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Princeton has no core curriculum or major initiative yet underway on classroom based civic education.¹ While I have never taught “civic education” as such, I’ve been broadly interested in the topic onward from my dissertation, on the distinctive virtues of liberal citizenship.² A second book addressed the challenge of reconciling shared ideals of citizenship with deep forms of religious and normative diversity, and defended the historical model of American public or “common” schooling as a fit vehicle for promoting civic ideals. Common schooling sought to educate all of the children of the community together in a public institution representing public (rather than sectarian) values (structure may have counted for more than curriculum).

I subsequently chaired the APSA Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement but focused there on the educative/formative effects of major political institutions and policy choices. The resulting book, *Democracy at Risk: How Political Institutions Undermine Democratic Participation and What We Can Do About it* (Brookings 2005), focuses on the educative and formative impact of the laws (in the broadest sense, the regime), leaving schools to one side.

I’m guessing we will all agree that a civic education curriculum now, as in the past, will struggle to make headway against the more pervasive and deeper influences of major institutions (including the political economy), political culture, and norms. But struggle we must, against deep forces in our polity and also on campuses.

Consider Mendelberg, McCabe, and Thal’s “College Socialization and the Economic Views of Affluent Americans.” Conservatives worry that the overwhelmingly left-leaning professoriate indoctrinates students, but in fact it is students’ experience outside the classroom that most shapes their views. Elite colleges and universities skew toward an affluent student body. “[A]s affluent students spend years immersed in a social environment oriented to affluence, they emerge with more economically conservative views relative to peers in other environments. ... Nonaffluent students are

¹ We have various service programs of course.

² My dissertation became the book *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (Oxford, 1990). It was a response to civic republican and communitarian critics of liberalism, arguing for the distinctiveness and moral and practical attractiveness of characteristically liberal virtues associated with demanding and being willing to give public reasons to contest and justify political power.

also affected by their campus's political norm, but not by its affluence. It is the process of affluent cultural reproduction that renders campuses into sites of class socialization....” Belonging to a fraternity or sorority enhances the effect.³

I am totally open to the idea that Princeton needs to do something, and I'd like to learn from others.

I remain somewhat skeptical about the impact of curricular interventions but am also ignorant about how civic education scholarship and practice have developed. Do we have evidence of effectiveness? (How to control for selection bias and all the usual problems?)

In substance, I would press the urgency of two main themes, the second of which speaks to universities themselves and their internal norms regarding class but also partisanship and viewpoint diversity.

The first theme I would express as the need for **greater understanding the workings of politics in diverse democracies**. Americans generally, including students, fail to appreciate how arduous is political organizing and political reform in a complex and diverse democracy, including the difficulty of assembling a winning coalition and passing a complex piece of legislation, the vital role of political parties in mass democracies, the need for compromise including, or especially, with the opposing party, and the many challenges faced by working politicians. This lack of basic and realistic understanding of politics makes them grossly impatient and unrealistic in judging political performance. “Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards,” as Weber said. “Politics is not the art of the possible,” JK Galbraith observed, “It consists in choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable.”⁴

Let me just add one element to that, borrowed from my insightful colleague and co-author, Frances Lee. Anyone who professes a serious appreciation, or pretends to a decent understanding, of diversity in America should study the House of Representatives: it embodies America diversity in its complex, contradictory, and often unpalatable messiness. Such is democracy in practice. It is too easy for academics

³ Tali Mendelberg, Katherine T. McCabe, Adam Thal, “College Socialization and the Economic Views of Affluent Americans,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 00, No. 0, xxxx 2016, Pp. 1–18

⁴ Galbraith, 1969, 312.

(and I count myself in this) to slip into fantasies of constitutional democracy as an elite-drive affair. Much (not all!) of the current obsession with populism reflects that.

The second theme, which again I think most or all of us will share, is the **profound need to build bridges of civil discourse and engagement across the hyper-polarized partisan divide**. There is much good scholarship on the extent of Americans' loathing of opposing partisans, founded partly in exaggerating the extremism of the other side. Tellingly, increased percentages of Americans are willing to say they would countenance violence against political opponents, and a principal reason is pre-emptive: not because that is their preferred option but because they think the other side is planning it.⁵

A valuable exploration of the extent of moralized intolerance of the partisan other is Jeff Spinner-Halev and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Respect and Loathing in American Politics: Polarization, Moralization, and the Undermining of Equality* (UChicago, 2024). The find that liberals have at least as difficult a time respecting conservatives as conservatives do liberals. You may say that this is because conservative positions are less respectable in substance, and we can discuss that, but on a wide range of particular issues the whole truth is not on the progressive side, and progressive positions are weakened by the intolerant refusal to take seriously arguments and concerns coming from the political right.

That last point is monumentally true of Covid policy, as Frances Lee and I describe in a book that is under review at Princeton University Press. The deepest problem is not that policy mistakes were made, but that intolerance of dissenting views truncated public consideration of alternatives and a weighing of the costs of favored policies. Disagreement was prematurely moralized and dissenters were dismissed and often scorned in stark defiance of the basic values of science and liberalism.

⁵ I think this sort of issue is discussed in the forthcoming, *Partisan Hostility and American Democracy: Explaining Political Divisions and When They Matter*, James N. Druckman, Samara Klar, Yanna Krupnikov, Matthew Levendusky, and John Barry Ryan (University of Chicago Press).