitly anti-intellectual; they repeatedly emphasize that moral and civic virtue is far more important than mere knowledge. What again and again proves fatal to the pursuit of knowledge is the conviction that civic virtue is more important than truth. Indeed, some leading contemporary advocates of civic education in schools frankly admit the need to sanitize and falsify history.  

Civic education in schools usually involves various kinds of duplicity on the part of educators – teachers pretend to teach American history, but actually use historical examples to covertly attempt to impart civic virtues. In response to the traditionally rosy and uplifting versions of American greatness designed to instill patriotism, we now find dark and brutal narratives of American imperialism and racism designed to covertly instill multicultural tolerance. Both conservative and progressive civic educators routinely subordinate the quest for truth to a preferred agenda for civic uplift. In English courses, literature is selected not on the grounds of its beauty, renown, or utility for teaching prose-style, but because it presents desirable moral lessons, such as how boys love to cook.
“Before the Revolution, Russia had 1,000 tractors; now thanks to Comrade Stalin we have 250,000 tractors. How many more tractors do we have under developed socialism?”

Civic education poses a profound threat not only to the integrity of the curriculum but also to the integrity of pedagogical techniques. Much of what is known as “progressive” educational pedagogy, that is, teaching that attempts to respond to the spontaneous curiosity of the student — often in hands-on, collaborative projects — has long been advocated on moral and civic grounds as much as on academic grounds. John Dewey, in particular, championed many progressive pedagogical innovations because he thought they turned classrooms into laboratories of democracy. Progressive pedagogues always have championed their techniques on the grounds that they are egalitarian, democratic, tolerant, and caring, and they foster autonomy. Critics of progressivism have wondered why these methods are adopted so widely when there is so little empirical evidence of their effectiveness. But the passion for progressivism, like the passion for civic education more broadly, does not rest upon the conviction that it is effective, but on the conviction that it is morally desirable. Indeed, some advocates of civic education defend progressive pedagogical methods even when they are not academically warranted on the grounds that these methods produce better future citizens. So civic educators often are quite frank about the need to subordinate not only truth, but also academic achievement, to the imperatives of civic virtue.

In practice, then, and in theory, we have compelling evidence that civic education poses a fundamental and permanent threat to both the academic curriculum and to academic pedagogy. How seriously we take this subordination of academic to civic education depends on our understanding of the values and virtues intrinsic to academic education. Indeed, the obvious objection to my claim that academic education is a kind of moral education is that the information and skills acquired in school are just as easily used in the service of sophistry as in the service of truth-seeking. But this view of academic education in terms of the dissemination of mere information and skills misdescribes the actual objective of scholastic education, which is to acquire information and skills in the context of a love for genuine knowledge. In other words, good math, history, science, and English teachers do not attempt to arm students with morally neutral resources and weapons and then hope for the best. Good teachers attempt to fuse the growing acquisition of information and skill to a growing desire for genuine knowledge. In other words, proper academic education does not seek merely to provide the means for whatever ends the student might choose; proper academic education encompasses both the means and the end. John Dewey saw this clearly: “The knowledge of dynamite of a safecracker may be identical in verbal form with that of a chemist; in fact, it is different, for it is knit into connection with different aims and habits, and thus has a different import.”

The aim of academic education is the acquisition of the character traits, such as thoroughness, accuracy, perseverance, intellectual humility, and intellectual courage, that make us conscientious in the pursuit of true knowledge. Our relation to these academic virtues is fundamentally different than our relation to our capacities and skills. Capacities and skills, like any resource or tool, are things we can use or misuse; we recognize a kind of “distance” between our selves and our capacities or skills. Virtues, however, are not capacities or skills but qualities or aspects of persons. Virtues cannot be misused because they cannot be used at all. Virtues define who we are; they are not things to be employed. Academic education aims not only to equip us with new resources and skills, but also to transform us as persons: from persons who have a curiosity for knowledge but who are credulous and prone to false beliefs into persons who love and can reliably acquire genuine knowledge. Academic education is as deep, transformative, and virtuous as any other kind of moral education.

What evidence do we have that schools are the proper instruments for academic education? We noted above that empirical studies of civic education found that schools do have some small effect on civic knowledge, even if they have virtually no effect on civic attitudes or virtues. There are no empirical studies, to my knowledge, of schools’ effectiveness in inculcating the intellectual virtues. But the most influential study of the effects of scholastic attainment on adults’ knowledge may be suggestive of the important role of schools in inculcating not just a body of information but also in fostering a disposition to the lifelong acquisition of knowledge. Herbert Hyman, Charles Wright, and John Reed in *The Enduring Effects of Education*, surveyed adults on their knowledge many decades after they had completed their schooling. The researchers found that every year of schooling contributed positively
not only to the adults’ knowledge base, but also to their propensity to continue learning by reading newspapers, magazines and books, and seeking out opportunities for adult education. By including current events knowledge in their survey, these researchers were able to establish that the adults who had the most schooling also were keeping abreast of current events most effectively. Therefore, we have some evidence that schools effectively foster a lifelong love for learning.\textsuperscript{52}

Once we see that the inherent moral purpose of schooling is the conscientious pursuit of knowledge, we will not be surprised by the absence of any agreement about which civic virtues schools should teach. Since none of the civic virtues is intrinsically related to the inherent moral purpose of schooling, there is no academically principled way to decide which civic virtues should be taught in schools. I quite strongly value a commitment to human rights, the rule of law, public service, and a love of our country, but I do not see how these noble virtues relate to pursuing knowledge of physics, French, English, chemistry, history, and math. No catalogue of civic virtues can be shown to be a prerequisite, a part, or a product of academic excellence. The simple truth of the matter is that one can be both a paragon of academic virtue and a lousy citizen. Many great scholars, scientists, and educators notoriously have lacked civic virtues by being resident aliens, cosmopolitans, or Epicureans. Trying to decide which civic virtues to teach in schools is like trying to decide which sports or crafts to teach: since none of these is related intrinsically to academic education, there are no academic grounds for deciding these matters.

Because civic education, like driver or consumer education, lacks an intrinsic relation to the academic curriculum, teachers and students quickly regard it as purely ancillary and irrelevant. The purely ancillary nature of civics courses may help to explain why they have been proven so ineffective. To overcome this irrelevance, many advocates insist that civic education become incorporated into the core academic curriculum, so that English, history, and social studies courses impart lessons in civic virtue. But here we become impaled upon the fundamental dilemma of civic education: if we teach civic virtue in a way that respects the integrity of the academic curriculum, civics becomes ancillary and irrelevant; but if, to overcome this irrelevance, we attempt to incorporate civic education into the academic subjects, we inevitably subvert the inherent moral aim of those subjects by subordinating the pursuit of truth to civic uplift.

\textbf{CONCLUSION: CIVICS OR CIVILITY?}

Robert Putnam’s influential study of the decline of American civic participation, \textit{Bowling Alone}, has fueled the growing consternation about the waning civic virtue in our polity. How important are civic virtues in our democracy? How widespread must those virtues be? Although the framers of our constitution strongly affirmed the importance of civic virtue, they nonetheless counted on the careful division of powers and the rule of law to compensate for a likely shortfall of virtue. Nonetheless, we cannot rely upon constitutions and laws alone to protect our democratic ideals: does anyone follow Kant in supposing that institutional design alone can make democracy safe for a race of devils? It seems more likely that enough raw self-interest, lust for power, and sheer indifference ultimately will undermine any legal or institutional arrangement. Still, it is easy to exaggerate the importance of widespread civic virtue in a large, complex, and commercial republic such as our own.

Those who express most concern about the decline in civic virtue tend to forget that our polity is not simply a republic of citizens but also a liberal society of persons. Our deepest traditions of liberty always have affirmed every person’s fundamental right to be a lousy citizen. Of course, every resident of this country, whether a citizen or not, is obligated to obey the law and respect the legal rights of every other resident; but we do not require all American citizens, let alone resident aliens, to commit themselves to work conscientiously for the good of the nation by serving in the armed forces or even merely voting. Indeed, our polity prides itself on its respect for whole communities of persons whose religious commitment to pacifism prevents them from being good citizens. How many Americans would want to live in a pure democratic republic in which military service, voting, and other public service are mandatory for all? So, yes, we want some civic virtue but not too much; and we want many people to have civic virtue, but certainly not everyone.

Even those, like Putnam, most concerned about the recent decline in
civic virtue do not look to school as either the source or the remedy of our civic ills. What role can schools properly play in fostering more civic virtue? Although civic virtue includes more than mere knowledge, clearly knowledge about the structure, functions, and ideals of government is essential for civic virtue. Civic knowledge is a perfectly appropriate aim for institutions of learning. Who can object to public schools teaching about public institutions? The bitter controversies over civic education and the dangers of indoctrination arise not from teaching civic knowledge, but from attempting to instill certain civic attitudes, from multicultural toleration to patriotism.

The history of civic education in schools is as old as public schooling itself, and that history is a cautionary tale. The attempt to use public schools for the purpose of sectarian civic education always has led to bitter politics of religious and moral recrimination. A deep fraying of civic trust, and the wholesale abandonment of common schools by Roman Catholics and others. Protestant civic education in the nineteenth century provoked many Catholics, Lutherans, and some Jews to take on the enormous burden of parochial education. With the current erosion of public confidence in common schools, the rise of private and home schooling, and the push for vouchers, the future of public education in our society is increasingly uncertain. Much of the current dismery with public schools stems from their perceived academic failings, but many parents send their children to private schools because they believe that public schools attempt to indoctrinate their children with either liberal or conservative civic virtues. Wherever schools become battlegrounds for partisan moral and religious agendas, the whole ideal of common schooling loses public support.

Public schools in a pluralistic society have a special moral duty to forbear from all non-academic kinds of moral education. That is because the project whereby citizens’ agreement to educate their children together in publicly funded schools depends upon a high degree of civic trust. Each of us, with individual comprehensive moral and religious outlooks, surrenders his or her children to a common school on the assumption that none of us is permitted to deliberately impose his or her own conception of moral or civic virtue on the rest. We all must acknowledge the temptation to want the common school to reinforce the moral and civic aims we pursue at home; but equally, civic trust depends upon our principled forbearance from advocating that schools do so. For, as we have learned repeatedly throughout our history, once public schools adopt any particular conception of moral or civic education beyond the moral education inherent to academic study, not only is the moral integrity of schooling likely to be compromised as the curriculum and pedagogy are manipulated in an attempt to indoctrinate students, but this loss of integrity also will fray the civic trust necessary for vibrant common schools.

Admittedly, it requires truly heroic forbearance to refrain from taking advantage of the naivety of small children who are a captive audience for all manner of idealistic moral and civic uplift, to refrain from attempting to deploy the intellectual authority of the teacher in favor of a noble moral or civic aim, and to refrain from manipulating academic curricula and pedagogy for moral and civic ends. Of course, every advocate of some particular version of moral or civic education in our common schools will claim that although all other proposals are obviously sectarian, his or her proposal is uniquely universalistic and merits the entire community’s support. But, as I have argued here, the deepest objections to moral and civic education in schools are unrelated to how widely accepted a moral agenda might be, or even how widely accepted a moral agenda should be. Indeed, civic moral education always has posed a uniquely powerful threat to schooling, precisely because its aims are so widely, and often rightly, shared. The deepest objections to moral and civic education stem from their incompatibility with the conscientious pursuit of truth, which is the necessary aim of all academic schooling; for public schools, there is an additional and very important concern about undermining civic trust.

The purely academic moral education in the intellectual virtues poses the least risk of corrupting schooling and the greatest potential for fostering the civic trust necessary for vibrant common schools. Ironically, civic trust around common schooling would be fostered best by renouncing civic education in schools. No one could plausibly claim that the attempt of schools to convey to students accepted bodies of knowledge along with the disposition and skills to seek truth reflects an uncivil intention to indoctrinate. Indeed, what we mean when we accuse public schools of “indoctrinating” students is that schools have abused their proper intellectual authority by deliberately imposing some moral agenda under the guise of academic study and have thereby violated the civic trust that parents have placed in them. To the extent that
the content of the curriculum and the methods of instruction are consistent with international standards of academic scholarship and pedagogy, parents have no plausible grounds for thinking that their trust in the common school has been violated. But to demand that schools teach inherently partisan conceptions of civic virtue violates the civic trust upon which vibrant common schools depend. These civics lessons truly lack all civility.

NOTES

1 This paper draws freely upon my article “Good Students and Good Citizens” in The New York Times, Sep. 15, 2002 (Op-Ed) and my manuscript “Against Civic Schooling,” forthcoming in Social Philosophy and Policy 21 (February 2004). I am indebted to comments on that manuscript by Mark Stein, Lucas Swaine, Shelley Burtt, and the participants in the conference “Morality and Politics” at the Social Philosophy and Policy Center, Bowling Green University, Bowling Green OH, Sept. 19-22, 2002. I also wish to thank my indefatigable research assistant and copy editor, Karen Liot.

2 http://neahin.org/programs/schoolsafety/september11/materials/hshome.htm

3 http://www.socialstudies.org/resources/moments

4 See September 11: What Our Children Need to Know (Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, September 2002):


8 Rogers Smith says of the Jeffersonians: “Education came to be so identified with preparation for citizenship that noncitizens were often denied it.” See his Civic Ideals (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 189.


10 Liberal moral education is usually neo-Kantian and emphasizes critical reflection and autonomous choice; conservative moral education is usually neo-Aristotelian and emphasizes character formation and virtue.

11 See the critique of liberal and conservative moralism in Amy Gutmann’s Democratic Education (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 56-64.

12 Amy Gutmann, for example, wonders “why so much taxpayer money should go to schooling that gives up on the central aims of civic education.” See her “Civic Education and Social Diversity,” Ethics 105, April 1995, pp. 557-579, at 572-573.


14 Amy Gutmann, for example, insists upon teaching critical reflection while William Galston does not.


17 See Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady, Voice and Equality: Civic Volunteerism in American Politics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 376 and 425. The authors find that American high schools provide civic education “not by teaching about democracy but by providing hands-on training for future participation.”

18 See Philip E. Jacob, Changing Values in College (New York:
19 Kenneth Langton and M. Kent Jennings, “Political Socialization and the High School Civics Curriculum in the United States,” *American Political Science Review* 62, 1968, pp. 852-867. They examined the effects of these courses on: political knowledge, political interest, spectator interest in politics, political discourse, political efficacy, political cynicism, civic tolerance, and participative orientation.

20 Black students were a partial exception to this rule: “The civics curriculum is an important source of political knowledge for Negroes…” Langton and Jennings, “Political Socialization… “, pp. 865 and 860.


22 Paul Allen Beck and M. Kent Jennings, “Pathways to Participation,” *American Political Science Review* 76, 1982, pp. 94-108 at 101-102. “…those who engage in extracurricular activities are more likely to become politically active later on…” (p. 105).

23 See the discussion of the scholarly consensus in Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn, *Civic Education*, pp. 13-20. They comment: “…the presumption that academic knowledge is gained entirely or even primarily in the classroom may be a truism for some subjects but not for civics” (p. 61).

24 Niemi and Junn, *Civic Education*, p. 81.


26 Niemi and Junn, *Civic Education*, p. 140.

27 See Jay P. Greene, “Review of Civic Education,” *Social Science Quarterly* 81, June 2000, pp. 696-7. Greene performed a reanalysis of the Niemi and Junn data set and found that the variable of how recently the civics course was taken collapsed into whether a student is enrolled in a civics class at the time the civics test is taken: “If knowledge fades so rapidly that the only benefit of a civics class occurs while one is in it, then schools may not be able to do much to improve civics knowledge in the longer run.” Greene found defects in other independent variables as well.

28 Plato, *Republic*, p. 539E.

29 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 1095a 3 and 1103a 15.


32 True, Aristotle does recommend public or common schooling over private schooling (*Politics*, p. 1337a 3; *Ethics*, p. 1180a 14); but there is no evidence that he thinks these schools should aim at civic education; in fact, he prefers a liberal education for leisure over a civic education (*Politics*, p. 1338a 21-32).

33 See, for example, Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, pp. 106-107; Macedo, *Democracy and Distrust*, p. 235.

34 For evidence, see my “Against Civic Schooling.”


40 Elhanan Winchester, *A Plain Political Catechism Intended for the Use of Schools in the United States of America* (Greenfield, MA: Dickman, 1796), Questions LX and LXV.


42 See Pierce, *Civic Attitudes in American School Textbooks*, pp. 229-239.


47 William Galston rightly observes about the purpose of civic education: “It is unlikely, to say the least, that the truth will be fully consistent with this purpose.” But he goes on to defend the imperative to falsify history in order to produce good citizens: “For example, rigorous historical research will almost certainly vindicate complex ‘revisionist’ accounts of key figures in American history. Civic education, however, requires a more noble, moralizing history: a pantheon of heroes, who confer legitimacy on central institutions and constitute worth objects of emulation.” See Galston, “Civic Education in the Liberal State” in *Liberalism and the Moral Life* ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 90-91.

48 Robert Mozert sued his school board for using English lessons to teach liberal morality; see *Mozert v. Hawkins County School Board* 857 F. 2d. 1058 (6th Cir. 1987).

49 See Hirsch, *The Schools We Need*, chap. 5.

50 Amy Gutmann defends progressive pedagogy even when it is not academically warranted, in *Democratic Education*, p. 287.


53 “Certainly no one applies the word ‘indoctrinate’ when the schools try to teach most facts and *accepted* bodies of knowledge. That is regarded not as any unwarranted ‘imposition’ but as a duty.” Hyman and Wright, *Education’s Lasting Influence on Values*, p. 66.
A CIVIC DECLINE, BUT FROM WHAT?

AMERICA’S EXCEPTIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Jim Sleeper

WHAT THE PROBLEM ISN’T

The first of the three broad questions posed for this discussion asks “whether policymakers are right in diagnosing an unhealthy decline in civic responsibility.” The other two questions assume that the answer to the first is yes, for they ask whether government can help to remedy the decline and what values or principles should be central to the conception of civic virtue that public policy would promote. In this paper I want to linger on the first question, not because I doubt that there is a serious decline in civic responsibility but because I do not know what kind of decline it is, from what former state of civil felicity and political engagement the country is declining, or why.

Public policymakers may not be the best assessors of a decline in civic virtue, let alone the civic healers the words “diagnosing” and “unhealthy” imply. In The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York, I diagnosed an unhealthy decline in public policymaking itself, at least as it affected the urban civic cultures I had engaged as a journalist and activist in the city. While developing my account, I came, against my own left-liberal inclinations, to accept charges that a lot of social policymaking had itself become an accelerant of civic decline. There was something almost anomic about the American provision of social welfare that, whatever its intention to
redress the damage economic exploitation and racism had done, retarded any balance between rights and responsibilities that could advance civic responsibility for a liberal republic.

But still, I accepted much of the counter-charge that the civic irresponsibility conservatives blame on entitlement and redistribution policies is driven more strongly by the investment and consumer marketing methods of the legal, fictive “persons” we call corporations. Their methods, which are ever-more protean, intrusive, and absorptive of civic life, encourage civic irresponsibility by workers, consumers, and the unemployed. While liberal social-welfare policy has accelerated civic decline, it has done so as a maladroit response to this other, more basic cause of that decline. The classical liberal understandings of freedom and sovereignty that conservatives proclaim, and upon which the American republic perhaps uniquely relies, cannot be squared with today’s conservative understandings of corporate freedom and sovereignty. The thorny paradox we all face is that these patterns of investment, broken loose from the religious and civil ethos in which John Locke would have harnessed them, are generating an ever-more reckless, relentless, and intrusive “culture” of consumer marketing that degrades and atomizes civic and political culture in ways liberal government is not constitutionally empowered to constrain, much less redirect.

If I were to end the diagnosis here, the obvious prescription would be to reconfigure somehow the relationship between liberal public sovereignty and corporate capitalism. We might ask President Bush, “If you want to assert American sovereignty, why not do it against tax shelters on the Cayman Islands and in other places abroad that enable companies to shift their tax burdens to the people who fight your wars?”

To take a more extreme example, we might subordinate the supposed “free speech” rights of conglomerates such as Time-Warner to the civic conversation of people who are real, not fictive, and who are citizens, not just consumers. Corporate bodies are not thinking beings with political ideas whose expression the First Amendment should protect; their “ideas” are all tactically deployed reiterations of a single, unexamined imperative—the pursuit of profit and market share. Yet their power to inundate and deform public discourse in that pursuit, buying up political debate while assembling huge audiences on any other pretext, guarantees not better democratic deliberation, but more off-screen spectacles, as when Time Warner CEO Gerald Levin’s son, an inner-city teacher, was murdered six years ago by a 19-year-old aficionado of the gangster rap the elder Levin was pumping into the Bronx. Of course there is no legal or even investigative-journalistic connection between what the elder Levin does and what the 19-year-old did. But need one be an Aristotle or Plato (or a Jeremiah or a Cicero) to warn that a society is mainly a slippery web of contracts and rights lacks a civic vocabulary or culture to account for its own cultural and moral decay?

WHERE RELIGION DOES AND DOESN’T COUNT

These are merely exhortations, for where can anyone who stops at such a diagnosis go to find a prescription? Here, sadly, both big-government liberals and the left have demonstrated repeatedly that they had nothing with any real civic and political traction to offer. Who can provide citizens—including those who serve corporate usurpers of the prerogatives of citizenship—with a healthier statutory or constitutional regimen and even a cultural diet that reconstitute the society? The medical metaphor fails—and, with it, a lot of the policymaking that relied on the civic strengths it meant to enhance. The power to recast relations between corporate capital and civil authority would have to be generated somehow from an Aristotelian, perhaps Arendtian engagement with “the political.” Or, if American history is a guide, real power to effectuate reform would have to come from politics that, while essentially liberal, could draw on the nationalist and religious currents that at times in the last century proved more potent than either corporate investment and marketing or liberals’ statist, materialist responses to it—responses stripped juridically of moral content.

This next step in my diagnosis—from an anti-capitalist accounting to a Calvinist reckoning—is not as far-fetched as it may sound to liberal policymakers. One cannot begin to understand this country’s politics—especially its social-reform movements, from offshoots of the original Puritan errand itself to abolitionism and through the Social Gospel, Progressive, suffragist, temperance, early labor movements, and certainly the civil-rights movements—without knowing the revolutionary Hebraic/Protestant covenantal and prophetic-nationalist currents that
have carried American reform across, and sometimes with, the Enlightenment currents in our civic thinking. Never mind that when Ronald Reagan invoked the Puritan “City on a Hill” against the Soviet “evil empire,” liberals heard only rigid cold war ideology; more Americans heard sounds of a longer struggle between Old World tyranny and an America they think chosen for great things.

That struggle probably continues even in the dim but filiopietistic mind of George W. Bush. If you dismiss him and Reagan, look into what drives Joseph Lieberman and John Ashcroft and into the passion that produced 5,000 new, owner-occupied “Nehemiah” homes in “hopeless” inner-city New York, built by church-based power organizations working with the Saul Alinsky-inspired Industrial Areas Foundation. These homes are named for the biblical leader who convinced his despondent neighbors to rebuild Jerusalem. The organizing that made them sound and affordable to first-time, non-white buyers – nurses’ and teachers’ aides, transit and hospital workers – did not demand or offer the deep subsidies of public housing where a surprising number of Nehemiah buyers had lived; it drew unapologetically on religious and patriotic currents to nourish civic responsibility in the “power organizations” I sketch in The Closest of Strangers and IAF organizer Michael Gecan describes more intimately in Going Public.3

Suffice it to say here that these organizations succeed in stabilizing neighborhoods that others had thought drained of economic and political clout, partly because they understand that while civic virtue may be aided by abstract or legalistic defenses, it cannot be awakened or sustained that way. For the Nehemiah builders, who organized the crucial home-owner preparation and training, faced down the corrupt union and public officials who were driving up the costs of housing, and mounted the crucial home-owner training and living-wage campaigns in the basements of their churches as centers of a moral community, civic responsibility rests on sustaining a general, public expectation of religious faith without any imposition of doctrine.

There is a genius here that conservatives understand but abuse and leftists and liberals resist or simply have not grasped: is keeping American understandings of personal dignity and liberty free of doctrinal or ecclesiastical (and therefore corruptible) frames, the separation of church and state strengthens voluntarist religious enthusiasms, but it also reinforces presumptions of natural rights by sideling arbitrary claims of divine right in politics. Among the unexpected benefits is that those of us who are non-believers find far better protection in the interstices of this balance between the Enlightenment of Locke and the Lord of the Covenant than we would in some post-modernist free-for all, which would really be a Hobbesian free-for-all.

Expecting faith without imposing doctrine is only the beginning of any struggle. IAF organizer Gecan tracks the evolution and entanglements of three public cultures: the market, the bureaucratic, and the relational or voluntary. Organizations like his might not have been needed in the first place if Lockean capitalist property-making had not been just as important as religion to American civic culture, a duality that goes almost all the way back to the Puritans. But the lesson to draw from the “built-in” conflict between the spiritual and the material in American life is that liberal government cannot by itself regenerate politics by statute or social policy.

To put it more pointedly, a politics of civic responsibility cannot sustain itself without going into opposition to an economic dispensation that has overreached but that, contrary to what dialectical materialists thought, is not doomed and needs reconfiguring, not abolishing. The question is where to find the public moral strength ti reconfigure it. But there is a caution lurking in Max Weber’s suggestion, in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, a culture capable of inspiriting and tempering capitalism must draw, explicitly or surreptitiously, on religious wellsprings of personal responsibility. The caution is that, in the American scheme that has endured since Puritan times, capitalism is not ultimately the deepest threat to civic virtue. That threat runs back in history beyond capitalism, through the biblical myths of the golden calf to the Garden of Eden, which contained a serpent and a couple of very corruptible human beings long before there was a single capitalist. Leftists still think and act as if capitalism itself was the original sin; fundamentalists still construe the problem biblically; but the last century taught many to prefer a civic politics that is not so Manichaean and utopian and that, by acknowledging people’s divided nature in more prosaic, Madisonian ways, fortifies them to reckon with oppression’s roots, in themselves as well as in their representatives and their “betters.”

Still, Madison and other framers drew, sometimes surreptitiously, on
residues of the Puritan faith on which the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was founded it drew moral passion into a vortex of self-scrutiny, sometimes reducing political responsibility to personal authenticity (or “grace”). But whenever Puritan moralism was liberated from the surplus repressions that so often attended it as in Lincoln’s politics or Harriet Beecher Stowe’s writings), it nourished the personal and civic responsibility upon which the republic relied repeatedly, if sometimes only in a pinch. It was in communing with a higher power that leaders (elected or insurgent) felt strong enough to confront the powers that be. That is how we got William Jennings Bryan, the Social Gospel, and Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, but also, at least residually, the more avowedly secular Progressives and Debsonian socialists, and the Bill Bradleys, John McCains, and other rebel tribunes.

Here, too, was the more prosaic civic leadership I sometimes encountered growing up in Yankee New England, with its ethos of plain living and high thinking, understated felicity of expression, willingness to volunteer for leadership in otherwise-leaderless circumstances, and capacity to bear pain with grace (if only because bearing it demonstrated that one’s “grace” in salvation was guaranteed). The pain-bearing got transmuted into sportsmanship and is the point, I think, of those football prayer huddles: yes, we play brutal contact sports and sometimes fight wars and run toward death in collapsing buildings in order to save people, not slaughter them. And while religion is used to “bless” some of the worst of these efforts – that is why we have constitutional liberalism to restrain it – we should give it some room. Unless you think that capitalism is the only obstacle to heaven on earth, a religiously inflected civic nationalism is needed to transmute public aggression (or despair) into something nobler against great odds, as in the Nehemiah organizing or in Lincoln’s religiously inflected rhetoric and his fraught, agonizing decision to fight the Civil War.

In The Souls of Black Folk, W. E. B. Du Bois reprinted the poet James Russell Lowell’s rendering of the long, twilight struggle with evil that is woven into the heart of American civic culture: “Truth forever on the scaffold; wrong forever on the throne Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.”4 Every so often, this God would loose the fateful lightening of his terrible swift sword, so that even in 1963 Martin Luther King could stir millions by crying, “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”

Similarly, in 1968 I saw Yale University Chaplain William Sloane Coffin, Jr., “bless” the courage of three students who handed him their draft cards to symbolize their defiance of the American government in the name of the American nation by refusing to fight in the Vietnam War. “Believe me,” Coffin quipped, “I know what it’s like to wake up in the morning feeling like a sensitive grain of wheat, lookin’ at a mill-stone.” It was a burst of Calvinist humor, jaunty in its defiance of the powers that be on behalf of a higher power, but against what seemed overwhelming odds. This vignette of constitutional patriotism makes little civic sense unless one complicates the idea by suggesting that such patriots might include civilly disobedient but peaceful anti-abortion activists who believe that life is a continuous, sacred thread, not to be broken by the state or individuals exercising their “rights.” Some may loathe these activists as much as others loathed those who opposed the Vietnam War or, in the civil-rights movement, the false racial comity of the old South. But the test of a constitutional patriotism leavened by an almost sacred sense of civic duty is that it respects even bitter adversaries who are willing to accept legal punishment to strengthen peaceful dissent.

Such heroic protest is... well, heroic, and rare. Not so the ordinary civic-republican ethos the literary historian Daniel Aaron called “ethical and pragmatic, disciplined and free.”5 This, too, used to be confirmed in folkways and friendships, as well as in the Constitution, and it, I think, was part of what Ben Franklin had in mind when he answered, “A republic, if you can keep it,” to a spectator outside Independence Hall who asked what kind of government the delegates were preparing. Another way of putting it is that, in the American view, civil society precedes, legitimates, and may even overthrow a regime and the interests it has empowered. We “keep” the republic by obeying its laws, but also by practicing the fair play, reasoned argument, and tolerance that cannot be mandated but are nourished in the folkways, friendships, and rites of passage of republican (small “r”) training grounds – the after-hours schools, youth programs, summer camps, and other institutions that are established to strengthen civic attachments, not just to enhance the resumes of college applicants.

I realize that I have opened the door to questions about government
funding of faith-based organizations, and in principle I am not opposed, although I hasten to repeat that conservatives abuse the principle as often as they understand it. Even some secular republican training grounds have drawn quite consciously on the Puritan/Hebraic religious currents in our culture as well as on Enlightenment affirmations of natural rights. I believe that it was civic crucibles like these that made the Jimmy Stewart of “Mr. Smith Goes To Washington” credible to the young Bill Bradley, John McCain, Mario Cuomo, or even a Rudolph Giuliani.

What bears repeating – because it extends this paper’s “diagnosis” of our civic decline beyond the materialist critiques that it incorporates but transcends – is that American civic responsibility inheres in political projects recognizing struggles with evil in the protagonists’ own hearts, as well as in their adversaries”. And the lesson I am inclined to draw from these ruminations is that the civic culture we see declining – the old one that cantilevered the Enlightenment of John Locke and James Madison with the Christian introspection of Jonathan Edwards – reckoned more fruitfully with our divided natures than does the palliative “culture” of sensationalism, anomie, and amnesia that is replacing it, attended by “helping” professions and policymakers who would medicate away even its irreducibly moral crises. To understand our decline, assess it against this loss of the resilient tension between good and evil, between faith and natural rights.

CAPITALISM AND CONVICTION

Van Wyck Brooks wrote early in the last century that when the jug of old New England finally cracked, spilling its Puritan wine, the liquid ran into earth as rank commercialism, while vapor and aroma rose heavenward in the dissociated mysticism of Transcendentalism. Boston liberalism is still suffused by the latter, while the George Herbert Walker Bush who began his 1988 presidential campaign by lambasting Michael Dukakis as a Boston liberal was himself the embodiment of the Puritan liquid run aground in the oil fields of West Texas. The Bush tenure – both times, this one even more than the last – serves an unrestrained Lockean ethos of property making (or the appearance of it) that, however well it has served this country in Locke’s Christian, quasi-Calvinist harness, is broken loose from that covenant and is running rampant over civic virtue in a “culture” that degrades the individual and social dignity it pretends to enhance. It measures out individualism by the slender power of choice at the mall, draining other associations, inducing us to privatize our pleasures and socialize only our pains, as Robert Reich put it.

America has always been a rolling synthesis of forces no one could grasp or ride, certainly not by thinking ideologically, doctrinally, or perhaps any other way than mystically, like Whitman or Melville. But lately the country seems to me not a synthesis but a riot of forces that are atomizing and dissolving us as a polity, in currents so swift that only a doomed national security state or empire would even pretend, quite wrongly, to channel them. Through both classical liberal and Puritan moral lenses we observe the fading of “the political” as Arendt envisioned it, and, with that, of Daniel Aaron’s civic ethos, “ethical and pragmatic, disciplined and free.”

But are those lenses right for us? Robert Bellah and others have described the loss I’ve just mentioned as a cause of diffused, if quiet, heartbreak, quiet because the therapeutic, medicating, or hedonist consumer culture replacing it deprives us of the vocabulary of moral connectedness I mentioned earlier in linking Time Warner’s products with a murder. This is a risky way of seeing things. After all, American political culture has been riotous, scandalous, even licentious often enough in the past. But never, Robert Putnum warns us, has it seen such poignant disaffection, expressed in so much silence and plummeting voter turnouts.

More symbolically, the collapse of the World Trade Center, although caused by external forces, seems to mirror the implosion of mighty corporations and Catholic Church governance, as well as of standards of decency and civility in public places, as evidenced in fans’ attacks on players in a former national pastime, baseball, which the market is eating alive. What George Orwell called the “prolecul” of mass entertainment is more gladiatorial, from the recent movie of that name to TV’s “The Sopranos,” insinuating calculations of force and fraud into daily life. The degradation of even upper-middle-class morals and manners, from road rage to compulsive body building, suggests a sauve ce qui peut, “every man for himself” stance toward a society no one trusts.
For 30 years now, a lot of this decline has been marketed and even ideologized as “liberating.” But the civil rights movement would have been inconceivable without its famous capacity to uphold some of the older civil society’s supposedly hypocritical and oppressive conventions: when Rosa Parks, on her way home from a long workday in the department store that employed her as a seamstress, refused quietly to move to the back of the bus, the dignity in her bearing strengthened what was good in some old conventions even as it challenged what was bad in others. But now corporate marketing is dissolving them all, shuffling our racial and libidinal decks so indiscriminately that it “liberates” us only into a spacey, anomic meaness.

In the studios of television tell-all circuses and show trials, for example, blacks and whites vent their despair together in perfect equality. Native American “tribes,” some concocted by activist-entrepreneurs and investor-friendly officials, use their sovereignty to set up casinos that, in a bitter poetic justice, hook busloads of flaccid, despairing whites on gambling as surely as whites once hooked Native Americans on firewater. Both the left, flummoxed by racialist fantasies of liberation, and honorable conservatives, flummoxed by free-market idolatry, are speechless about this addictive, regressive tax of casino gambling. And our decline is accelerated by journalism’s collapse into the tentacles of entertainment conglomerates.

If I sound like an old Roman citizen echoing Cicero’s lament that we are too ill to bear our sicknesses or their cures, it’s because I foresee for America neither the Soviet-style totalitarianism of conservative nightmares nor the fascism of the fevered leftist imagination, but a dissolution like ancient Rome’s. Edward Gibbon’s account of it leap off the page. He wrote that the imperial paternalism introduced a “long, slow poison” into the vitals of the republic, such that citizens “no longer possessed that public courage which is nourished by the love of independence, the sense of national honor, the presence of danger, and the habit of command.” Especially interesting is his description of Rome’s passage from republic to empire: Augustus framed “the artful system of the Imperial authority to deceive the people by an image of civil liberty,” writes Gibbon, because Augustus knew that:

the senate and people would submit to slavery, provided that they were respectfully assured that they still enjoyed their ancient free-

dom.... That artful prince... humbly solicited their suffrages for himself, for his friends and scrupulously practiced all the duties of an ordinary candidate. The emperors disdained that pomp and ceremony which might offend their countrymen.... In all the offices of life they affected to confound themselves with their subjects and maintained with them an equal intercourse of visits and entertainments.6

And there we are, arguably: George W. Bush may be no Augustus, but the resonance of these passages in his manner suggests the passing of a civic-nationalism that balanced conservative values with liberal opportunities in the name of a larger liberty and constitutional comity. Ideological thinking is part of the problem. It is when civic discipline loses ground to those who would impose on our politics the left-versus-right floor plan of the nineteenth century French Chamber of Deputies that we find ourselves lurching back and forth between the opportunism of left and right, each side right about how the other is wrong, but each too partisan to follow its vaunted truths wherever they really lead.

But lamenting the rise of “empire” and the end of days is too easy, a cheap moralism for people who abdicate civic responsibility to a comfortable, insulated resignation to the loss of freedom. It would be better to try to regenerate civil society by recalling how it was generated in the first place, and that would return us to the irony with which I began: indispensable though the Enlightenment is to this country, one cannot know all of its sources of strength without reckoning, even as an unbeliever, with the Judaico-Protestant legacies that have shaped its politics and still might temper its capitalism.

Perhaps it is because policy intellectuals have not so reckoned that their, and our, political responses to market deprivations have been so inadequate. Liberals have chosen statist, materialistic, and paternalistic responses – legalistic, bureaucratic entitilements (including “corporate welfare” in subsidies of all kinds) – that, combined with private mass marketing, insinuate the “slow poison” into the vitals of the republic and undercut civic responsibility as Gibbon recalled it (or projected it?) in ancient Rome. We have not sought new ways to nourish or assert the civic sovereignty and patriotism on which a republic stands.

But the paradox I mentioned earlier, in which unleashed market forces
“liberate” us into crises over which liberal sovereignty has no sway, suggests that liberal government is a doubtful provider of civic virtue and responsibility, of energetic civic education, training, and rites of passage. Like settlement houses and some labor unions in the past, today’s deeper crucibles of civic engagement, if not civic virtue, are the stronger neighborhood organizations and churches such as those organized by IAF, some employing community-organizing methods pioneered by the activist Saul Alinsky. They do this in arms-length relationships with public as well as private supporters, whom they tend to fend off but sometimes cajole or embarrass into doing things their way, whether in supporting charter schools or other school reforms or in developing housing and living-wage programs that are far from the social-welfare models of the Great Society. They challenge both inner-city “welfare” programs and corporate welfare and both white racism and the reactive, non-white racialism of “liberationist” academics and activists.

I first saw their power and faith at work in October of 1982, in Brooklyn’s devastated Brownsville section, at a rally of 8,000 American and Caribbean blacks, Hispanics, and a few whites whose organization, East Brooklyn Congregations (EOC), was breaking ground for the first 1,000 of the Nehemiah single-family row homes on 15 abandoned city blocks. “Contrary to common opinion,” cried the Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood, “we are not a ‘grassroots’ organization. Grass roots grow in smooth soil! Grass roots are shallow roots! Our roots have fought for existence in the shattered glass of East New York and the blasted brick of Brownsville! And so we say to you, Mayor Koch, ‘We Love New York! We Love New York!’” The crowd joined him, on its feet, shifting the emphasis to the “We,” in “We Love New York!” The mostly white dais was stunned. The bishop of Brooklyn blinked back tears.

Civic patriotism was not supposed to happen here. But these people had built a “power organization” that turned both capitalist and socialist assumptions upside down. In hundreds of house meetings and lay leadership training sessions run by the late Saul Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation, the EBC studied local power and began with simple goals. National parent church bodies contributed almost $9 million. The city and state gave land and subsidies, but the initiative, training, and discipline came from the EBC. These poor, faithful people’s probity made local bankers, contractors, politicians, bureaucrats, and even progressive organizers seem opportunistic by comparison. And not just by comparison, by confrontation. The EBC had to face down corrupt unions and public officials demanding kickbacks, and it did so only by combining the power of numbers with the power of faith as represented in calls from the Roman Catholic bishop to the mayor and union leaders.

This certainly was not socialism or black power: in the crowd that day were 100 dazed-looking whites who came by bus from Archie Bunker’s neighborhoods in nearby Queens – members of a sister organization of churches. Their president, Pat Oettinger, took the microphone and cried, “Our trip to Brooklyn today has reinforced our belief that there is no boundary between us. We are all one neighborhood, one great city. Your heartaches are our heartaches! Your victories are our victories!” The crowd roared back its welcome. The Queens visitors loosened up and waved. “Two years ago,” Oettinger later told me, “you couldn’t have gotten my neighbors here in a tank.”

What they experienced would have to happen to tens of thousands more to change the civic culture of New York. But two things are worth noting. First, 8,000 low-income black and Hispanic people instructed white officials and fellow citizens in rebuilding civic consensus as well as housing. Second, years after that groundbreaking, I watched Mayor Rudolph Giuliani embrace Johnny Ray Youngblood on a stage in Queens. Giuliani wasn’t one to subordinate politics to claims about capitalist root causes or to ideologizing people’s pain. Valid though indictments of speculative misinvestment and its social consequences have been, Giuliani was elected – if only by default – because those indictments, and the racial flag-waving that accompanied them, were not in themselves prescriptions, let alone alternatives that could work. There seems to be no substitute for the covenant of civic trust that Nehemiah knew how to tap when other organizers had failed.

Again, I am not urging religious belief on anyone, only more respect for it as a civic wellspring. We can control it constitutionally without discouraging or censoring it as automatically as some of us have tended to do. Precisely because the United States is becoming even more racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse than any census color-coding or Ford Foundation ethnic corolling comprehend, we should be working harder to forge a few republican/civic bonds.
I plead guilty to begging many policy questions in order to aerate this issue of civic decline. Against the explanations I have offered, policies such as the public funding of faith-based institutions and charter schools, stronger statutory support for organizing the unorganized, and “living-wage” contracts with private providers of certain public services are all preferable to the large state bureaucratic entitlements that have tried to offset the consequences of predatory corporate practices I have mentioned. We probably do better, morally as well as administratively, by helping people to help themselves. The efforts I have just listed are doable, and probably with no more scandal than attends the fundamentally corrupt, socially bankrupt political system we sustain now, but only if a civic consensus to do them can be nourished and translated into an electoral one. Ideologues have failed at this; public policymaking tends to enhance market pacifications. I see nothing that can break through the torpor besides a deeper faith that is resonant in an understanding of this country’s history as a moral experiment. I believe that our history should be taught that way and that our projects should be undertaken in that spirit.

NOTES


3 Michael Gecan, Going Public (Beacon Press, 2002).


6 Edward Gibbon, History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (Viking “Portable”).
HOW WOULD YOU KNOW A VIRTUOUS CITIZEN IF YOU SAW ONE?

Keith J. Bybee

In the months immediately following September 11, when politicians of every persuasion rallied around the flag and refused “to play the blame game,” public criticism of President Bush was almost impossible to find. Even so, a critical refrain occasionally could be heard in the chorus of support. Every now and then liberals and conservatives alike questioned the Bush Administration’s commitment to civic engagement: the war against terrorism proceeded on many fronts, but seemed to ask nothing of citizens. Where was the sense of national mission that would demand collective effort and sacrifice? Where was the vision of a common project that would call forth our better natures and energize civic responsibility?

This worry about civic engagement tapped into a broader concern that predated the September 11 attack. Led by the political scientist Robert Putnam, pundits have long argued that more and more Americans are less and less interested in civic life. The problem, so the argument goes, is that Americans have increasingly privatized their free time. They tend to pursue their recreational and social interests alone, without the face-to-face interaction offered by a club or civic association. As a result, many Americans are said to have lost faith in what Alexis de Tocqueville called “self-interest rightly understood” – the idea that the successful realization of private goals depends on the vitality of common life. We spend less time being good neighbors or doing community service because our daily experience tells us such things don’t matter.

The claim that civic engagement is declining has proven to be controversial. Commentators agree on neither the extent nor the significance
Strains of the Federalist-Antifederalist debate continue today, alongside a jostling variety of alternative views. For instance, many proponents of affirmative action and enhanced minority representation tie the political character of Americans fundamentally to racial membership. Opponents of race-based policies typically view American political character as more protean: each citizen is thought to possesses a vast range of interests that extends past the boundaries of any one group affiliation. Additional examples are easy to find. The debates over abortion, gun control, and campaign finance each feature their own claims and controversies about the kinds of citizens Americans are.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the papers collected in this volume are rooted in rival accounts of the American political character. Jim Sleeper provides a catalogue of political sins that can be overcome only by religious faith, while William Galston offers a detailed description of political apathy that can be overcome only by secular knowledge. James Bernard Murphy outlines the essential virtues Americans successfully learn in school, while Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn insists that Americans not only lack an intelligible understanding of virtue, but will continue to do so until they engage in public deliberations governed by transcendent goals.

The welter of interpretations of American political character gives the debate over civic engagement its complexity and its cacophony. But it also shows us what is really at stake. The acceptance of one account of civic life over another elevates one conception of American citizenship over its competitors. In a word, judgments about civic life are judgments about political character – both what it is and what it should be. Participants in the civic engagement debate therefore must be pressed to identify and to defend the understandings of political character on which their arguments are based. Jim Sleeper must explain more explicitly how the secular citizen can be politically redeemed by the religious beliefs of others. William Galston must explain more clearly how improved factual knowledge can alter a contemporary politics and culture marked by passions and interests. James Bernard Murphy must explain more carefully how schoolhouse virtues can be separated from citizenship virtues when justly celebrated judicial decisions such as Brown v. Board of Education insist that the two sets of virtues are intimately connected. And Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn must explain more plainly how Americans can be said to lack any understanding of virtue.

The lack of consensus was evident at the founding of the United States. James Madison and his Federalist allies based their support of the Constitution on the belief that citizens were ruled primarily by political passion. They believed that the interaction between liberty, self-love, and unequal wealth fired an inexhaustible rage for political projects antithetical to the common good, ensuring that public life always would be riven by factional conflict. “In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men,” Madison wrote, “the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.” The Federalists thus championed the Constitution because it controlled and regulated a passionate people, creating a set of institutions that would frustrate factions and free elected representatives for rational deliberation.

Madison’s Antifederalist opponents attributed a very different kind of political character to the American people. The Antifederalists viewed the citizenry, when left to its own devices, as a wellspring of sound judgment and sturdy virtues. Threats to the public interest did not come from the people at-large, but from elected politicians, corrupted by the possession of power. Far from encouraging a politics of public reason, the Constitution gave corrupt national elites liberty to pursue their own narrow interests at the expense of the common good. As Antifederalists in Pennsylvania put it, the Constitution promised government by “lordly and high-minded” aristocrats, “harpies of power that prey[ed] upon the very vitals, that riot[ed] on the miseries of the community.”

of the problem. And even among those who see diminishing civic engagement and consider this diminishment to be problematic, there remains wide disagreement over the proper solution.

One might say that proponents of a revitalized common life seem to have little in common – and for good reason. Claims about the quality of civic engagement are inevitably tied to prior beliefs about the political character of the American people. Thus, jeremiads about waning civic engagement are never just abstract lamentations: every warning about our anemic common life carries with it specific hopes about the kind of citizen who will step forward and assume civic responsibilities. This is a surefire recipe for controversy, because little agreement exists on the political character of American citizens.

The welter of interpretations of American political character gives the debate over civic engagement its complexity and its cacophony. But it also shows us what is really at stake. The acceptance of one account of civic life over another elevates one conception of American citizenship over its competitors. In a word, judgments about civic life are judgments about political character – both what it is and what it should be. Participants in the civic engagement debate therefore must be pressed to identify and to defend the understandings of political character on which their arguments are based. Jim Sleeper must explain more explicitly how the secular citizen can be politically redeemed by the religious beliefs of others. William Galston must explain more clearly how improved factual knowledge can alter a contemporary politics and culture marked by passions and interests. James Bernard Murphy must explain more carefully how schoolhouse virtues can be separated from citizenship virtues when justly celebrated judicial decisions such as Brown v. Board of Education insist that the two sets of virtues are intimately connected. And Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn must explain more plainly how Americans can be said to lack any understanding of virtue.
when we have the highest levels of church attendance in the industrialized world.

To return to the questions with which I began: what should be made of the demands for more civic engagement in the wake of September 11? Should President Bush call Americans away from their private pursuits and attempt to rededicate them to a shared mission? In addressing these issues, our attention must be focused on the conception of political character in whose name the president’s efforts might be undertaken. Thus, we should ask: just what kind of citizen should the Bush Administration hope to draw into civic life? What are the implications of bolstering one version of the American political character over others? As these questions suggest, the critical issue is not whether the call to civic engagement is sent out, but how – and to whom – the call is made.
EUROPEAN IDENTITY:

DIVERSITY IN UNION

Rik Pinxten, Marijke Cornelis, and Robert A. Rubinstein

INTRODUCTION

Current discussions within the European Union about the possibility of achieving a singular European identity largely are stalled in a debate between unqualified multiculturalism and absolute monoculturalism.\(^1\) In our opinion, continuing to frame the debate as a stark choice between these two views is a mistake because it institutionalizes an unproductive dichotomy. On the one hand, monoculturalists hold that a European identity already exists because it is presupposed in the structures and institutions of the European Union. Those holding this view argue that Europeans already share core cultural values represented by the European Union and that these values are the essence of European identity. That is, subscribing to these values is necessary and sufficient for European Union citizens to construct a common identity. On the other hand, multiculturalists assert that diversity is a reality within the European Union, and that as a result many cultural identities already exist, perhaps uneasily, within the European Union. These identities are the frameworks within which people experience daily life and the frameworks that motivate community action. Multiculturalists further assert that the core cultural values of these several identities are profoundly different from one another, thus making the groups that coalesce around them incompatible.

Following these moral and ideological values to their logical conclusions, monoculturalism promotes a eurocentrist view, while multiculturalism rejects any common rule in which particular cultural preferences are included because it may disrespect cultural values other communi-
ties held. When this dichotomy is taken for granted, it forces a choice between the two sides, each of which can be made to appear equally plausible when based in underestimated cultural, religious, or historical traits. Citizens are then coerced into choosing an identity either as Europeans or as members of a smaller community.

In this paper we seek to make manifest the devastating impact of such binary thinking (of which the dichotomy between the monocultural and multicultural views of European identity are just one instance). We begin by acknowledging that within the large economic and political entity of the European Union there is distinct diversity in languages, religions, cultures, and histories. Yet, we think that it is important to try to figure out what are the best ways to ensure a durable and prosperous existence for an entity such as the European Union. We think this requires the development of a framework that creates a linkage between citizenship in the European Union (a legal status) and a European identity (a felt social identification). Popular movements and electoral evidence from across Europe suggest that the former (legal status) is not sufficient to create the latter (identification with an over-arching community).

What then are the necessary preconditions for the creation of a European identity within the European Union? We propose first that it is possible, notwithstanding the diversity within the European Union and the resulting particularisms, that there are some specific rules, values, or agreements to which all European Union citizens would subscribe and that might form the minimum set of such cultural materials that would be the basis of European identity. Secondly, we claim that the diversity of that entity must be taken into account to a large extent.

Any normative project for constructing European identity must work for the entire European Union, while at the same time coming to terms with the diversity that exists within the Union. In this way, we hope to combine the emphases of both monoculturalism and multiculturalism without being forced to make a binary choice. Put another way, we seek to discover the necessary preconditions of the whole for the (political) entity to subsist, and then we turn to the question of how the constituent (cultural-political) entities can learn to marshal themselves optimally in relation to this whole. To answer the first question we try to identify how people actually think about and enact citizenship. The answer to the second question is sought along the lines of learning procedures and attitudes that focus on the status of the European Union as a social and political space within which people are in constant negotiation about their rights, obligations, and identities.

FOCUS ON CITIZENSHIP

Over time the social status of the free and sovereign citizen has grown into greater prominence, and much social theory has developed about this status. In thinking about this circumstance (a new social status and the social theoretical consideration of it, what we call the project of citizenship), we follow the historical analysis of authors such as Touraine who point out that the present era has radically broken the bondages of the past and has freed citizens in a genuine way for the first time. Citizens’ old obligations to churches, kings, and nobility came under attack with the American and the French revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, they continued in a modified way in the period of nationalistic and ideological supremacy through World War II. It was only in the 1960s that the citizen had a position of extended and engaging freedom and could organize individual and social life in a substantial way. These material and political developments allow people to think in fresh ways about the project of citizenship. We adopt Taylor’s reasoning on this point: groups and communities adopt and develop “social imaginaries” in order to interpret and implement social agreements. While the ascription of the growth of freedom to a historical era may thus seem to deal with the past, in fact it allows contemporary groups and communities to engage themselves in a societal project on the basis of the symbolic and political entailments of that historical image. Within that frame of thinking, we suggest that the social imaginary of freedom is expanding in the present era to become a core idea in the organization of society.

Throughout the same period of two to three centuries, there has been embedding of societal institutions in increasingly complex structures of regulations and laws, what we call the “juridification” of society. This juridification yields a legalistic mentality in political personnel. It may well be that this juridification has gone a step too far and is producing a “democratic deficit” as a by-product: the juridical construal of one’s
citizenship and cultural roots no longer obtain, or they must be reinvented and given new meaning within the new system. To do this it is necessary, we think, to explore from the bottom up the subset of values, rights, and obligations that are recognized throughout the European Union. This would enable us to judge what European identity might be recognizable throughout Europe. The next step would be to determine what common values and agreements can be discerned and how they can be negotiated as a basic societal platform for the functioning of the European Union as a political and social space.5

The European Union space is an economical and a juridical construct. In addition, there are pan-European institutions such as the European Parliament and the European Commission that pass decrees and bylaws. The political benefit of the European Union is that old nationalistic antagonisms no longer lead to interstate wars. The economic advantage could be that a very substantial internal market is realized, and hence, the globalization of economies and finance might thus be achieved successfully. It will become clear in the future whether or not that will be the case. Beyond that, the general claim is that Europe (in the format of the European Union) is one of the largest democratic political and social spaces in the world. Issues in some areas of sociocultural life suggest that these potentials may not be achieved. Among these are political parties, immigrants’ rights, neoracist movements, and nationalism.

**Political Parties**

There is growing electoral success of anti-democratic, neo-communitarian political parties in a number of countries. These parties reject the universalizing, democratic project of the European Union. This can be seen in Austria, Flanders, Denmark, Northern Italy, and Germany, as well as in the surprising 2002 elections in the Netherlands and France. It is true that there has been great success through juridical and organizational means in maintaining peaceful relations between nations over the past decades. Nonetheless, it is sobering to see an ever-growing counter-movement in several member states of the European Union since the 1970s, with part of this movement adopting strong exclusionist positions and rejecting the humanistic and democratic perspective for which Europe stands.

**Immigrants’ Rights**

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There are no European Union-wide policies for dealing with immigrants that systematically guarantee their human rights. The result is that member states have different ways of administering papers for “newcomers” and refugees. Because different national rules govern immigrants, substantial opportunities for criminal activity are created. All members of the European Union have not signed the Schengen Agreement, which is an agreement between a subset of states within the European Union to cooperate in police work and in the prosecution of international criminals across national borders. Moreover, the agreement itself is not optimal in terms of human rights.

Refugees and new immigrants are drawn to the European Union because of its manifest economic prosperity, which is advertised through press releases on economic progress and through the media images broadcast around the world. Refugees flee to the European Union in the face of raging wars and other conflicts, and also because of bleak economic prospects in their countries of origin. That these “push factors” show no signs of abating suggests that people will continue trying to enter the European Union, either through legal immigration (for example by taking advantage of the German “green card” policy developed in 2001) or through the ever-growing illegal refugee traffic. This results in national programs for dealing with refugees and immigrants with quite different requirements and sanctions in most of the countries. Countries contest each other over these issues, and produce different policies. For example, Germany reduced the right of political refugees and at the same time searched for a delineated new cohort of high-tech immigrants from Asia. The more-or-less mild “hunt” for illegal immigrants and refugees now is a high priority of national governments throughout Europe, yet no genuine and uniform European Union policy exists that would develop competencies to deal with the resulting diversity.

Neoracist Movements

There is a growth of neoracist movements in the European Union, and no adequate way to combat them has come from democratic political parties, from states, or from European institutions. The extreme rightist parties focus almost exclusively on the badly digested influx of “others” and hence direct the public discourse to accept versions of the “fortress Europe” ideology that excludes those others. Refugees are treated as potential criminals or enemies, or as victims. Extreme rightist parties, through the redefinition of the old communitarian ideology of “our people first,” have been developing a Europe-wide policy program over the past decade, emanating from the French study center GRECE. This picks up basic elements of Italian fascism of the 1930s and adds to it other discriminating discourses, including “culture as race.” Certainly, different trends can be seen within these developments (from anti-universalism to neo-paganism, for example). Nonetheless there is a common focus that feeds on anxieties about globalization and blames all evil effects on “foreigners to our culture.” The result is ever greater success in terms of power and election results for these extremist parties since World War II. Strikingly, this development can be seen in some of the smaller, more prosperous regional (not necessarily national) areas of Europe, including regions of Denmark, Sweden, Carinth (in Austria), Northern Italy, Flanders, Southern France, and cities in the Netherlands that have substantial votes for extremist parties.

Nationalism

Our experience suggests that people commonly see national mandates rather than European positions as more important. Time and again, representatives elected on a European ticket resign to take up ministerial responsibilities in their nation-states. Some open clashes between the chair of the council (the body of nation-state ministers who make the decisions on all important matters in regular high-level meetings) and the European Commission (the body with the executive power of the European Union) showed that prime ministers and presidents of the member states explicitly assert their decision power over and above the European rulership.

A true, socially motivating European identity with some status is not developing within this context. The European Union is perceived increasingly as a boring institution with more rules and more bureaucracy than as a blessing. At the top level, a superstate with its bureaucracy often is seen to be ruling against the interests of nation-states (or so they feel), and at the bottom level, citizens and their local politicians are becoming less powerful. The European Parliament has limited power now, but the Commission and the Council of Ministers, which hold real
decision power, are not democratically accountable. Citizens see that there is a deficit in democracy and become alienated from the European Union, often seeing themselves as the “others.” Hence, they do not identify themselves as European citizens.

NECESSARY PRECONDITIONS FOR EUROPEAN IDENTITY

How can Europeans construct the European Union so that it survives as a durable structure that will guarantee a democratic society of equal opportunities to its citizens? This is the million Euro question! We suggest that it is useful to begin by thinking about what might be the necessary preconditions for such a durable structure.

We advocate starting from the fact that existing diversity within Europe (in the format of the European Union), acknowledging that this was also true historically, and that these facts must be taken into consideration when suggesting what its durable organization might entail. In addition, however, the European Union must function as a unified and uniform structure. To enter the Union, a state must comply with a series of rules with far-reaching implications on the legal, societal, economic, and political reorganization of that state. Hence, unity and diversity will need to be combined and balanced for individual citizens, groups, and communities within the European Union.

Our preliminary view is that the following minimal conditions must be met to form the common ground for a political space like the European Union to persist equal rights, value of freedom, and redefined notions of brotherhood or solidarity.

Equal Rights

All citizens have the same rights as individual human beings. This legal rule should be translated into a societal rule of conduct such that all who participate in the European Union structure strive for the concrete implementation of the value expressed in this right, namely, that all persons are born equal and hence should be treated as equal in rights of life. The next step would be for European Union members to agree that any individual, group, or community that systematically blocks another from this right is “indecent” and should be sanctioned as a violator of a right expressing a basic value. In other words, unity rules supreme in such matters, and any religious, cultural, or other particularism must be in agreement with this basic value or become obsolete. This means that no one group or community can, on the basis of its cultural, religious, or any other prerogatives, deny any individual or group basic human rights in a continuous or structural way. Hence, “our community first” is out of the question, as well as “minority culture above everything else” in perspective. On this conception, such views are indecent to the extent that they violate this basic agreement. Indeed, both would qualify as instances of “cultural fundamentalism” and hence would jeopardize the prospect of a durable European Union. Presently, this basic agreement about the equal value of individuals is enshrined as a juridical construct in the policy, acts, and decrees of the European Union, but it has not achieved widespread penetration in the social consciousness of Europe.

Value of Freedom

We think that a second value that must be part of the common core of European citizenship is the value of freedom. The French political scientist Touraine suggests that we are entering what he calls the “positive freedom” stage, a period during which freedom is extended to more people and engaged by them more extensively in some parts of the world, including Europe. In contrast, negative freedom consists of freedom from bondage, such as that from the church, from nobility, from the state, and from capitalist groups. The growth of extended freedom after World War II urged citizens to deploy in a maximal and optimal way their personal values and prospects. However, in a society of more than one person and even on a global level, this presents us with the obligation to develop personal ambitions and strive while taking into account equal rights and opportunities for others. In practice within the European Union, this means citizens will need to explore how their private plans can be realized while respecting the developmental possibilities of all others within the European Union and within the world at large. Increasingly, this also has come to mean the chances of a good life for children of future generations and eventually for animals as well. The notion of positive freedom certainly is a common value of the European Union. We see it as an important “social imaginary” in
conditions for the existence of the European Union as a social, political, and economic space. The capacity to live with and respect diversity can be reconciled with the values of freedom and equality only by conceptualizing the European Union as a space for intercultural negotiation. Hence, its citizens should be able to negotiate and should be equipped through education and cultural-societal projects to that end. This will allow them to deal with the factual diversity in which they are living.

It would be interesting to apply this structural analysis of preconditions to “failures” of intercultural coexistence, such as policies that criminalize refugees or the rise in Europe of neo-communitarian sentiments, for example. We think that the present frame of analysis can show in each case which premise or premises of the three preconditions discussed above was frustrated or violated. If that is true, then this frame of analysis allows us to understand somewhat what happens in the minds of so-called neoracists and to study how the project of unity and diversity within the European Union space can be enhanced.

SOME SOLUTIONS

The notion of European identity ought to be one that endorses at least the three values of equal opportunities for all, freedom for all, and respect of diversity by all. We recognize that these three values exist in something of a creative tension, and that European Union citizens must have capacities in intercultural negotiation in order to make this tension work for constructive, rather than destructive, ends. But, the capacity for intercultural negotiation is not an innate gift; rather, it is something that must be learned. Without such capacities, a person might be thought of as an unfinished citizen. We further suggest that a person who has not fully actualized his or her European Union citizenship in this sense will have great difficulty adopting European identity. To fully endorse the three core values, a “partially” developed person must be socialized or culturalized to become able to deal with disparity or potential conflict between universal rights and respect for diversity.

The focus on learning processes and on the citizen as a learning subject allows us to frame the situation in an unusual, but potentially powerful way. Citizens should be equipped with conflict resolution strategies and

Redefined Notions of Brotherhood or Solidarity

Advocating equality and freedom in an area that is diverse implies that one should be conscious and capable of dealing with diversity. Citizens who are unconscious of diversity or incapable of dealing with it will frustrate others and themselves, although they will do so partly unwillingly. We think that the capability of dealing with differences in a durable manner, based on equality and freedom, can be fostered by helping people develop their capacity for intercultural negotiation. Although we agree that solidarity can be identified as a value that is said to be shared by all citizens of the European Union, this value often conflicts with the two former ones. Hence, we propose a pragmatic approach: Citizens should explore how intercultural negotiations, in the context of equality and freedom increase their prospects for maintaining stable relationships. In our view, the fact that the population is getting more and more mixed makes the development of intercultural negotiation skills increasingly important. There should be structured and regular opportunities, from the earliest educational settings for adult learning, for people to learn intercultural negotiation skills and to consolidate and continuously improve these skills.

So far, we have suggested that European institutions, agreements, and laws should give priority to two basic values: freedom of agents to choose how they wish to live and to implement that choice and the equal rights of all individuals.

At the same time, we appreciate that social and cultural diversity is a historic feature of the European experience. This diversity exists on many dimensions, including gender, religion, culture, history, language, lifestyle, and economic and political activities. In the past, the denial of diversity has led to extreme and violent conflicts, such as religious wars, linguistic battles, nation-state wars, and so on. It has been a primary target of the European Union to dissuade and avoid such conflicts after World War II. This entails that everyone should recognize and respect diversity.

The combination of these premises yields the required structural pre-
techniques acquired through education and socialization procedures. However, as reviews of educational curricula show, these procedures and techniques currently embed within them somewhat monocultural and bourgeois-social presumptions and are also gender-insensitive to some degree. During the time when Europe might have been seen as less diverse than it is now, especially prior to World War II, these presumptions may not have resulted in conflict. However, during the past 50 years, decolonization has brought to Europe massive inflows of refugees from a wide variety of cultural areas. In the face of this diversity, the strategies and techniques that served in the past have proven increasingly inadequate or inefficient. Problems and conflicts seem to accrue, and typical citizens become conscious of these failures and feel powerlessness to cope in a satisfactory way with the diversified world surrounding them. This is particularly true in the old cities of Europe, where urban or metropolitan political perspective that promises to solve problems of violence, insecurity, and material deterioration is lacking. So, as a result of being incapable of coping adequately with the changing situation, citizens feel under attack. In reaction, they are prone to find comfort by turning to reductionist and unrealistic perspectives on reality.

The often fictionalized world, for which the old conflict resolution strategies and techniques are believed to be adequate, is separated ideologically from the real and diversified world, where inaptitude of the citizen is rampant. Hence, cultural fundamentalism and hatred against diversity emerges. This ideological line can be found in the discourse of the far right. One example of an ideology puts people in political offices and yields practices of “cleansing” and of reduction of diversity, especially against other cultures and religions, but also against women. The short period of power for Front National in French southern cities in particular and for Haider’s FPO (Austrian Freedom Party) have shown this trend to be true.

It is our view that people in a diversified world should be equipped with the conflict resolution strategies and techniques necessary for a culturally diverse context. This would allow a person who can combine universal rights and respect for diversity satisfactorily to function as a citizen. It is on this basis that a European identity can form. We have some encouraging results at the individual and group levels, notably in intercultural education and in group-level intercultural negotiation. There is grassroots work in classes and schools, unions, sociocultural centers, and cultural centers that implies that research (in a more ethnographic way) and training can help successfully implement such a program.

We do not claim that embracing the three values discussed above in combination with appropriate intercultural negotiation skills will completely address the problem of establishing European identity. However, implementing intercultural negotiation strategies in school curricula and encouraging intercultural communication and interaction in the social and cultural field surely is an important first step. Such a program will equip people with new strategies and techniques that can help them feel more effective in coping with diversity and, in turn, make them less fearful of engaging in collaboration in a diversified world. Thus they will perceive European Union citizenship as an empowering status rather than a diminishing status.

Since human beings are not born as full-grown social and cultural subjects, socialization and enculturation processes are of the essence for developing people who have a sense of effective citizenship and European identity. We propose that intercultural education and negotiation should be part of education and training at all levels (from primary schools through university training and beyond) in order to produce citizens who are able to cope with diversity while staying loyal to the universalistic values of the European (and for that matter, western) tradition. Presently, we see a lack of commitment in the larger nation-states of the European Union to promote such campaigns, even though in 1988 the Council of Ministers of Education declared the implementation of intercultural education. We also witness a lax attitude vis-à-vis hate speech and racial talk, which may in fact dissuade people from engaging in the political project outlined above. One would rather blame the “other” for one’s difficulties than engage in changing one’s own attitudes.

During the past decade, the assertion of the old political power of the nation-state and the rise of more local neo-national and neocommunitarian sentiments have frustrated the growth of European identity. If these trends continue, it is our opinion that European Union citizens will continue to be torn between inadequate nationalistic or monocultural identity and the sociocultural reality that demands intercultural competencies and the development of a common European identity that
acknowledges their common interests and values. In our view, within the European Union the nation-state is hampering the emancipation of the citizens and is standing in the way of constructing a European identity. All citizens of the European Union have a common interest in being able to live in a balanced political environment and at the same time adequately cope with the real diversity in Europe and with the universalistic values of freedom and equality that form the basis of European citizenship. Hence, all citizens have an interest in being educated and socialized by efficient strategies and techniques, such as intercultural education and intercultural negotiation skills, for making constructive use of these tensions.

6 There is some degree of uniformity in the programs of the Schengen countries.


8 This term was coined by Stolcke referring to a fundamentalist way of using one’s cultural roots. V. Stolcke, “Claiming Culture Again,” Current Anthropology 37, 1996, pp. 3-37.


NOTES

1 Evens Foundation, ed., Europe’s New Racism: Causes, Manifestations, and Solutions. (Oxford: Berghahn Publishers, 2002). We thank Ghislain Verstraete and Angie Mizeur for comments on this paper.


**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

**Rogan Kersh** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University.  
rtkersh@maxwell.syr.edu

**Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn** is an Associate Professor of History at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University.  
edlash@maxwell.syr.edu

**William Galston** is Saul I. Stern Professor of Civic Engagement at the School of Public Affairs of the University of Maryland. He is also Director of the School's Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy.  
wgl4@umail.umd.edu

**Suzanne Mettler** is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University.  
sbmettle@maxwell.syr.edu

**James Murphy** is an Associate Professor of Government at Dartmouth College.  
james.b.murphy@dartmouth.edu

**Jim Sleeper** is a writer on American urban politics and civic culture, and a lecturer in the political science department of Yale University. His most recent book is *Liberal Racism*.

jimsleep@aol.com

**Keith Bybee** is an Associate Professor of Political Science and the Michael O. Sawyer Chair of Constitutional Law and Politics at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University.  
kjbybee@maxwell.syr.edu

**Rik Pinxten** is Professor of Anthropology and the Study of Religion at the University of Ghent, Belgium.  
hendrik.pinxten@rug.ac.be

**Marijke Cornelis** is Assistant to the Department of Comparative Study of Cultures at the University of Ghent in Belgium.

**Robert Rubinstein** is a Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Program in Analysis and Resolution of Conflicts at the Maxwell School of Syracuse University.  
rar@syr.edu