

A close-up photograph of the American flag, focusing on the blue field with white stars and the red and white stripes. The flag is draped and folded, creating deep shadows and highlights in the fabric. The stars are embroidered in white, and the stripes are made of a textured, woven fabric. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wooden table or a similar material.

Giving Civics a Sporting Chance

By Matt Impink and Sheila Suess Kennedy

Chapter One: The Questions and Why They Matter

This year, as every year, millions of children will spend time playing various sports, and developing their skills and knowledge of those sports. In 2008, in the United States, 69 percent of girls and 75 percent of boys participated in organized or team sports.¹ Interest in sports crosses social and ethnic boundaries, and involves children and adults from all groups. The 2014 Super Bowl drew an average viewership of 111.5 million, and inspired 5.6 million people to send 25.3 million tweets. (President Obama’s 2014 State of the Union address garnered only 33.5 million viewers.) Given these numbers, the amount of newsprint and television time devoted to sports, the popularity of sports bars and the ubiquity of sports talk, we think it’s safe to say that the American public exhibits a very high level of what we might call “sports literacy.”



*This book is about America’s very **low** level of civic literacy. Why can people quote football and baseball statistics for hours, explain the most arcane rules governing sports from bowling to curling, and cite the performance history of even minor athletes, but then are unable to identify the Enlightenment or the rights protected by the First Amendment? Why are people who can knowledgeably discuss the business performance of major league sports franchises confused about the differences between capitalism and socialism? Why are fans who are able to predict the speed and trajectory of a pitcher’s fastball unable to distinguish between science and religion, or between a scientific theory and our conversational use of the word “theory” to mean “best guess”?*

This book considers how we have gotten to this point, and what it would take to make civics at least half as important to the American cultural experience as sports.

Through a Lens of Local History

In 1927, the city of Indianapolis bought Casino Gardens, an old dance and gambling hall, and renamed it Municipal Gardens. In 1952, the city opened the facility as a public park. It quickly became a central institution in the then-growing community west of the White River and just across from the city’s downtown. In addition to its dance hall, it became a center for athletics; basketball and football were especially popular among the working class population. The Gardens became a haven for the area’s youth.

In 1958, Don Stout, a World War II Air Force Veteran, began a second job at the Gardens so his son could learn to play football. He organized a youth basketball league in the makeshift gym in the upstairs dance hall, and despite the fact that a regulation-sized court could not be fitted into the space, the league became immensely popular. Neighborhood residents would congregate in the cramped gym an hour before the games to get choice seats. Late arrivals would sometimes stand 15 deep to watch the rowdy games, and it set a high bar for other youth sports leagues in the city.²

In its heyday, what officially became the Don Stout Basketball League would have three age groups totaling around 200 boys and girls. In the early years, the founders of the league, including Stout, would regularly choose the best players to form one of the city’s few AAU traveling teams. It did not take long for talented young basketball players from all over the city to come and play at the Gardens; indeed, the Gardens became the centerpiece of basketball development in talent-rich Indianapolis. The league claims nine AAU National Championships, eight Indiana Mr. Basketball winners, 69 Indiana All-Stars, and 32 professional players. More recent Gardens alumni include Eric Gordon of the New Orleans Pelicans

¹ Sabo & Veliz, 2008.

² WCTV Indianapolis, 2011.

and George Hill of the Indiana Pacers. Before his death in 2012, Stout estimated that between 14,000 and 15,000 players had come through the Gardens during his years with the league.

This institution was resilient through many changes experienced by the surrounding neighborhood. The Haughville area of Indianapolis has always been a working class neighborhood, but it has experienced significant changes in terms of race and socioeconomic status. During the 1980s and 1990s especially, residents with the means to do so moved out, school performance declined, and crime increased significantly. Yet, fathers who had played in the league continued to drive their sons and daughters from the suburbs—past many other sports venues—to Haughville to play at the Gardens. The old guard—the men who founded the league—remained involved well into their twilight years. Long-time coach Red Taylor said in 2009:

It gets in your blood and you don't want to leave. The rewards are fantastic. I still get calls from my kids. People around the country know about Municipal Gardens. It was always a well-kept secret in Indiana, but that's because we didn't do a lot of bragging. We just kept working with the kids.³

The Gardens generated what sociologists and political scientists call *social capital*, and what most of us think of when we hear the term *civil society*. There are lessons for civics education that we can take from that history.

Sports and American Culture

There is an argument to be made that the United States is experiencing a *sports renaissance* that rivals similar moments in Ancient Greece or Rome. Time is marked by new, if unofficial, holidays (e.g., Super Bowl Sunday). Voluntary participation increases every year across all demographic groups, assimilating immigrants and new community members alike. In an era with declining sources of traditional journalism, the media continue to dedicate enormous and disproportionate resources both to sports reporting and to in-depth analysis of sporting events—an allocation of resources that they justify by pointing to the demand side of the equation and the undeniable interest of the public. Scarce tax dollars are spent erecting public stadia and other facilities for sports. Some of our most heated arguments are not about politics or religion, but the merits of preferred teams.



The cultural and social importance of sports has never been higher. On February 2, 2014, an estimated 111.5 million viewers tuned their televisions to watch the Super Bowl, the National Football League's championship game. Each March, millions of Americans fill out brackets, competing with friends and co-workers to predict winners and losers of basketball games in the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament. ESPN's once-revolutionary decision to devote 24 hours, seven days a week to sports coverage proved prescient; it is now the most watched television network in America and generates advertising

revenue that dwarfs all competitors. It's not too farfetched to suggest that Americans have an addiction to sports. Indeed, despite his belief in the intrinsic merits of sports, athletic scholar John Gerdy acknowledged the addictive element:

Rather than interacting with a friend or family member, our eyes and attention turn instead to the tube, where we slowly slip into a collective ESPN-induced stupor. Rather than getting involved, sport makes it easy for us to choose to sit idly and watch, television remote in hand. Sport is what we talk about when we want to avoid thinking or talking about anything meaningful or important.⁴

Noam Chomsky saw the addiction in an even less positive light:

Well, in our society, we have things that you might use your intelligence on, like politics, but people really can't get involved in them in a very serious way—so what they do is they put their minds into other things,

³ Ballard, 2009.

⁴ Gerdy, 2002, pp. 22-23.

such as sports. You're trained to be obedient; you don't have an interesting job; there's no work around for you that's creative; in the cultural environment you're a passive observer of usually pretty tawdry stuff; political and social life are out of your range, they're in the hands of the rich folks. So what's left? Well, one thing that's left is sports—so you put a lot of the intelligence and the thought and the self-confidence into that. And I suppose that's also one of the basic functions it serves in the society in general: it occupies the population, and keeps them from trying to get involved with things that really matter.⁵

Sports entertainment has become the distraction of choice in contemporary America, and it continues to grow, *thanks in large part to an organized and sophisticated youth development system*. Sports culture did not grow to its current importance spontaneously. It was cultivated.

In public and private schools, after-school programs, playgrounds, or travel teams, participation in youth sports is at an all-time high in America. An estimated 7.8 million high school students participated in sports in the 2012-13 school year.⁶ Interest in sports crosses all ethnic and socioeconomic divisions. Participation and interest are fed by a vigorous grassroots system of youth sports for children in elementary and middle school. In the United States, 69 percent of girls and 75 percent of boys played organized or team sports in 2008.⁷ Sports play a crucial role in civil society venues outside of these formal school and after-school programs. Of young children in grades 3-5, 77 percent of boys and 68 percent of girls play in community centers or leagues, private or commercial organizations, and church-based programs,⁸ not unlike Municipal Gardens in Indianapolis. Furthermore, sports are no longer the exclusive domain of males; girls' participation increased dramatically following passage of Title IX in 1972.⁹

Whether one considers Americans' obsession with sports an unfortunate distraction or a mechanism for building civil society, there are important lessons we can learn from the sports culture and its infrastructure—and many of those lessons can be applied to increase civic literacy and engagement of Americans.

Civic literacy as we are using the term is the minimum knowledge base needed to understand the political and social environment of our 21st century world, and to be (in the words of William Galston) “a competent democratic citizen.”

What Do We Mean by Civic Literacy?

In any discussion, it's important to define one's terms. What do we mean when we say that Americans display low levels of civic literacy? For purposes of this discussion, civic literacy is the minimum level of public knowledge necessary for *informed* civic participation. It encompasses an acquaintance with American history; an understanding of the nation's constituent documents—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights—together with their roots and their subsequent amendment and interpretation; and sufficient familiarity with and comprehension of basic economic, scientific, and policy terminology to permit the formation of reasonably informed opinions on matters of policy and the performance of elected officials.

In other words, civic literacy, as we are using the term, is the minimum knowledge base needed to understand the political and social environment of our 21st century world, and to be (in the words of William Galston) “a competent democratic citizen.”¹⁰ In Chapter Four, we will elaborate on the content of civic literacy.

To say that such basic knowledge is in short supply would be a massive understatement. Policymakers and pundits pay a great deal of attention to America's fiscal deficit; however, we would argue that our civic deficit is far deeper, and infinitely more troubling. Research from a multitude of sources over a long period of time provides ample evidence of a widespread lack of constitutional competence and civic knowledge in the United States. Only 36 percent of Americans can

⁵ Chomsky, 2013, p. 99.

⁶ Sports and Fitness Industry Association, 2015.

⁷ Sabo & Veliz, 2008.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Galston, 2001, pp. 217-234.

correctly name the three branches of government.¹¹ Fewer than one-half of 12th grade students can describe the meaning of federalism.¹² A 1998 study conducted by the National Constitution Center found that nearly 94 percent of teenagers could name the Fresh Prince of Bel Air, but only 2.2 percent could name the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and only 35 percent of teenagers can correctly identify “We the People” as the first three words of the Constitution.¹³ Most Americans (58 percent) are unable to identify even a single department in the United States Cabinet, according to a recent national poll of 800 adults.¹⁴

Some 70 percent of Americans cannot name both of their state’s Senators, and the majority cannot name any congressional candidate in their own district, even at the height of a congressional campaign.

The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) 2010 report on civics competencies found barely one-quarter of the nation’s 4th and 8th graders to be proficient in civics while only 24 percent of 12th graders were proficient. Only 21 percent of high school seniors can list two privileges that United States citizens have that noncitizens do not. Over 60 percent could not identify the Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination.¹⁵ One scholar reacted to the 2010 NAEP results by worrying that the amount of civic knowledge in this country may be “too low to sustain democratic governance.”¹⁶

There is no consensus on the reasons for this widespread civic ignorance. All we really know is that (a) the civic deficit exists, and (b) it’s bad. The statistics just quoted are only the tip of the iceberg—indeed, most of the available research on civic literacy simply confirms the public’s widespread lack of familiarity with the most basic elements of America’s history, government, economic system, and scientific principles.¹⁷

In his recent book, *Democracy and Political Ignorance*, Ilya Somin grimly catalogued the public’s lack of familiarity with current events, even during times when those events are generating considerable public attention, and the even more troubling lack of knowledge about the basic structure of American government. As he noted, most of the public is unaware of a wide range of important government programs structured as tax deductions and payments for services,

and unaware of the extent to which most such programs transfer benefits to the affluent.¹⁸ Some 70 percent of Americans cannot name both of their state’s Senators, and the majority cannot name *any* congressional candidate in their own district, even at the height of a congressional campaign.¹⁹ Worse:

Majorities are ignorant of such basic aspects of the U.S. political system as who has the power to declare war, the respective functions of the three branches of government, and who controls monetary policy . . . A 2002 Columbia University study indicated that 35 percent believed that Karl Marx’s dictum “From each according to his ability to each according to his need” is in the Constitution (34 percent said they did not know), and only one-third understood that a Supreme Court decision overruling *Roe v. Wade* would not make abortion illegal throughout the country.²⁰

We don’t have empirical data showing the demonstrable (rather than theorized) consequences of low levels of civic literacy. Does civic ignorance really matter, and if so, how? Do low levels of civic knowledge correlate with or predict

¹¹ Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2007.

¹² NAEP, 2006.

¹³ National Constitution Center, 1998.

¹⁴ Polling Company Inc./WomanTrend, 2003.

¹⁵ National Center for Education Statistics, 2011.

¹⁶ Niemi, Richard, & Junn, 1998.

¹⁷ For a comprehensive, annotated bibliography addressing the civic deficit, visit the Center for Civic Literacy’s website civilliteracy.iupui.edu.

¹⁸ Somin, 2013, p. 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

political extremism? Political apathy? Does low civic literacy correlate with or predict efforts to discriminate, defined as willingness to deny basic civil rights to disfavored groups? Do civically literate/illiterate people have different definitions of what it means to be an American? What aspects of civic knowledge are most predictive of civic engagement, defined as regular voting, participation in democratic deliberation and political activism? Do low levels of civic knowledge hinder government accountability? If so, how? What about our media? Do the journalists and reporters upon whom Americans depend for information know enough to place the news they report in accurate context?

Ignorance of the way in which government functions is a problem even for people who reject political involvement, have no desire to be active citizens, or to participate by voting. Emerging research suggests, for example, that lower levels of civic literacy translate into lower levels of personal efficacy. If you don't know what federalism is, if you have no idea what the differences between local, state, and national government activities are. How do you decide where to take your complaint about that pothole? Where do you go to get your zoning classification changed? If you are in business or practicing a profession, ignorance of relevant government regulations—and their sources—can spell the difference between profit and loss.

These personal costs are more than matched by the effect of civic ignorance on our democratic institutions. As former Congressman Lee Hamilton has written:

The truth is, for our democracy to work it needs not just an engaged citizenry, but an informed one. We've known this since the nation's earliest days. The creators of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 thought the notion important enough to enshrine it in the state's founding document: "Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people," they wrote, "are necessary for the preservation of rights and liberties."

Getting the basic facts right is essential to governing well.²¹

A 1999 study by Popkin and Dimock found that citizens with low levels of information can't follow the public discussion of issues, are more critical of the give and take of policy debates, make political judgments on the basis of perceived character rather than on judgments about the issues, and are much less likely to participate in the political process.²²

When citizens don't know what their government is supposed to be doing...it shouldn't be surprising that so many are uneasy, cynical, and suspicious.

Although there is scant empirical evidence on the subject, it is also likely that current distrust of government institutions is linked to low levels of basic civic information about those institutions, coupled, ironically, with unprecedented amounts of information and misinformation supplied by our burgeoning and fragmented communications networks. When citizens don't know what their government is supposed to be doing, when they have no framework within which to evaluate the tsunami of charges and counter-charges that characterize today's media and political environment, it shouldn't be surprising that so many are uneasy, cynical, and suspicious. In a system that depends in so many ways upon citizen participation and voluntary compliance with laws and regulations, that lack of trust is a non-trivial problem; it becomes part of a feedback loop that impedes efforts to make government transparent and responsive.

Despite much hand wringing on the part of lawyers and political scientists, there is no scholarly agreement on the essential elements of civic literacy—the knowledge and skills required for even minimally effective participation in civic life.²³ And there is no consensus on *why* our periodic efforts to improve citizenship education have

failed to have a lasting effect. Furthermore, discussions about civic literacy can be confusing, because there is a tendency to use a number of related terms interchangeably. We talk about *civic engagement*, *civic skills*, and *civic knowledge* without bothering to draw important connections and distinctions. That's understandable; the exercise of citizenship requires skills, those skills require knowledge, and it is often difficult to tease out differences.

²¹ Hamilton, 2015. p. 2.

²² Popkin & Dimock, 1999.

²³ For one effort to describe that essential knowledge, see Kennedy, 2014.

Then there is the relationship of knowledge and skills to *values*.

Citizenship, as we currently understand it, is based upon acceptance of values that are thought to be foundational to that particular national culture. Jonathan Haidt recently elaborated upon that thesis in a book tracing the evolutionary advantages conferred by shared principles and by what he calls “groupishness.” In *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, he writes:

Human beings . . . are one-of-a-kind freaks of nature who occasionally—even if rarely—can be as selfless and team-spirited as bees. If your moral ideal is the person who devotes her life to helping strangers, well then, OK—such people are so rare that we send film crews out to record them for the evening news. But if you focus, as Darwin did, on behavior in *groups* of people who know each other and share goals and values, then our ability to work together, divide labor, help each other and function as a team is so all-pervasive that we don’t even notice it.²⁴

This ability to cooperate, this *shared intentionality* and common understanding of how things are supposed to be done, Haidt argues, is one of the things that separates humans from other species. It is absolutely critical to the formation of a society:

Humans construct moral communities out of shared norms, institutions, and gods that, even in the twenty-first century, they fight, kill and die to defend.²⁵

Citizenship thus implies certain types of shared values and what we might call team participation, or at least team spirit. (That sports analogy again!) Questions about the nature of citizenship, the characteristics of a just and effective government and the attributes of a good society have been a major focus of philosophers since Aristotle first defined a good society as one that encourages human flourishing. (We discuss citizenship more in Chapter Two.)

Certain civic behaviors are considered necessary to the maintenance of democratic self-government, and we do know that there is a correlation between civic literacy and the informed exercise of those behaviors. (We consider civic skills and the nature of productive civic engagement in Chapter Three.)

Historically, as we will see in Chapter Two, citizenship was reserved for the upper classes, elites who were educated in the necessary skills, socialized to exercise those skills, and taught to exhibit the appropriate attitudes. The question democratic countries face today is how to prepare democratic polities—the “masses”—for competent citizenship. What does a citizen—as opposed to a mere resident—look like? What must she know? What skills must he exhibit? Are there certain values that citizens of a nation—members of the national “team”—absolutely must share? Most scholars answer that question in the affirmative, but if that is so, what are those values and why is their broad cultural acceptance important?

The American Team

A not-insignificant number of Americans answer that last question by insisting that ours is a Christian Nation and the values we must share to be authentically American are Christian values. That answer ignores several inconvenient facts, including the reality of our national demographics. The United States is one of the most religiously and ethnically diverse countries in the world; furthermore, although the country is predominantly Christian, doctrinal differences among Christian denominations are often as deep as or deeper than the differences between Christians and Jews or Muslims. Adherents of virtually every religion on the globe live in the United States, and recent polls put the number of secular Americans (those unaffiliated with any religious body, sometimes called the *nones*) at close to 20 percent. Religious homogeneity cannot act as the glue that holds our team together, because it doesn’t exist.

America’s religious diversity and our increasing differences in race and national origin, socioeconomic status, education, and lifestyle pose a significant challenge to America’s social and governing institutions. Today’s Americans come in assorted colors, ethnicities, and ideologies. We read different books and newspapers, visit different blogs, watch different television programs, attend different churches, and even speak different languages. The common cultural ground we share is

²⁴ Haidt, 2012, pp. 229-30.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

diminishing and our diversity is growing. Given that reality, we face a pressing question: What common values and beliefs are needed to enable and sustain the necessary “groupishness” and define our collective civic enterprise? What are the essential characteristics of our team? What makes us all Americans?

The national motto of the United States is *e pluribus unum*, “out of the many, one.” Most prominent social and political theorists argue that a common belief structure, what some scholars call a “civil religion,” is required to turn the many into the one. (Robert Bellah first coined the phrase “civil religion” in 1967, in an article that remains the standard reference for the concept.²⁶) It is when we get to the question of the proper content of such a civil religion, however, that we encounter significant debate. In fact, the nature of civic virtue and the elements that should form our civic consensus have been the subject of debate since the Revolutionary War. Over the past decades, as the nation’s diversity has dramatically increased, that debate has taken on added urgency, with political theorists, pundits, sociologists, and scholars of religion all weighing in. The right to dictate the content of America’s national value structure, or civil religion, is at the heart of what has been called—aptly—the culture war.

Most of us recognize that a society as diverse as that of the United States requires some sort of civic glue. Whatever you call that common value structure—a civil religion or patriotic belief structure or just the American creed—it is what provides citizens with a sense of common purpose and identity. As we have seen in the culture wars, some of the most heated disputes revolve around the identification of those values. The United States is not and has never been an officially Christian Nation, although it has historically been culturally Protestant and both the New and Old Testaments are an indelible part of American civic and popular culture.

The U.S. Constitution contains no reference to God; indeed, it specifically rejects the use of any religious test for citizenship or public office. To be consistent with the Constitution, any civil religion must respect the nation’s commitment to individual autonomy in matters of belief, while still providing an overarching value structure to which most, if not all, citizens can subscribe. This is no small task in a nation founded upon the principle that government must be neutral among belief systems. It is a formidable challenge in a country where so few citizens are familiar with either the history or philosophical roots of the First Amendment religion clauses, or with the constitutional separation of church and state. This constitutional requirement of state neutrality has long been a source of considerable political tension between citizens who are intent upon imposing their religious beliefs on their neighbors and those who reject efforts to base laws of general application on biblical principles embraced by a fervent minority of their fellow citizens.

But if religion cannot supply the requisite belief structure, *our constituent documents and national story can*. To the extent that Americans do endorse an overarching ideology or civil religion, it is a belief system based upon the values of individual liberty and equal rights enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. It is precisely because the nation’s constituent documents act as both our civil religion *and* our operating manual—in sports lingo, our rulebook—that civic knowledge is so important, and civic ignorance so threatening.

What Comes Next

The thesis of this book is fairly simple: self-government in a democratic state requires a civically-educated citizenry. When a country’s population is very diverse, as it is in the United States, it becomes even more important that citizens share a common understanding of the history and philosophy of their governing institutions. In the absence of other ties—Americans don’t share race, religion, or national origin—a devotion to the nation’s constitutional principles is critical to the formation of national identity. That devotion, however, must be based on a genuine shared understanding of the history and context of the Constitution and other constituent documents.

Even before the modern age, America was one of the world’s most diverse countries, composed of many different ethnicities, races, and religions, with different histories, different experiences, and different cultural antecedents. In prior times, those differences were countered to some extent by widely shared cultural experiences: reading the daily mass-circulation newspaper, discussing programs that aired on one of three television broadcast networks (did you see *I Love Lucy* last night?), attending public schools, registering for the military draft—and of course, attending and following sporting

²⁶ Bellah, 2005.

events and arguing about the merits of the various preferred teams. In our increasingly differentiated and privatized social landscape, however, citizens no longer have most of those (or other) avenues of shared communication and experience. Sport is actually one of the few that remains.

If Americans are to constitute a polity, rather than a collection of tribes—if we are to forge *unum* from our ever-increasing *pluribus*—we need an overarching national value system to which all of our disparate communities can subscribe. If ever-growing diversity poses a significant challenge to America’s social cohesion, we must identify and emphasize the common themes and beliefs that define our collective civic enterprise, that define what it is that makes us Americans.

To put it another way, all governments are human enterprises, and like all human enterprises, they will have their ups and downs. In the United States, however, the consequences of the down periods are potentially more serious than in more homogeneous nations, precisely because this *is* a country based upon a set of ideals rather than on common ancestry or religion. Americans do not share a single ethnicity, religion, or race. Culture warriors to the contrary, *we never have*. We don’t share what sociologists call a “comprehensive worldview.” What we *do* share is an approach to self-government that incorporates a particular set of values, and when we don’t know what that approach or those values are or where they came from, we lose a critical part of what makes us Americans.

Citizens who are smart enough to memorize all of the teams that ever won the World Series and the years of those wins are capable of learning which rights are protected by the Bill of Rights. People who can discuss the intricacies of major league ownership policies can learn what the branches of government are and what they do. Fans who follow the ups and downs of a favorite football player, and who can describe the philosophy of their favorite coach are capable of understanding partisan policy differences. The millions of Americans who place bets on the outcomes of various games and sports contests and who spout the statistics that justify their reasoning are capable of grasping the differences between capitalism and socialism. Sports literacy is a valuable skill set, but its ubiquity only underscores that many Americans have the capacity to be civically literate as well.

Americans are smart. The question is: how do we make people care? How do we make civics a national sport? That is the central question we will try to answer in the chapters that follow.

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Chapter Two: Citizenship—or Us versus Them

It's a truism that membership has its privileges. It is also true that, to be a member of anything, non-members are required; that is, for there to be a meaningful "we," there must also be a "they" against whom "we" define ourselves. Humans define ourselves both by who we are, and who we are not. Arguable or not, helpful or not, this paradigm clearly applies to definitions of citizenship (which is a term denoting membership in the contemporary nation-state) no less than it defines some of the more rabid sports fans among us.

There are Nations, and Then There Are Nations

In the megalopolis that is the Eastern Seaboard, the geography of allegiances to the Boston Red Sox and the New York Mets is often blurry. Before the devastation of Bill Buckner's legendary error and the resulting Red Sox collapse at the end of the 1986 World Series, there was a lively debate over the contending teams' territorial claims to fandom in western Connecticut. As *Boston Globe* writer Nathan Cobb explained:

Yes, the 1986 World Series is Boston vs. New York, that meanest of sports rivalries. But in Connecticut, where Boston and New York baseball fans are New England's Hatfields and McCoys, the border between the two camps has suddenly shifted. The traditional boundary—meaning the dangerous line you cross when traveling from Red Sox turf to Yankee turf—is found near Hartford, roughly parallel to the Connecticut River.

Why a different boundary from the one that separates Yankee country from Red Sox nation? One theory states that the Mets, born just two dozen years ago, have not had time to penetrate farther into central Connecticut. A second argues that such Yankees players of the past as Joe DiMaggio and Tony Lazzeri still engender ethnic loyalties deep within the state's urban pockets. Whatever the reason, Yankee fans were laying low here Saturday night. Torn by two hatreds, they seemed unsure whom to loathe. "I'm afraid I might have too much to drink and actually start rooting for one of these teams," snarled Frank Nagy, a Bridgeport electrician, as he tilted a long-neck bottle to his lips.²⁷

The article initially received little attention, but is anthropologically important as the first recorded reference to the *Red Sox Nation*. The much more celebrated Boston sports writer Dan Shaughnessy is often erroneously given credit for inventing the term, especially after his popular 1996 book *At Fenway: Dispatches From Red Sox Nation* cemented the term into the canon for fans. But it was Shaughnessy himself who concluded that it was Cobb who first used what became part of the language around all of New England and anywhere else one finds Red Sox fans. For years a popular blog by the same name chronicled the many laments of die-hard fans who faithfully awaited the club's first World Series Championship since 1918. Eventually, the Red Sox organization adopted the name to sell membership cards and premium seats at Fenway Park. The term has since entered the mainstream and is used in the baseball community as shorthand for the dedicated Red Sox fan base.

And dedicated they are. In fall 2004, when political observers and pundits were following the close Presidential contest between incumbent George W. Bush and Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, baseball fans were much more concerned with the prospects of breaking the "Curse of the Bambino" and ending the Red Sox' 86-year drought since their last championship. (Kerry, himself a citizen of Red Sox Nation, highlighted his support of the team publicly, in part to remind New Englanders that there was a little election going on at the same time.)

Despite the fact that New England tends to be liberal and Democratic, four years under George W. Bush seemed less consequential to many fans than 86 years of waiting for their Red Sox to finally win again. Kerry supporter Elizabeth Coyte expressed what may have been the collective sentiment of Red Sox Nation when asked whether a Kerry or Red Sox victory would be more important, "Definitely the Red Sox. Is that bad?"²⁸ The Boston Red Sox went on to sweep the St. Louis Cardinals and win the 2004 World Series. Six days later John Kerry lost the 2004 presidential election to George W. Bush. We presume Elizabeth was satisfied.

²⁷ Cobb, 1986.

²⁸ Finer, 2004.

Who is a Citizen?

Today, we use the term citizenship to refer to a person's legal status in a nation-state, and we recognize that today—just as with Red Sox Nation—it may represent a voluntary, chosen affiliation. However, the history and meaning of the concept is far more complicated. For one thing, as we have previously noted, some people define their allegiances, identity, and citizenship in opposition to someone or somewhere else. Red Sox fans likely came to so strongly identify with the team in part because of their close proximity to Yankee and Mets fans. The “border war” in Western Connecticut during the 1986 World Series was the perfect moment to give birth to Red Sox Nation.

Such references to war, although hyperbolic, are reminders of the fact that, throughout history, conflict has served to test and strengthen civic identity. In the United States, as in most countries, patriotism is at its highest during times of war.

Derek Heater's, *A Brief History of Citizenship*, examined the ways in which citizenship acts as a form of socio-political identity. Historically, feudal, monarchical, and tyrannical forms of governance were based on the relationship of one individual to a stronger individual who had demanded loyalty. The development of a more generalized national loyalty grew out of the shared acceptance of territorial boundaries and the exclusive right of those in power to exercise coercive force. Citizenship came to be seen as the relationship of the individual to the idea of the state:

The civic identity is enshrined in the rights conveyed by the state and the duties performed by the individual citizens, who are all autonomous persons, equal in status. Good citizens are those who feel an allegiance to the state and have a sense of responsibility in discharging their duties. As a consequence they need the skills appropriate for this civic participation.²⁹

At some point between 1800 and 2000, the idea of the state and the idea of citizenship became effectively fused, especially in Western society. All citizens are called upon to contribute in some fashion to the success of the nation.

It Began in Greece

Our earliest recorded examples of the concept of citizenship are from ancient Greece. In Sparta, the title of citizen was granted only to landholding men who completed military service and helped control the slave population of workers. In Athens, however, leaders developed a different form of citizenship. Aristotle (as quoted in Heater, 2004) believed that a special kind of civic friendship would ensure that citizens within the state reached *homonoia* or concord:

[Concord] is something more than agreement in opinion, for that might be found in people who do not know one another . . . we say that there is concord in a state when the citizens agree about their interests, adopt a policy unanimously and proceed to carry it out . . . But bad men . . . want more than their share and . . . the result is discord.³⁰

Indeed, civic virtue is the belief that citizens will not shirk their public obligations, nor elevate their own interests above those of the polity. Heater quotes Aristotle:

There is this to be said for the Many. Each of them by himself may not be of good quality; but when they all come together it is possible that they may surpass – collectively and as a body... the quality of the few best... each can bring his share of goodness and moral prudence.”³¹



²⁹ Heater, 2004, p. 2.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 28-29.

These Aristotelian ideals have continued to influence attitudes toward citizenship, but they were especially potent in Rome. Roman citizens enjoyed many rights that non-citizens lacked. Those rights included voting, sitting in the assembly, and—depending upon one’s class status—running for elected office.³² *Civis Romanus sum* (I am a Roman Citizen) was a declaration of pride everywhere in the ancient world. There were many benefits of Roman citizenship, including protection against torture and a guarantee of trial by jury in Rome for those accused of crimes. These benefits secured the loyalty of citizens and, not incidentally, generated numerous potential recruits for the military.

The Romans made an important strategic decision about the grant of citizenship status. When they expanded the empire, they also expanded citizenship. Rather than open conflict with the troublesome city-state of Tusculum, for example, Rome allowed it to establish its own municipal government, and extended to its residents the rights of Roman citizens. Tusculum acquiesced without a fight. As Rome’s influence grew around the Italian peninsula, a second device—what we might call semi-citizenship—was employed: *civitas sine suffragio*, or citizenship without the vote. By extending citizenship, Rome turned itself into a cosmopolitan city welcoming its citizens from all around the known world.

Before Rome finally collapsed, it dealt with multiple challenges, including its own culture war, occasioned by the need to integrate and accommodate the new religion of Christianity. When the Roman Empire disintegrated, the Catholic Church was positioned to replace it. The Church organized geographical areas into parishes and effectively redefined the political and legal boundaries of Europe. Parishes were given considerable autonomy in civic matters, and citizenship at the local level flourished.³³ Town life provided fertile soil for the revival of citizenship, especially in Italy (for example, in Florence). Local governments administered their city-states, imposed taxes, and saw to civic discipline. The extent of self-government varied greatly, but this hyper-local administration of towns created a sense of pride that fostered a concept of citizenship that placed great emphasis on local units of government.

When larger states arose in Western Europe, it became necessary to turn increasingly diverse populations into citizens. (The initial impulse was simply to subjugate annexed populations, but that proved unsatisfactory, since those being subjugated tended to be resentful; for example, the Scottish uprisings against the British in the 13th century.) In the 18th century, thanks to the intellectual and scientific ferment we refer to as the Enlightenment, a more liberal idea of citizenship and citizen rights began to emerge, along with the civic republican ideal.³⁴

Enlightenment thinkers increasingly wrestled with the idea of nationhood. Jean Jacques Rousseau, in a nod to Aristotle’s idea of concord, asserted that national cohesion would replace ethnic and local ties:

National institutions which form the genius, the character, the tastes, and the customs of the people, which make them what they are and not something else, and inspire that warm love of country founded on habits impossible to uproot.³⁵

Rousseau was hardly the only influential Enlightenment thinker whose new approach had a profound effect on the New World. Hobbes, Locke, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and many other philosophers of the time shaped the thinking of those who would create the United States. A case can be made that the views of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau were among the most influential.

The American experiment—and it *was* an experiment—grew out of a particular philosophical moment; unlike countries with long histories, our geography was defined anew (albeit through the devastation of Native Americans) and our nation invented. That invention owed a great debt to the Enlightenment, and especially to the notion of a *social contract* as developed by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.

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of the polity.

³² Ibid., p. 32.

³³ Ibid., p. 43.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes argued that the principal purpose of a social contract is to protect people from the harm that others might do them. The social contract removes individuals from the state of nature and allows them to escape lives that Hobbes famously described as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short,” a state of mutual distrust and “war of all against all.”³⁶ Hobbes argued that mankind needs social institutions to control human nature and protect us from each other. In Hobbes’ view, social cooperation and mutual reciprocity would flow not from human kindness or benevolence, but from a hardheaded recognition that such behaviors are in everyone’s best interest.

Locke agreed with Hobbes about the need for a social contract. In *Two Treatises on Civil Government*, he argued that such a contract is necessary to protect the rights and interests of individuals. Unlike Hobbes, however, Locke didn’t see the state of nature as a state of war, and he didn’t base the need for a social contract simply on the need to avoid such an unpleasant reality. Locke’s social contract operated to improve the lives of those who were parties to that contract; it was an arrangement from which all parties benefited.³⁷

In a very diverse country that places so much importance on individual rights and liberties, how do we encourage concern for the common good? How do we give citizens a sense of belonging to something larger than family, clan, or ethnic group?

Rousseau, in contrast with Hobbes and Locke, believed that human nature is naturally good, and that social institutions distort our good nature. Rousseau’s goal was to diagnose the evils in society, explain their origins, and determine how they might be eliminated. He focused on the inequalities in societies, and warned that they would lead to dangerous alienation. Rejecting Hobbes, he argued for the need to make social institutions consistent with the social contract to secure moral freedom, political and social equality, and independence. Rousseau also argued for the existence of a *general will*, a set of social bonds that hold individuals together. He believed that this general will is what remains after all private and particular biases are removed.³⁸

These three philosophers, along with numerous other Enlightenment thinkers, created the intellectual base upon which the Founders erected America’s governing and legal systems and our particular approach to citizenship. They also set up a tension between the rights and interests of individuals and the common good—a tension that is at the root of most of today’s policy disputes. That tension can be seen in a challenge that has echoed through America’s history: In a very diverse country that places so much importance on individual rights and liberties, how do we encourage concern for the common good? How do we

give citizens a sense of belonging to something larger than family, clan, or ethnic group? How do we encourage a healthy, non-jingoistic attachment to the nation and to political community? How do we inculcate civic virtue?

Early in the country’s history, Horace Mann answered that question by proposing what he called the Common School. Agreeing with Locke and Rousseau that human nature can be improved by the actions of government, Mann argued for the establishment of tuition-free public schools that would engage in citizenship education. Mann believed that educational institutions should be sponsored by state governments rather than by religious bodies, as was the case earlier in the country’s history, and he argued that citizens educated in such secular schools would be more likely to create a democratic society rather than a government dominated by elites.

Citizenship Evolves

Debate over the proper balance between individualism and citizenship—between private concerns and what has been called the public sphere (see discussion in Chapter Three)—has characterized most of American history. The proper role of educational institutions and the necessary content of civics curricula has been a substantial part of that debate. Today, as charter schools and other changes disrupt education systems, that debate is—if anything—more heated and more polarizing than ever.

³⁶ Hobbes, 1651, Part I.

³⁷ Locke, 1884.

³⁸ Rousseau, 1989.

The revolutionary period in the United States was characterized by a high degree of political consciousness, at least within the significant proportion of the white male population that actively participated in government. Political ideas were debated in the public square, informed by a newly energized press. As opposition to the repression of England's King George III grew, Americans identified—and demanded—the citizenship rights of Englishmen. When they felt those rights had not been extended to them, they revolted.

Three major issues arose at the birth of the United States with respect to citizenship:

- 1) As a nation of immigrants there was no common ethnic identity around which citizenship could be created. Before the Revolution, states had clamored to increase their populations by liberalizing their immigration requirements. England had tried, with varying degrees of success, to control immigration to the colonies, and had restricted the number of immigrants; colonists had just as diligently attempted to work around those laws. After the revolution, under the Articles of Confederation, the newly constituted states developed a patchwork of laws addressing the naturalization of immigrants. After the Articles of Confederation were replaced by the Constitution, the Federal government assumed control of immigration policy.
- 2) The Federal system of government, with its overlapping jurisdictions, leaves citizens to constantly rationalize and prioritize their citizenship status at the federal, state, and local levels.
- 3) The citizenship status of slaves was one of the thorniest issues facing those charged with drafting the American constitution. After the Civil War Amendments ended slavery and granted citizenship status and voting rights to the freed slaves, the challenge of overcoming institutionalized attitudes and systemic barriers to realize equal legal rights for African-Americans continued through the civil rights era of the 20th century and to the present day.



The American experiment thus confronted an unprecedented diversity that challenged Rousseau's idea of national cohesion. Indeed, as we have previously noted, the fusion of the idea of nationhood with that of citizenship is a relatively recent phenomenon:

Until the eighteenth century the word "nation" had different connotations from those associated with it today. Then it started to become synonymous with "country" or "fatherland", and the people who inhabited it. So, just as the word "citizen" was being detached from its municipal meaning and attached to the state, so the term "nation" was also becoming attached to the state. This is by no means to say that they necessarily had exactly the same meanings in the eighteenth century, because there were complications. The question was still to be resolved: was a nation to be defined by political or cultural criteria? If political, then, in a reasonably democratic state, the two terms would approach synonymy.³⁹

It is this fusion of citizenship and nationhood that makes assimilation of immigrants possible. The 20 million immigrants who arrived in the United States between 1870 and 1920 did not share a culture, ethnicity, or language, and the country has gotten steadily more diverse in the decades since; nevertheless, virtually all of those immigrants and their children became Americans, demonstrating rather conclusively that what it means to be American cannot be limited to or defined by a specific cultural or ethnic identity. Language, however, has often been identified as a central and necessary tool of

³⁹ Heater, 2004, p. 89.

assimilating into a citizenship, and demands that new immigrants learn to speak a common language have been a constant as far back as John Stuart Mill (1873), who addressed this need:

Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion necessary to the working of representative government cannot exist.⁴⁰

Identities Weak and Strong

In the 21st century, Americans increasingly have multiple identities. We work for multinational corporations, we have attachments to ethnic groups and cultures rooted elsewhere, we experiment with new religious practices and adopt popular culture signifiers that are meant to set us apart from the mainstream. (Indeed, the very notion of *mainstream* is increasingly a contested one.) Globalization and supranational governmental organizations are weakening the idea of the nation-state in a post-Cold War world. When the state weakens, so does citizenship.⁴¹

The attacks of September 11, 2001, sparked a renewed discussion about what it means to be a citizen and an American; scholars and pundits called for a national conversation revisiting our fundamental values. After previous provocations, Americans had been called to civic duty, and asked to make various sacrifices for the collective good; however, President George W. Bush did not follow that pattern, and that conversation about our national character and identity did not occur. Bush took the country to war without instituting a draft or raising taxes; there was no rationing, no selling of war bonds as had been done during World War II. Instead, the call to civic action from the nation's President was to carry on as before:

Americans are asking, "What is expected of us?" I ask you to live your lives and hug your children. I know many citizens have fears tonight, and I ask you to be calm and resolute, even in the face of a continuing threat. I ask you to uphold the values of America and remember why so many have come here. We're in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them. No one should be singled out for unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith. I ask your continued participation and confidence in the American economy. Terrorists attacked a symbol of American prosperity; they did not touch its source. America is successful because of the hard work and creativity and enterprise of our people. These were the true strengths of our economy before September 11, and they are our strengths today.⁴²

The speech was widely criticized, arguably unfairly, for a message that many interpreted as "go shopping"—an attenuated picture of citizens' obligations in the face of a threat to the nation. What is required of citizens in a moment of crisis?

I Know It When I See It

What *are* a citizen's obligations? At a minimum, those obligations include participation in the American experiment of self-government. We will address the nature of that participation in more detail in Chapter Three, but some level of civic engagement in democratic decision-making is clearly required.

James Fishkin, perhaps the most well-known advocate of *deliberative democracy*, has identified five essential characteristics of citizen participation in democratic decision-making, one of which is possession of accurate and relevant

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⁴⁰ Mill, 1873.

⁴¹ Heater, 2004, pp. 143-144.

⁴² Bush, 2001.

information.⁴³ Numerous other scholars and thinkers have grappled with the nature of the skills and information needed to create a “we,” a unified citizenry, while still respecting the rights and prerogatives of individuals.

Complicating the task of creating *unum* from America’s *pluribus* is the need to distinguish between a necessary patriotism and an unhealthy nationalism. Both of these terms refer to the relationship of the citizen and the nation, but nationalism might be considered patriotism on steroids; nationalists tend to see unity as a product of culture, language, and heritage (for example, the Nativist movement, proponents of English Only laws, or opposition to immigration). Patriots place their emphasis on common values and beliefs. Nationalists see their country as superior to all others. We might think of patriotism as strong but realistic affection for one’s country and nationalism as an aggressive superiority complex.

Finding the proper balance between the individual and the state, the need to encourage patriotism without unleashing nationalist impulses, and the proper content of the social contract all raise thorny citizenship issues that are further confounded by contemporary challenges to the very nature of nationhood and sovereignty posed by global commerce and planet-wide threats to health and the environment. In a world where communication is virtually instantaneous and transportation technologies have made even the most remote parts of our planet accessible, the challenge of defining who “we” are is growing more daunting. In this environment, what does citizenship look like? What is the minimum amount of knowledge that citizenship requires?

Being a citizen in the 21st century isn’t a job for the uninformed.

As Karin Geiselhart has written:

Traditional liberal concepts of democracy and citizenship rely on an informed citizenry to hold governments accountable. The shift to a global economy creates additional layers of complexity, attenuated accountability, and exponential growth in the information necessary for informed decision-making.⁴⁴

One thing seems clear: today, citizenship requires that each of us have knowledge and skills that our parents and grandparents didn’t need, because we confront a vastly more complicated policy landscape. The issues with which we wrestle increasingly require specialized knowledge, and we need to know how to distinguish the experts we can trust from the charlatans and spin-doctors we cannot. We need sufficient credible information about government, the economy, and science to allow us to detect fakery, propaganda, and demagoguery.

Being a citizen in the 21st century isn’t a job for the uninformed.

A Footnote: Sports Again

While it may seem counterintuitive, youth sports participation has been shown to increase civic engagement in adulthood. The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) found that in areas “such as voting, volunteering, and news attentiveness, youth who are involved in sports report higher average levels of civic engagement than their counterparts who do not participate in sports.”⁴⁵ CIRCLE found that youth sports participants were 18 percent more likely to register to vote, 12 percent more likely to vote, and 8 percent more likely to feel comfortable making a public statement. They also found sports participants watched news coverage more closely, and that such significantly greater viewership was not limited to sports, but extended to political news.⁴⁶

This should not be surprising because many young Americans first learn citizenship on sports teams.

Sports participation offers a positive way to develop skills needed by a participatory democracy. Playing on youth sports teams provides an identity signaled by the uniform worn, common goal of winning games, and collective mission to which all are expected to contribute. The best strategies to develop healthy peer relationships within the team include: 1) shared problem solving and collective decision making, and 2) customized selection of group leaders. This helps devel-

⁴³ Fishkin, 2003.

⁴⁴ Geiselhart, 1999.

⁴⁵ Lopez & Moore, 2006.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

op the physical and social skills of all participants and encourages inclusion, teamwork, and mutual respect.⁴⁷ Not unlike Heater's (2004) definition of citizenship, sports participation develops one's sociopolitical identity. It is no wonder Red Sox Nation and sports fandom across America have nurtured many prominent leaders.

The question is: how do we build on these aspects of our very robust sports culture to increase currently weak civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic participation? How do we apply the lessons of sport and team building to the creation of effective citizenship?

⁴⁷ Jowett & Lavalley, 2007, pp. 41-54.



Chapter Three: Getting Citizens in the Game

Chris Cavanaugh is an accomplished educator and coach at Indiana's Plainfield High School, located in the western suburbs of Indianapolis. For over 24 years, he has developed the school's swimming program into one of the area's best; winning six conference titles, many sectional titles, and coaching several All-Americans. He has been named the Indiana Swimming and Diving Coach of the Year eight times.

Swimming can be a grueling sport that requires discipline for students to wake up at 5:30am every morning and swim three miles before classes begin. Unlike team sports, swimming is not just about beating your opponent; the swimmer competes against the clock. Swimming is a contest for personal best. Despite the strong reputation of the PHS swimming program, Cavanaugh does not cut swimmers from the team. Anyone can be on the team as long as they support their teammates and strive to get better every day, and he often spends time working with kids who have mental and physical impairments. While everyone is competing against the clock, building a team and atmosphere where everyone supports everyone else is Cavanaugh's goal.

Ask this determined swimming coach about his greatest moment in coaching, however, and you'll get an unexpected story. An award-winning Civics teacher (the 2006 American Civic Education

Teacher of the Year), Cavanaugh also coaches his school's We the People (WTP) team. WTP is a highly successful program aiming to increase the civic competence of the nation's K-12 students. It consists of a rigorous curriculum focused upon the founding institutions of America's constitutional democracy and culminates in a competition in which teams of students deliver an initial prepared statement, then respond to questions posed by a panel of judges on issues of constitutional importance. Judges score each team and the winners advance through local, state, and national competitions. The national competition is a major event held in Washington, DC. Student finalists tour the capital and meet with members of Congress and other dignitaries. Since its inception in 1987 by an act of Congress, over 75,000 teachers and 28 million students have participated in the program. Mr. Cavanaugh's team members typically meet 3-5 hours each week to train for their competitions.

Cavanaugh remembers fondly when his team qualified for the national finals in 2013 and went on to finish in 10th place nationally. While in Washington for the finals he took his team to dinner outside the Kennedy Center for the Arts on the banks of the Potomac River, and they discussed their performance while they were missing their high school prom back home in Indiana.

America is a society that heavily invests in sports, while ignoring or underfunding equally valuable youth development opportunities. Plainfield's new \$103 million high school (opened for the 2008-09 school year), included a new pool for the swimming team. At the same time, Cavanaugh notes a diminishing investment in WTP—despite the fact that is a proven best practice for civics education. Research has shown that WTP participants are more informed, more likely to vote, and more likely to participate in their communities as adults. Americans give lip service to the belief that civic literacy is important, yet Congress has refused to find alternative funding for the WTP program since it banned the use of earmarks in 2010. (Prior to that time, the program was funded as an earmark.) Presumably, lawmakers could not distinguish between an earmark for projects like the infamous Alaskan "bridge to nowhere" and the allocation of public funds for civic education.

Chris Cavanaugh and other *We the People* coaches understand what citizenship behaviors have in common with team sports, and how to leverage that team mission effectively, to build civic knowledge.

Coaching Citizenship

American public schools are charged with two sometimes conflicting tasks: provide individual students with the tools they need to thrive in our market society, and teach them the democratic skills they need to play their role in the broader American community. Each of these missions is important; however, as schools nationwide have struggled with efforts to improve instruction in the former, attention to what has been called “the civic mission of the schools” has waned. As a result, educators—even those with the very best of intentions—have failed to differentiate between mastery of the lessons that will benefit students personally and those that are necessary to informed citizenship.

Perhaps the best description of how the two missions differ—and why the difference is important—was offered in a slender book by Jane Jacobs, titled *Systems of Survival*. (Jacobs is better known as an urbanist, and her *Death and Life of Great American Cities* is a classic.)



Systems of Survival was an effort to explicate a line from Plato’s *Republic*, in which the philosopher wrote “Justice is to perform one’s own task and not to meddle with that of others.”⁴⁸ After noting ethical principles and desirable characteristics that are “esteemed across the board”—honesty, courage, patience, wisdom, etc.; she identified two “moral syndromes,” a commercial syndrome and a governance category that she dubbed “the guardian syndrome.” In many respects, these two moral or ethical systems require contradictory behaviors, those pursuing commerce are bound by principles like “collaborate easily with strangers and aliens,” “respect contracts,” and “be efficient,” among others. Those operating as guardians (government and many nonprofit organizations) are admonished to “exert prowess,” “take vengeance,” and “treasure honor.” Jacobs explains the contradictory rules by noting, for example, that trade, an essential component of commercial success, is inappropriate in government, where actors must take care to avoid trading public benefits. The conflicting ethical principles identified in the book reflect the different nature and purposes of the public and private sectors.⁴⁹

Whether one agrees with Jacob’s taxonomy or not, her argument recognized a fundamental aspect of American political culture: what constitutes proper or ethical behavior is in large measure dependent upon the task (sector). All of us—government actors, nonprofit managers and private-sector entrepreneurs—are bound by the basics, but we are also subject to ethical constraints and performance standards that grow out of and are appropriate to our sectorial tasks—constraints that will differ depending upon the task or sector involved. Jacobs traced governing, and the origins of “guardianship” back to military forays—when armies conquered new lands, it had to administer and govern them. Contemporary efforts to recruit people to public service—everything from the military, to scouting, to AmeriCorps and Vista—continue to use the language of the corps, and to stress teamwork and common purpose. If citizenship is based upon an understanding of teamwork and the common good, it helps to explain why participation in sports has been found to help develop civic skills, and why programs like *We the People* have proved more effective in inculcating those skills than classroom lectures.

The question we face is: how do we ensure that we don’t shortchange the civic mission of the schools as we work on improving the transmission of more market-oriented skills? And how do we convince students of the value and importance of both?

⁴⁸ Jacobs, 1992.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

The Challenge of Modernity

Civics educators face two problems: giving students the information they need to engage productively with the political process, and making that information—and that participation—sufficiently relevant so that they will act upon it as they mature. To achieve relevance, we need to know much more than we currently do about the mechanisms of civic motivation, but we do have some research to guide us.

No one really knows which comes first, civic knowledge or civic engagement, but research—including the research on *We the People* referenced above—suggests that the two are strongly related. In the 1990s several scholars concluded that the dominant characteristic of Americans who don't vote is lack of knowledge about government—and that lack of knowledge was a far more potent factor than distrust of government, lack of interest in politics, or even a perceived lack of efficacy (What some people call rational political ignorance—a considered decision that participation is meaningless, based upon a belief that one vote doesn't make any difference.).⁵⁰ Knowledge not only predicts the likelihood of voting, but it seems to produce more civically-conscious voting; that is, more knowledgeable voters are more likely to base their electoral choices on what they believe is best for the country, rather than what they think will be best for themselves and their businesses or families.⁵¹

In addition to the civic skills required for informed participation in political life, a citizen living in 21st-century America needs the ability to evaluate the credibility of the massive amounts of information—and disinformation—with which she is increasingly surrounded. Which sources are trustworthy, and which are not? Which newspapers, television networks, blogs, or other sources are most likely to help a citizen with family and work responsibilities keep abreast of current events, and to separate out the wheat of factual information from the chaff of spin and propaganda? What are the intellectual skills that a citizen needs to be able to successfully navigate an increasingly complex social and technological environment?

No one really knows which comes first, civic knowledge or civic engagement, but research—including the research on *We the People* referenced above—suggests that the two are strongly related.

In 1994, Harvard University Professor Robert Kegan wrote a book offering an intriguing perspective on that question, *In Over Our Heads*. Kegan compared the evolving complexity of a child's mind to similar stages in the mental capacities of adults. His thesis was that human development is in significant part a response to the changing demands of our (increasingly complex) social environments—that the skills required for living a coherent life in modern western societies are very different from those required by simpler, tribal cultures, and that humans become more complex in response to the demands of environments that require such complexity.⁵²

Kegan described five observable stages of adult mental development, or Orders of Mind. The Fifth, or highest order—which he noted very few of us reach—is the self-transforming or postmodern mind; it describes people who are less likely to see the world in black or white. These are people who are comfortable with lots of gray, with nuance and ambiguity. The Fourth Order—which Kegan labels self-authored or modern, characterizes people who are self-guided and self-motivated—what we might call inner directed, while Third Order people are more outer directed, guided in their behaviors by institutions like churches or

political parties, or by role models they admire. According to Kegan, modern societies require, at a minimum, Order Four skills and mental abilities; unfortunately, he noted that most people remain at the level of Order Three.⁵³

Whether or not one accepts Kegan's thesis, it is hard to argue with the proposition that successful navigation of life in modern Western societies demands intellectual skills substantially different from those needed by our grandparents. Our challenge as parents, teachers, and coaches is to equip children with the 21st-century skills they will need to make their

⁵⁰ Popkin & Dimock, 1999.

⁵¹ Galston, 2001.

⁵² Kegan, 1994.

⁵³ Ibid.

way in the world. Our challenge as citizens is to equip them with the information and skills they will need to understand the structures of their government and to participate knowledgeably in the democratic process.

There is an old Chinese curse that translates to “May you live in interesting times.” It’s considered a curse because dealing with interesting times—times of change and conflict—is challenging, requiring a nimble and flexible mind, a steel spine, and a stiff upper lip. If living in interesting times is a curse, it’s an unavoidable one for those of us who reside in 21st-century America.

Making the Case

Polls confirm a widespread belief that our country isn’t working very well right now. Despite some really wonderful advances in science and technology, we apparently haven’t learned much when it comes to getting along with each other, and, at least in the United States, we aren’t joining forces to solve the very real common problems we face: global climate change; the growing gap between the rich and everyone else; the outsized influence of money in politics; the loss of credible media sources; the challenge of terrorism; the persistence of racism, Anti-Semitism, and homophobia. It’s a pretty daunting list, and it’s understandable that many people look around and decide to just throw in the towel—to concentrate on their jobs and families, look to sports and entertainment to fill leisure hours, and simply ignore civic issues. That decision might be understandable, but it dangerously shortchanges both the community and the individual. Ultimately, the acquisition of civic skills and esprit de corps benefits individuals as well as the community, and that is a case we need to make.

Most of us do understand the importance of civic engagement to the broader community, at least enough to give lip service to such efforts, but fewer Americans seem to recognize the ways in which civic knowledge and civic engagement are also necessary to empower them as individuals. As part of our effort to encourage the acquisition of civic skills, we need to spell out the personal benefits of civic action—we need to answer the “what’s in it for me” question, to make the issue of civic literacy more salient to a greater number of Americans.

We might begin by pointing out that involvement with a political or nonprofit organization generally leads to the acquisition of new skills and often, valuable connections. Young people learn things that help them when they enter the job market, and they meet people with whom they can network. These activities allow them to encounter businesses and nonprofit organizations and hear about job openings.

There is a good deal of research, including a 2007 study from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)⁵⁴, suggesting that students who are engaged in civic and voluntary activities do better academically (although this may be one of those chicken and egg conundrums—are better students more likely to get involved, or does involvement improve academic performance?) And we can argue that engaged people tend to be happy people. An article published in *Psychology Today* listed 10 habits that characterize happy people; among them were cultivating strong communities and volunteering time.⁵⁵ There is also research that finds a positive relationship between activities like community service, advocacy, and activism and positive physical and mental health.

Citizens who do have a passion for improving their communities are also very likely to learn how government functions, to become more politically savvy and personally effective. Civic involvement helps people develop a sense of belonging; it helps them build social capital by forging connections to groups and people they might not otherwise encounter. Most people who are genuinely and actively involved in their worlds find rewarding human meaning through those involvements.

Civic involvement helps people develop a sense of belonging; it helps them build social capital by forging connections to groups and people they might not otherwise encounter.

⁵⁴ Dávila & Mora, 2007.

⁵⁵ Davis-Laack, 2012.

We need to make this case to Americans of all ages, but especially to students and young people. In the age of the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media competing for attention, it has never been easier to live in a bubble, to interact—in real life and online—almost exclusively with people who share a common perspective. Getting involved in civic activities can introduce volunteers to people they won't meet on the football field, to ideas they might not otherwise encounter. For some Americans, leaving the bubble may be frightening; for others, however, it is liberating.

Those arguments for engagement all respond to the “what’s in it for me?” question. But making the case that civic behaviors benefit individuals should not replace the broader argument. Proponents of civic engagement ought not to shy away from making the moral case for doing one’s share and paying one’s civic dues.

As we noted in Chapter Two, America was founded on Enlightenment principles, and foremost among those principles was a respect for personal autonomy—the right of every individual to self-determination, the right to “do our own thing.” The heart of our legal system was the libertarian principle: your right to live as you like and do what you want, until and unless you harm the person or property of someone else, and so long as you respect the equal right of others to do *their* own thing. Partly as a result of that founding philosophy—which created a civic culture very different from those of the European countries from which our earliest settlers had come—Americans are known for our emphasis on individualism. We take personal responsibility, we stand on our own two feet, we’re “can-do” entrepreneurs—and those elements of our social DNA have stood us in very good stead.

But individualism taken too far, taken to extremes, can destroy community, and make it impossible to do the things that we have to do collectively, either through government or through the voluntary sector. The challenge is to find a balance between the very American emphasis on self, what we might call our *cultural individuality*, and our obligations as members of a community—of a national team.

In a widely circulated and cited quotation, Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren explained the interdependence of individual and community—and the obligations that interdependence poses—thus:

There is nobody in this country who got rich on their own. Nobody. You built a factory out there—good for you. But I want to be clear. You moved your goods to market on roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate. You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. You didn't have to worry that marauding bands would come and seize everything at your factory Now look. You built a factory and it turned into something terrific or a great idea—God bless! Keep a hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay it forward for the next kid who comes along.”⁵⁶

Warren’s point was simple—and profound. Whether we recognize it or not, we all depend upon our social and governmental infrastructure. Social and legal systems (and just plain luck) play much more important roles in our lives than we individualistic Americans like to admit. And because the social and legal infrastructure is so important, we have to pay attention to its maintenance. Not only is it in our long-term self-interest, rightly understood, it is also our moral obligation. American institutions will not function properly without broad citizen participation.

Recognition of our individual responsibility to the team actually brings us full circle, because to discharge that obligation—to pay our way by giving back to our communities—we need basic knowledge about the history and operation of the systems within which we are embedded. We need civic literacy. To be a functioning, contributing member of whatever community you live in, you need civic skills and citizenship information. Just as people who don't have money can't contribute any, people who don't know the rules of the game can't play that game. People can't be contributing members of the American community if they don't know where that community came from, what its members have in common, and what it needs to function properly.

Understanding the basics is like learning the rules of your favorite sport. Mastery of the rules is absolutely essential for players, and knowing the rules not only allows fans to follow the action, it vastly enhances their enjoyment of the game.

In Chapter Four, we'll consider what those basics are.

⁵⁶ Warren, 2011.

Chapter Four: The Rules of the Game or What We Need to Know

Sports bars across America regularly schedule trivia nights, competitions to display mastery of the arcana associated with their preferred sport. The word “trivia” is important: it is an implicit acknowledgement that much of the information on display is not essential to enjoyment of the game, although it may enhance that enjoyment. What is necessary—as opposed to optimal or interesting—is a grasp of the rules governing play.

What is true for spectators is especially true for those who play the games.

Take golf, for example. There is an argument to be made that Tiger Woods is the greatest golfer in the history of the game. He is transformative for reasons having nothing to do with his much-publicized Black-Asian-American identity; Woods changed the game of golf by globalizing the sport and at his peak, raising the standards by which success is measured so significantly that it took several years for the rest of the field of professional golf to catch up. Woods’ 1996 debut showcased a youthful talent that brought physicality and flash to a game that had often been associated with overweight middle-aged men. Despite his tabloid-fodder personal problems in recent years, Woods is a skilled player who has always displayed great respect for the history and conventions of his chosen sport.

Tiger Woods’ skill with a club has overshadowed another important skill, his mastery of the complex rules of the game—rules he understands better than most. An incident in 1999, during the Phoenix Open, put that mastery on display. On the 13th hole of the Scottsdale Stadium Course, Woods’ drive bounced out of the fairway and into the unkempt desert landscape, coming to rest a couple of feet behind a large boulder. The boulder was blocking any shot at the green. Rather than conceding to the one-ton boulder, Woods asked the judge to rule whether the boulder could be considered a loose impediment and moved without penalty. According to Rules of Golf, “Loose impediments’ are natural objects including stones, leaves, twigs, branches and the like . . . provided they are not fixed or growing, solidly embedded or adhering to the ball”.⁵⁷

While the one-ton boulder fell under the category of stones, Woods and his caddie certainly could not move it by themselves. Woods quickly recruited approximately ten of the many spectators who always follow him, and asked them to collectively push the boulder. After a couple of tries, the recruits were able to move the boulder a few feet to the side, giving Woods a clear shot to the green. After a few handshakes to thank the movers, he calmly stepped up to the ball and hit it onto the green. He eventually scored a birdie on the hole.

Some commentators at the tournament cried foul, but they were quickly silenced. Existing clarifications to the rules, known as Decision 23-1/2 and 23-1/3, said that (1) large loose impediments can be moved if doing so does not cause undue delay and (2) spectators can be enlisted to help move the impediments.⁵⁸ Woods went on to finish third in the tournament and has since become the most celebrated player in the history of the game. The famous boulder was eventually moved back to its original place and a plaque was bolted to it to commemorate the ruling.

Learning the Rules

The moral of this story is obvious: Whether in golf or in life, it helps to know the rules. To be a truly effective citizen, you have to know the laws of the land and how to navigate the system. That certainly doesn’t mean that everyone has to be a constitutional scholar or a master of obscure precedents, but basic knowledge of the framework within which we all operate is required to function within society. Tiger Woods knew enough about the rules of his game to ask the right

What do citizens really, truly need to know to function in 21st-century America, and what do they need to know to ensure that 21st-century America functions?

⁵⁷ United States Golf Association (USGA), 2012.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

question—whether the boulder could be classified as a “loose impediment.” Similarly, a basic amount of civic knowledge is necessary to navigate increasingly complex social systems.

The story of Tiger Woods and the boulder raises a fundamental question: What *do* citizens need to know? What rules of the legal/political game are essential, and which ones fall into the “trivia” category—things that we might wish students knew, but that are hardly essential elements of citizenship. The names of Supreme Court Justices, the number of stripes on the American Flag, or even the year that the Constitution was ratified are examples of “nice but nonessential” information.

Similarly, much of the survey research on civic knowledge tests for information that is peripheral to civic understanding. Knowing the number of Justices serving on the Supreme Court and similar bits of political trivia really don’t tell us much about the “rules of the game,” or how government—or the world—works. As William Galston has written, “Competent democratic citizens need not be policy experts, but there is a level of basic knowledge below which the ability to make a full range of reasoned civic judgments is impaired.”⁵⁹

The \$64,000 question is: what is included in that level of basic knowledge? What do citizens really, truly need to know to function in 21st-century America, and what do they need to know to ensure that 21st-century America functions?

What We Know and How We Function

In their 1996 book, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters* (still arguably the most important contribution to the scholarship of civic literacy), Delli Carpini and Keeter noted that “Democratic theory has never been terribly explicit about the precise requirements of knowledge and cognitive skill that must be exhibited by each citizen in order for the system to work as intended.” Nevertheless, they identified what they saw as essential:

Factual knowledge on such topics as the institutions and processes of government, current economic and social conditions, the major issues of the day, and the stands of political leaders on those issues assists citizens in discerning their individual and group interests, in connecting their interests to broader notions of the public good, and in effectively expressing these views through political participation. In addition, the more equitably information is distributed among citizens, the more likely it is that the actions of government will reflect the public interest.⁶⁰

The information that Delli Carpini and Keeter identify, however, requires a foundation, a basic understanding of the way in which American government functions, the assumptions that undergird our approach to governance, the history that informed those assumptions, and our subsequent experience with, and modifications of, that approach and those assumptions. Increasingly, understanding current events also requires at least a minimal acquaintance with basic economic principles and an understanding of what science is, and is not. In other words, the issues of our day demand an informed *context*, as well as a recognition that a debate is occurring.

Look at just a few of the issues dividing American citizens today: arguments over “activist” judges, same-sex marriage, the reality of climate change, teaching creation science in public school classrooms, tax and social welfare policies—the list goes on, but the debates are rarely enlightening because far too many of those engaged in the arguments lack the necessary background to understand the context of their own arguments, or even to adequately define their terms.

Judicial activism is a good example. People who don’t like a particular decision authored by a particular judge will often argue that we should elect federal judges, who would then be more responsive to majority preferences. Of course, keeping judges insulated from the “passions of the majority” was the whole purpose of an independent judiciary and an independent judiciary was an essential component of separation of powers—a fundamental element of our constitutional architecture. The legislative and administrative branches of government were intended to be responsive to the will of the voters; the judicial branch was supposed to ensure that government laws and actions remained consistent with the Constitution—to see to it that those “responsive” branches were playing by the rules of the game. Basing criticisms of a court ruling on the decision’s logic, its conformity with precedent, or other perceived deficiencies is perfectly

⁵⁹ Galston, 2001, p. 218.

⁶⁰ Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996.

appropriate, but railing against judges for “activism” or for “thwarting the will of the majority” generally betrays a lack of understanding of the intended role of the courts.

Tax and economic policy is another area of argument in which heat frequently exceeds light. In an era where critics of the Administration can assert—with straight faces—that the President is both a Nazi and a Socialist (concurrently, no less), it is glaringly obvious that few of those critics can accurately describe the (very different) ideologies and economic practices of either fascism or socialism. You need only turn your television to a heated debate over the size and trajectory of the deficit, and it becomes painfully clear that many of the antagonists who are pontificating most passionately don’t know the difference between the budget deficit and the national debt. Similarly, when partisans argue tax policy, it is often

embarrassingly obvious that many of them are either unaware of the difference between marginal and effective tax rates, or are counting on the public’s ignorance of the difference.

[Citizens] should be able to determine whether an assertion is based upon an empirical, scientific examination (i.e., is falsifiable) or is simply an expression of ideology (i.e., is faith-based).

It isn’t only economics; despite the nation’s love affair with technology, the American public is woefully ignorant of the most basic scientific principles. When a snowstorm brings a chorus of “see, there’s no global warming,” we see the potentially catastrophic consequences of such scientific incompetence. Science can be very technical and conceptually demanding and it would be highly unrealistic to expect citizens to be well-versed in the latest scientific breakthroughs. But as Bruce Alberts, Editor in Chief of *Science* and former President of the U.S. Academy of Sciences, has written, “Over the long run, any nation that makes crucial decisions while ignoring science is doomed.”⁶¹ Alberts argues that every adult should have a basic scientific understanding of the way the world works, and a “realistic understanding of the nature of science.”⁶²

Citizens may not be able to follow complex scientific arguments—and we would argue that such an ability isn’t necessary—but they *should* be able to determine whether an assertion is based upon an empirical, scientific examination (i.e., is falsifiable) or is simply an expression of ideology (i.e., is faith-based). At a

minimum, they should understand the difference between a scientific theory (a well-substantiated explanation based on facts, laws, inferences, and tested hypotheses)⁶³ and our popular use of the term “theory” to mean “a guess.”

In short, citizens need a common factual foundation to have productive debates. They need to occupy the same reality. Just as all basketball players need to know what constitutes a travel violation, arguments about politics and current events need to be grounded in a common base of knowledge and fact.

To use a non-sports analogy, in the courtroom, two sides to a conflict will often stipulate to a set of facts, and then proceed to argue in good faith about what those facts imply. For example, the parties may agree that the car ran the red light and caused an accident, but disagree about *why* that happened—the brakes failed, there was oil on the street making the car skid, the driver had a seizure. Or they might argue about whether the accident was the actual cause of the injuries suffered. These arguments are amenable to evidence. If the parties can’t even agree that the car entered the intersection, finding a resolution is going to be much more difficult.

Similarly, reasonable people may disagree whether the Establishment Clause permits or prohibits a particular action by government. That disagreement is unlikely to be productive, however, if one party insists that the United States is a Christian Nation and that separation of Church and State is a communist plot—or in the alternative, that all the Founders were Deists for whom religious belief was superfluous. Similarly, people of good will can disagree about the appropriate measures to be taken to address climate change, without dismissing the overwhelming scientific consensus about the nature and extent of that change.

⁶¹ Alberts, 2010, p. 1287.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ National Academy of Sciences Staff, 1999.

Grounding policy debates in a common understanding of the rules that will govern resolution of the matter at hand is a first step, and an essential one. But it is not sufficient. Although we recognize the danger in attempting to define what is and is not essential, there are some elements of our common civic environment that seem absolutely critical to the exercise of informed citizenship.

Knowing the Rules and How They Apply

History matters. The U.S. Constitution and laws did not emerge from a void; there were reasons for the choices made by the nation's founders. Citizens need not be able to recite the dates of battles or even the names of the Presidents, but an informed citizen really does need to understand the broad outlines of American history—why settlers came to these shores, how the early colonists addressed the environment they found, and especially the impact of the Enlightenment—the intellectual ferment that gave us science, empiricism, and the social contract. It is impossible to understand contemporary political issues without recognizing the broader social and historical context within which those issues arise.

Similarly, the increasingly acrimonious debates over rights would benefit from a much broader understanding of the Bill of Rights as a counter-majoritarian document. Too many citizens believe that a democratic system must always reflect majority preferences; they fail to understand that the Bill of Rights was conceived of as a list of things that government is prohibited from doing *even when a majority of citizens wants government to do them*.

Even a cursory review of contemporary political debates confirms widespread misunderstandings of key constitutional constructs. Take, for example, the public debate over anti-gay statements made by the owner of the fast-food chain Chik-fil-A a couple of years ago. When gay rights supporters threatened to boycott the chain, its defenders accused them of trying to deny Chik-fil-A its free speech rights. Those making this assertion clearly did not understand that in our system *only government* can violate the provisions of the Bill of Rights. Had a local government refused to zone a Chik-fil-A outlet because of its founder's opinions, that would have been a deprivation of the chain's First Amendment rights, but in this situation, both Chik-fil-A and the critics who were threatening to boycott the chain were exercising their rights to free expression. Similar scenarios have played out in numerous other venues.

Another example comes from a political attack ad that has frequently been used against criminal defense lawyers who are running for public office. The essential message is: candidate X represented Bad Person Y, who was accused of [insert various heinous crimes here]. Therefore, candidate X is unfit to hold public office.

This is the same tactic that is routinely used against public interest lawyers (especially those who work for the American Civil Liberties Union) when they represent unpleasant people whose rights are being violated. (Lots of the ACLU's clients are unpleasant, since as a general rule, pleasant people are less likely to have their rights violated.) Defending accused people—even people with whom they may violently disagree—is *what lawyers are supposed to do*. Otherwise, the justice system doesn't work. People who don't understand the basic premises of America's legal system will be persuaded by these sorts of political attacks; voters who do understand how the system is supposed to work will reject them. Unfortunately, large numbers of Americans *don't* understand the basic premises of our legal system.



There are many other examples of the effects—political and social—of low levels of civic knowledge, but an inventory of such examples begs the question with which introduced this chapter: What does a citizen need to know to be an informed participant in self-government, and how do we identify that knowledge?

As we previously noted, there is no consensus answer to that question; probably the closest we can get to a considered—albeit narrowly focused—response is found in the civics standards used by public schools in the several states, and in the curriculum of *We the People*, widely regarded as the best available vehicle for teaching students about the history and principles of American government.

In *Talking Politics: What You Need to Know Before You Open Your Mouth*, the author identified constitutional, economic, and scientific elements of civic learning necessary for minimally informed 21st century citizenship. Those elements fell into three broad categories: information about American government—its structure and historical roots; basic economic concepts necessary to an understanding of tax and economic policy debates; and even more basic scientific principles, beginning with what science is and what it isn't.⁶⁴

The Basics

Any effort to compile a list of what citizens should know will of necessity be arbitrary, and subject to criticism and debate. At the very least, however, most people would agree that citizens need to know what government is.

In today's era of privatization and public-private partnerships, it isn't always obvious when an action or program is part of government, but identifying when government has acted is critical because, in the United States our Bill of Rights protects us only against infringements by government. No government, no invasion of our constitutional rights. (This is why people will sometimes refer to our constitutional system as one of *negative liberties*.)

For that matter, citizens need to recognize the differences between the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, and the different characteristics and missions of those sectors.

They need to know how constitutions differ from statutes and ordinances—and how the constitutional language reflects that difference. Constitutions are broad frameworks of principles intended to guide lawmakers; they lack the specificity that characterizes our everyday rules, because they are intended to serve very different purposes. Citizens unaware of the differences fail to understand important legal debates centering on the courts and judicial decision making.

Ideally, Americans should be at least minimally familiar with the Enlightenment—and the way its introduction of empiricism, science, and the scientific method changed the way humans approach learning.⁶⁵ They should also understand the constitutional *architecture*—the operation of the three branches of government, what is meant by separation of powers, and how checks and balances are intended to work.

Americans need to know that the Bill of Rights limits what government *and* popular majorities can do—that this country is not a pure democracy in which the majority always rules; to the contrary, the whole purpose of the Bill of Rights was to shield individual liberties from what our Founders called the “passions of the majority.” That concern over popular passions also led the Founders to insulate judges from the political process. Judges are *supposed* to decide issues on their merits and not in response to the popular opinion of the day. Judges are like referees or umpires in the sense that their calls won't always be right, but their independence from either “team” is necessary for the system to work.

As noted previously, Americans need to understand the concept of negative liberty, the fact that the Bill of Rights *only restrains the government*. This may rank as one of the most misunderstood aspects of our governing system. Free Speech protections, as we have noted, just keep *government* from censoring you—it doesn't protect you from your boss, your mother, or other people who may disagree with you.

And it should go without saying—but we'll say it—American citizens should know what liberties the various provisions of the Bill of Rights do and do not protect.

Beyond the contours of our national charter, most Americans need to have a working knowledge of their state and local government institutions, and how those government agencies share authority with each other and with the federal government. There are practical reasons for understanding the ins and outs of local government (don't try taking that zoning issue to your Congressman, or asking your City Council representative for help with your Social Security); that information empowers citizens. This is the sort of information most likely to be immediately relevant to individuals; furthermore,

⁶⁴ Kennedy, 2014.

⁶⁵ Ferris, 2010.

people who know how to navigate their local environments are the people most likely to develop the civic skills needed by a democratic society.

When it comes to basic economics, people need to understand what capitalism, socialism, Nazism (sometimes called National Socialism) and communism are, and the very significant differences among them. Citizens also need to understand the differences between the debt and the deficit, between the marginal tax rate and the effective tax rate, and what the debt ceiling is—and is not. Without a grasp of these very basic concepts, people simply cannot participate intelligently in discussions of economic policy.

Finally, in a world where science and technology are increasingly important, where scientists are unlocking many of the mysteries of the universe (and identifying threats to the planet we occupy), we simply cannot make rational policy decisions in a scientifically fact-free environment. Voters don't need to be scientists; they don't need the ability to independently verify the results of scientific experiments and studies. But they *do* need to understand what real science is, and to be able to distinguish between science and pseudoscience and religious doctrine.

Beyond the Basics

Historians can undoubtedly produce lists of the historical matters with which citizens should be familiar to understand the context of the world we inhabit. Other disciplinary experts will argue—some quite convincingly—for basic literacy in their disciplines as well. Geographers will contend that informed citizens should be familiar with the geography of the country and the globe (it is always embarrassing when the United States goes to war in places that a majority of Americans cannot locate on a map); sociologists will argue for a basic understanding of culture and the process of socialization. English majors and those who teach communication skills will insist that basic *literacy*—unmodified by terms like “civic” or “scientific”—is the bedrock of knowledge.

Today, thanks to the Internet and the decline of what has been called “the journalism of verification,” Americans are drowning in oceans of information, much of it specious. There is a good argument to be made that the ability to detect spin and deception is an increasingly important skill. And that brings us to the subject we will call *current events*.

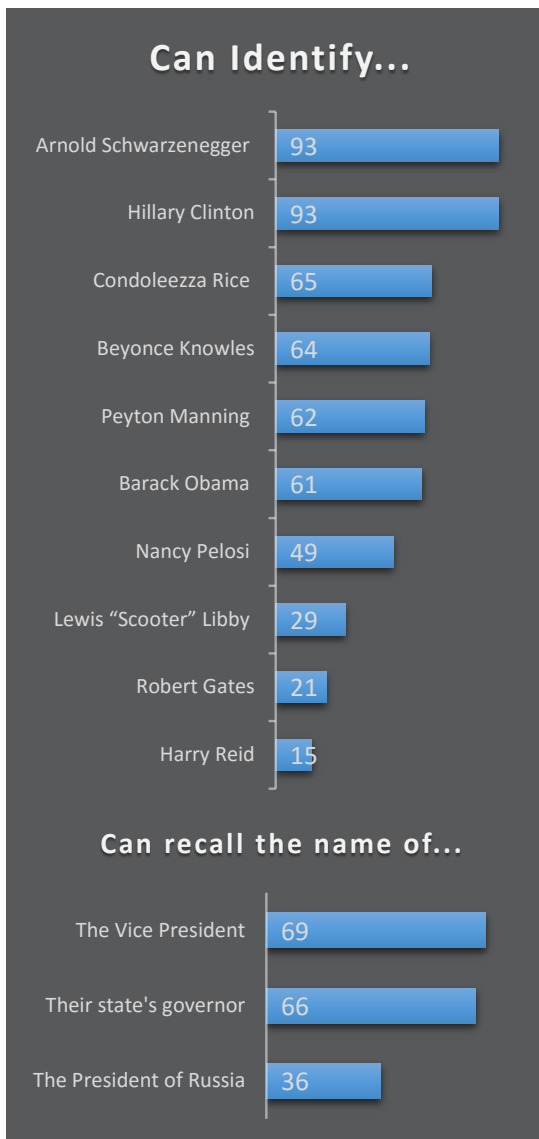
The same Americans who have sports trivia at their fingertips, who can recount the marriages and divorces of their favorite celebrities and recite the twists and turns of plotlines of multiple popular television programs are demonstrably indifferent to and



unaware of the political decisions that affect them. The Pew Research Center for People and the Press regularly monitors public political knowledge, and just as regularly finds a troubling lack of political awareness:

[D]espite the fact that education levels have risen dramatically over the past 20 years, public knowledge has not increased accordingly.

These are the principal findings of an in-depth Pew Research Center survey that interviewed a representative national sample of 1,502 adults between February 1-13, 2007. Respondents were asked to identify public figures who had recently been in the news. They also were asked questions that measured how much they



Source: Pew Research Center, 2007.

knew about important and widely covered news events. Awareness of public figures varied widely.⁶⁶

More than 90 percent of Americans could identify Arnold Schwarzenegger as the California Governor or a former action-movie star – both responses were counted as correct in the scoring. An equally large proportion of the public identified Hillary Clinton as a U.S. senator, a former first lady, a Democratic leader, or a candidate for president. Clear majorities also correctly identified Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (65 percent) and (then) Senator Barack Obama (61 percent). House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was recognized by about half of the public (49 percent).

Other prominent national figures and world leaders are not as well known. When asked to name the president of Russia, just 36 percent recalled Vladimir Putin. Less than one-third (29 percent) could correctly identify former White House aide Scooter Libby; the survey was conducted during Libby's trial but before his conviction on perjury and obstruction of justice charges.

Public knowledge of news events also varies widely. Nearly nine in ten (88 percent) knew that as part of his revised Iraq strategy, President Bush planned to increase U.S. military forces in the country. But only one in four Americans (24 percent) are aware that both houses of Congress passed legislation to increase the minimum wage and 34 percent knew that Congress voted to raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour.⁶⁷

Follow-up surveys, including one in 2013, told a similar story. Despite the exponential growth of available information, researchers found no improvement in public knowledge of current news events. Overall, the new quiz proved difficult: Majorities answered 5 of 13 questions correctly. A substantial majority of Americans (77 percent) are able to correctly identify Edward Snowden from a photograph of the former government contractor who leaked classified information about the NSA. Nearly as many (74 percent) know that the Federal Reserve is primarily responsible for monetary policy and not tax, trade, or energy policy.

Other questions are more challenging. The most difficult question on the quiz asks respondents to identify the trend in the stock market since 2008 from four charts. Just (21 percent) correctly selected the chart showing a steep drop in the Dow from 2008 to 2009, followed by a gradual and steady recovery.

Another question presents the pictures and names of four Supreme Court justices and asks respondents to identify the justice who has most often been the court's swing vote in recent years; just 28 percent selected the picture of Justice Anthony Kennedy. Previous news quizzes also have shown that the public is not knowledgeable about the Supreme Court and its members.⁶⁸

Why It Matters

In a September 2013 column in *Forbes*, James Crotty made a compelling case for the importance of general knowledge. He began by quoting the Core Knowledge Foundation:

⁶⁶ Pew Research Center, 2007.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Pew Research Center, 2013.

Research consistently shows that strong readers have a substantial store of background knowledge that helps them make connections as they read — and make correct inferences about things they don't know.

The more you know, the easier it is for you to understand what you read and to learn new things.⁶⁹

Crotty tied a breadth of general knowledge to:

. . . evidence of a person's fitness for the high-class gift of citizenship in an advanced capitalist republic. As *The Federalist Papers* and de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* both make clear, our founders expected citizens to be self-sufficiently cognizant of basic facts in the world — regardless how or where they were schooled — so they were not prey to the seductions of faction, bamboozlement and demagoguery that had historically plagued democracies. It is, thus, paramount that Americans carry substantial general knowledge with them, in their very brains, not just in the McLuhan-esque extrapolations of such brains known as smart devices and laptops.⁷⁰

A general consensus about the specific information Americans need to be deemed civically literate may elude us, but most thoughtful citizens will endorse efforts to raise the question—and most, we believe, will agree that we need to change the culture in ways that will make knowledge of our shared civic environment at least as important as knowledge of sports and entertainment.

That task—elevating the importance of civics and making civic knowledge salient to most Americans—is both important and daunting. In Chapter Six, we will suggest some approaches that seem promising, but no one reading this book should assume that there is some sort of magic bullet that will transform a lethargic and disinterested public into an engaged, informed, and energized polity.

Our task is arguably more difficult because there is a widespread perception that American government isn't working; to borrow another analogy from the world of sports, fans will desert a non-performing team. And just as the presence of loyal fans can be an incentive to better performance, active and constant interest in our common political life is an incentive to better government. Unfortunately, the reverse is also true; when fans are not knowledgeable, when uncaring citizens enable the election of incompetent leaders to important positions, the game—and the conduct of government—suffer.

There is a widespread perception that American government isn't working; to borrow another analogy from the world of sports, fans will desert a non-performing team.

⁶⁹ Core Knowledge Foundation, 2015.

⁷⁰ Crotty, 2013.

Chapter Five: The Central Role of American Public Schools

Eton College in England was founded in 1440 by King Henry VI and is one of the most important educational institutions in all of England. Eton has educated 19 British Prime Ministers and countless members of the Royal Family. It is one of the original nine English Public Schools (very exclusive institutions—“public” school in England is what Americans call private school); it educates boys 13-18 years of age and boards the students throughout the school year. Originally founded to provide an education to boys from poor families, Eton morphed over the years into an enclave for the British aristocracy and developed its current identity by training the future leaders of the Empire.

Sports have long been a part of the identity of Eton, since all students are expected to participate in a sport. In each of the three terms that comprise the school year, students select a major sport and prepare to train seriously to compete—either between different houses at Eton or against top teams from other schools. Sports at Eton have the distinct purpose of teaching the future leaders of England teamwork and competitive spirit.

Among the many famous Old Etonians is Arthur Wellesley, better known as the original Duke of Wellington. Eton was one of the many schools Wellesley attended during his adolescence in the late 18th century. At much the same time, Britain was establishing its own place in the world. As British influence continued to spread to other parts of the world, England needed to develop leaders who could understand the challenges and complexities that accompanied global hegemony. Wellesley came to excel at the art of combat, which was a needed skill among the elite of the world’s great 19th century military power, and he went on to earn fame as the commander of the British and German forces opposing Napoleon’s advance through Europe, and as the leader who eventually defeated Napoleon’s massive army at Waterloo in 1815. Wellesley went on to serve as Prime Minister and is regarded as one of the most important leaders in British history.

The idea that English gentlemen must be well educated and able to win battles was seen as required preparation at the nation’s elite public schools. It was reported that Wellesley visited Eton in his later years, and remarked that the boys playing their sports were gaining the skills that were needed to win battles. The apocryphal quote “the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton” is often mistakenly attributed to Wellington, but whether he originated it or not, the phrase embodies contemporary understandings of a period during which education was increasing in importance in England and elsewhere, and was seen as critical to the future of the British Empire. The quote, genuine or not, also reflects a widespread belief that athletic participation significantly benefits those who partake of such exertions.



Unlike the elites who attend Eton, where duty and service to country were built into one’s identity from birth, students at early American schools (public and private) did not arrive with civic attitudes nurtured by longstanding traditions. American schools had to create a civic identity; their challenge was to turn students into agents of democracy.

Early 20th century iterations of the American public education system were grounded in the idea of creating good citizens. John Dewey’s principals of Action Civics were fundamental to the creation of curricula in public schools.⁷¹ Dewey believed that students should learn civics through engagement and he advocated that schools develop classes that would expose children to the challenges of living in a diverse democracy.⁷² The U.S. Bureau of Education formally endorsed “community civics” in 1915; this was a curriculum that aimed to teach children about their communities. Community civics went beyond facts about government structure and explanations of how laws are passed, instead focusing upon what it means to be a good citizen. Meanwhile, the industrial revolution steadily increased the need for an educated workforce—a need that was particularly acute at the turn of the 20th century—allowing Dewey and others to argue successfully for the marriage of job training and citizenship training within the public education system. (This marriage, which seemed so effective in the 19th and early 20th centuries, has become a source of tension in our current age of education reform and tight budgets.)

As the nation’s public education system matured, there was a migration away from civics education and the study of citizenship, and these subjects were eventually amalgamated into the discipline of social studies. During most of the 20th century, *American Government*, *Civics*, and *Problems of Democracy* were all required courses for high school graduation. Civics focused on the role of individuals in their communities and *Problems of Democracy* involved reading and discussing the news. The latter two courses have largely disappeared. “Overall, the shift is not from more social studies to less, but rather from courses about current events and citizens’ roles in their communities to courses based on college-level academic disciplines.”⁷³ In particular, history has become the most popular social studies discipline in American public schools.

As America has continued to diversify, the role of the schools in creating citizens and transmitting democratic principles has become, if anything, more important. Schools today still struggle to live up to Dewey’s concept of action civics, and to debate the “chicken and egg” conundrum of knowledge versus engagement. They also struggle to find time for civics in a curriculum increasingly focused upon STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—and an emphasis on job readiness.

Once lauded by Alexis de Tocqueville as a mecca of voluntary associations, the contours of American civil society have changed over the latter half of the 20th century. Although the nonprofit sector has continued to grow, participation in the public sector has declined sharply in the last 50 years and the remaining participants are disproportionately well-educated and wealthy.⁷⁴ Schools can and should be a primary vehicle for reestablishing appreciation for the benefits of democratic self-government and civil society, but efforts to regain that role have been uncoordinated and episodic. State standards and education policies have increased demands that schools be accountable for specifics of student knowledge, and as a result, most states require far more information in social studies courses than it is possible to teach in the time available: “Standards for Civic Education don’t need to be voluminous volumes of facts . . . turning standards into long lists can lead to micromanaging teachers, favoring breadth over depth and even trivializing important topics.”⁷⁵ One result of the increased detail in the standards has been a shift in emphasis from democratic principles to fact-based learning.

This shift to facts and away from principles and processes has been part of a much larger effort to foster more accountability in education generally. Although educators and reformers differ in their definitions of what accountability looks like, reform has often taken the form of teaching facts that can be assessed objectively, usually through standardized testing. Meanwhile, less concrete civic skills have been deemphasized. Meira Levinson has described how the standards

As America has continued to diversify, the role of the schools in creating citizens and transmitting democratic principles has become, if anything, more important.

⁷¹ Levine, 2012. pp. 37-56.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 40.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 44-45.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 48-49.

revolution in the United States initially included a charge for college, career, and citizenship. Citizenship, however, has gotten short shrift as the education reform movement has focused on math and English literacy as the basis for assessing educational improvement, and a corresponding emphasis on standardized testing to measure student performance. As test results were increasingly used to punish or reward schools in the wake of *No Child Left Behind*, in 2002, curricula shifted accordingly, focusing increasingly more time, energy, and resources on math and literacy.⁷⁶

Social studies—and especially civics—suffered. Only 13 states require students to pass a civics test and only 7 require civics-specific proficiency in order to graduate. Only two states require instruction on how to vote. Ironically, in an era obsessed with accountability, there is little or no accountability for civic education.⁷⁷ Even if states do require civics, 75 percent of teachers end up teaching to the tests and focusing more on other local accountability measures, especially in math and language arts. (In the age-old tradition of good news/bad news, the absence of specific directions and micro-managing of curricula gives civics instructors more freedom in the classroom, but the determined focus on other subjects means there is less time, less support, and fewer resources for civics in the curriculum.)

Ample research confirms that the best way for children to learn how to be citizens is to have effective civics classes in school, so it is tempting to lobby for inclusion of civics in our current high-stakes testing environment. But this approach to accountability creates a quandary for the civics education community. If civics knowledge were to be tested as part of existing accountability measures, more time and effort would undoubtedly be invested in civics, but the curriculum would almost certainly narrow. Many civic learning objectives do not translate well to multiple choice tests, so the question becomes whether we can hold schools accountable using new and different kinds of assessments. Programs like iCivics are great places to start, but there remains considerably more work to be done in this area.

Although it is difficult to develop standard assessments, there are curricular strategies that show potential in American schools. Some of the most successful civic education practices address the “knowledge versus engagement” dilemma head on. James Youniss asserts that “Civic Knowledge is not and should not be separated from democratic practices any more than scientific knowledge needs to be separated from application to agriculture or industry.”⁷⁸ Student government, informed classroom debate of political issues, and service learning are all effective curricular strategies for increasing civic literacy. Unfortunately, schools have increasingly become some of the most authoritarian, undemocratic institutions in America; unsurprisingly, at the same time, student government has declined.

Learning by Doing

A revival in student government that included real power sharing could teach students the benefits and challenges of a democratic system. However, putting a student government in place is difficult in environments where few students have been exposed to the democratic practices and principles they would need to operate such a governance structure. Diana Hess argues that debate should be vigorously taught in schools and modeled by teachers in the classroom to expose students to democratic practices. In a longitudinal experiment where she observed classroom debate as a civic learning tool, she saw quite clearly the relationship between debate in the classroom and the practice of democracy. Hess found that debate reinforces the importance of informed citizenship, because students are required to prepare for debates by searching out available data and points of view, “. . . classroom debate encourages youth to understand that politics thrives, not just with ideas in one’s own head, but with the public give-and-take.”⁷⁹

Students exposed to debate in class averaged 155 and 152 on the NAEP, while students who weren’t exposed to debate scored 125 and 126. Similar results were found for students who had regular conversations about current events as part of their curriculum (or who had engaged in regular discussions of politics at home).⁸⁰ However, political conversations are not taking place in millions of homes or in most controversy-averse schools, and the lack of democratic discourse is harming our ability to conduct civil community discussions. According to research conducted by Nina Eliasoph, “the introduction of politically controversial topics often brought sudden stops to ongoing talk among adults. This bodes

⁷⁶ Levinson, 2012.

⁷⁷ Saavedra, 2012, pp. 135-159.

⁷⁸ Youniss, 2012, p. 116.

⁷⁹ McIntosh & Youniss, 2010.

⁸⁰ Youniss, 2012, pp. 119-120

poorly for democracy because if individuals keep their views to themselves, they miss opportunities to learn from others and to reflect critically on their own views.”⁸¹ Furthermore, the degree of openness in the classroom to engage in debate works just as well for students of lower socio-economic status as their high socio-economic status peers. Learning how to engage in contentious debate and reach compromise is clearly a skill that needs a greater emphasis in formal education. One of the most effective methods of achieving that competency comes from a tried and true program.

As we’ve said, *We the People* is an education program designed to promote civic competence and responsibility in American students. Some teachers use the critically acclaimed curricula and textbooks for regular classroom civics instruction while others coach it as an extracurricular activity for students. Educators like Chris Cavanaugh, profiled in Chapter 3, swear by its effectiveness at developing the civic skills that are necessary for active citizenship. Evaluation research on WTP confirms what enthusiastic teachers have been saying for years. RMC Research conducted an independent evaluation in 2008 and found that WTP students impress when it comes to civic knowledge:

We the People participants scored 30% higher overall on a test of constitutional knowledge when compared to their high school peers and 36% higher than university/college students enrolled in introductory political science courses on all study outcomes.⁸²

Where *We the People* as a tool gets interesting is in the effectiveness of the competition model to develop the kind of skills that Hess found to be essential to developing civil discourse. Each year, students in WTP get to display their knowledge and use their civic skills in a national competition that starts at the Congressional District Level and proceeds



to State and National competitions. In front of a public audience, panels of students are required to make an opening statement on an issue of constitutional importance and then defend their positions to adults and fellow students. (They can choose the subject of their initial statement from three possibilities provided, but they have no advance information about the follow-up questions, which are posed by a panel of judges.) It quickly becomes evident in the course

of a competition that students have learned skills of argumentation that augment their acquisition of civic knowledge; the competition requires students to engage in civil discourse and to conduct an honest and respectful debate. (It is truly humbling to hear a 12-year-old analyze the constitutional considerations surrounding government’s use of drones, or the tapping of cell phones, and following up those analyses with observations that eclipse one’s own grasp of the issue.) Often a presentation will be challenged by a classmate on the same panel who has a different opinion and who respectfully lays out a counterargument. Such exchanges help to develop a tolerance of alternative perspectives and foster an ability to productively engage in conversation and debate.

It is frustrating to report that *We the People*—one of the most demonstrably effective civics programs ever developed—is struggling financially. When Congress changed the definition of earmarks in 2011, it also banned any separate appropriation for funding to “outside organizations.” That definition included the Center for Civic Education, which administers *We the People*. As a result of this overly-broad definition of earmarks, an incredibly effective program lost \$21.6 million in Federal funding,⁸³ and many states experienced significant cuts in their programming. It is a testament to the effectiveness of the program that other funders have emerged in an effort to save it.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 120-121

⁸² RMC Research Corporation, 2008.

⁸³ McCollum, 2011.

What about Service Learning?

As traditional civic education programs have experienced declining investment in recent years, another form of civic education has exploded in popularity. The rise of service learning is a laudable development in the civic landscape of society and education. Beginning around the mid-1980s, service projects exploded at the secondary and post-secondary level. Service learning has now become ubiquitous, and “two-thirds of high school seniors and about 75 percent of entering college freshmen claim to have done service the previous year.”⁸⁴ Some studies show that service increases voter participation, but overall the results are mixed.

Service is a social good, and should be rewarded by colleges looking to increase the civic-mindedness of their student populations. However, only about five percent of service reported by college students is political or policy related in nature.⁸⁵ Not only are most service learning projects devoid of governmental or political information, service projects can actually end up *reducing* political engagement if they are considered an alternative to policy action. Delli Carpini explains:

...the one-to-one experience of working at a soup kitchen, cleaning trash from a river, or tutoring a child once a week...Missing is an awareness of the connection between the individual, isolated “problems” these actions are intended to address, and the larger world of public policy; a sense that the problems might be addressed more systematically and (at times) more effectively through other forms of civic engagement...the belief that politics matters.⁸⁶

Rather than defining service broadly to include any and all community-based volunteer efforts, schools need to identify the kinds of service that are political and offer students an introduction to the civic and governmental structures relevant to the issues they are addressing.

Public service can lead to significant improvements in civic behavior when thoughtfully constructed. Youniss posits three components that make service learning more likely to lead to eventual political engagement. First, the volunteer must be aware of the underlying purpose of the service being completed. Second, he/she must be exposed to traditions and history of the organization or individuals who sponsor the service activity. Third, the participant should develop some sense of identification with the service being provided, including resolve for future action.⁸⁷ Group mobilization around a particular issue can help undergird these components. For instance, young participants who fought for civil rights in the 1960s and 70s have been shown to vote at high rates, participate actively in volunteer organizations, and contribute to their local community. Teach for America alumni show similar levels of active citizenship following their commitment to the program.⁸⁸ In short, not all service learning is created equal. Educational institutions have to recognize the importance of civic knowledge as a crucial part of public service.

Service learning programs also need to make an explicit connection to civic themes, consistent with Youniss’ recommendations. Historically, we have taken the task of crafting citizenship seriously as part of public service. Melissa Bass compares the civic mission of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of Roosevelt’s New Deal fame with the more recent VISTA program that was reimagined as AmeriCorps in 1993. Bass found that “the CCC more effectively acted as an instrument of civic education because it made participants’ civic development an explicit priority and integrated civic language and principles into multiple aspects of the program’s design.”⁸⁹ America has long valued public service, particularly national service, as a way to foster citizenship. “To the extent that national service exposes participants to national needs, provides them with an opportunity to help address them, and supports them in their endeavor, it may help increase participants’ concern and commitment to the country.”⁹⁰ The most prominent case of national service in the United States is still military service and we have tried to find creative ways to translate the civic benefits of military service to the civilian world.

⁸⁴ Bachman, Johnston, & O’Malley, 2010.

⁸⁵ Musick & Wilson, 2007, p. 127.

⁸⁶ Delli Carpini, 2000, pp. 341-349.

⁸⁷ Youniss, 2012, pp. 129-130.

⁸⁸ Fendrich, 1993.

⁸⁹ Bass, 2004, p. 2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

If the playing fields at Eton created a safe environment for future English leaders to learn the skills of combat, so, too, must American classrooms equip students with the skills to engage in the battles of citizenship in a diverse democratic society. Sports developed as an effective method for students at Eton to practice their future roles as military and political leaders. American schools today have the same challenge, but they face that challenge within a much different context in this digital information age. Open classrooms that encourage debate and civil discourse are particularly important—and frustratingly rare—in American schools. Programs like *We the People* need to be reinvigorated and adequately supported so that each new generation of students is introduced to the American constitutional framework and process. Significant efforts to improve the way service learning programs are conceived and administered can help schools realize their huge potential for civic learning.

At the end of the day, school-based civic education must play a prominent role in shaping the citizens who will in turn shape America's future.

Chapter Six: What's to be Done? Proposals Big and Small

So far, this publication has plowed familiar ground: we have echoed the belief of most political philosophers, political scientists, and sociologists that informed citizenship is a requirement of democratic self-government, and we have shared a small part of the (massive) research confirming America's deficit of such knowledge. For many of those reading this book, the research underscores an old and depressingly familiar story.

We have also compared the nation's comparative disinterest in government and civic knowledge to Americans' love affair with sports of all kinds. The stories with which we have introduced the preceding chapters may have seemed out of place in a tract devoted to the need to improve civics education, but there was—we hope—a method to our seeming madness. The characteristics of what might accurately be called the culture of sports are the same characteristics we so desperately need in our civic culture.



Inculcation into the sports culture begins in school. Students who display any innate talent are encouraged to go out for a team; those who don't make the cut participate by attending sporting contests, cheering on the players, and rooting for their team. As people age, most stop playing physically demanding team sports (although many continue to play golf and tennis), but they rarely lose interest. They may continue to attend football, baseball, and soccer games, or to follow their preferred sport on the many radio and television programs and networks devoted to them. They continue to take a lively interest in the players, the statistics, and even the legal issues that may be raised—everything from the incidence of concussions in the National Football League to allegations of improprieties in college athletics to debates about the propriety of the monopolies enjoyed by major league sports. Vigorous political disputes revolve around the massive subsidies that cities provide to their local sports teams, especially in an era when dwindling resources have forced cutbacks in city services. Robust debates accompanied efforts by Congress to pass Title IX, opening participation to girls and women, and although those debates have dwindled, they haven't died.

As a result of this massive institutional support, sports have become ubiquitous in American culture. Even people who have no interest in football or baseball hear constantly about national and local teams' wins and losses; even people who have never set foot on a golf course recognize Tiger Woods. It's inescapable, and as a result, even the least interested person knows a great deal about most of the popular sports.

We would solve our civic literacy problem if information about the history and operations of our governing institutions were similarly ubiquitous. But changing culture is admittedly a daunting task.

The Challenge

We know we have a problem. We know our citizens are ill-equipped for democratic self-governance. We know the consequences of the civic deficit are serious—indeed, we would assert they are considerably more serious than the country's fiscal deficit. The question is: what can we do about it? What would it take to make civic knowledge an element of American culture at least as compelling and interesting and inescapable as knowledge about sports?

As we were researching and writing, we identified a variety of mechanisms that might be employed in an effort to improve civic literacy.

Clearly, public schools are an important part of the answer, and Chapter Five considered what we know about effective civics education. Recent research has confirmed the efficacy of the *We the People* curriculum,⁹¹ and a drive to expand the reach of that curriculum is clearly warranted; right now, in most states, use of *We the People* is voluntary, and federal funding for the teacher training workshops that are key to its success has been eliminated. Education policy changes encouraging widespread use of *We the People* would make a genuine difference, and it behooves those of us who care about this issue to work for much wider adoption of this curriculum.

At the same time, there must be increased emphasis on the importance of civics instruction generally, and an easing of the current single-minded focus on STEM subjects to the exclusion of instruction in history, economics, and civics—the subjects that inform citizenship.

As important and necessary as these measures are, however, we can't expect our underfunded and overburdened public education system to carry the entire burden. What is needed is a more comprehensive approach, one that will begin to change the culture.

For an undertaking of that magnitude, we must clearly engage the so-called “mediating institutions”—the organizations and institutions of contemporary society with which we are all involved (or at least surrounded). The most important of those, of course, is the media and especially the Internet.

Comparative research has documented a correlation between high-civic-literacy countries and publicly-supported media;⁹² similarly, in the United States, the audience for NPR and PBS is regularly found to be the most—and most accurately—politically informed. It is tempting to point to this research and advocate that Congress provide more support for public media generally and our struggling newspapers in particular; however, given both America's historic approach to free speech issues (an approach that is suspicious of government involvement with our sources of information) and the rapidly changing nature of the media, such support is highly unlikely and its probable efficacy uncertain. Traditional print media, especially, is experiencing a period of extreme fragmentation and transition. Older people cling to newsprint, while younger readers increasingly occupy a digital universe. Traditional newspapers thus find themselves caught between the proverbial rock and hard place—still printing and delivering a physical newspaper, at considerable expense, to the steadily diminishing number of readers who cling to paper, while moving increasingly (and often awkwardly) to the web, where they find themselves competing with the proliferation of new digital media sources offering news and entertainment.

What would it take to make civic knowledge an element of American culture at least as compelling and interesting and inescapable as knowledge about sports?

Making the job of genuine journalists that much harder, new technologies have sped up the entire news cycle. There's no longer any need to “stop the presses” for breaking news—and little time for the fact-checking and careful verification that used to distinguish true journalism from more questionable sorts of publications. To add insult to injury, the Internet (e.g., Craig's List) has substantially captured the classified advertising on which newspapers formerly depended for much of their income. Estimates are that American newspapers have lost over one billion dollars a year in classified ad revenue to such sites. As a result, newspapers—and print media generally—are in crisis. It is highly unrealistic to expect them to assume the burden of civic education. This is especially worrisome, because civic literacy and newspaper readership have long been closely correlated.⁹³

Television news is also hard-hit. Multiple channels, streaming from the Internet, video games, and changes in viewing patterns have all taken a toll. Everyone seems to agree that what we call traditional media is in a transition, but it remains unclear what we might be transitioning *to*—and in the meantime, more and more Americans operate from within the *Filter Bubble* so eloquently described by Eli Pariser⁹⁴ in the book of the same name, an electronic cocoon within

⁹¹ Hess & McAvoy, 2014.

⁹² Milner, 2002.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Pariser, 2011.

which they receive verification of their pre-existing beliefs rather than news and fact. In this environment, we are lucky when a media outlet is able to ensure that its own reporters and journalists are civically literate, and we are thrilled when a knowledgeable reporter is willing to challenge assertions made by sources providing misinformation or engaging in spin.

On the other hand, the Internet and various social media platforms offer inexpensive, accessible methods for reaching people—particularly young people. Facebook and Twitter have been used to inform people worldwide of political repression and efforts to unseat dictators (e.g., Arab Spring). Innovative use of social media is an obvious mechanism for communicating information, and explaining why that information is important. Popular culture generally provides a wealth of opportunities to educate—and to reward education. (Research has demonstrated that audiences for popular satirical shows—the Daily Show, the Colbert Report, Saturday Night Live—are far more politically knowledgeable than the general public, probably because those programs require a significant base of civic knowledge to understand and appreciate the humor.) But the Internet is also home to conspiracy theories, misinformation, disinformation, and literally millions of sites devoted to games, celebrities, sex, and hobbies from cooking to knitting to travel to medieval jousting. It's an important communication tool, but we can hardly expect a few websites, no matter how well-intentioned, to carry the civic burden. Nonprofit and voluntary organizations—advocacy groups, arts organizations, trade organizations, unions, churches, and many other organizations—regularly sponsor programs or convene gatherings that are—or could be—focused upon civic education. Government itself is a source of civic information and could do much more—local government could augment public libraries and citizen forums by using routine communications to educate and inform. (What if every local tax bill contained an easy-to-read and understand explanation of who paid those taxes, what operations of the government they supported, and why the decision was made to use that particular levy to support that particular service?)

There is no broad and deep culture that supports informed civic participation, and the measures enumerated above are unlikely to provide the scale or critical mass needed to make civic information as pervasive and compelling as conversations about the most recent playoffs.

If not endless, the possibilities are certainly great. The mechanisms exist, and the more of them that are employed, the more likely they are to improve general knowledge. The bigger question, however, is: how do we motivate these various actors to employ them? What incentives might we employ, what encouragement might we offer? There's an old saying "Where there is a will, there's a way," but we are faced with the opposite dilemma. We have lots of ways—what we appear to lack is political will.

In a very real sense, we have a problem of scale. Well-intentioned efforts like those suggested above do take place, but they are disjointed and scattered. There is no critical mass. There is no broad and deep culture that supports *informed* civic participation, and the measures enumerated above are unlikely to provide the scale or critical mass needed to make civic information as pervasive and compelling as conversations about the most recent playoffs.

We need a massive intervention.

An Audacious Proposal

In the wake of World War II, Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the G.I. Bill. The law provided a wide range of benefits for returning veterans, including subsidies that allowed G.I.s to obtain low-cost mortgages, low-interest loans that could be used to start a business, and cash payments of tuition and living expenses to attend a university or vocational training program. The qualifications were capacious: all soldiers who had been on active duty during the war for at least 120 days and had not been dishonorably discharged were eligible. By 1956, estimates were that roughly 2.2 million veterans had used the G.I. Bill education benefits to attend college, and an additional 5.6 million had obtained job training of some sort. Many of those carried their service into civilian life and in many ways became model citizens (e.g., Don Stout and the founders of the youth sports leagues at Municipal Gardens, described in Chapter 1).

The G.I. Bill was expensive, but by all accounts it was a major political, humanitarian, and economic success. It contributed significantly to the creation of a skilled workforce, moved thousands of people into the middle class, and was a spur to long-term economic growth. By 2014, 70 years after its passage, more than 20 million veterans had used the G.I. Bill to obtain college educations at an estimated cost of \$120 billion.



The G.I. Bill was originally an effort to reward those who had manifested a willingness to risk their lives for their country, but it has had a number of other salutary consequences: in addition to raising the skill level of the American workforce, the program provides an avenue for social mobility. The availability of the G.I. Bill has become an important recruitment tool as the armed forces now compete against many other employers for top talent.

Military scholar Ronald Krebs and others argue that in many ways the Silent Generation's high level of civic engagement throughout their lives did not just come from military service itself, but from widespread participation in the G.I. Bill as well.⁹⁵ Since World War II and the establishment of the G.I. Bill, military veterans consistently vote at higher rates than other citizens.⁹⁶ As the United States has shifted from a conscripted military to an all-volunteer force, we can mourn the loss of a common American experience in military service. A Pew poll shows a growing Military-Civilian gap in that only 33 percent of 18-29-year-olds reported having an immediate family member who served in the military, compared to 79 percent for 50-64-year-olds.⁹⁷ In total, over 16 million Americans served in the military during WWII compared to a little more than 2 million active duty and reservists in today's military; at the same time the U.S. population has more than doubled since 1940 to over 300 million.

Defending the United States is an important goal, but military service is only one aspect of that defense. It is equally important that citizens understand just what it is that our military is protecting. Citizenship is more than residence, and a population that is ignorant of its own history and most fundamental principles is incapable of citizenship. Patriotism requires informed engagement by people who have earned the right to be considered citizens. Survival of America *qua* America is not the same thing as physical survival.

To put it bluntly, there is more than one way to lose one's country.

If we are to ensure that second kind of defense—defense of the American system of law and government—we require a civically-educated populace. *We need a G.I. Bill focused upon producing engaged and informed citizens through military and civilian service.*

There are many ways in which a national program might incentivize the acquisition of civic literacy. Our proposal is a rough first draft and could undoubtedly be improved, but it is intended to start a conversation that focuses upon the question: what sort of national programmatic effort(s) might begin to change the civic culture?

We propose a voluntary National Public Service program for high school graduates who would be paid minimum wage during a one year *tour of duty*. At the end of that year, assuming satisfaction of the requirements, the students would receive stipends sufficient to pay tuition and room and board for two years at a public college or trade school. The public service requirement would be satisfied through employment with a government agency or not-for-profit organization like public schools or Goodwill Industries where significant capacity is still needed to improve quality of life in local

⁹⁵ Krebs, 2006, p. 10.

⁹⁶ Teigen, 2006.

⁹⁷ Pew Research Center, 2011.

communities. In addition, students would be required to attend and pass a civics course to be developed by the U.S. Department of Education in conjunction with the Campaign for the Civic Mission of the Schools, thus linking service with civic knowledge.

The groundwork for such a program is already in place through existing programs like AmeriCorps that are in high demand, but limited by funding. A G.I. Bill for civilian service would be a big step towards achieving the kind of widespread participation in civic life that youth sports currently enjoys in most of America.

What sorts of outcomes might we expect from such a program? Since the program is likely to be most attractive to those struggling to afford higher education, we could expect broader civic participation from populations whose voices are largely missing from today's civic conversation. A better-educated population should engage in better, more nuanced policy debates, leading (hopefully) to more thoughtful policy choices. We might even see more meaningful and issue-oriented political campaigns, with less of the intemperate rhetoric that characterizes messages crafted to appeal to uninformed voters.

A program of this sort would also have an enormous and salutary impact on the level of student debt.

According to a 2014 report by *The New York Times*, total student loans outstanding have risen to \$1.1 trillion, compared with \$300 billion just a decade before. The average total debt for student borrowers was around \$30,000 in 2013.

Student debt has thus become a significant impediment to America's economic growth.

Studies show that the burden of student debt constrains individual decision-making in a number of ways, and affects the entire economy. People with student loans, for example, are less likely to start businesses. Considering that 60 percent of jobs are created by small business, diminishing the ability to create new businesses does considerable harm to the economy.⁹⁸

Debt loads also affect overall consumer consumption. According to research by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, fewer 30-year-olds in general have bought homes since the recession, but the decline has been steeper for people with a history of student loan debt and has continued even as the housing market has recovered. In an economy that depends upon the ability and willingness of consumers to purchase homes, furniture, automobiles, and other goods, a debt load that effectively precludes such purchases poses a real problem. (According to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, "three-quarters of the overall shortfall in household formation can be attributed to reductions among younger adults ages 18 to 34. In 2011, 2 million more Americans in this age group lived with their parents than in 2007. Moody's Analytics estimates that each new household formed leads to \$145,000 of economic impact. If student debt is holding back just one-third of those 2 million young Americans from living on their own, that adds up to a \$100 billion loss or delay in economic activity."⁹⁹

Economists also note that high levels of household debt leave the economy more vulnerable to overall shocks, and make downturns longer, more severe, and more difficult to overcome.

Finally, to the extent that lower-income students must rely more on debt than their wealthier peers, current levels of student debt operate to slow social mobility.

A national public service program of the sort contemplated here would significantly reduce student loan debt, increase civic competence, and provide local communities with additional human capital—resources they can deploy to improve the quality of local life.

A national program of this sort would inevitably change Americans' cultural assumptions. Perhaps Americans will never debate the pros and cons of fiscal or regulatory policy with the enthusiasm of sports fans, but an informed citizenry with experience in civic life can be expected to vote, volunteer, and engage at substantially higher levels.

The question is: do we Americans still have the ability to think big? Can we give our common civic life a sporting chance?

⁹⁸ Ambrose, Cordell, & Ma, 2014.

⁹⁹ Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, 2013.

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