The Challenges of Civic Education

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There is both good and bad news for political scientists in the reemergence of civic education as an issue high on the discipline's agenda. The good news is that many of us can now give voice to a normative concern that had been muffled (but never really silenced) for several decades within the field. At one time a core obligation for the discipline, civic education had been peripheralized for different reasons by both the behavioral revolution and the post-behavioral movement, and found a home instead among those in the field who maintained bridges to K-12 educators.

The bad news is that the field now faces some significant challenges – professional and pedagogical – in dealing with this renewed civic education effort.

Those challenges began with the very decision to bring civic education back into the discipline's mainstream. Civic education is historically part of political science's DNA. The urge to create a distinct discipline at the turn of the last century was motivated, in part, by a desire to promote better citizenship through education. Civic education was more than a mere rationale for the field – it was *foundational*! It helped define us as a distinct discipline during an era when normative orientations were sanctioned among the social sciences, and when civic-mindedness was a critical characteristic of the professions.

But times changed, and so have the standards of disciplinary and professional status. While never really abandoning its inherent "urge" for promoting civic life, the field increasingly assumed that the civic education mission was most effectively achieved by concentrating on the production and dissemination of knowledge. By the late 1920s, the field's leaders had developed a critical view of traditional civic education. "In point of fact," noted Charles E. Merriam, "much of the secondary education of the world is not adapted to develop political science or intelligence, but to intensify nationalistic or class traditions, in such a manner as to breed war and conflict. Secondary political education is employing the agencies of history and government to make sober and impartial judgment impossible on the part of the generation that is coming on" (Merriam 1970, 287). To counter this, Merriam argued, the field must concentrate on "the creation of a more effective political research" (294).

However, in the process of enhancing their competencies as social scientists, political scientists grew increasingly indifferent to issues surrounding the promotion of civic life. There was no automatic linkage between producing research and promoting political intelligence among the citizenry, and traditional civic education seemed incompatible with the field's disciplinary advancement as a social science. The rekindled interest in civic education has directly challenged that indifference by making us confront the fundamental tensions between a commitment to promoting civic life and the standards of social science research.

Easing that tension requires that we carefully consider the implications of alternative pedagogical approaches to civic education. This is no easy task given the array of options. In attempting to get an intellectual "handle" on the major alternatives, I focus on two issues that seem to differentiate various positions on civic education pedagogy. First, should a civic education curriculum stress the political community's need for stability and support, or should it focus instead on the individual citizen's need for autonomy? Second, should our civics curriculum stress ends or means – that is, should it concentrate on justifying civic commitment or providing the tools and skills for effective civic engagement? Four distinct approaches to civic education emerge by juxtaposing the alternatives for each issue:

	Focus on:	
Curriculum stresses:	Justifying civic commitment	Tools & skills for engagement
Community's needs	**Patriotic**	**Deliberative**
Autonomy of individual citizen	**Moralistic**	**Critical**

In its *patriotic* form, civic education gives priority to fostering ties to the community for the sake of support and stability. In caricature, this approach produces a curriculum filled with ritual and nationalistic histories that seek to develop and reinforce the student's attachment to (and support of) the regime. While unlikely to find much support within the political science community, variations on this approach have powerful advocates in state legislatures and on school governing boards where there is a revitalized interest in requiring elementary school students to learn more about the flag (Utah) and mandating that college students pass courses in U.S. history (George Mason University).

The *moralistic* approach emphasizes the role of civic education in enhancing the support of our political institutions, but it also assumes that individuals achieve personal fulfillment as virtuous citizens through their commitments to the political community. William Galston, the leading advocate of this approach within the discipline, calls for a "pedagogy that is far more rhetorical than rational," relying on curriculum content that highlights the value and legitimacy of the political system and its institutions. Unlike "philosophical education" which seeks truth and promotes rational inquiry, civic education aims at the "formation of individuals who can effectively conduct their lives within, and support, their political community" (Galston 1991,

242-244). Once this moral foundation is set and the community is assured of support from the general population, those who choose to become activist citizens will likely do so within the legitimate "rules of the game."

The *deliberative* approach regards citizenship in more active terms, and sees civic education as providing instruction in the value and skills of active participation. Commitment is not enough; the capacity to actively engage in the political system in pursuit of one's interests is required for the sake of the community as well as the individual. Benjamin Barber, Amy Gutmann, and James Bohman are among the prominent advocates of this perspective. Barber argues that civic education must include an experiential service component developed to "teach citizenship, not charity" (Barber 1992, 253-261), while Gutmann calls for a "political education" that "prepares students to participate in consciously reproducing their society" (Gutmann 1987, 287). Gutmann and Dennis Thompson argue that it is the deliberative process itself that develops and enhances the civic virtues of citizens, especially in a democracy (see Gutmann and Thompson 1996).

Finally, the *critical* approach intends to focus on the empowerment of the individuals by increasing their general capacity to understand and assess what is taking place in the social life that surrounds them. Civic education does not necessarily involve political participation; instead, any instruction that promotes the critical thinking skills of students – skills that can be effectively applied in civic life – are relevant and appropriate. Taking their cue from John Dewey, advocates of this approach call for the "cultivation of practical reason" (Anderson 1993, esp. chapter 6) through experiences in and out of the classroom. It is a civic education that flows from a social education rather than from any distinct body of knowledge, moral values, or political skills.

The distinctions among these four approaches are more pronounced in the abstract than they are in reality. Any civics education curriculum is likely to reflect pedagogy drawn from each approach over time. But the philosophical differences among the four are significant enough to make it unlikely that any comprehensive approach will emerge. The challenge for the field – and specifically, for the APSA Task Force on Civic Education in the Twenty-first Century – is to move the cause of civic education forward while deferring decisions about pedagogy to individual instructors.

References

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