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Civic Education: A Modern Necessity

A popular Government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy, or perhaps both.

-James Madison, *Letter to W.T. Barry* [1]

A democratic structure of government, i.e. a system of governance that invites citizen participation in the decision-making process, requires an informed populace to function in an efficacious manner. This representative model assumes a level of knowledge of its members, whose responsibility is to make rational choices at the ballot box. In the same way that Adam Smith justified capitalism on the basis of better products outcompeting worse ones, our founders justified democracy by arguing that candidates who have better ideas will rise to the top in the marketplace of ideas, and the end result will be an election in which the country has aligned its ballot with the best politicians.

An informed knowledge of civics, though, is the proverbial engine that powers this machine of democracy. Only in a society in which the participants comprehend the workings of governments can the citizens understand differing policies, weigh their relative merits, and proceed with the best one. The founders understood this requisite condition of a representative system and tasked the education system with shaping the next generation of engaged citizenry, so that the wheels of the republic could keep on turning. That informed society, unfortunately, is a far cry from what America is currently. In fact, Madison's prescient observation seems all too relevant now: the nation seems to possess farce and tragedy in spades. The capacity for the country collectively to sort right from wrong, truth from falsehood eludes us.

This failure of government, in part, stems from the dearth of civic education in the United States. American youth are graduating from schools without the requisite political vocabulary to engage in the thorough debate that is necessary for the functioning of democracy. For example, only a fourth of twelfth graders were found to be “proficient” in civics, and 36% of seniors were deemed as not even possessing “basic” civic knowledge [2]. This problem is relatively contemporary and originates from inadequate schooling of the newest generations because older portions of the population consistently perform better on basic civics questions [3]. Even more so than basic political knowledge, our education system is failing to impart the core values of the United States political system. An increasing percentage of Americans express distrust in the institution of democracy [4]. The share of Americans who view democratically selecting representatives via free elections as unimportant increased from 14% in baby boomers to 26% in millennials [5]. Instead of being unimportant or immaterial, these trends have very real consequences for our political environment, shown by the relatively high number of Americans in 2016 who favored eliminating double-jeopardy protections (46%) or who favored the ability of the government to crackdown on peaceful marches for simply expressing offensive views (26%) [6].

This subtle erosion of both governmental knowledge and democratic values in subsequent generations of American youth is inimical to the country’s upholding of a stable rule of law. Rule of law describes the reliability of a given governmental system, and this reliability is the key characteristic that separates democracy from despotism because democratic policy is based not on the whims of a given leader but rather on the wishes of the general public. Our founders understand that consolidation of power and demagoguery was a threat constantly lurking on the margins of representative systems. Because it takes only one leader bent on control to undermine a government permanently, safeguards such as an independent judiciary were established to uphold the rule of law and to beat back against the unending tides of authoritarianism.

These safeguards, however, are only as strong as the population who controls them because an uninformed populace is one ripe for exploitation. After all, how can Americans who are not able to differentiate the three branches understand the importance of checks and balances from an independent judiciary? On a broader level, why would citizens who do not place value in democracy be concerned with the ability of a judiciary to restrain elected officials? In this

way, an educated citizenry imbues the judiciary and other democratic checks with the power necessary to conquer despotism, but an uneducated citizenry makes American governance inherently more volatile.

If our country continues to go down the path of political ignorance, we are opening the door to subversion of the rule of law as our institutions are corrupted from within. The country is already beginning to see these cracks and fissures, as attacks on justices become commonplace, and more executive leaders seek to exist outside the scope of the courts [7]. It is only through a reinvigoration of civic education that the country can hope to inspire faith in democratic safeguards and hold these leaders accountable.

Works Cited

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