

Diversity, Immigration, and the Politics of Civic Education

by
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Classrooms across the nation have over the past two decades taken a diverse turn, most notably in the changing face of school children from predominantly white to increasingly multiracial and multicultural. Immigrants and their children now account for more than 20% of the U.S. population, and roughly a third of Americans consider themselves to be something other than white. The younger average age of immigrants and higher birthrates among these groups and minority populations more generally contribute to an even larger proportion of non-whites under the age of 30. In-migration of this magnitude is not unprecedented in the United States; an even larger share of the U.S. population was foreign born at the dawn of the twentieth century. During that period it was Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants rather than the Mexican, Chinese, and Afro-Caribbean immigrants of today who faced political, economic, and social barriers in their racial classification as “less than” white (see, e.g., Jacobson 1998; King 2000). Indeed, there is a clear echo of earlier calls for schools to properly socialize children of immigrants into patriotic ways in many of the contemporary claims citing the impera-

tive of civic education to preserve the true character of American democracy. These efforts prioritizing the adoption and inculcation of a particular set of values and civic behaviors sit at one end of a continuum; qualities of patriotism, obedience, and belief in the superiority of the United States system of government rank highest among the ideal characteristics to be fostered in this view of civic education. Further along the continuum, however, are a set of imperatives for civic education to stem the tide of youth disengagement and to renew political interest, efficacy, and political and social activity among American youth. The emphasis in this position is less on the adoption of nationalistic patriotic values, for example, and more on the development of skills and predispositions to encourage democratic deliberation and social and political action.

While the basic goals of the two perspectives differ in substantial ways, the policy trajectories are nevertheless similar. Both look to political scientists and educators to develop curricular programs in civic education to encourage some set of desirable citizenship qualities. Other essays in this

symposium will address these issues more directly. My purpose here is to reveal what I view as a particularly problematic set of assumptions shared by the two—that a true character of American democracy is teachable, and that civic education should yield more desirable qualities among individuals and therefore better political outcomes in the aggregate. Despite the distinctiveness of ideal civic education programs at opposite ends of the spectrum, both nevertheless bundle a set of theoretical starting points, methodological strategies and evaluation techniques loaded with a set of assumptions about individual agency, a faith in the causal link between citizen behavior and political outcomes, and a relatively fixed notion of an American democratic creed that are problematic when viewed in the light of increasing ethnic and racial diversity in the United States. I utilize growing multiculturalism in the United States not as a claim for racial identity politics, but instead in an effort to question the prevailing notion that a true character of American democracy has equal resonance, incentives, and costs to all members of the polity. Civic education programs may indeed be instrumental in developing strong democratic citizenship among the nation’s youth, but we should be careful not to expect that the effects will be the same for all, or that they will have equitable benefits.

It Depends on Where You Sit: Contradictions in the Creed

Civic education curricula often highlight how politics in the United States is a study in both conflict and cooperation between people, interests, and ideologies. In the texts accompanying these courses, government is most often portrayed as an arbiter in the process of struggle and accommodation between groups. Assuming a neutral and ostensibly fair democratic structure combined with a companion notion of equality of agency presents a set of perplexing inconsistencies for students when they are confronted with realities of injustice in America. As recently as 50 years ago, how could Southern states use literacy tests at election precincts for selected individuals with questions such as: “How many bubbles are in this bar of soap?” How, in the greatest democracy in the world and under the leadership of one of the greatest presidents in modern U.S. history, could the U.S. Supreme Court uphold the constitutionality of imprisoning American

citizens of Japanese ancestry during World War II?

Yet for many students, particularly those of minority and immigrant backgrounds, these are not surprising or embarrassing anomalies whose practice has now been outlawed. Rather, from where these young people sit, discrimination is a norm of everyday politics that is felt palpably in economic, social, and civic life. Inequality and barriers to action structure rather than pepper their daily lives, and concepts such as freedom, fairness, equality, justice, and even democracy are far from unambiguous. The American democratic creed, tidy as it may sound when one is advocating its support, does not apply equally, but instead depends on where one is situated in relation to others. In this regard, there is no one and uncontested story of American democracy, particularly for those who sit outside of the inner circle (see, e.g., Smith 1997). Consequently, the disadvantaged are rationally more suspicious of its promise, less likely to support its maintenance, and harder to convince that it is worth pursuing in its current form. The “American dream” is disproportionately distant for some (see, e.g., Scovronick and Hochschild 2003; Hochschild 1995; Chong and Kim 2004).

Thus, how successful is a hypothetical civic education program valorizing units of the American federal justice system in the post-September 11 era? Try the program in a Detroit suburb where there is a heavy concentration of Arab-American residents, and in a socio-economically similar area of metropolitan Philadelphia with a small immigrant and non-white population. The results of a program evaluation are all too predictable. It does not work well in the former, and does better in the latter; post-intervention data make the Detroit students look like less-desirable citizens for not demonstrating an increase in their support of democracy and trust in institutions compared with the mostly white students in the Philadelphia suburb. Well-intentioned though they may be in attempting to increase characteristics of good democratic citizenship and social capital such as trust, civic education programs that privilege one version of a true democratic creed can yield results that exacerbate rather than alleviate prejudice. Similarly, civic education curricula attempting to increase political activity and interest in politics through greater exposure and activity in current political issues and local electoral contests, for example, have a different but related problem. Popular strategies in this vein include connecting groups of students to candidates running for office, and organizing classrooms to lobby local officials about a community concern with the goal of empowering students to make a difference in the system. These semester- or year-long civic education programs have the best chance of producing measurable consequences for students who have the resources and structural incentives to work with and in the system to accomplish political goals. For them, the light bulb of political efficacy and significance of politics to their daily lives might indeed illuminate, and consequently motivate them to follow current events more closely and become politically active as adults. But for others, the civic education curriculum is their political power, and while perhaps inspiring in its own right, that power is substantially diminished once they exit the classroom door and re-enter the reality of their lives characterized by a relatively low position in the social, economic, and political hierarchy. As a result, incentives for activity are diminished not only because money, time, and political motivation are scarce at home, but because political responsiveness does not follow the resource-poor at the same rate it follows the advantaged. Mediating institutions such as political parties have not effectively mobilized new immigrant populations, and remain resistant to doing so,

further diminishing the influence of marginalized groups (Andersen 2004). Post-intervention evaluations measuring a laundry list of good citizenship behaviors and attitudes such as interest in politics, efficacy, knowledge, and forms of political participation such as contacting officials, making campaign contributions, voting, and working with others in the local community, will likely demonstrate the strongest and most persistent effects in populations who already control democratic processes, and the weakest effects among disadvantaged populations. In politics as in economy, the rich get richer.

Assuming Equality of Agency and Participatory Efficacy

Findings such as these are repeated consistently, though with some variation depending on the particular type of civic education curriculum. Similar results differentiated by politically relevant groups can be found in evaluations of a host of other social and economic programs, yet we continue to wonder why intervention strategies don't work as well on the poor, minorities, and women, for example. As far as civic education programs aimed at increasing youth political engagement are concerned, I suggest that modes of political participation such as voting or making a campaign contribution are implicitly acts in support of the maintenance of a political system which may not be in the best interests for people who benefit least from that system. Rather than assume the same set of conditions equally structures the costs and incentives of political activity, interpretations of findings need to provide space for the likelihood that strategic calculations among individuals categorized by race and ethnicity vary systematically as a function of the location of their group in the social and political hierarchy. Suspending the assumption that groups ought to see participation in the political system as desirable provides the opportunity to train the lens away from the failings of the curriculum or inactive and apathetic youth, and instead focus scrutiny on the practices and institutions of democracy that may themselves inhibit the achievement of equality. A companion assumption accompanying the notion that individuals have equal agency in politics is one about representation—that more participatory input from citizens means that there will be more responsiveness from elected political officials, and consequently better policies. These are reasonable assumptions, neither of which I am in disagreement with in principle. At the same time, however, they are precisely that: assumptions about which research in political science provide little certainty.

The equality of individual agency assumption makes a lot of sense in that it is something we want to believe. One more semester of a particular civic engagement curriculum will garner the same increase in political engagement for whites as for blacks. But if there is evidence that there is an interaction between antecedents to political activity—a set of structural constraints that present unequal contexts for opportunity among individuals classified by race and ethnicity—then the assumption becomes much more problematic. The same is true for the representation assumption. If it is the case that participation from disadvantaged populations receives the same attention and action as from those who can make substantial campaign contributions, then the assumption is justifiable. But if there is something in the political process that systematically advantages some to the disadvantage of others, it requires reconsideration.

The relevance of these two assumptions regarding equality of individual agency and the efficacy of participation for civic

education lies in the ultimate aim of efforts to teach democracy to youth in order to increase political engagement and activity. In the current climate, advocating more citizen activity seems obviously normatively appealing. Expanding voice and deliberation, particularly in a time of growing diversity in the United States, should help to forward democracy and solve distributional inequities in social and political goods. In this view, more participation is especially important for those traditionally disadvantaged and politically underrepresented, for more voice will create pressure to develop public policies that take their interests into account. Under circumstances of relatively modest rates of political activity among minorities, what falls under scrutiny for change are the individuals who supposedly influence the process of democratic government, rather than the institutions and practices themselves. But if we relax the assumption that the political process provides equality of agency for all, then the comparatively low rates of participatory activity among minority Americans can be interpreted in another way: as an indicator of the structural inequalities present.

Accommodating Diversity in Civic Education: The Democratic Imperative of Equality

Creative and thoughtful civic education programs may go a long way in helping to invigorate democratic values, interest in politics, and motivation for social action among American youth. But we cannot expect that they will have equal effects across populations grouped by politically relevant categories such as race and ethnicity. Under the best possible circumstances, educational interventions would help to “level the playing field” by promoting civic and cognitive skills related to political activity and motivation to participate among all students. However, at worst, these interventions might also reinforce and even exacerbate present inequalities by providing jump-starts to civic engagement for the already powerful. Acknowledging the possibility that more democracy in its current form will not necessarily cure the ills of inequality present in its current form is a good place to start. Few would argue with the notion that inequality is deeply entrenched in the policies and institutions of American democracy, as well

as in the systems of public education in the United States. Constructing civic education curricula that will work to enhance equality then requires an explicit acknowledgement of the extent to which American democracy in its current state may be part of the problem.

In fashioning civic education programs to accommodate diversity, it might be useful to begin with the counterfactual that political equality exists among all in America. Take the plunge and imagine what politics and society would be like if things were different. It forces one to think about how a democratic system would be created if political equality were the rule and not the exception. Only with participatory equality might we be able to imagine an educative democratic system that helps to create competent citizens as a result of a fair system of incentives for political action. It is clear that the commitment to political equality in any polity, democratic or otherwise, is ultimately a political decision that manifests itself in the institutional structures and practices embodying government. Posing the counterfactual nudges us beyond identifying the variables that correlate with or lead to inequality on the input side, and encourages us to dig into the mechanisms that create, institutionalize, and then reinforce inequality.

Growing racial and ethnic diversity in the United States poses a significant challenge to political scientists and educators charged with the development and implementation of civic education curricula. Recognizing the limitations of the theoretical starting points of existing programs is a first step in constructing a civic and multicultural education that neither approaches the teaching of American democracy with a one-size-fits-all rubric or one in which the particularities of any given group in question are solely emphasized. The inclusion of the perspectives and situations of disadvantaged and disenfranchised individuals grouped by larger social categories does not necessarily require a difference strategy often associated with divisive identity politics. Rather, educating students for democracy requires a balance of the two—grounded in a set of common goals that while contested, nevertheless allow for shared common ground, yet sufficiently animated by the lived experiences of those diverging from the norm of the good democratic citizen (see e.g., Gutmann 2003; Young 2000). While this is certainly a tall order, it is one matched by the complexity of U.S. democracy and the imperative of political equality.

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