

## **Civic Education as a Precondition for Civility and Civil Discourse**

In an era marked by rising political polarization, violent rhetoric, and a decline in public trust, there is a widespread call for civility. Yet, this demand for respectful discourse often overlooks its most critical precondition: a foundation of shared civic knowledge. The idea of civility is not merely an external performance of polite behaviors or a code of conduct for debates. Instead, it is a direct consequence of an informed and engaged citizenry equipped with the tools to understand and participate in a healthy democracy. Without this foundational civic education, the pleas for civility are little more than a request for better manners in a system that is fundamentally broken.

Civility is a foundational social virtue. It's about being courteous, respectful, and polite, even when you disagree with someone. It focuses on the form of interaction, such as not interrupting, avoiding personal attacks, and using respectful language. While important for peaceful coexistence, an overemphasis on civility alone can sometimes be used to silence legitimate dissent or avoid uncomfortable but necessary conversations. In such cases, the demand for "niceness" can become a tool to maintain the status quo and prevent marginalized voices from being heard.

Civil discourse is a higher-level, more complex skill. It's the purposeful engagement with others to discuss difficult public issues. Its goal is not just to be nice but to expand knowledge, promote understanding, and identify shared values to solve problems. It requires a willingness to listen actively, consider other perspectives, and subject your own beliefs to criticism. Unlike mere civility, which can be passive, civil discourse is an active process that requires logical, intellectual, and emotional effort. It can involve passionate debate and disagreement, but the focus remains on the issue, not the person.

Ultimately, being nice is a social grace, but civil discourse is a democratic necessity. Civic education is the means by which we learn to practice that necessity, ensuring that our society can move beyond mere politeness to address its most challenging problems through reasoned, respectful, and productive dialogue.

Just as a physician's expertise is predicated on medical knowledge, the ability to engage in civil debate is dependent on a civic education that provides historical context, philosophical grounding, and an understanding of shared civic virtues. The idea that a healthy republic depends on a well-educated populace is a timeless wisdom. Philosophers like Socrates believed that citizens needed to be knowledgeable to make sound judgments about the state. His analogy of a good doctor—one who possesses medical knowledge—applies directly to the citizen: to be an effective participant in a democracy, one must have a sound grounding in civic principles. This idea was central to the founding of the American republic.

The Founding Fathers deeply understood this link between education and governance. In his Farewell Address of 1796, George Washington warned against the "spirit of party" and the dangers of blind allegiance to factions. He feared that such uncritical loyalty would allow

ambitious individuals to seize power and undermine the republic. Washington's concern was that citizens without a firm civic foundation would be easily manipulated, leading to a breakdown of national unity.

Similarly, the correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson emphasized the importance of a virtuous and informed populace. Their letters are a testament to the belief that education was not just about acquiring knowledge, but about cultivating the moral and civic virtues necessary for self-government. They understood that a republic could not survive on its own; it required active, responsible citizens who had a duty to protect and participate in the nation's governance. This historical context underscores that the American founders saw civic education as a prerequisite for a functioning democracy, not an afterthought.

In contemporary discourse, many discussions about civility focus on manners, tone, and the etiquette of disagreement. Pundits and public figures often lament the decline of polite debate without addressing the root cause: a lack of shared civic understanding. This narrow focus on civility as a performance rather than a cultivated virtue misses the point. To truly have a civil debate, participants must first understand the fundamental principles they are debating.

The Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, in his seminal work *Democracy in America*, observed the vitality of civic associations and local governance. He argued that these "habits of the heart"—the customs and behaviors that shape a society—were crucial for the success of American democracy. However, these habits are not innate; they are learned. Tocqueville's observations highlight that a healthy democracy relies on a community actively engaged in shared civic life, an engagement that civic education facilitates.

In the 20th century, philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey championed the idea of democratic education. Dewey argued that education should be a "training for citizenship" that prepares individuals to participate effectively in a democratic society. He believed that educational institutions should not just transmit knowledge but should cultivate the skills of critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration necessary for civic life. For Dewey, democracy was not a fixed system but an ongoing process that required continuous civic engagement and education.

In the face of rising political polarization and tribalism, the need for robust civic education is more urgent than ever, particularly in higher education. Universities are no longer just places for career preparation; they must also be a bulwark of civic training. By incorporating foundational courses on history, philosophy, political science, and law, institutions can equip students with the necessary tools to navigate complex public issues and engage in meaningful, civil discourse.

For example, a student armed with an understanding of Tocqueville's insights on civil society, Dewey's philosophy of democratic education, and the founding principles articulated by Washington, Adams, and Jefferson is far better prepared to participate in a reasoned debate than one who is not. They will understand that political parties are not an end in themselves,

that democracy requires active participation, and that civility is a reflection of a shared commitment to a functioning community.

Ultimately, civility is not a standalone virtue; it is a direct consequence of a well-educated citizenry. The current call for civility without a corresponding demand for civic education is like asking a doctor to perform surgery without medical school. To rebuild a culture of civil discourse, we must first lay the groundwork of civic knowledge and understanding, ensuring that citizens have the shared intellectual and moral foundation necessary to debate and disagree constructively.

In his book, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, Ronald Daniels, the president of Johns Hopkins University, makes a powerful case that universities have a solemn duty to actively preserve and strengthen democracy. He argues that this responsibility is not a passive one, nor is it a luxury; it's a matter of civic survival. Daniels contends that at a time when democracy is under "profound stress," universities must reassert their role as vital civic institutions. He identifies four key functions that universities must fulfill: promoting social mobility, educating citizens, fostering factual stewardship, and cultivating pluralism.

Daniels's work underscores the urgency of civic education by framing it as a direct antidote to democratic backsliding. He warns that universities have, at times, abdicated their role in this area, sometimes by replacing rigorous, knowledge-based civic education with a focus on service learning that doesn't adequately teach about institutions and political history. His call to action is clear: universities must prioritize instilling civic literacy in their students, ensuring they have the knowledge and skills to be active and informed participants in a self-governing society. This is not simply about being polite; it's about equipping future citizens and leaders with the intellectual tools to counter misinformation, engage in productive and robust debate, and safeguard the fundamental tenets of a liberal democracy.

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