The Role of Political Science and Political Scientists in Civic Education

By James W. Ceaser

An essay for the series “The Professions and Civic Culture”
The Role of Political Science and Political Scientists in Civic Education

By James W. Ceaser

An essay for the series
“The Professions and Civic Culture”

August 2013
This essay is part of a series exploring the role of professions in a modern, liberal democratic society and their effect on the civic culture of the nation. The other papers include:

• Education for Liberty? The Shortcomings of Contemporary Civic Education Theories, Rita Koganzon
• Economists and Res Publica: The Virtues and Limits of Economic Analysis, Steven E. Rboads
• Music and Civic Life in America, David Tucker and Nathan Tucker
• The Literary Profession and Civic Culture, Paul A. Cantor
• The Future of Journalism and Citizenship, Christopher Caldwell

To read the other papers in this series, or for more information about AEI’s Program on American Citizenship, visit www.citizenship-aei.org.
The Role of Political Science and Political Scientists in Civic Education
By James W. Ceaser

Civic education in America today is widely said to be in trouble. Whether the concern is primary and secondary education (K–12), where national civics tests show that only a quarter of 12th graders score at a level considered proficient; higher education, where requirements in core American history and government courses are being rapidly abandoned; or adult education for immigrants, where communities and businesses have fallen woefully short in providing English language and civics instruction, all signs point to a failure in imparting the basic knowledge that contributes to good citizenship.¹

We cannot say for sure if things have gotten worse than they were in the past, but leaders and educators today are certainly worried. As former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, now active in promoting civic education, recently noted, “We have a terrible problem on our hands.”²

Although not alone in expressing alarm, members of one profession can perhaps lay special claim to a proprietary interest in this problem: political scientists. Practitioners of political science in ancient Greece first identified the concept of civic education, and political scientists to this day continue to produce some of the most significant commentary and scholarship on the subject.

The Discipline of Political Science

Political science is the oldest of the social sciences, dating back to classical Greek philosophy, in particular to Plato and Aristotle, who launched the first investigations into the full range of political phenomena. The practical subject matter of political science for Aristotle has aptly been characterized as “knowledge of the varieties of regimes and of the things that create, support, preserve and destroy them.”³ For the classical thinkers, this empirical focus went together with a more speculative and normative inquiry, known as political philosophy, that considered the nature of political things and the standards for judging better and worse regimes.

Citing these facts about the origin of political science is of more than an antiquarian interest. It is a reminder that a continuing body of thought in the West has helped some to analyze and understand political affairs and influenced how people conceive of the world of politics. Much of the terminology used in analyzing politics has been either defined or refined by political science, and the discipline has helped to focus inquiry on the purposes and ends of political life.

Today, most in America probably associate political science with the organized profession found in departments in universities and colleges. But long before these institutional embodiments, many notable thinkers, such as Montesquieu, David Hume, and Alexis de Tocqueville, were consciously adapting, revising, and developing the science of politics.

No nation owes more to political science than does the United States. Some of the nation’s most influential founders took their intellectual bearings from the discipline. James Madison and Alexander Hamilton refer explicitly to “political science” or “the science of politics” in The Federalist, while John Adams celebrated “the divine science of politics.”⁴ These men relied extensively on political science in crafting America’s form of government, and all of them are now counted as major contributors to the development of the discipline.

By the same token, political science is deeply indebted to America for both its prestige and influence.
As the early American historian David Ramsay observed, the United States had placed the “science of politics on a footing with other sciences, by opening it to improvements by experience, and the discoveries of the future.”

Political science has had a special relationship with civic education. The connection between them flows almost directly from Aristotle’s definition of political science. In enumerating the factors that “support and preserve regimes,” Aristotle immediately singled out education: “the greatest of all things that have been mentioned with a view to making regimes lasting—though it is now slighted by all—is education relative to the regime.” Political science was thereby invited to consider the proper kind of education for each regime type, a task that involved designing the ends or objectives of an educational program, for whom it was intended, and how and at what stages of an individual’s development its teachings would be presented. Aristotle began to carry out this task in The Politics, and others later took up parts of the assignment, including Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Some of America’s founders, including Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Rush, also added noteworthy reflections, although as acting statesmen they practiced “applied” political science, focusing on the kind of civic education appropriate to the new American republic.

No nation owes more to political science than does the United States.

To avoid getting twisted in words, a clarification is needed at the outset. The discipline of political science studies the properties and objectives of civic education. It does not follow, however, that political science itself is part of the content of civic education (or, if it is, that it should be included at every level of instruction). The place of political science within civic education is therefore a matter to be investigated.

This clarification is needed because in higher education in America today courses on government and politics are usually offered under the label of political science. Many from outside the universities expect that the instructors in certain of these courses, in particular an introductory course in American government, consciously consider that part of their purpose is to provide civic education. Yet many of those who teach these courses do not share this assumption, and some would reject the notion that political science should play any role in this task.

Political science was developed in the Greek city-state. Aristotle was well aware of other forms of political or social organization, such as the tribe or the empire, but he focused on the city-state, which was the form his fellow Greeks knew best and which he thought promoted the highest possibilities of both self-rule and just rule. His most extended treatment of civic education was on regimes having a republican element, where a substantial number of citizens actively participated.

Civic education in republican regimes was a crucial aid to preparing people for citizenship. Montesquieu, whose systematic treatment built on Aristotle’s analysis, stated this point best: “It is in republican government that the full power of education is needed.” “Need” notwithstanding, most republican regimes failed to attend adequately to the matter, which was a source of their weakness. Sparta was the great exception, and thinkers from Plutarch to Rousseau celebrated it for its comprehensive education plan. Aristotle also admired the attention Sparta gave to education, though he believed its system needed certain corrections.

Other regime types have different goals for education. In tyrannies or despoticisms, for example, civic education, as described by Montesquieu, looks to be almost a “noneducation” that aims at inculcating fear and discouraging citizens from involvement in political affairs. Modern totalitarian systems have had a Janus-faced approach to civic education, acting like despoticisms by teaching obedience to the state while often promoting intense ideological indoctrination.

As a result of the analysis of classical political science, the “model” of civic education came to be associated with the idea of republican government. The connection between civic education and republicanism was strengthened when those who founded modern liberal democracies, beginning with the founders of the United States, often chose to designate them as “republics.”

Despite some similarities between ancient and modern republics, the two are obviously distinct regimes. And even though this was well known, the use of the common name “republic” has had an effect. Thinkers who sought to revive the concept of civic education for modern
republics were able, when they wished, to invoke themes of ancient republicanism to bolster an argument. This influence also operated unconsciously, as the republican model structured the categories of thought about civic education. The term “civic education” is almost synonymous with republican civic education.

Given the influence of Greek political science on civic education, it is important to summarize that science’s general themes, restating some of the points already noted:

- Education is a key factor in maintaining a regime.
- Republican government in the city-state entails a huge commitment of the citizen to the public. Although the civic part of education is not the whole of education—there is still a place, obviously, for music or the liberal arts, not to mention philosophy—civic education takes up much of the “space” of the educational experience. Its goal is the inculcation of civic virtue, meaning the individual’s devotion to the public good over his private good. This goal requires reaching every part of the individual’s character and intellect. Civic education is all-consuming. As Montesquieu explained, “Political virtue is a renunciation of oneself, which is always a very painful thing.”
- Civic education is relative to the regime. Civic education is therefore not a pure normative concept. Effective civic education for a bad regime can hardly be considered a good thing, not just because it may be supporting a bad system, but also because it may be forming an inferior human being. Likewise, proper civic education for a good regime might not be the best for producing the highest human type—the philosopher whose bent is to question continually even a good regime’s laws, opinions, and pieties.
- Civic education relative to the regime is education that functions to maintain the system. It is not necessarily the education that comes most naturally to those formed in that system. As Aristotle remarked, “To be educated relative to the regime is not to do the things that oligarchs or those who want democracy enjoy, but rather the things by which the former will be able to run an oligarchy and the latter to have a regime run democratically.” This statement contains a major theme of classical political science. Political systems are never in perfect equilibrium; they generate effects harmful to their preservation and well-being—hence the need for continual adjustment and correction from some source or perspective from outside the regime. Political science supplies the knowledge for making such corrections.

- Civic education is so essential to the preservation of a republican regime that it should not be left to chance. Civic education should follow a rational and comprehensive plan. Especially in republics, it should be taken over by the state and subjected to public superintendence. In Aristotle’s words: “Since there is a single end for the city as a whole, it is evident that education must necessarily be one and the same for all, and that the superintendence of it should be common and not on a private basis.” The “civic” dimension is identified with public control.

The Profession of Political Science

The second term to characterize is the profession of political science. A substantial literature now exists on professions, their development, and the roles that major professional associations play in modern society. The Dictionary of Social Sciences summarizes the origin of modern professions: “In the nineteenth century professions and professional organizations emerged from a variety of traditionally learned occupations—generally those that required substantial theoretical knowledge and training, such as medicine, law, and science.”

Professions today have expanded beyond the confined circle of the learned occupations to include such new occupations as real estate and hairdressing. This development may owe something to status concerns of the new professionals, but it is also a consequence of the growing legal requirements of the modern state, such as occupational licensing laws, that necessitate the creation of professional associations. The “learned occupations” nevertheless still represent a kind of model for a profession. Law and medicine, which stretch far back into history, were in many places legally incorporated entities known to have certain responsibilities and that enjoyed certain privileges.
The study of professions is part of the analysis of “civil society,” the name given to the vast realm of activity that takes place between the state and the individual. This realm was of less consequence in the ancient city-state, where the main actors were the state, the individual, and the family. With the greater size and complexity of modern political units, and with the recognition, at least in some places, of the inadvisability or futility of the state controlling all aspects of life, a variety of new actors and entities developed.

Where the individual in modern times was often weak, associations could be strong. They could play an important role in governing modern society.

The professions are an important instance of these. Two of the major political thinkers of the 19th century, Georg W. F. Hegel and Alexis de Tocqueville, brought the study of civil society systematically under the purview of political science, seeking to understand how this realm operated and how its elements could be arranged to sustain constitutional government. Their analysis focused on the role of “corporations” (Hegel) or “associations” (Tocqueville), collective bodies that represented different traditions, interests, and values. Where the individual in modern times was often weak, associations could be strong. They could play an important role in governing modern society. The influence of any particular association would vary not only with such factors as the size of its membership and its resources, but also with its ethical relationship to the public. A profession having a reputation for wisdom and expertise, as lawyers had at the time Tocqueville famously described them in Democracy in America, would have the moral authority to exert a greater degree of influence.

Entities widely known today as professions do not, obviously, possess in equal measure all of the relevant and distinguishing attributes. Some have a longer history, more developed norms, and a greater sense of esprit de corps than others. Medicine seems to be more of a genuine profession than, say, political science. While physicians still swear the Hippocratic Oath, no Aristotelian oath or anything similar is requisite to becoming a political scientist. Nor do political scientists, in contrast to the members of many other professions, need to meet a legal qualification or acquire official certification.

Still, political science today seems to have many of the elements to warrant the status of profession. The informal threshold for membership is met by an individual who: (a) is credentialed by an advanced degree (master’s or PhD) in political science or its equivalent; (b) is employed in an institution because of an expertise in political science, the modal case being as a teacher or researcher in a college or university in a department of political science; or (c) is a member of the American Political Science Association (APSA) or a similar professional organization or regards these associations as important to the profession.

It is generally accepted that the father of academic political science was Francis Lieber and that the beginning of the creation of a profession dates from his arrival to the Columbia University faculty in 1856. There were soon departments formed at Cornell University and the University of Michigan, but the most influential were at Johns Hopkins University and Columbia, where there were recognized professors of political science and advanced degrees were first granted. Among the earliest and most notable individuals to receive a PhD in political science (and history) was Woodrow Wilson, who earned his degree from John Hopkins in 1885. The Academy of Political Science, one of the first organizations, was begun at Columbia in 1880, and its journal, Political Science Quarterly, has been published continually since 1886.

The real birth of a professional sense occurred among the second generation of academic political scientists, who came to prominence in the 1880s. During these early years, political scientists did not have a major professional association with its own annual professional meeting. Political scientists usually joined the large and prestigious American Historical Association (AHA), formed in 1884. Part of the closeness of the relationship between the two disciplines at the time can be attributed to the fact that many political scientists, like John Burgess and Woodrow Wilson, espoused a historical-developmental approach to political science.

By 1903, political scientists finally broke off to form a separate association, APSA, although for the next 15
years the group held most of its meetings in conjunction with the AHA meeting. By the 1920s, the spirit of the two disciplines began to grow apart, as political science embarked on new directions, identifying more closely with the social sciences. Today, most political scientists might feel some unease if they knew that they were the stepchildren of the discipline of history. Fortunately, APSA has grown to be a large and powerful professional association, with a permanent residence in Washington, DC, and a professional staff, including a lobbyist on retainer. According to its official website, APSA boasts a membership of “over 15,000,” while AHA claims “nearly 14,000 members.”

Professional academic associations, except when captured by ideological crusaders, exist primarily to promote their discipline and the interests of their membership. Yet what political science is has been contested since at least the 1950s. Although political scientists are members of the same profession, they have been said to “sit at separate tables.” Most in the profession would reject the Aristotelian conception, organized around the substantive theme of regimes and assessments of who should rule or the justice of forms of rule, in favor of a more abstract designation focusing on a set of interactions, such as “power relations” between interest groups or bureaucratic players—or, simply, as one of the founders of modern American political science might say, of “who gets what, why, when, and how.”

The current official definition of political science from the American Political Science Association deliberately casts a wide net while avoiding giving undue offense (or providing any focus): “Political science is the study of governments, public policies and political processes, systems, and political behavior.” Under the newer definitions, civic education no longer occupies the central place that it did under the Aristotelian conception. The subject is of relatively minor interest in political science today, even allowing for a recovery of some its questions and concerns within the modern subfield known as “political socialization.”

Nevertheless, whether because of a legacy of influence from classical political science or, more likely, because of obligations that a professional association feels it owes to society, both the Academy of Political Science and APSA have officially recognized a special responsibility for promoting civic education. In the case of the older Academy, it pledges to help “educate members of the general public so that they become better informed participants in the democratic process.” In the case of APSA, included on its list of 10 core objectives, is “preparing citizens to be effective citizens and political participants.” APSA, as we shall see, has followed up on this commitment with a number of initiatives over the years to promote civic education.

Civic Education

The last term to define is civic education, meaning here the “applied” variant of civic education in America. Civic education can be conceived in a broader or narrower sense. In the broader sense, it refers to efforts to (a) create a connection to, a familiarity with, and an appreciation of America’s political tradition and political system and (b) impart and encourage habits, mores, skills, and knowledge that preserve and maintain that system. The narrower sense refers to instruction intended to (a) create a connection to, a familiarity with, and an appreciation of America’s political tradition and political system and (b) impart knowledge of the political-economic system and its underlying principles and mechanisms of operation, as well as certain skills of citizenship.

As the repetition of wording indicates, these two definitions are complementary. The narrower version fits within the broader one; it is distinguished by only its focus on schooling and curricular matters and thus to a larger extent on the cognitive aspects of education. Which definition is preferred depends on how one wants to delimit the field of inquiry for policymaking purposes. I will outline some of the attributes of each definition in the context of a treatment of different dimensions of civic education.

Character Formation and Cognitive Learning.

The broader definition of civic education puts more emphasis on the elements of character that support the political system. This emphasis is in line with the classical thinkers’ stress on cultivating “virtue” to maintain a republic.

Educators in America, especially early in the nation’s history, often mentioned general character qualities linked to preserving the regime. These include responsibility and honesty, which are needed to create civic trust and
enable citizens to exercise their liberties effectively, and self-discipline and industriousness, which are so necessary in a free-enterprise system. In contemporary educational thinking, although these general character qualities are regarded as good things, they are not generally categorized as civic qualities directly linked to the maintenance of the political system and thus to civic education. Two exceptions reflect recent concerns: tolerance and an ethic of service, which many educators today place squarely within the scope of civic education.

The question of inculcating character attributes has become embroiled over the years in debates about public versus private schools. Champions of the public (or “common”) schools have maintained that public schools represent the genuine republican tradition and are thus best suited to promoting civic education. This argument draws on the linguistic accident that equates “public-run” with “civic.” Private schools, in this view, are sometimes depicted as exclusive and thus unconcerned with the civic.

Although there may be something to the idea that public education enjoys an advantage in developing a student’s capacity to mix and get along with students from diverse backgrounds, when it comes to inculcating character attributes related to civic mindedness, private schools may do just as well as or better than public schools. Private schools can emphasize the cultivation of some character qualities beyond what is possible in public schools, given some of the legal restraints under which public schools operate and their need to serve a diverse population. There are private schools, for example, that promote military virtues (for example, military academies), strong community service (for example, Friends schools), and an ethic of morality and responsibility (for example, many religious schools). Private schools, of course, vary in the character attributes they emphasize, and they can on occasion test the limits of what is genuinely civic. But pluralism in the cultivation of civic attributes is arguably an asset to the nation.

Developing character attributes is obviously crucial to civic education. Yet their very importance, along with the challenge of teaching character that is especially present in public schools, is a reason to focus on the narrower definition of civic education, for otherwise the cognitive dimension of civic education might be overlooked. Cognitive aspects of civic education can more readily be defined and targeted in a curricular program than character attributes, and schools, again especially public schools, may be on firmer ground in the function of transmitting knowledge.

There are two other reasons why the transmission of civic knowledge is especially important in the case of the American regime. The first is that the American system, unlike most other regimes, is grounded in an explicit theory or set of principles. The doctrine—oddly, sometimes called the “creed”—of natural rights is not a matter of character, but something to be understood and learned. As John Adams emphasized, “Children should be educated and instructed in the principles of freedom.” This theory also helps forge unity among a population consisting of people of different races and different religious beliefs, making them all, in Lincoln’s words, the “blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh” of one another.

The second reason is that America’s form of government was designed to be complex. It is an intricate mechanism, with separated powers, checks and balances, and a division of powers among different levels of government. As Benjamin Rush maintained, “All governments are safe and free in proportion as they are compounded in a certain degree, and on the contrary . . . all governments are dangerous and tyrannical in proportion as they approach simplicity.”

Understanding the basics of how government works—an important element of the subject sometimes called “civics”—requires knowledge and study of the Constitution and the workings of the national, state, and local governments. Alexis de Tocqueville once commented on the complexity in civic knowledge that American citizens had to master:

Everything is conventional and artificial in such a government [i.e., a federal system] and it can be suitable only for a people long habituated to directing
its affairs by itself, and in which political science has descended to the last ranks of society. I never admired the good sense and the practical intelligence of the Americans more than in the manner by which they escape the innumerable difficulties to which their federal constitution gives rise. 19

A few other aspects of the narrower definition of civic education need further elaboration.

Cognitive learning and character education do not exist in airtight compartments. Knowledge can affect basic dispositions. Thus, instruction in “the principles of freedom” can encourage tolerance by supplying the intellectual reasons for acting in certain ways, and knowledge of how government operates can lead to greater appreciation for the regime, promoting more citizen participation. This point bears stressing today because of a widespread view that downplays the cognitive dimension of civic education in favor of programs that emphasize building up positive democratic attitudes.

Schooling can teach about content, including America’s animating principles, its traditions, and the mechanisms of the operation of government. Under some theories, it should also teach certain competencies and skills in civic participation. In practice, this has meant in-school practicing of democratic interactions among students and programs for student involvement in social or political activities or projects—what educators refer to as “experiential” or “service” learning, an idea that lies between an emphasis on character and an emphasis on cognition. By this theory, one learns best by doing, and this learning should take place within the schools. To what degree schools can carry out this charge, and at what level this kind of learning becomes appropriate, are questions that educators continue to debate. There is also the issue of whether service learning becomes so much the preoccupation of civic education that it begins to crowd out cognitive learning.

Liberal democratic theory might in principle promote the idea of the good citizen as one who either (a) while fulfilling his or her normal obligations (voting, jury duty, and so forth), is largely a private person, or (b) actively and regularly participates in civic affairs as a doer. Both notions have roots in the principles of the regime, with the former being associated more with the liberal tradition and the latter more with the republican tradition. Civic education programs in America generally favor the active or participatory model, though, as just noted, this preference does not settle the question of how much responsibility schools should assume for teaching the competencies of participating and involvement in their formal curricula.

The character of cognitive civic education will naturally vary according to the age of the students and the kind of educational institution offering the programs. Pupils in elementary school learn in different ways than high school students, who in turn learn differently than college students or adults, often immigrants, attending civic education courses. In particular, what fosters appreciation of the political system will differ by age. No one expects an elementary school teacher to present the ideas of the Declaration of Independence and those of the Communist Manifesto and ask students to choose between them. By contrast, college-level courses in a liberal arts setting might follow the path of opening everything to question and criticism. Impartial investigation may prove to be the best way—perhaps the only way—to promote deeper attachment. The end of civic education may be achieved, at least in many cases, without directly pursuing it. As the 19th century historian Richard Hildreth argued in regard to instruction on the American founding, what “is due to our fathers and ourselves, [and] due to truth and philosophy,” is to present the past in America “unbedaubed by patriotic rouge. . . . The best apology is to tell the story exactly as it was.” 20

Some today seek to discredit civic education by identifying it with the kind of education that takes place in the early years of schooling, when the element of partiality is at its zenith. This line of argument is often heard today on college campuses, where civic education is attacked as a puerile and conservative exercise in indoctrination, something completely at odds with a liberal education. Civic education, it is said, is “closed,” beginning with the aim of preserving the regime, while higher education is supposed to be “open,” having the purpose of pursuing the truth. This argument has created an image problem for the concept of civic education, raising doubts about its appropriateness at higher levels of education.

Many who invoke the lofty rhetoric of higher education, however, do so in bad faith. Their real aim is not an
open education, but a different form of political education that promotes a different kind of political order. They are opposed to civic education because it seeks to preserve the existing regime.

For the few who are genuinely concerned about the alleged tension between civic education and liberal education, some perspective is in order. Higher education in America today, which includes community colleges and a wide range of four-year colleges and universities, often serves purposes other than offering a pure liberal arts education. In many of these cases, including a civic objective is entirely reasonable; the objective is to make up for what students should have learned in high schools. In the case of the liberal arts institutions, the purpose of civic education can be achieved through courses consistent with the principles of the liberal arts. Such courses will, of course, be different than regular civic education. They cannot have a preordained goal. But the end result of the study of political science and history as applied to the American case may result in a greater appreciation for the system under which they live.

**Experience and Schooling.** The broader definition of civic education recognizes that a great deal of civic learning takes place outside the confines of schooling and formal instruction and beyond the school-age years. Civic learning is a lifelong venture. For many, the most important instruction in civic affairs comes from life experiences—it might be military service, activity in civic associations, or participation in political life. As Alexis de Tocqueville stressed in *Democracy in America*, people often learn about politics by practicing it.

To increase “republican” skill levels, Tocqueville emphasized activities in civic associations like clubs and churches, where citizens could acquire the confidence and techniques that might transfer to the political realm. Especially important were vibrant local governments with opportunities for significant citizen input, which would be the arenas for perfecting citizenship skills: “The institutions of the township are to freedom what primary schools are to knowledge; they put it within reach of the people; they make them taste its peaceful employ; and habituate them to making use of it.”21

Even when it comes to cognitive learning, much civic education takes place outside of schools. Museums, public monuments, libraries, and historical societies all engage in substantive civic education. They are visited not just by schoolchildren on field trips but also by millions of persons interested in learning more about the nation, its principles, and its traditions. Numerous Internet projects, some government-sponsored, offer instructional materials about America. The National Archive currently makes all the books that it helps to sponsor, including the papers of important political figures, online and accessible to the public. Finally, music, literature, television, and film provide civic education. The recent movie *Lincoln*, a historical dramatization viewed by millions, is an example.

The importance of these sources of civic learning is clear, as evidenced by the amount of intellectual commentary devoted to them. Their significance is also testified to by the practices of totalitarian regimes, which, to promote their own version of civic education, go well beyond control of school curricula either to assume full management of all these other outlets or to closely monitor them, using...
censorship, spying, and intimidation to stifle opposition and ensure support.

In liberal democratic systems, where the principle of liberty exists, activity in these areas largely operates free of direct government superintendence. Educators may remind actors in the cultural realm of their obligation to promote civic education, but it is often in vain. Artists and entertainers may feel no responsibility to assist, preferring instead to maximize pecuniary rewards or pursue purely artistic goals. Sometimes their message will indeed be political, but not with the aim of fostering appreciation for the political system. There is, as we shall see, a huge difference between civic education and “political education.”

No one, then, disputes the importance of civic learning that takes place beyond the schools. But, once again, the diffuseness and unsystematic character of this learning process, where so little may be under the supervision of those concerned with civic education, is a reason to adopt the narrower definition, which allows for a focus on a curriculum of study. Schooling, whether or not it is the primary vehicle of civic education, supplies a core of basic knowledge that most citizens would be unlikely to acquire elsewhere. This core consists in the primary elements of American history, the basics of “civics” (or how the political system operates), and an introduction to the fundamental principles of free government. Background in these areas will enable people to better take advantage of the many nonschool sources of civic education.

Schooling also has the advantage of being compulsory. K–12 content is under the superintendence of school boards or state governments, which can implement a coherent and comprehensive plan for civic education and test students. In higher education, there is less external or public control, although some state governments still impose civic education requirements for their public universities. Still, most universities are sensitive to debates about civic education and to questions of how well higher education is meeting its obligations in this area.

Use of the narrower definition does not mean that civic education is limited to courses found under the headings of civics and history. These subjects are the primary vehicles of civic education, but schools that take the concept seriously look for other ways to promote civic learning. Courses in music, art, and literature can provide additional opportunities to introduce civic education. Recently, for example, three prominent scholars, Amy Kass, Leon Kass, and Diana Schaub, assembled a collection of readings, mostly short stories, that could be used for this purpose in high schools or universities: What So Proudly We Hail: The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song.

Literature, according to these scholars, offers one of the best means for investigating the character and principles of American life. It does so in a way that promotes deeper reflection rather than anything that resembles indoctrination and provides another example of how advanced civic education can be compatible with a liberal arts approach.

**Disputes over Civic Education.** The character of civic education in America has never been free of controversy, but the level of disagreement over the past two decades seems to have reached new heights. Debates about civic education have become a battleground for conflicting views on the value of tradition, the meaning of diversity, and the place of the nation in the modern world.

The two definitions of civic education I have offered here focus on its purposes. Neither specified the content of how these purposes would be achieved, which is a task that far exceeds the power of a definition. Questions such as how many hours of instruction should be devoted to the study of the thought of the Founding Fathers versus reflection on the experiences of different immigrant groups are matters that need to be worked out in some kind of decision-making process. Differences of opinion will be inevitable and ongoing, and the hope is that they will be resolved reasonably, with people putting long-term educational benefit above the temporary pull of issues of the day and of partisanship. But as heated as certain disputes become, as long as the objective is to preserve the regime, the arguments fall within the ambit of civic education.

Quite different is the position taken by those who dismiss or reject civic education. Many today attack existing civic education programs not because they wish to reform them to better serve the purposes of preserving the regime, but because they have some other kind of objective. In one case, some are so consumed with a current grand cause—it could be saving the environment or reducing inequality—that they would like “civic education” to serve the goal of their movement. Genuine civic education, treating the principles of the regime and the operations of the system, is forgotten or set aside to promote this higher political cause.
The other and more serious case of opposition comes from those who seek a change in the existing political system. What they propose is education not to preserve the existing regime, but to undermine and replace it. Very often, they pursue this objective not by openly opposing civic education, but, for strategic reasons, by keeping the name while seeking to gain control of this area of instruction to promote their alternative. Where infiltration and colonization of civic education prove unhelpful or impossible, the preferred tactic may instead be to attack the concept of civic education itself so as to discredit it. It is not the name that counts, but the substance or goal.

Accordingly, an important distinction can be drawn between noncivic political education and civic education. The term “political education,” as used here, refers to an educational program designed to undermine the existing regime and change it; its aim is transformation. Civic education is a program of education designed to preserve the existing regime; its aim is transmission.

To repeat, those pursuing programs of political education will often deliberately blur this distinction to make inroads among people who are dissatisfied with the character of civic education and seeking reform. Whatever words the advocates of “political education” employ, however, their objective is regime change. The educational model they have in mind is to win control of the educational subsystem of society, which begins by persuading intellectual elites and those in higher education of the desirability of change. Those in well-placed and prestigious positions then use their influence over time to train students and win over educators, with the result of eventually changing the messages in the textbooks and the content of the curricula.

There have been three major projects of political education in the United States over the past century. The first derived from a strand of the Progressive movement. For some Progressives, the plan was to jettison the Constitution, which they thought fragmented political power and left government incapable of managing a modern industrial society, and to discredit the doctrine of natural rights, which they believed provided undue protection for private property and the wealthy. To achieve their goal of regime change, polemists and historians sought to diminish the founders’ reputation, depicting them as self-interested individuals who had designed a new government to protect the privileges of the wealthy class to which they belonged. The program of political education the Progressives developed enjoyed considerable success, working its way from the lecture halls of universities down to many of the textbooks used in classroom instruction in high schools throughout the nation. Civic education was infiltrated and altered to reflect the Progressives’ program.

The second project comes from certain elements within the general movement known as “multiculturalism,” which came into prominence in the 1980s and 1990s. Parts of this movement remained within the sphere of civic education, seeking to improve it by expanding the treatment of the experiences and contributions of minority groups in the formation and development of America. Other parts of this movement, however, have promoted a program of political education designed to change the regime.

Under this understanding of multiculturalism, the formal, individualistic theory of natural rights in fact underwrites the deeper reality of a division between a dominant group of white European males (the “Hegemon”) and the subaltern and exploited groups of African Americans, Hispanics, women, and homosexuals (the “Other”). Nothing less than a reconstitution of the political order, in which the rights and claims of exploited groups and their cultures are recognized as group rights, could create the good society. Proponents of this view have in many instances followed the strategy of seeking to capture civic education curricula to have it serve this end of transformation. In other instances, especially at the university level, they have built parallel programs of “studies” like women’s studies, postcolonial studies, and queer studies, while discrediting civic education.

The third project of political education is the movement for cosmopolitanism and global citizenship. According to the most advanced elements of this movement, a strong attachment to the nation-state is an anachronism that stands in the way of the progressive evolution of a world community. People should begin to think of themselves first and foremost as citizens of this global community, not as citizens of a parochial nation-state. In contrast to the previous two projects, where the tactics included a capture of civic education, here there is no alternative but to attack the very concept of civic education, which by definition aims to cultivate attachments to the nation. From this movement, accordingly, derives the strongest propaganda against civic education, which includes the
charges that it is narrow, conservative, at odds with the true purposes of education—in brief, anything that will bring the concept into disrepute. Proponents of global citizenship meanwhile build parallel curricula of political education under the label of “global studies.” This movement is the most serious challenge today to civic education.

It might be thought that the distinction outlined here between civic education and political education is intended as a polemical device to attack radical critics of the current political order. In fact, its purpose is analytic: to make clear a fundamental difference between two different programs of education. Which of them is to be preferred depends on one’s basic viewpoint and objective. Civic education would be the choice if the goal is to preserve the regime, and political education if the goal is to change it. There is no reason why a confusion of language should be used to hide this fundamental choice.

The Idea of Civic Education before the Formation of the Profession of Political Science

The early American writers who were interested in reviving civic education drew initially on many of the categories of thought that were developed by classical political science. These writers were also aware, however, of the differences between ancient republics and modern America. The challenge was to develop a model of civic education appropriate to the new circumstances of the modern world and to a new form of government.

This task was easier said than done. Existing political science was helpful in posing the general problem or issue of civic education, but it unfortunately provided no assistance for the new regime of liberal democracy. With the demise of the city-state, investigation of the question of civic education largely ceased. From the early Roman Empire until the 18th century, no notable works appear on the topic. Even in the 18th century, two of the most important authors who dealt with the subject—Montesquieu and Rousseau—mostly elaborated on the classical teaching for small republics; their writings helped to revive interest and awareness of the concept but did little to supply a basis for future liberal democratic regimes.23

In the English-speaking world, John Locke’s Some Thoughts Concerning Education touched on the subject, but in a work devoted to the education of a gentleman, which took place in private with a tutor. The civic component was perhaps appropriate for the responsibilities of someone in the higher class in Great Britain of that age, but it had nothing to say about the republican idea of a civic education designed for most citizens. In fact, many early American educators used the book as a foil; they identified Locke’s prescriptions, and private education generally, with the exclusive privileges of a governing class in a nonrepublican system.

The demise of the Greek city-state also contributed to a change in understanding of the ends of political life. In a republic, at least in theory, participation in civic life, including the dignity of ruling and being ruled, was important to both citizenship and the experience of the good life. There was, of course, more to the city-state than politics and more to education than civic learning; the highest education of the gentleman, not to mention that of the philosopher, veers away from civic education. Nevertheless, the simplified model of republican theory stressed the centrality of the civic dimension.

By contrast, in the world of the Roman Empire that followed, attention to the civic dimension within education diminished. Political rule became the province of a few. Education focused more on the cultivation of matters related to the private sphere. With the rise of Christianity, the importance of politics diminished still further. There was now a realm of life held to be higher than politics, a City of God as opposed to a City of Man. Over time the Catholic church developed an institutional authority separate from the apparatus of the state, and it came to exercise much influence over the domain of education.

The relations of church and state eventually occupied a central place in modern thought about civic education. As many saw the problem, the restoration of a greater civic dimension to politics had to begin by wresting control of education from the church and ecclesiastical authorities. As long as minds were formed under the aegis of the church, it would be impossible to establish a modern, enlightened form of government. Here was a paradox: the modern regime of liberty required as a precondition eliminating or suppressing church education, at least for the vast majority. Early proposals for a universal public education system in France in the 18th century were advanced chiefly to free citizens from the tutelage of clerics. Public school meant nonecclesiastical education.
The American case was more complicated. On one side were those like Thomas Jefferson who echoed the anticlerical position and who saw in universal public education an instrument to diminish the power of the religious schools:

The first stage of this education being the schools of the hundreds, wherein the great mass of the people will receive their instruction, the principal foundations of future order will be laid here. Instead therefore of putting the Bible and Testament into the hands of the children, at an age when their judgments are not sufficiently matured for religious enquiries, their memories may here be stored with the most useful facts from Grecian, Roman, European and American history.

The rhetoric of republican civic education was enlisted less to serve its original purpose than to assist in the more urgent task of discrediting religious education.

But there was another viewpoint. In America, especially in parts of New England, the idea of widespread education had already been established. Under the theory and practices of reformed Protestantism, the schools, which were religious, were tied to their communities and to republican ideas and were supported by public funding. Many Americans accordingly viewed religious education not as detracting from republicanism, but as contributing to it. Religious schools were especially commended for their role in character formation. As Benjamin Rush said of the schools, “Our business is to make them men, citizens, and Christians.”

The American republic differed from the ancient republic in several other respects that bore on the character of civic education. For one thing, as noted, American republicanism, in contrast to the classic republics, rested on a general philosophical theory: the doctrine of natural rights. This theory needed to be taught by means deemed appropriate to the student’s age and preparation. For Thomas Jefferson, primary school education must “instruct the mass of our citizens in these, their rights,” which he thought would be heavily aided by courses in history. The child’s study of history would be mindful of its purpose of promoting the doctrine of natural rights. It would alert people to the threats posed by “ambition under every disguise it may assume [and] knowing it to defeat its designs.” University education would instruct them in the principles of right as found in the works of the modern philosophers of the Enlightenment.

Those who wrote about civic education in America in the early era agreed on the part of the Enlightenment that established the case for rights. But there were strands of Enlightenment thought that led then—and that still lead—to enormous controversy. For some Enlightenment thinkers, universal public schooling was viewed as a vast new instrument for ongoing social transformation that would promote the evolving political projects that derived from modern philosophical ideas. Schools would be employed to erase society’s various “prejudices,” including its forms of religious belief, and remake human beings according to the models discovered by modern thought. In his work *The Old Regime*, Alexis de Tocqueville describes the outsized objectives for public education proposed by the philosopher Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot to King Louis:

For him [Turgot], as for most of the physiocrats, the first political guarantee is a certain public education given by the state, according to certain procedures and in a certain spirit. The confidence he shows in this kind of educational medicine . . . is limitless. “I dare say to you, Sire,” he says in a report where he proposes a plan of this kind to the king, “that in ten years your nation will be unrecognizable and that by its intelligence, its good mores, by informed zeal for your service and for the fatherland, it will be infinitely above all other peoples. The children who are now ten years old will then be men prepared for the State, lovers of their country, submissive to authority not through fear but by reason, helpful to their fellow-citizens, accustomed to recognize and respect the law.”
The idea of using public schooling as an instrument for transforming society is the origin of “political education.” This model goes far beyond the normal task of civic education, which seeks to preserve a regime. It uses education as the engine to change the existing order so as to keep up with the regime favored by advancing philosophy. As this model has been applied in the last century in America, the regimes favored by philosophy (as many conceive it) have evolved beyond the traditional American regime and have become hostile to it. Such has been the case with progressivism, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism. The conflict between political education and civic education is endemic to the American experience during the last century.

Another challenge to Americans in developing a new model for civic education was to take account of the modern republic’s goal of protecting individual rights, which was not a feature of classical republicanism. Modern republics (or liberal democracy) acknowledge and promote the importance of the private sphere, including the significance of commerce and of diverse religious beliefs. This fact means that the civic dimension constitutes only a part of education, not, as in the classical republic, its main focus. Under this idea, learning in common schools, if there were to be common schools, would have less to do with the inculcation of political virtue and more to do with private things, like the acquisition of skills helpful in getting along in the world or perhaps the cultivation of liberal studies. The goal of universal literacy had an important political dimension to it, allowing all to read newspapers and follow public debates, but it was also understood as providing the essential means for the less fortunate to move up economically in society. Education is important for promoting class mobility.

The modern republic’s goal of protecting liberty also limits certain positions that can be claimed to emanate from the classical republican tradition. The principle of liberty lends support to the position that children are, up to a certain point, under the tutelage of the family and of groups with which the family chooses to be attached and not the charges of the state. This fact implies a right of exit from public schools, whether to pursue the family’s own positive goal of education or its wish to escape what parents may consider to be an unwelcome project of political education. The principle of liberty also opens the door to the development of an alternative conception of civic education to the one derived from republican theory. The liberal idea rejects the identification of the civic idea exclusively with public or state-run schools. It stresses instead the legitimacy of a plurality of approaches to cultivating the civic idea, in which the state’s role may not go beyond prescribing part of the content and setting certain outer boundaries.

The idea of using public schooling as an instrument for transforming society is the origin of “political education.”

The circumstances in America added new tasks to civic education that went beyond what classical republican theories included. The ancient republic was situated in a unit small enough that the attachment of citizens to the place or country could ordinarily be taken for granted. By contrast, the greater size and heterogeneity of the nation-state meant that the sentiment of attachment might not be spontaneously generated but would need to be cultivated. In the United States, which was formed from 13 colonies over a vast territory and rapidly expanded into the West, there was great concern from the outset about the possibility of disintegration along sectional lines. Writers accordingly identified nation building as a key objective of civic education and stressed the need to supply students with the historical accounts, stories, and ideas that would help them think of themselves as one people.

Given the federal structure of the union, in which control of education rested with the states and localities, this task could not be accomplished by a common curricula mandated by a single central authority—although, in the case of higher education, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and others made a concerted, though unsuccessful, effort to establish a national university, in part for the purpose of nation building. The job of fostering a national sentiment through education was instead to be carried out indirectly, by major educators whose texts were designed to encourage this unity. Noah Webster was one of the earliest and most successful in this regard, with the publication of his widely used New England Primer. Many historians also considered it as part of their “office.”
or responsibility to tell the American story in a way that promoted a feeling of being one people.

Promoting national unity through education was a main concern of many American leaders, especially as feelings of sectionalism began to increase following the debates on the Missouri Compromise. The Whig Party, in particular, subscribed to a view of attachment that sought to promote and cultivate deeper sources of political and cultural unity. An expression of this viewpoint often cited today is from the young Whig Abraham Lincoln, speaking before the Young Men’s Lyceum in Springfield, Missouri, in 1838:

Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation.

Following the Civil War, which ended the possibility of geographical disintegration (though not geographical isolation), the challenge of fostering national attachment emerged in a different form. With the massive immigration of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, one of the pressing questions of public policy was how to integrate the millions of new entrants into American life. The challenge was to “make” Americans.

Schools played a key role in this endeavor, along with programs in adult education set up by communities and businesses. Some of the terms used to characterize this policy, such as “assimilation” or “Americanization,” can be made today to sound sinister, as indeed some of the programs became where the objective was to try to erase immigrants’ previous cultures and make them regard those cultures as objects of shame. The policy finally adopted has been to seek to create a strong and primary attachment to America, its principles, and many of its traditions and mores, while allowing the original culture to continue to be an object of pride, though a secondary object of identification. An educational program of this kind aims at integration or pluralism, in contrast to the educational program of strong multiculturalism that aims to sanctify the original cultures while deploping as imperialistic all efforts to establish America as the primary political object of identification and loyalty.

The need to create an underlying unity is not just a matter for integrating immigrants. It is an ongoing need for all citizens of every generation. One of the nation’s leading educational theorists, E. D. Hirsch Jr., has for years argued that the basis for respecting diversity among different groups practicing somewhat different ways of life (the “salad bowl” metaphor of American life) is the prior foundation in a common set of principles and traditions (the “melting pot” metaphor). Citizens need to be able to draw on a common “language” of ideas and traditions.

Teaching common content, in Hirsch’s view, must be a primary goal of civic education. Hirsch has worried that the idea of instilling content has been under siege from proponents of a child-centered view of education that emphasizes “the individual child and his or her interests, talents, and needs.” For Hirsch, the possession of a common content is what allows people to begin to talk to one another, even where they disagree. Without it, they may have words but have no basis for communication.

A final element in American thought on civic education relates to the place of political science as a part of a program of education. It is unclear in what degree classical republican thinkers sought to include the study of political science within civic education. Political science is not explicitly mentioned in most of the discussions, but Aristotle taught a “course” in political science and the resulting text, The Politics, unlike Plato’s Republic, is in no obvious sense a subversive work. It could be taught and studied by advanced students. The best guess, then, is that classical philosophy meant political science to have a place inside republican orders and to provide instruction in general theory that could be put to use, in an applied form, in each city.

Whatever was the classical disposition, Americans were clear in assigning to political science an important role in civic education. This position is presupposed by the Federalist Papers, a work designed to guide public deliberation in the great debate on the ratification of the Constitution. The authors refer to political science and draw on many of its arguments and findings. The assumption was that the educated portion of the populace would have familiarity with some of its main precepts. For example, when treating the question of the structure of government, Madison felt comfortable referring to the
to intellectual historian Mathew Mancini’s work on the reception of *Democracy in America*, we now know that the book filled just this role until the 1930s: “Tocqueville was a writer the knowledge of whose work was actively cultivated at prestigious and culturally strategic institutions like Hopkins, Columbia, Yale and Harvard.” The subsequent eclipse of the study of *Democracy in America* as part of political science, along with the rejection of Tocqueville’s understanding of the role of political science in maintaining liberal democracy, owes much, paradoxically, to modern conceptions of political science.

Tocqueville provided an argument for why a liberal democracy should include political science as part of its civic education. This argument does not, however, supply the reason why political scientists should feel obliged to meet this need. Although decency might preclude entertaining such a question, very little in Tocqueville’s writing escapes the cold analysis of a rational response. As *Democracy in America* aims to show, liberal democracy is the regime form in our age that best promotes liberty and a sense of human worth or greatness. All the alternatives lead to a form of despotism. Presumably the political scientist, in his or her concern for human well-being, will see fit to perform this duty, which conforms to reason and is in no sense onerous. The earliest academic political scientists in America willingly embraced this duty. Francis Lieber, who was very much a follower of Tocqueville, declared that political science had to be a science of democracy should include political science as part of its necessary” than in America.

**The Political Science Profession and Civic Education**

Since its formation in the late 19th century, the political science profession has been active in trying to shape civic education in America. By no means is it the only profession to take part in this effort—historians and educators (among others) have been involved as well. Nor have political scientists claimed a monopoly of wisdom on the subject or engaged in a turf war with other professions for control of civic education. Still, being human, political scientists have their pride, and on occasion they have been unable to suppress suggestions that they possess a
special status. As one political scientist noted in a 1999 colloquium on the subject, “Efforts at civic education will proceed with or without our involvement. I leave it to my disciplinary colleagues to decide which option is preferable.”

A survey of the profession’s activity in civic education is best conducted by dividing the account between two areas: (a) actions sponsored and undertaken by the professional association APSA (“official” involvement), and (b) actions of political scientists undertaken on their own (“unofficial” involvement). In discussing what the profession has done in this area, it is important to keep in mind the larger point that the profession’s involvement overall has been limited. Concern for civic education has been urged by certain elements in the profession, by no means of the same mind, in the face of what is likely a majority whose attitude ranges from indifference to mild contempt.

Official Involvement. According to its previous national executive director, Michael Britnall, “APSA has had an interest in civic education from its founding, and interest in civic education has cycled in and out throughout the association’s history.” The high point of activity seems to have been in the early years, just after APSA was formed. The association quickly set up a section on civic instruction (in 1905) and over the next 15 years went on to establish no fewer than four high-level committees to study civic education and make recommendations for reform. Civic education was initially one of the association’s chief priorities.

The explanation for this interest probably begins with the tradition that recognized an important role for civic education in higher education, a role that political science had embraced. Civic education was thus very much in the discipline’s sights. It was only a small step from the political scientists’ acceptance of this responsibility in their own university classrooms to the launching of an inquiry into the status of civic education at all levels. Civic education as whole thus became a matter of policy analysis. There was also a powerful strain within Progressive thought at this time that emphasized the practical efficacy of social science expertise in solving social and political problems. Acting through their newly formed professional association, some political scientists hoped to demonstrate the prowess of their discipline by stepping into this policy area and fixing the deficiencies of the system. Reforming civic education, especially in secondary education, would be the association’s trial run in a bid to establish the profession’s influence in American politics.

A number of themes characterized the work of these early committees. An initial objective was simply to get a grip on the status of civic education in secondary schools across the nation. The association’s committee on instruction posed this question in a 1905 report titled What Do Students Know about American Government before Taking Courses in Political Science? and followed up the next year with a survey of various schools, asking what was taught, what textbooks were used, and what the objectives of the programs were. This survey appears to have been the first genuine effort of its kind. The committee’s judgment on the level of student knowledge was not very positive—it sounded, in fact, remarkably similar to the results of the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress test in civics. The committee then went on to ask: “Is it not a curious fact that though our schools are largely instituted, supported and operated by the government, yet the study of American government in the schools and colleges is the last subject to receive adequate attention?”

Since its formation in the late 19th century, the political science profession has been active in trying to shape civic education in America.

Another theme of the early committees was the advocacy of experiential learning, meaning learning by doing and observation. The committees urged involving young people in the practice of participatory decision making and taking outings at the local level to observe firsthand political civic activities, like city council meetings. Although the cognitive elements of civic education were to be maintained and improved, they advocated that teaching participatory habits should also be a priority. Consistent with a general “bias” of civic education, the good citizen was identified with the active participant or doer, rather than the person inclined more to activity in the private sphere.

The Progressive spirit that dominated APSA in this respect echoed older republican participatory ideas,
adding to them a discourse of human fulfillment coming from German idealization of the “state.” As one committee member wrote, “There is no satisfaction in life so great as devotion to the welfare of the state.” The Progressive influence reached to certain other ideas, however, that clashed with some expressions of American republicanism. One was the deference Progressives accorded to technical expertise. While commending citizen participation, one of the APSA committees on instruction was quick to set limits, noting that on “technical matters”—the boundaries were never clearly defined—“no one but an expert is qualified to form an opinion of any value whatsoever.”

Another notable Progressive theme, which conflicts with the Jeffersonian form of republicanism, is visible by its absence. The early APSA committee reports rarely, if ever, mention individual rights. For Progressives, the doctrine of natural rights was a relic of 18th-century thought that blinded people to the social character of their liberties and prevented the state from legislating in the public’s best interest.

The work of these committees must be set in a larger context. Other tendencies were afoot within political science that began to detach the profession from a direct concern for civic education. In good Progressive fashion, however, these movements always were justified by their “civic” contribution. For many in the profession, the mission of political science in the new industrial era was not the transmission of knowledge to inform and improve citizens, but the training of the new experts needed to manage a modern society. With political science as the lead discipline, universities, they argued, should undertake the task of preparing a cadre of public administrators. This enterprise could be called “civic education.”

Some did undertake the task, but it did not produce civic education in the traditional sense of education for the general population of students. According to one of the leading students of the history of the discipline, Stephen Leonard, “The reform of higher education was seen as part of a giant civic education project in which new knowledge and civic improvement were inextricably linked. It was in this movement that the importance of civic education for higher education, as well as much of the form of higher education today, was set.”

Another tendency, which extended this last line of argument beyond the training of public administrators, operated to separate political science even more from civic education. Many political scientists contended that the highest function of the discipline was to produce a new kind of knowledge that was vital to modern society. Research, along with training political scientists of the future who would continue to produce such knowledge, was the purpose of the profession. Political science should be devoted to maintaining political science. The civic education of students would be at most an ancillary concern.

If this “research model” for political science seems on first encounter to represent a turn away from civic mindedness, proponents of this position insisted that, in fact, the opposite was the case. Under the Progressive understanding, social science research was of a practical kind that sought not knowledge for its own sake, but knowledge to transform and improve society. Political scientists would accordingly maximize their benefit to the nation by conducting research rather than by wasting their time and society’s resources by engaging in civic education. Even the study of civic education as a policy matter was of relatively minor importance.

Political science in the decades after the establishment of APSA was thus being pulled in two different directions: toward greater concern for civic education and away from it. It was the latter movement that triumphed and formed the ethos of the profession. APSA’s initiative on behalf of civic education produced many reports and some interesting research. Whether these efforts resulted in any actual impact on the character of civic education in secondary school is unknown, though no evidence has ever been produced to suggest that its impact was major and the association never claimed it to be so. The association thus failed in its test to prove the efficacy of its expertise in taking hold of and fixing an area of American public policy.

Even the chair of the last APSA civic education committee, William Bennett Munro, seemed to have soured on the project. According to Leonard, the last committee began to develop a “skeptical assessment of the usefulness of the discipline’s direct participation in any civic education project.” Munro, who later became president of APSA, dismissed as ineffective many of the ongoing efforts to teach basic principles through civic education classes. Any improvement in civic education, he contended, could not take place until scholars first understood how students learn, which is probably as much a topic for educational psychologists as political scientists.
Munro all but pronounced a eulogy on APSA’s involvement in civic education. The upshot was the association’s withdrawal from active concern with civic education. Also resolved was the status of the profession’s responsibility for civic education. Political science, like the other sciences, was to be concerned with its scientific production (research), not with any social responsibility. Worrying about contributing to the good citizenship of students in primary and secondary schools, or even in higher education, was not a special concern of the discipline. As time went on, moreover, the Progressive idea of a connection between this research and solving social problems grew more tenuous. For all the boasting and fanfare, much of the research had never really achieved that objective anyhow. The real purpose of political science research, post-1950, has been to advance pure knowledge. Political science had become a self-contained enterprise.

It has been only in the last 20 years or so that APSA decided to make another go at civic education.

Although there were occasional moments of APSA involvement in the next decades, none of them amounted to much. It has been only in the last 20 years or so that APSA decided to make another go at civic education. The centerpiece in this initiative came in the form of the establishment in 1996 of a banner “APSA Task Force on Civic Education in the 21st Century.” The 15-member group was initially chaired by then APSA president Elinor Ostrom (later awarded a Nobel prize in economics) and included such prominent figures as Kent Jennings, Robert Putnam, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Lief Carter, Margaret Levi, and Melvin Dubnick. The task force promised a broad survey that would extend beyond the confines of higher education and inquire into “how, at every level of political education, we teach or fail to teach the craft and practice of politics”; it would also look at the problem of civic disengagement and consider what kinds of programs, curricular and extracurricular, would “reinvigorate the motivation and skill to engage in political life.”

The task force may be said to have accomplished its primary objective, which was to encourage, as one says today, a “conversation” on these issues. It invited multiple submissions to the member journal PS, set up a List-serv to promote exchanges on the Internet (at the time something of a technological novelty), sponsored many face-to-face discussions at APSA meetings, and held a number of retreats. Six years later, its term coming to an end, the task force experienced what one political scientist called a “quiet demise” without ever producing a “comprehensive statement” or recommending a “grand strategy.”

To some, this was a disappointment, leaving a legacy that was all talk.

The task force did, however, speak, albeit briefly, at the outset, justifying the reason for undertaking the new initiative, which lay in an impending national crisis. America was suffering from “mounting political apathy” that manifested itself in a growing “civic disengagement” with ominous effects; according to the task force, “Current levels of political knowledge, political engagement, and political enthusiasm are so low as to threaten the vitality and stability of democratic politics in the United States.” One of the most notable signs of disengagement was the decline in voter turnout, which had reached alarming proportions in 1996 and that was especially acute among the young college students included. This fact likely disturbed many professors and might serve as a clarion call for reassessment.

Robert Putnam had expressed concern with “civic disengagement” the year before in a well-known article, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital.” For Putnam, civic disengagement was associated with a decline in people joining civic associations. The task force connected this problem to a deficiency in civic education in schools and universities. Education in politics “was inadequate across the board.” Although improvement in education could not singlehandedly “reverse the trend toward apathy and disengagement,” it could compensate for problems elsewhere. Civic education thus emerged as the key factor in confronting the underlying crisis of American democracy.

Civic education could succeed in higher education, however, only if political scientists consciously embraced this task and made it part of their pedagogical mission. The task force argued, “We believe that we who have chosen to teach politics as our profession bear major responsibility for addressing the problem.” Accepting this responsibility would mean deviating, at least in certain
courses, from the canons of the dominant positivist and value-free conception of political science:

Many of us on the task force have come to see that our disciplinary emphasis on “value neutrality” must be adjusted in the civics education classroom to reflect the need to promote and enhance basic democratic values. Our reliance on “critical thinking,” without a moral framework within which to think critically, may be part of the problem. It may feed not healthy skepticism but unhealthy cynicism and political disengagement.

The “problem” mentioned here was obviously not limited to university-level political scientists, but included secondary school teachers who adopted the approach of their mentors. A full-scale change in orientation was needed, the task force argued: “We believe we must therefore teach the specific virtues on which effective political practice depends. We believe we must unequivocally teach the value of democratic aspirations to human liberation and human dignity. Without this framework, our descriptions of political facts and political virtues will not inspire and motivate people to the level of civic engagement that a healthy democratic polity requires.”

The brevity of the mission statements makes it difficult to know whether the justification for the transformation the task force sought was based ultimately on an ethical commitment to democratic values or on a critique of positivist and value-free political science. There is no doubt, however, that the language of democratic values served as the main rhetorical instrument, no doubt because the task force thought it might convince many in the profession who were committed “privately” to these values to support the movement. As for hints of the content of the new civic education, the task force quickly endorsed the need to look at the American tradition, especially as it embodied the democratic ethic, but it then went on to focus all the attention on promoting engaged democratic citizens. The identification of civic education with a project to encourage democratic participation leaves one wondering what room has been left for a fuller consideration of the principles and character of America’s political system.

The efforts of the task force have accompanied other APSA initiatives over the last two decades, including an annual Teaching and Learning Conference and publishing a separate *Journal of Political Science Education*. The record and experiences of instructors who have taken up the mantle of the civic engagement movement are outlined in a recently published collection, sponsored by APSA, titled *Teaching Civic Education: From Student to Active Citizen*. It recounts the efforts of numerous instructors in political science to enhance existing courses and develop new courses and programs to encourage greater civic engagement among students. Although the different authors note the significance of cognitive learning about American principles and traditions, the emphasis is on different forms of experiential and service learning designed to promote civic engagement.

Against those who might object that service learning represents a radical break from past practices, some authors point out that it has long been part of higher education, as found, for example, in Washington semester programs and in internships and practicums with state and local governments. The civic engagement movement nevertheless is promoting a change in priorities for the profession of political science. It seeks greater recognition from APSA and from university administrations of the value of civic education, understood as teaching civic engagement. It wants the skill of teaching civic engagement to count within the profession and to carry weight in career advancement. Professor Dick Simpson, a well-known figure in this movement, concludes this volume with an essay that contains an action agenda. A few items on that agenda illustrate the tenor of the movement:

APSA should adopt a code of ethics similar to that of social workers, which recognizes the benefits of faculty civic engagement.

Colleges and universities should educate for political participation.

High schools, community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities should adopt teaching civic and political engagement as a goal in their mission statements.

No one can say at this point what effect this call for a renewed commitment to civic education will have. For the moment, it is still a relatively small movement.
within the profession, despite the support it has received from APSA. The position in one way seems to represent a return to a previous tradition of political science that incorporates a responsibility for civic education into the profession. Yet the focus has shifted from an intellectual encounter with political science and the American tradition to a teaching of engagement in line with a commitment to democratic values.

As in all things, it may be the proper balance of objectives that counts. Service and participation are important, though how well educational institutions can successfully teach them on a large-scale basis remains a question. Moreover, too much emphasis on learning the skills of engagement might pull resources away from pursuing intellectual objectives. The line between the two is, of course, not clear, but there is a difference of emphasis. For higher education, the most important goal must be to deepen the students' understanding of the principles of the regime and of the fundamentals of the system under which the nation operates.

Preserving the regime, which is the end of civic education, is furthered, presumably, when students have been able to reflect on what it is they are seeking to preserve. If programs of civic education are pursued at the expense of this intellectual experience, they may end up doing more harm than good.

“Unofficial” Involvement. It would simplify matters enormously to identify a profession’s activities with what its professional association does. Unfortunately, this approach is inadequate. Professional associations do not usually loom so large in the lives of their members. The political scientists who go to sleep and wake up thinking of APSA are rare, even when the concern is with the direction that the profession should take.

The greater part of a profession’s activities must be reckoned from what members do outside the association, acting individually or in concert with others. Viewed in this light, the political science profession has been highly active and influential in the field of civic education, playing a major role in research, teaching, and policy analysis.

Scholarship. Political scientists are responsible for much of the nation’s scholarship on civic education. Not surprisingly, given the tradition of political philosophy, political scientists have been at the forefront in preserving a theoretical understanding of the basic concept of civic education itself. Only a few titles have appeared recently in this area; two of them have been collections edited by political scientists: Civic Education and Culture (2005), edited by Bradley C. Watson, and Civic Education and the Future of American Citizenship (2012), edited by Elizabeth Kaufer Busch and Jonathan White. A decade earlier, political philosophers Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas Pangle published a major work on the educational views of America’s founders, The Learning of Liberty (1993). Political philosophy remains the field in which the most fundamental questions about the idea of civic education continue to be discussed.

Two core objects of study in American civic education are the nation’s basic principles and the Constitution. These subjects are concerns of scholarship in the field of American political thought, which is located mostly within the discipline of political science. In studies of the American founding over the past half century, political scientists were identified as having developed many of the basic interpretive frameworks. The same holds true in the scholarship on the great moments of debate on American basic principles, including the lead-up to the Civil War, the Progressive Era, the New Deal, and the Reagan revolution. In recognition of the increasing importance of this field, a new, multidisciplinary journal, American Political Thought, published by the University of Chicago Press, was finally established in 2011. It is edited by a leading political scientist, Michael Zuckert.

A final area of scholarship that relates to civic education is research on political participation. The study of this topic, which was pioneered by Alexis de Tocqueville, was long considered relevant to civic education in the “broader sense,” outside of schooling, but as I have noted, the problem of participation has more recently been brought into curricular discussions, as schools, especially colleges and universities, are being urged to launch academic programs to promote civic engagement. The main contributors to the research on political participation have been political scientists, among them Robert Putnam, Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and David Campbell.

Teaching. The profession of political science is comprised mostly of academics concentrated in institutions of higher learning. Its direct teaching responsibilities therefore are fulfilled inside the nation’s colleges and universities. The
course usually thought of as the mainstay in civic education is some variant of an introduction to American government. Political scientists teach this course, and they have written the many textbooks that are used in it. A number of other courses also figure in the general program of civic education, such as in American Political Thought, Constitutional Law, and newer offerings involving civic engagement.

Instructors in the American government course do not need to have engaged in theoretical inquiries about civic education to make a solid contribution to its objectives, nor is it necessary for them to stand on a soapbox and evangelize on behalf of democratic values. A careful investigation into how the political system operates, including its underlying principles of construction, will go a long way to filling the bill. This said, the American government course will likely fall short as a vehicle for civic education if its purpose is to introduce the “science” of current political science. A course that fulfills the objective of civic education must have in mind what students need to know as citizens. Unfortunately, the topics of America’s basic regime principles and of the Constitution are of little or no interest to the mainstream of modern academic political science. For this reason, a conscious commitment to teach courses that contribute to civic education can be important.

There is a movement today among political scientists and historians to ensure that courses on American politics and the American political tradition continue to be taught at the university level. This project in one sense is simple. It consists of little more than finding the instructors who are interested in and competent to teach such courses and seeing that such courses are offered. But in another sense this project is complicated. To find the instructors and institute the courses, the subjects of America’s basic principles and of the Constitution must be a concern of political science so that scholars do research in these areas and graduate programs produce faculty who understand the “civic” dimension of political science. This kind of political science must have a foothold within the profession. It is political science in the intellectual mold, focusing on scholarship and on teaching. Civic education understood as training in civic engagement might well serve as a supplement to—but, within higher education, cannot substitute for—this primary intellectual experience.

A number of institutions and foundations are concerned with just this issue. One of the most notable is the Jack Miller Center, a private educational organization founded in 2004. The Miller Center has pursued a comprehensive strategy in this field, identifying graduate students and beginning professors who have an interest in civic education, offering them support in their research and teaching, holding summer seminars on themes relating to American constitutionalism, and encouraging the formation of centers and institutes on college campuses devoted to promoting an understanding of the American political tradition. The movement for a renewed civic education, which extends well beyond the Miller Center, now has the support of hundreds of political scientists around the country. How far it will go remains to be seen.

The simple truth is that the political science profession has very little to do with most civic education in America, and political scientists possess little hands-on knowledge of the issues and problems beyond the confines of higher education.

The limits of the political science profession for influencing the general function of civic education instruction in America must be kept in mind. The profession, as just noted, is concentrated at the level of higher education, but the major share of the instruction takes place in primary and secondary schools. Discussions of civic education within the profession often start with talk about addressing the issue at all levels, but they usually end up with debates about civic education in colleges and universities. The political science profession touches K–12 instruction only indirectly—through occasional studies from on high of the general status of civic education, by teaching some (but not all) of the K–12 teachers who have taken university courses in political science, and by supplying some of the textbooks used in secondary school courses. The simple truth is that the political science profession has very little
to do with most civic education in America, and political scientists possess little hands-on knowledge of the issues and problems beyond the confines of higher education.

There are some ways to connect political scientists more closely with the function of civic education in secondary schools. Federal and state programs sponsor courses and institutes in the American political tradition in which social science teachers from secondary schools are taught by political scientists and historians. The Ashbrook Center at Ashland University in Ohio has built a remarkable program in this area that has been going for years. Other organizations and institutions are joining in. All of these programs involve secondary teachers after they have begun their careers.

Another strategy, which has been largely overlooked, is to start at the front end and involve political scientists and historians with schools of education to produce more teachers trained or certified to teach civics courses (or the equivalent) in secondary schools. A cadre of secondary school teachers with master's degrees in teaching political science and history would make an important contribution. The possibilities for creative collaboration in this area are enormous.

Policy Analysis. American primary and secondary education is becoming more and more subject to centralizing influences—from consortia of the states and directly or indirectly from the federal government. Standards of learning or their equivalent, already adopted for reading and math, are in the midst of being drawn up for civics and the social sciences. How the mechanics of this process will eventually operate is still unknown. What is clear, however, is that the growth in this kind of centralizing influence has expanded the influence of a field of “players”—call them experts or policy analysts—who study the issues and problems of civic education. Located in some universities, in think tanks, and in foundations, this group now figures, and will continue to figure, prominently in shaping the character of civic education in America. Political scientists occupy some of the important places in this network. For better or worse, much of the influence of the profession of political science will enter through this window.

Conclusion

Civic education is an activity whose future will be shaped not by any one profession but by individuals who are trained in various fields and who have developed their opinions through their own experiences and professional expertise. The real interest in the analysis of a profession is to understand what perspective or point of view it brings to the table and what organized activities it promotes.

Professions embody traditions, prerogatives, and missions. By its tradition, political science, which discovered civic education, is likely to be the discipline that maintains and develops much of the intellectual architecture for its concept. By its prerogatives, political science occupies a key site as the profession that influences or controls the instruction in civic education in almost all of American higher education. By its mission, which is constantly being contested, political science will do much to determine the future of civic education.

Author Biography

James W. Ceaser is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and Harry F. Byrd Professor of Politics at the University of Virginia, where he has taught since 1976. He has written several books on American politics and political thought, including Presidential Selection, Liberal Democracy and Political Science, Reconstructing America, and Nature and History in American Political Development.
Notes


4. See Federalist nos. 9 and 31 (Hamilton), and nos. 37 and 47 (Madison); and John Adams, Thoughts on Government.


8. Ibid.


10. Ibid., 229 (1337a 27–29).


17. Cited in Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas L. Pangle, The Learning of Liberty (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993), 89 (emphasis added). These words were written in 1778, so Adams was likely referring to the constitution of Massachusetts, which he sketched and which became the template for all the other complex constitutions, including the US Constitution. Adams went on: “The instruction of the people in every kind of knowledge that be of use to them in the practice of . . . their political and civil duties, as members of society and freemen, ought to be the care of the public . . . in a manner that never yet has been practiced in any age or nation.”


21. Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 57.


23. The texts of Rousseau in question here are The Social Contract and The Government of Poland, not Emile, which is a book primarily of private, not civic, education.


30. Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 7.


32. Francis Lieber, Reminiscences, Addresses, and Essays (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1880), 353, 351. For a fuller account,


37. Ibid.

38. Ibid. Schachter notes, “The early documents eliminate almost all concern with individual rights.”


40. Ibid., 750.

41. William Bennett Munro, “Physics and Politics—An Old Analogy Revised,” The American Political Science Review 22 (February 1928): 1–11. This article is a text of Munro’s 1927 APSA presidential address. In his article, Munro not only questions how the nation now teaches civic education, but also now dismisses as outmoded the entirety of the original principles on which the nation was founded.

42. The others were Richard Brody, Mary Hepburn, Margaret Levi, Richard Niemi, Susan McManus, Ronald Oakerson, Wendy Rahn, Alan Rosenthal, and Edward Thompson.


50. Ibid., 637.

51. Rios et al., Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen.
