

Learning to Disagree: Why We Need a Refresh of Our Civic Culture

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Strengthening American democracy will take more than reforming political institutions. Equally important is refreshing our civic culture. Specifically, the nation needs a reawakening of civic education, broadly defined. Priority one for a renewed education in civics is for Americans to learn how to disagree with one another. This is harder than it sounds, as most people are predisposed to avoid conflict. Research shows that the most effective form of civic education in K–12 classrooms entails the open discussion of controversial topics. Tragically but understandably, the current political environment makes teachers reluctant to engage in this type of instruction. But teachers should be encouraged to lead such discussions and model for our young people how to disagree agreeably. Civic education, however, should not be limited to the classroom. Civic organizations of all types – clubs, congregations, groups, and guilds – are also settings in which we learn to interact with our fellow citizens, including and especially people with different political views than our own. While the nation’s organizational life has been in decline, the 250th anniversary of America’s independence is a unique opportunity for Americans to once again come together in local groups to find common ground in spite of political disagreement.

When considering ways to strengthen democracy, reformers – perhaps especially political scientists – often turn to institutional change. *Our Common Purpose*, published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, is no exception, as the report features a number of recommendations that involve reforming how elections are run and government bodies work.¹ I fully endorse both the spirit and specifics of those institutional reforms. I also endorse the theory of action motivating *Our Common Purpose*, which is that institutional reform is not enough. Reviving American democracy requires more than tweaking or even overhauling the nation’s institutions. Equally important is a refresh of the nation’s civic culture. To see why, we need only turn to the voluminous literature on transitions to, and retreats from, democracy. While scholars of the state of democracy hardly ignore the importance of institutions, many also point to the

need for strong, widely held democratic norms.² What are norms but one expression of culture? For example, the report *Habits of Heart and Mind*, published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to deepen the recommendations of *Our Common Purpose*, defines civic culture as “the set of *norms*, values, narratives, habits, and rituals that shape how we live together and govern ourselves in our diverse democratic society.”³ When democracy reformers decry the deterioration of democratic norms, they are talking about culture.

It is striking that, way back in 1960, *The Civic Culture* (the book that popularized the term) raised the alarm about the survival of democracy in societies that seem a lot like the contemporary United States.

If there is no consensus within society, there can be little potentiality for the peaceful resolution of political differences that is associated with the democratic process. If, for instance, the incumbent elite considered the opposition elite too threatening, it is unlikely that the incumbents would allow a peaceful competition for elite position.⁴

Writing over sixty years ago, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba pinpointed the need for a healthy civic culture as a necessary condition for democracy.

The key question for democratic reform is not whether norms – that is to say, culture – matter. Rather, it is whether culture can change and, if so, how. While institutional change is not easy to implement, it is at least straightforward to describe: add more seats to the House of Representatives, employ a ranked-choice ballot in elections, set term limits for Supreme Court justices. Cultural change is admittedly difficult to describe and even more difficult to envision implementing. Without confidence that culture is changeable, then the whole exercise of creating a new culture is merely a theoretical exercise.

As evidence that culture can indeed change, I point to the recent (2020) book by Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*.⁵ In it, Putnam and Romney Garrett assemble a wide array of data demonstrating that over the previous century and a half, American society – that is to say, American culture – has experienced what they call the “I-We-I curve.” During the Gilded Age of the late 1800s/early 1900s, the United States had a highly individualistic, even selfish, culture – the “I” era. This was manifested in the tax code, the lack of a social safety net, and even the prevalence of the pronoun *I* in books published in this era. Then came a “We” era, spanning from the Progressive Era through the first decade or so following World War II. The tax system was more egalitarian, the social safety net expanded, and more and more authors wrote in terms of *we* instead of *I*. This is also the period Putnam earlier documented as the high-water mark for civic associations and thus social capital. This communitarian era was then followed – as is well known – by the current historical period in which social capital has declined. In many ways, American culture, society, and public policy have returned to the individualism of the

Gilded Age. *I* has replaced *we* – not just metaphorically, but also in the written word. I suggest an addendum to the I-We-I curve, as the current era is not just characterized by individualism but also political antagonism. Ours is a time of *I-versus-You*.

My objective here is not to parse the specifics of the Putnam – Romney Garrett metrics but instead to make the general point that culture, including aspects of culture directly relevant to the health of a democratic society, can change – for the worse and the better. And if change is possible, what should a reimagined civic culture look like?

Strategy 6 of *Our Common Purpose* makes a number of recommendations to foster “a culture of commitment to constitutional democracy and one another.”⁶ While at first glance these recommendations may seem like disparate species – an expectation of national service, an initiative to have conversations around the country about the American story, civic gatherings and rituals – they share enough common DNA to be grouped under a single genus. I argue that they can all be considered a form of civic education (the reform of which is also a recommendation within Strategy 6). Here I adopt the spirit of *Our Common Purpose* in calling for a renewal of civic education in America but broaden its scope to cover the renewal of civic culture more generally.

If the term *civic education* conjures up images of schoolchildren dutifully learning how a bill becomes a law, that barely scratches the surface of what I mean. By civic education, I am referring to the myriad ways in which we all learn to deal with each other: that is, how to be citizens. The meaning of *citizen* here is not the narrow, legal sense of which government issues you a passport, but in the broad, cultural sense of being a member of a community, whether it is defined in global, national, state, or local terms. Certainly, K–12 schooling is one important venue for learning citizenship. But so is higher education of all types, from community colleges to trade schools to universities. Yet even a list of the institutions of formal schooling hardly exhausts where civic education takes place, as it includes families, adult education courses, religious congregations, clubs, unions, workplaces, and even online activities.

What would a reimagined civic culture look like? What should a renewal of civic education focus on? Fundamentally, *we need to learn how to disagree with each other* and, where possible, to compromise for the common good. When I was an undergraduate, a professor of mine used to say that just as economics results from scarcity of resources, politics results from scarcity of consensus. I suspect that one reason many people profess to dislike politics is because of that lack of consensus; what they actually dislike is disagreement. This is because we are hardwired to seek commonality and avoid conflict. In her 2006 book *Hearing the Other Side*, political scientist Diana Mutz puts it well:

Conversation is about the search for similarity between people. Anyone who has ever sat on an airplane beside a garrulous stranger recognizes the truth of this statement. “So,

are you on business in Philly?” No, I live here. “Are you in sales?” Not exactly; I work for the University of Pennsylvania. “That must be a huge state school. I went to a big state school too.” No, it’s small and private. “Oh really. What kinds of things do you teach?” Political science. The passenger responds with relief: “Political science! I took a course in political science in college once.” Yes, indeed, I reply: we must be first cousins.⁷

In other words, we cannot assume that people will naturally gravitate toward people, places, and environments that cause them to experience disagreement. Mutz further observes that people tend to assume that others around them are in agreement (whether they actually are or not), an assumption that typically goes unchallenged because of the reluctance to discuss politics. As a consequence, we not only have to learn to disagree with one another in theory, but actually put what we learn into practice, despite most people’s natural inclination to sidestep conflict.

Research into K–12 civic education demonstrates the value of learning how to disagree with one another. Within this literature, one pedagogical technique that is consistently found to be effective for a variety of democratically positive outcomes is an open classroom climate.⁸ While the stereotypical and, sadly, all-too-common form of civic education is passively listening to lectures, watching movies, and filling out worksheets, the best civic educators bring the classroom alive by leading their students in discussions of meaningful issues. They foster dialogue and debate. In so doing, they ensure that their students have the opportunity not only to speak and have their views respected but to learn to listen to others. Creating an open classroom climate requires skill; teachers have to strike a balance between allowing students to speak their minds while maintaining civil discourse that acknowledges the dignity of everyone. It is not for the faint of heart, and we should applaud those unsung teachers who do it well. Ironically – even tragically – the current political climate has made many teachers wary of fostering discussions around contentious issues.⁹ The very pedagogical method that can help young people navigate our polarized politics is often thwarted by that very same polarization.

What about higher education? Given all the attention paid to battles over free speech on campus, cancel culture, and “deplatforming” campus speakers, one might get the impression that college students are rarely exposed to disagreement. I am less sure that is truly the case. While I have no doubt that many institutions could do more to ensure that students are exposed to – and feel safe to express – a wide range of perspectives, my sense is that campuses are actually one of the few places where young people engage with difficult issues. At my own institution of Notre Dame, I recently conducted a representative survey of the undergraduate student body and found that roughly one-third report holding conversations with someone who holds a different view at least weekly. Is that high or low? Compared with the general population of all American adults, it is relatively high. Specifically, it is nearly twice the rate of people asked the same question in the nationally representa-

tive Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey.¹⁰ Eighteen percent of all Americans report holding conversations across lines of difference. Unfortunately, I am unable to say whether Notre Dame students' experience is typical of all undergraduates, as we do not have systematic data on this question across campuses. Until and unless such data are collected, we should not assume that campuses fail to foster their own civic culture and that students fail to learn how to disagree. Some no doubt do it well, others less so. In the case of Notre Dame, it should be sobering for faculty colleagues to hear that when we asked students with whom they discussed matters of disagreement, the most common response was their fellow students, while the least common was their professors. At least at Notre Dame, faculty have work to do. I suspect the same is true on other campuses.

While formal education, whether K–12 or postsecondary, can offer a structured environment for exposure to disagreement, it is even less common “in the wild.” The collapse of civic organizations of the sort documented by Putnam in *Bowling Alone* has meant that Americans are less and less likely to overcome their predisposition to avoid disagreement and gain experience dealing with it in face-to-face settings. While the social capital literature has long drawn a distinction between social ties that bond (connections among people who share a common trait) versus bridge (connections among those who differ), the fact is that any group, no matter how seemingly homogeneous, entails some degree of disagreement.¹¹ Consider a religious congregation. By definition, members of that congregation form religious bonds. But having religion in common hardly exhausts the ways in which those same congregants can bridge across difference – in age, economic background, even politics. Congregations are only one type of civic organization, but are an important one. When the alarm was first raised about the decline in associational life, religious congregations were the seeming exception. Secular civil society was waning while religious groups held steady. In the years since *Bowling Alone* was published, however, places of worship ceased to be the bulwark against the general decline in social capital, as there has been a precipitous drop in religious identification and attendance.¹² The decline in religion has had a partisan inflection: liberals have been far more likely to leave religion than conservatives. As a result, congregations are less and less likely to be sites of partisan bridge-building. This political sorting is exacerbated by partisan-motivated switching among congregations, such that even people who maintain their religious identity seek out congregations in which they are surrounded by people with similar political beliefs.¹³ In short, Americans are less likely to forge ties in associations, whether religious or secular, today than in the past, and when they do, those ties are less likely to be among people of different political persuasions.

The prevalence of social media has made it even easier to avoid exposure to political disagreement. While social scientists differ on the extent to which people actually experience political segregation online, no one can dispute that what happens online is qualitatively different than collective action – not to mention

deliberation – “in real life.”¹⁴ That is, even if the typical social media user is not completely cut off from differing points of view, online engagement does not entail the same reciprocity that arises from face-to-face relationships.

Is engagement across lines of difference civically efficacious or simply an empty platitude? Here again, research from K–12 civic education is informative. When young people are in an open classroom climate, they not only learn more about politics, they also become more politically engaged.¹⁵ Other research with the general population likewise finds that exposure to cross-cutting political talk – that is, engaging with people with opposing political views – is correlated with greater political tolerance.¹⁶

Knowledge, engagement, and tolerance are all democratic virtues that have occupied political scientists for many years. More recently, however, the concern has been less about these measures and more the emergence of affective polarization: dislike, even hatred, of people who identify with the opposing party. Here, again, there is good reason to think that exposure to disagreement lessens negative feelings toward cross-partisans. Underpinning the rise of affective polarization is the fact that Democrats and Republicans alike tend to assume the worst of the other party.¹⁷ Specifically, they mistakenly think that far more supporters of the other party hold radical positions, and even support political violence, than actually do.¹⁸ It is easy to see how misimpressions develop in the absence of actual contact and conversation with cross-partisans.¹⁹

In calling for a civic culture in which exposure to political disagreement is normalized and even encouraged, there is another lesson to be taken from the literature on K–12 civic education. A number of civic education studies find evidence of the *compensation effect*, in which a civics curriculum has the greatest effect on the young people who have the lowest baseline levels of civic engagement or knowledge because they have the most room to grow.²⁰ This was true for African American high school students in the pre–Civil Rights Movement era, who because of de jure and de facto segregation were excluded from the political system, as it is true in our current era for immigrant students, students with low socioeconomic status, and students of all backgrounds who are not exposed to politics in the home.²¹ The logic of the compensation effect is that we would expect exposure to political cross-talk – the most effective form of civic education – to be the most likely to depolarize people who have only known, or have always assumed, that the United States is a highly polarized nation. Will this hypothesis hold up under empirical scrutiny? It is a research question well worth asking.

My call for more attention to disagreement may seem at odds with the general spirit of *Our Common Purpose*. Doesn't highlighting disagreement cut against fostering a sense of common purpose? It need not. Remember that the key to a healthy civic culture is learning *how* to disagree with one another, which rests on also recognizing

what we have in common with each other. Some of the most interesting research on strategies for depolarization finds that getting Americans to recognize that they share passions, such as fandom for a sports team or patriotism for the nation, with people of the other party ameliorates affective polarization.²² When I lead undergraduates in discussions of potentially fraught topics, I frequently remind them that we are all members of a campus community in which what we share far exceeds how we differ.

If you agree, or at least are willing to consider, that a renewed culture around American democracy requires a new emphasis on civic education – both in formal schooling and beyond – that leads to the much more difficult task of considering realistic, feasible ways to bring about cultural change. As Putnam and Romney Garrett demonstrate, the shift from *I* to *we* back to *I* only happened because of conscious choices made by decisionmakers in government and civil society. We should not be complacent and assume that an ailing civic culture will heal itself.

The recommendations in *Our Common Purpose* directed toward rebooting our civic culture are a step toward a new emphasis on civic education generally and exposure to disagreement specifically. Take, for example, the recommendation “to establish a universal expectation of a year of national service.” Service in a community presents an ideal setting for balancing *unum* with *pluribus*. Service programs – whether public or private, secular or religious – unite their participants in a common cause. Ideally, they also bring together people with different backgrounds and give them space to discover where they may disagree. Similarly, *Our Common Purpose* calls for civic gatherings and rituals, a context in which people can come together to celebrate what they share while also recognizing how they differ.

Which brings me to the final recommendation to improve our civic culture: bolstering civic education in a formal sense, whether in K–12, higher education, or adult education (which could be offered by educational institutions or elsewhere). As difficult as implementing the other reforms might be, this one might be the hardest of all. I recognize the irony that an essay framed around civic education broadly defined would worry about the feasibility of reforming civic education in its more conventional meaning. In particular, K–12 teachers often feel under siege, especially in our current political climate of heightened scrutiny of what teachers say and do. Nonetheless, there are glimmers of hope that it is possible for bipartisan action in the field of civic education. A leading example is the Educating for American Democracy (EAD) project, which was developed by an ideologically diverse group of civic educators. EAD is not a curriculum per se but instead provides teachers with guides, lesson plans, and other forms of curricula support as they teach history and civics. The philosophy of EAD is to pose age-appropriate questions about key themes in civic education.²³ These questions do not have predetermined answers for students to memorize and regurgitate. Rather, they require students to think through their own responses, which are often grounded in research and

refined through discussion with classmates and teachers alike, providing young people with the opportunity to consider different perspectives on the questions posed. EAD has been adopted in red, blue, and purple states, suggesting that civic education need not be hopelessly partisan.

As for higher education, here again there is reason for hope. As one key example, the Institute for Citizens & Scholars has assembled a coalition of College Presidents for Civic Preparedness, all of whom are concerned about the civic culture of their campuses. The Institute for Citizens and Scholars has led the way in developing measures of the extent to which college students have learned to engage with others across lines of disagreement. Collecting such data is an important first step toward ensuring that civics – particularly learning how to disagree – is a priority in higher education. Are the critics of higher education correct to portray college as a place for indoctrination? Or are defenders right to argue that college is a rare example of an institution in which young adults encounter a spectrum of ideas? Without reliable data, there is no way to know.

As important as both K–12 and higher education are to the project of renewing the nation’s civic culture, they are not enough. A true renaissance of civic education must go beyond the classroom and meet Americans where they are. While there are myriad possibilities, the 250th anniversary of America’s independence is a civic education opportunity *par excellence*. *Our Common Purpose* calls for marking the nation’s semiquincentennial with conversations among Americans of all perspectives to “explore both their feelings about and hopes for this country.”²⁴ As noted in *Habits of Hearts and Minds*, it is a myth that conservatives are blind to the shortcomings of the United States, just as it is a myth that liberals ignore the nation’s successes.²⁵ Both need to hear those on the other side express their thoughts on what America has done right *and* wrong. These conversations will be most productive if done in a spirit of charity, recognizing that while reasonable people can disagree on the state of our union, they can find common ground in celebrating the ideals on which the nation was founded. Likewise, imagine a public service campaign – through multiple media channels – that encourages Americans to learn to disagree with one another. Such a campaign could even be bolstered by social gatherings, perhaps even with civic rituals, designed to foster a spirit of finding *unum* without ignoring the *pluribus*.²⁶ No doubt there are many other ways that creative people can promote the idea that, as a nation, we must learn to disagree agreeably.

None of this will be easy. Is it all quixotic? Perhaps, but a cure starts with a diagnosis. Hopefully, I have at least taken the first steps of identifying that the nation has a culture problem and suggesting that the solution lies in a new era of civic education for all.

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ENDNOTES

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- ³ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Habits of Heart and Mind: How to Fortify Civic Culture* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2024), 4, <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/publication/how-to-fortify-civic-culture-america/section/3>; emphasis added.
- ⁴ Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton University Press, 1963), 358.
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- ⁷ Diana Carole Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 144.
- ⁸ Mikael Persson, "Classroom Climate and Political Learning: Findings from a Swedish Panel Study and Comparative Data," *Political Psychology* 36 (5) (2015): 587–601; Lies Maurissen, Carolyn Barber, and Ellen Claes, "Classroom Discussions and Political Tolerance Towards Immigrants: The Importance of Mutual Respect and Responsiveness," *Acta Politica* 55 (2020): 242–266, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-018-0114-0>; Ryan T. Knowles and Jennice McCafferty-Wright, "Connecting an Open Classroom Climate to Social Movement Citizenship: A Study of 8th Graders in Europe Using IEA ICCS Data," *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 39 (2015): 255–269; Carolyn Barber, Sachiko Ogata Sweetwood, and Makini King, "Creating Classroom-Level Measures of Citizenship Education Climate," *Learning Environments Research* 18 (2) (2015): 197–216, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-015-9180-7>; David E. Campbell, "Voice in the Classroom: How an Open Classroom Climate Fosters Political Engagement Among Adolescents," *Political Behavior* 30 (4) (2008): 437–454; Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (Routledge, 2015); and Diana E. Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (Routledge, 2009).
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²² Matthew Levendusky, *Our Common Bonds: Using What Americans Share to Help Bridge the Partisan Divide* (University of Chicago Press, 2023).

²³ See Educating for American Democracy, <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org>.

²⁴ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 9.

²⁵ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Habits of Heart and Mind*, 12.

²⁶ For examples, see Citizen University, <https://citizenuniversity.us>.