

Disagreeing to Build: Civic Renewal in an Age of Polarization

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Responding to David Campbell's call to "learn to disagree," this essay argues that disagreement alone is insufficient for revitalizing American democracy – it must be paired with collaborative problem-solving. As polarization and AI disrupt trust and discourse, civic culture should shift from "winning" arguments to building solutions together, benefiting both democracy and the economy, since employers increasingly value the same skills of dialogue and teamwork on which democracy relies. Colleges, K–12 schools, workplaces, and communities all have roles to play in making this solution-oriented civic engagement universal rather than optional. Ultimately, the essay calls for a cultural shift toward "disagreeing to build, not to win."

David Campbell, in his contribution to this volume, rightly states that institutions alone cannot save democracy; we also need a strong civic culture cultivated among citizens themselves.¹ Learning how to disagree – constructively, respectfully, and productively – is central to that culture. In this context, Campbell defines civic education broadly to include not just the teaching of civic knowledge but also the development of the skills and dispositions of effective citizenship. His call to "learn to disagree" is timely and essential because a healthy democracy requires the ability to navigate conflict productively.

At the same time, we must refresh our civic norms to meet today's challenges. Political polarization, amplified by social media algorithms, has eroded Americans' baseline trust in institutions and in one another.² The rise of artificial intelligence is further disrupting how we work, learn, and discern truth, potentially deepening the divides in our society. In such a fractured environment, our uniquely human advantages are our abilities to build trust, exercise judgment, and collaborate across differences. These capacities undergird both a healthy democracy and a thriving economy.

Indeed, across the higher education, business, and community sectors, leaders are now calling for three essential civic skills as critical competencies for the future: having productive conversations, using credible information, and collaborating to solve problems. Strengthening civic culture is therefore not only a democratic imperative but also an economic one (a point to which I will return).

This essay advances a related but distinct claim: learning to disagree, while necessary, is insufficient on its own. In an age of intense polarization, disagreement must be paired with the ability to work together, to translate difference into shared problem-solving. Without working collaboratively toward solutions, disagreement risks exacerbating division rather than strengthening the country.

Campbell emphasizes “learning to disagree well,” and I fully agree with his characterization of the challenge: it’s difficult to get people to disagree openly because people don’t naturally seek differences among each other. To this challenge, I would add a second: people don’t naturally seek to work together with those with whom they disagree. Yet we must teach our citizens to do both. Disagreement by itself is not enough; it must be paired with the capacity for collaborative problem-solving.

Public life today is dominated by a debate culture that rewards scoring points, asserting certainty, and “winning” arguments, while devaluing dialogue and problem-solving. The goal of civic discourse should not be victory but progress. The central question must shift from “Who’s right?” to “What can we build together, given our differences?”

Such a shift would transform the purpose of disagreement. No longer a zero-sum duel, disagreement becomes raw material for creativity and joint action. A healthy civic culture would not avoid conflict; it would channel conflict toward shared solutions. Imagine if in classrooms, workplaces, and town halls, disagreements were approached with curiosity and a spirit of cocreation. Participants would ask, “Given that we see things differently, how might we work together on this issue?”

This ethos – *disagreeing to build* rather than *to win* – can turn conflict into an opportunity. It forces us to move beyond rhetoric and toward designing real solutions that draw on diverse perspectives. In the process, we also empower young people to exercise agency: they see that by engaging adversaries as partners in problem-solving they can make tangible improvements in their communities.

The skills needed for this collaborative civic culture are also increasingly prized in the modern workforce. Surveys show that over 80 percent of employers prioritize graduates’ abilities in teamwork, communication, and critical thinking.³ Business leaders understand that technical proficiency is not enough; they seek employees who can communicate effectively, think critically, work through disagreement, and collaborate in diverse teams.⁴ In other words, the civic virtues of open dialogue and cooperation have become “durable skills” for economic success.

This convergence does not mean that civic learning derives its value from employer demand. Rather, employer demand reveals that the skills democracy requires – like judgment, cooperation, and trust-building – are also indispensable to business.

As a result, civic education is no longer a niche concern for democracy advocates. Teaching students to engage civilly across differences and evaluate information critically makes them not only better citizens but more-effective employees. Conversely, companies that foster a respectful, trust-rich culture – in which colleagues can debate ideas without fear – benefit from greater innovation and organizational health.⁵ Civic development and workforce development are two sides of the same coin.

In the age of automation and AI, human judgment, empathy, and collaboration are high-value assets that education can cultivate. By investing in these civic skills, we are simultaneously future-proofing our democracy and our economy.

Colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to develop these skills at scale. Campuses bring together young people from many backgrounds and give them space to engage with unfamiliar ideas. And, as Campbell points out, students seem more likely than the general population to have a conversation with someone who holds a different view from their own. However, up to now, meaningful exposure to disagreement on campus often happens only for those who *opt in* – for example, by joining debate clubs or taking certain courses. If learning to disagree is essential to democratic life, then engagement across difference must be a universal feature of the college experience, not an elective.

Encouragingly, many campus leaders are leaning into this role. Over one hundred college presidents have joined a coalition called College Presidents for Civic Preparedness to advance civil discourse and civic engagement campuswide. In a recent survey of these presidents, 85 percent reported increasing their investment in civic learning initiatives over the past year, and those that invested more saw measurable improvements in campus climate for free expression and dialogue.⁶

What would it look like if colleges truly embraced “learning to disagree” as a core educational outcome? We would see more first-year seminars in which students practice respectful debate on contentious issues. We would see faculty in all disciplines – from engineering to literature to biology – embedding discussions of ethical or societal dilemmas into their classes, routinely prompting students to exercise civil discourse skills alongside academic inquiry. Some institutions are even considering a civic capstone or portfolio, wherein students must demonstrate their ability to engage across differences and solve problems collaboratively before graduating.

By making such experiences universal, colleges would not only produce civically skilled graduates but also help restore public trust in higher education. They could answer the ROI (return on investment) question by showing that a college education yields both career-ready and civically responsible individuals. In short, treating civic learning as fundamental to the college mission benefits democracy and bolsters higher education’s value proposition.

A refreshed civic culture must also elevate the agency of young people. Rather than viewing youth merely as students to be taught, we should engage them as cocreators of civic life. Across the country, there are inspiring examples of Generation Z stepping up to lead on issues they care about. For instance, the Institute for Citizens & Scholars recently supported a cohort of five hundred Carnegie Young Leaders: teams of teenagers and young adults who are designing and implementing local solutions to community challenges.⁷ These young civic entrepreneurs are tackling problems from misinformation and mental health to climate resilience and neighborhood safety. They are not waiting passively for civic knowledge to be handed down to them; they are actively building civic muscle through practice.

One key insight from these youth initiatives is that disagreement is easier when paired with action. Many of these Gen Z leaders create projects that bring together peers of different viewpoints to work on a tangible goal. For example, by focusing on improving a local park or starting a dialogue program at their school, they provide a common purpose that helps participants navigate ideological differences. One youth team in Alabama converted a vacant lot into a community garden, bringing together diverse neighbors to address a local need. In the process, participants from different backgrounds inevitably had to debate ideas and make joint decisions, but because they were working toward a shared goal, those disagreements could stay constructive.

The lesson for civic educators is clear: treat young people not just as civics pupils but as problem-solvers with real responsibilities. When youth are given the tools, trust, and opportunities to lead, they often prove adept at inviting disagreement and collaboration in service of their goals. We should invest more in youth-led civic programs, school based or community based, that let young people practice democracy by *doing*.

Schools and colleges alone cannot transform civic culture, as Campbell would agree. We need an ecosystem approach in which workplaces, community organizations, and public institutions all reinforce the norms of civil discourse and common purpose. Consider the workplace: employers could train and encourage staff to engage in constructive debate, give and receive feedback, and collaborate across teams.

Similarly, local communities can create more venues for people to connect across divides. Public libraries, for instance, have hosted community dialogues on issues like public health and policing, giving residents a chance to hear different perspectives in a neutral setting. City governments and nonprofits can partner on deliberative forums or volunteer projects that unite people from different walks of life around local problems.

Such efforts can be linked and amplified. If a young person practices civil discourse in a college seminar and then encounters similar norms in their job onboarding and again at a town hall meeting, the norms are reinforced.

Over time, this ecosystem can shift expectations of behavior. Being a good teammate at work, an active listener in community meetings, and a constructive participant in online discussions are all manifestations of the same underlying civic competence. Fostering that competence – everywhere people live and interact – is how we refresh our civic culture at scale.

Despite today’s polarized climate, we should reject the cynical narrative that Americans are hopelessly divided. Yes, there are deep challenges, but as a society we are capable of learning and renewal. Campbell rightly centers Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett’s 2020 book *The Upswing*, which documents how the United States moved from an era of extreme individualism to one of broad social solidarity in the early twentieth century – an “I” to “We” upswing.⁸ It provides hope that the arc can bend back toward “We” in our time.

To get there, we must reframe civic education and civic life around trust and collaboration. In an era of AI and rampant mistrust, building trust is the supreme civic skill, and it is built by practicing disagreement and cooperation time and again. This is the human advantage that can never be automated or outsourced: our ability to form bonds of understanding and reciprocity across differences.⁹

A broad call to action is in order.

- *To K–12 educators*: Bring this more comprehensive conception of civic training into your classrooms and build skills and dispositions no matter the subject that you teach.
- *To higher education leaders and faculty*: Make civic learning and discourse a campus-wide priority, on par with job preparation, so every student graduates having engaged seriously with those who think differently.
- *To policymakers and philanthropists*: Support the expansion of civic-learning opportunities – such as debate-across-difference programs, service year initiatives, and community dialogue forums – to reach all youth, not just a select few.
- *To all of us as citizens*: Model “disagreeing to build, not to win” in our daily lives. The examples we set in our classrooms, workplaces, and Facebook feeds teach the next generation how to handle disagreement.

Cultural change does not happen by accident. It happens when people and institutions prioritize and reward trust-building and collaborative problem-solving. If we center these skills across civic life, the next chapter of America’s story could well be a new, more durable “We.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ David E. Campbell, "Learning to Disagree: Why We Need a Refresh of Our Civic Culture," *Daedalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 178–188, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/learning-disagree-why-we-need-refresh-our-civic-culture>.
- ² Laura Silver, Scott Keeter, Stephanie Kramer, et al., "Americans' Trust in One Another," Pew Research Center, May 8, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2025/05/08/americans-trust-in-one-another>.
- ³ National Association of Colleges and Employers, *Job Outlook 2023* (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2022).
- ⁴ David J. Bobb, "Young Employees Need Durable Skills: Civics May Be the Answer," *Illinois Business Journal*, August 14, 2025, <https://www.ibjonline.com/2025/08/14/op-ed-young-employees-need-durable-skills-civics-may-be-the-answer>.
- ⁵ Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* (John Wiley & Sons, 2019).
- ⁶ Institute for Citizens & Scholars, "College Presidents Sound Off: Civic Development Is Taking Center Stage on Campus," December 3, 2025, <https://collegepresidents.org/insight/college-presidents-sound-off-civic-development-is-taking-center-stage-on-campus>.
- ⁷ Institute for Citizens & Scholars, "500 Gen Zers Named 2025 Carnegie Young Leaders," August 13, 2025, <https://cands.org/500-gen-zers-named-2025-carnegie-young-leaders>.
- ⁸ Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Simon & Schuster, 2020).
- ⁹ Silver, Keeter, Kramer, et al., "Americans' Trust in One Another."