

4

This chapter describes the uncomfortable marriage between political science and civic education and calls for a reformulation of how we engage students in the wicked problems of democracy.

Political Science, Civic Engagement, and the Wicked Problems of Democracy

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Democracy in the United States is at a crossroads. National polls consistently show that not a single national political leader is viewed in a positive light on a consistent basis, and confidence in our political institutions is at record lows. In 2012 just 37% of respondents to a Gallup poll had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the institutions of the presidency or the Supreme Court, and only 13% thought similarly about Congress. This contrasts markedly with respondents’ opinions when the question was first asked in 1975. At that time, the presidency stood at 52%, the Supreme Court at 49%, and Congress at 42%. In other words, in the aftermath of Watergate, U.S. political institutions were more highly regarded than they are some 40 years later.

Not only are we losing confidence in our political institutions, we are also losing confidence in each other. Indeed, Putnam (2000) and Ulsaner (2002) show that Americans have the lowest levels of trust in their fellow citizens and that these levels have been declining precipitously. Regardless of whom we elect and which policies get implemented, the public has become increasingly disillusioned, cynical, and apathetic, while problems continue to fester and grow. It seems that too many of those in charge are either incompetent, impotent, ignorant, in someone’s pocket, or some combination of these. Partisan posturing, party gridlock, and an oft-noted decrease in civility among representatives from different parties reflect an adversarial approach to politics that is ill suited for the problems the United States faces in the 21st century.

Civic Education in Colleges and Universities

At the same time that we are experiencing a crisis of confidence in our democratic institutions, the liberal arts in higher education have developed a crisis of legitimacy. People are questioning the value of broad-based liberal arts training in history, philosophy, and literature as our society moves increasingly toward a technocratic expert-driven culture. Community colleges have followed suit, emphasizing job training and workforce development over the broad-based learning demanded for educated citizens. We have forgotten John Adams's advice to his son: "You will ever remember that all the end of study is to make you a good man and a useful citizen" (Butterfield & Friedlaender, 1973, p. 117). When the Constitution's framers talked about education, they did not just mean vocational training or apprenticeships. "While this type of training was certainly important, they also wanted a citizenry trained in government, ethics (moral philosophy), history, rhetoric, science (natural philosophy), mathematics, logic, and classical languages, for these subjects made people informed and civil participants in a democratic society" (Fea, 2012, n.p.).

Early education reformers reflected this relationship between education and citizenship. Horace Mann, an early advocate for public education, explicitly contended that democracy requires educated citizens. John Dewey (1966), a leading reformer of public education at the turn of the century, said: "Democracy cannot flourish where the chief influences in selecting subject matter of instruction are utilitarian ends narrowly conceived for the masses, and, for the higher education of the few, the traditions of a specialized cultivated class" (p. 226). These authors seem more prescient than many would give them credit for, as civic engagement in our colleges and universities often feels very disconnected from—and secondary to—other, more prominent aims of 21st century higher education.

Civic education in most U.S. colleges has essentially taken one of three paths. It occurs in political science classes where one learns about institutions, parties, and voting—more on that soon. The second avenue for civic education at most U.S. colleges is in student life and in the amalgamation of student clubs and extracurricular activities that focus on citizenship and leadership. These are most often seen in college Democratic or Republican clubs, debate teams, get-out-the-vote drives, and student government. The final area of civic learning in higher education is volunteerism and service learning.

Very few of these civic activities in higher education see students as creators of their own civic lives; rather, they emphasize a passive or subordinate view of students in their communities. Indeed, these forms of political education on campus are about amassing facts and making expert arguments while lining up converts on your side rather than listening to different perspectives or interests and working toward a common solution. They are attempts to engage students in adversarial politics. Rather than

helping students understand the full scope of potential roles for citizens, they reinforce the boxes that the broader culture puts citizens into and thus exacerbate the problems of democracy.

Political Science and Civic Education

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the discipline of political science. As Carcasson (2013) notes, “The bulk of the college experience focuses on the expert model . . . higher education is primarily tied to the notion of knowledge and data playing an important role in solving various problems” (p. 42). From a curricular perspective, civic education has been relegated to political science classes and unfortunately, as a discipline, it seems political science is ill equipped to handle it. The state of the political science field makes civic engagement an interloper on a broader scientific enterprise. Many modern theories of democracy actually eschew citizen involvement, arguing instead that passive apathetic citizens ensure stability of the political system and demonstrate citizen satisfaction with the status quo (Pateman, 1971). Almost no one makes the argument in mainstream political science journals that the lack of participation reflects a lack of democratic skills and that those skills must be learned (Boyte, 2001).

It hasn’t always been this way. Early political theorists such as Mill and Rousseau saw participating in the process of democracy as helping to build a participatory character and participatory ethic, which would lead to increased legitimacy of the system. For them, a socialized norm of participation was essential to the functioning of democracy. Yet in an attempt to be *scientific*, today’s political scientists have moved away from studying and grappling with a meaningful understanding of our role as citizens and the ways in which we act as agents in the political process. Instead they have reduced the citizen’s role in our democratic political system to the easily quantifiable role of voter, a passive onlooker called upon once every few years to choose between competing decision makers. Although this is an exceedingly narrow definition of *citizen*, it fits a conception of democracy as a game for competing elites who derive their legitimacy from the adversarial politics of the voting booth.

This shift in the nature of political science resulted in part from a desire that it be taken seriously as a science, by a need to be objective and nonvalue based (this is reflected in the renaming of government departments into political science departments). The disciplinary shift is also reflected in the growth of empirical political science in which statistics and rational choice models have become the dominant paradigm.

With the 1951 publication of Kenneth Arrow’s “Social Choice and Individual Values,” conceptions of *Homo Economicus* began to make inroads into political science as a theory of choice. Arrow was rapidly followed by Downs’ (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy* and Olson’s (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action* to form the rational choice trifecta that every

political science graduate student reads to enter the profession. Over the next 40 years, the number of rational choice-centered articles published in the *American Political Science Review*, the flagship journal of the American Political Science Association, grew from none to almost half of all articles (Green & Shapiro, 1994). Today, the tendency toward a rational choice-dominated field has not abated but it has stabilized. Of all the 2013 and 2014 articles appearing in the *American Political Science Review*, 49% either explicitly claimed a rational choice theoretical perspective or implicitly assumed it.

Why is this a problem for civic education? Within the rational choice framework, the issues of whether more people should participate in our democracy and how we encourage more participation are unasked questions; they are irrelevant because it is assumed that citizens must not see any expected utility from participating or else they would. Rational choice is an exceedingly conservative theology that prevents us from asking what *should be* or *might be* but permits studying only what *is*. For example, if people don't vote or attend neighborhood association meetings, the only permissible research question under this framework is why not. Researchers cannot ask whether people should do these things, what prevents them from doing them, or how might they be encouraged.

Politics is inherently a value-laden activity and trying to remove those values, I would argue, only drove them underground and out of sight. It isn't that there are no values in the dominant paradigm; it is only that they are not talked about. Rational choice implicitly assumes a normative framework and carries value judgments about political outcomes. As rational choice practitioners Riker and Ordeshook (1973) put it, "Society, not being human, cannot have preferences in any proper sense of 'have' nor indeed can it order the preferences it does not have" (p. 78). Thus with rational choice, political science entered a world where all preferences were merely the sum of individual preferences. Political science's dominant paradigm rejects the notion that individuals coming together may possess a different set of preferences as a group than the sum of their individual parts or that participating in a group may cause preferences to evolve or change. This assertion is made despite commonsense evidence to the contrary. Few people would argue that the actions of a family are simply the sum of individual preferences devoid of any collective interests. Although rational choice theory purports to be value free, the reality is that the perspective ends up positing a profoundly conservative set of values beneath the surface. Rational choice prevents—through its assumptions—any investigation into or questions about a common or collective good.

Furthermore, although rational choice models are inundating the political science literature, they fail to garner much support in the empirical world. When one looks at what the extensive rational choice literature has contributed to our understanding of politics, it is difficult not

to be underwhelmed. As McKelvey and Rosenthal (1978) noted, it only rarely led to “rigorous empirical analysis of real world political behavior” (p. 405). Similarly, Fiorina (1976) said that the empirical achievements of rational choice theory are a little like “dwelling on the rushing accomplishments of Joe Namath” (p. 48). The literature on campaigns, elections, and voting behavior has in large part led to the empty and vacuous politics in which we find ourselves today, leaving so many with a deep dissatisfaction with our democracy. Rather than offering citizens the tools that they need to be better citizens and participate in our political system in a more powerful way, we have provided the tools that allow for the routine manipulation of citizens and reduced effectiveness in the political arena.

Thus political science has caused the marginalization of citizens in a political system where they should be front and center. If politics is just the sum of individual preferences, then experts only need to calculate solutions to problems that provide the largest net gain (maximization) of individual utilities. Also, advocates of policies need only to mobilize supporters on their side in order to increase the likelihood that their solution will be viewed as the one that maximizes utility. Politics becomes a numbers game with a technical solution. Yet this approach fails to account for the reality of today’s problems. We inhabit a complex political world where people hold disparate values in varying intensities, and reconciling these entails many trade-offs and compromises. For political science to become relevant to the problems of democracy it needs a theory that understands the nature of contemporary democratic society and accounts for its complexity. Although not a theory, Rittel and Webber’s (1973) conception of *wicked problems* can help to reconcile our approach to political science and civic education in colleges and universities with the problems of democracy.

Wicked Problems

In their foundational work, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” Rittel and Webber (1973) argued that “the professional’s job was once seen as solving an assortment of problems that appeared to be definable, understandable, and consensual” (p. 156). But they go on to point out that “the professionalized cognitive and occupational styles that were refined in the first half of this century . . . are not readily adapted to contemporary conceptions of interacting open systems and to contemporary concerns with equity” (p. 156). They argue that today’s problems are *wicked problems*. Wicked problems are those that are difficult or impossible to solve because they involve incomplete or contradictory knowledge, there are a large number of people and opinions involved, the large costs of solutions, and/or the interconnected nature of the problem with other problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Not only do wicked problems have no definitive meaning, but they have no definitive solutions according to standard technocratic measures of success. In other words, the solutions to wicked problems cannot be good or bad, true or false; they can only affect a problem and in turn give rise to additional spillover effects in other areas.

Nonetheless, Carcasson (2013) notes that “the tensions inherent in wicked problems can certainly be addressed in ways that are better or worse” (p. 38). He argues that “tackling wicked problems requires different forms of inquiry, communication, problem solving, and decision making than we often see on politics or public policy research” (p. 39). Both Carcasson (2013) and Roberts (2000) see three strategies for dealing with wicked problems.

First, the expert (authoritative) strategies seek to tame wicked problems by placing authority to make decisions in the hands of relatively small numbers of stakeholders, thus reducing the wickedness of the problem. The authorities define the problem and come up with a solution. Although this strategy has the advantage of reducing complexity and streamlining decision making (Roberts, 2000), its disadvantage lies in decisions having decreased legitimacy and less widespread acceptance.

The second strategy for dealing with wicked problems is the use of adversarial (competitive) strategies. Adversarial strategies, like a market, are zero sum—some interests will win whereas others will lose. These strategies have the advantage of being efficient, as competing solutions are evaluated through cost-benefit analysis and the one that maximizes utility is chosen. But this strategy can consume resources of the competing groups and the loser feels left out.

The third way to deal with wicked problems is through deliberative (collaborative) strategies that discard the zero sum mentality and instead adopt a win-win perspective. By involving stakeholders in deliberation and dialogue and reaching consensus, solutions to wicked problems can be implemented that maximize acceptance and legitimacy. Although more resources are required at the beginning as the problem comes to be defined and solutions are negotiated, implementation can proceed more smoothly with fewer resources involved in building support or strong-arming opponents.

Because wicked problems are value laden, they involve the basic reality of modern democracies: the need to involve a broad range of people and perspectives (Carcasson, 2013). Democracy, broadly viewed, is a mechanism for decision making among people who have a shared existence in space and time. Carcasson (2013) identifies deliberative engagement as the preferred mechanism for dealing with these problems of democracy: “Citizens come together and consider the relevant facts and values from multiple points of view, listen and react to one another in order to think critically about the various options before them, and ultimately attempt to work through

the underlying tensions and tough choices inherent to wicked problems” (p. 41). Ultimately, the value-laden nature of wicked problems does not make their solution amenable to a simple aggregation of preferences in the manner rational choice literature suggests. In the end, a more nuanced and complex vision of decision making in a democracy is needed to help deal with these problems.

Civic Engagement

A focus on wicked problems also moves our efforts away from civic *education* and toward civic *engagement*. This is a popular idea; in recent years civic engagement has become a buzzword in higher education. Schools have been renaming their service learning programs civic engagement programs; Campus Compact now claims to be doing civic engagement, and scholars are writing about service learning as a kind of civic engagement. Service learning is out and civic engagement is in. Yet as so often happens, much of the emphasis on civic engagement is simply old wine being poured into new bottles. As Saltmarsh (2005) astutely notes, much civic education focuses on service and volunteerism. For service learning to be engagement, it must wed academic rigor with real civic experiences; it must advance students’ knowledge of course materials by “connecting subject interests with civic participation, inculcating the value of civic participation, and teaching skills for productive civic participation” (McCartney, 2013, p. 15). Clearly, the fact that people feel the need to clarify service learning with the words “proper” or “done right” indicates the degree to which we must move beyond service learning to provide students with positive civic experiences that do not reduce to volunteerism. Service stresses a person’s contribution in a nonpolitical manner—it emphasizes helping the less fortunate out of a sense of noblesse oblige—whereas civic engagement stresses student agency and power in caring for the health of the community.

The challenge for any institution of higher learning is to get beyond contemporary forms of political education—whether that be a lecture-based government class, party-affiliated student clubs, or volunteerism—and learn to tie rich civic experiences to concepts and skills from across the curriculum. As Ronan (2011) points out, civic engagement must move the whole person along a continuum from civics, voting, and patriotism toward deliberation, concord, and public action. Deliberation, concord, and public action are crucial to civic engagement because they provide students with the skills to tackle the problems of democracy. As Ronan notes, these three concepts are deeper and more transformative and thus get closer to the ideas that Mill and Rousseau thought participation in the system would bring. Institutions of higher education can and should provide students with the experience-based skills that are necessary for deliberation,

concord, and public action and essential for solving the wicked problems of democracy. Ultimately, for real civic engagement to occur, our century-old model of lecture-driven education, our preoccupation with rational choice frameworks in political science, and a few extracurricular opportunities for political involvement and volunteering will have to give way to a more holistic notion of civic education that seamlessly incorporates democratic practices across the campus, from the classrooms, to the dorms, and the community beyond.

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