

racy (in improved civic education for every student).

These polarities in the proposed standards no doubt reflect the multiple constituencies of American education, and the consequent pluralism and compromise of educational policy making. But because they are also *symbolic*, national standards and assessments in civics will allow policymakers to *surmount* pluralism, to reproduce these polarities, and to join hands in a ritualized dance of hegemonic public policy. The performance may satisfy policymakers that civics education will reduce contemporary strife, but I think what is happening is happening mainly to the performers themselves, not to their putative student audience.

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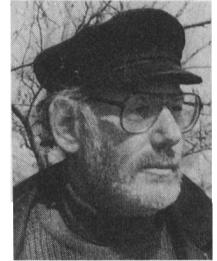
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## About the Author

**Richard M. Merelman** is professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He has published widely on issues of culture and politics in Western democracies. His most recent book is *Representing Black Culture: Racial Conflict and Cultural Politics in the United States* (Routledge 1995).



## Civics Is Not Enough: Teaching Barbarics in K-12\*

John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *University of Nebraska*

Like most college-level teachers of political science, we have been known to complain about the knowledge level of students who enter our classrooms. These students, who have already had at least 12 years of schooling, sometimes lack the most rudimentary background information. One of us recently administered a beginning-of-the-semester quiz in an Introduction to American Government class to determine the students' pre-existing level of political information. The results were dismal.

Only 5% of the class knew that John Major was the Prime Minister of Great Britain; just 5% knew that William Rehnquist was Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court; 10% could correctly identify the Speaker of the House of Representatives; 10% knew the correct length of a term for U.S. Senators and for U.S. Representatives; 24% knew there were nine justices on the Supreme Court; and 13% of the class did not know that Al Gore was vice-president of the United

States. Skills in tracking down information, critical thinking, and expression, alas, are typically not much better than students' knowledge base.

Although the above-mentioned deficiencies are indeed serious, another problem exists that we believe is more serious. Unlike knowledge and skill failings, it has not been accorded any attention from educators. Fortunately, it is a problem that can be addressed if needed changes in the curriculum and in teaching techniques in K-12 civics and government education are adopted. We need to shift the emphasis in teaching college-level political science classes as well.

### The Messiness of Democratic Processes

K-12 civics education gives too much attention to our government's clean constitutional components and arrangements and too little attention to the natural give and take

(and sometimes rough and tumble) that inevitably occurs when large numbers of diverse people are allowed and even encouraged to get involved in government. If the public is divided on the proper solutions to society's problems (and the American public is) and if democracy involves working through these differences in an open manner (it does), the resultant process can be nothing other than slow and unruly and perforce will involve debate and compromise. Yet, these simple points have not been impressed upon the psyches of most residents of the United States.

Using intensive focus-group sessions and a specially designed national survey of more than 1,400 individuals administered in 1992, we recently completed a major project on public attitudes toward Congress and other elements of the political system (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). We were not surprised to find a public upset by specific events such as the congressional pay raise, the check-kiting

scandal, and the Thomas-Hill hearings, and by Congress's perceived failure to address key problems facing the country. But the striking finding to us was that, even setting aside these particular incidents and situations, there was an undercurrent of intense disgust with intrinsic elements of democratic government, particularly democratic government in a technologically complex society of 270 million people, most of whom expect their government to do many things.

Although people, at least as represented by the individuals participating in our survey and in our focus groups, are effusive in praise for the concept of democracy as well as for the basic constitutional structure of United States government, they recoil from what democracy looks like when seen in action and sometimes in inaction. People love the rules of the game but they hate the game itself. Such a hatred of democratic procedures is obviously unhealthy and apparently springs from a patently unrealistic set of assumptions about the nature of democratic politics.

What is missing from the public mood is any realization of the difficulty inherent in moving from divided public opinion on complex issues to solutions that will work and be agreeable to the population. Because people do not take much note of society's intense issue differences, the conclusion at which they frequently arrive is that it must be the politicians who are messing up. The country has problems that need to be solved and the American people are ready for action, but, for shame, the politicians do not solve the problems, and the people become frustrated. If politicians would only listen to the ordinary people, not their staffers and the special interests, then they would be able to "just fix it" as Ross Perot so blithely put it.

But of course just fixing it is not that simple, and the way one person wants it fixed is probably different from another person's way. How can we resolve our differences democratically if not through careful collection of information, discussion, attempted persuasion, bargaining, compromising, and de-

liberation? We cannot. Why do so many people feel government is failing when they see debate, when they see a deliberate pace, and when they see that compromise is employed in reaching a solution? Why is debate called bickering? Why is compromise called selling out? And why is all conflict immediately labeled self-serving and counterproductive partisan gamesmanship? One part of the explanation may be that we have never been taught what democratic processes look like; we have only been taught antiseptic constitutional principles.

### The Need for Democracy Appreciation

Society is too quick to look to our K-12 educational system as a source of, and solution for, each and every social problem identified, so we are reluctant to repeat this common error. Still, in the vital area of political education it would seem that students are not receiving a balanced picture: they are taught the civics but not the barbarics of democratic processes. What is the evidence that current educational approaches are not doing the job? It is admittedly circumstantial, but nonetheless suggestive. It is derived from the national survey mentioned earlier. By dividing level of educational attainment into five categories (no high school degree; high school degree only; some college but no college degree; college degree only; and college degree plus additional education), it is possible to observe the extent to which political variables correlate with education.

For example, Figure 1a shows the relationship between political knowledge and educational attainment. Political knowledge was measured by creating a simple additive scale of four questions where correct answers were assigned a 1 and incorrect answers a 0. The questions were: how long is the term of a United States senator; how many U.S. senators are there from your state; which party has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives; and which party

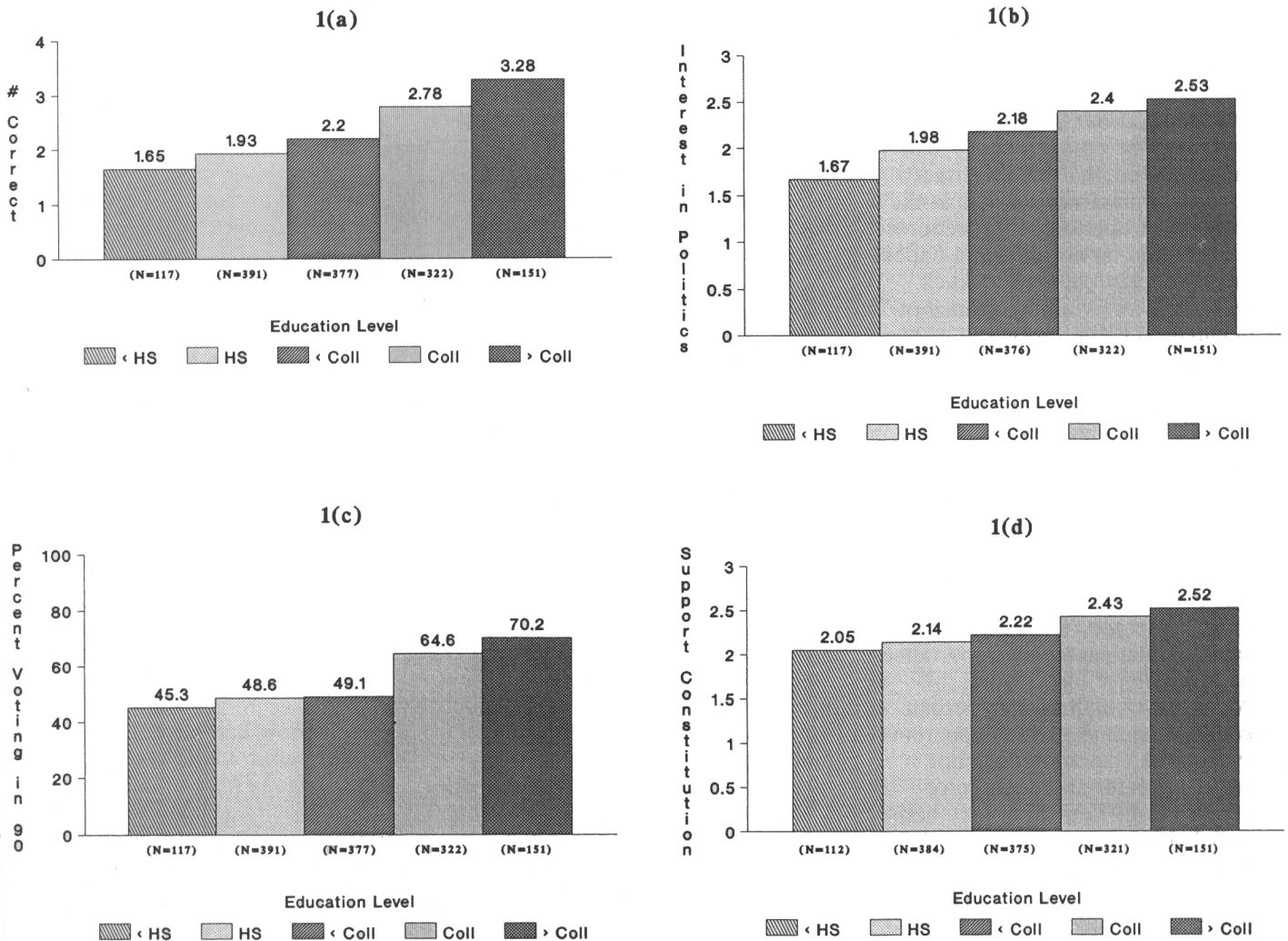
has the most members in the U.S. Senate. It is heartening to report that people with more education do better on this scale than people with less education. In fact, knowledge increases systematically with each higher level of education. People in the sample without a high school diploma had a mean number of correct responses of 1.65, whereas those with at least some postbaccalaureate work scored an impressive 3.28.

A similar positive correlation exists between educational attainment and interest in politics. Respondents were asked how interested they were in politics and national affairs. They were allowed to answer from four choices—very interested (3), somewhat interested (2), slightly interested (1), or not at all interested (0). On the whole, Americans claim to be at least somewhat interested in politics. The mean response for the entire sample was 2.17, the equivalent of slightly better than somewhat interested. But how does this vary across educational attainment? As can be seen in Figure 1b, interest increases systematically with education, from 1.67 for those without a high school degree to 2.53 for those with at least some postbaccalaureate schooling. People with more education are more interested in politics.

They also are more likely to be involved in politics in all capacities, including voting. We asked respondents to tell us whether or not they voted in the most recent midterm election (the 1990 election, since the survey was conducted in 1992). Fifty-five percent reported they had even though the actual percentage was approximately 35%. But to what extent does involvement in politics vary with educational attainment? This information is presented in Figure 1c. Here we see that the percent reporting they voted increases from just 45% for those without a high school diploma to 70% for those in the highest educational category. And since the tendency to overreport turnout is highest among the least educated, Figure 1c almost certainly understates the effects of education and turnout.

Finally, level of education also

**FIGURE 1**  
Education, Knowledge, Interest, Involvement, and Support



Source: Perceptions of Congress National Survey, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995

seems to correlate with the extent to which people approve of “the basic constitutional structure of the U.S. government” (Figure 1d). When strong approval is coded 3, approval 2, disapproval 1, and strong disapproval 0, those in the lowest educational category offer a mean response of 2.0. This figure increases modestly but steadily for each educational category, topping out at better than 2.5 for those with the most education.

Although all four of these relationships easily achieve statistical significance at the .01 level, none of this is evidence of causality. A certain type of person (say, one who is more intellectually curious) may be both more likely to attend

extra years of school and, independently, to be more aware of political facts. Still, the data suggest that education *may* increase a person’s level of political knowledge, interest and involvement in politics, and fondness for the constitutional design. Even though correlation is not equivalent to causation, it is generally seen as a precondition. Figure 1 gives no reason to be critical of the role education plays in developing informed, interested, involved, and supportive citizens.

The consistent relationship between educational attainment and these positive political attributes is the perfect backdrop for looking at the different relationship between educational attainment and an ap-

preciation for such core democratic processes as debate and compromise. Our survey did not include perfectly appropriate items for this task, but two items come close enough. Respondents were asked to rank the importance of various parts of a U.S. representative’s job from very important (2) to somewhat important (1) to not important (0).

It might be expected that individuals with additional education would be more likely to see the importance of elected members of Congress engaging in “discussing and debating controversial issues,” and that these same individuals would place greater importance on “compromising with the presi-

dent." After all, with education should come a greater appreciation for the essential character of debate and compromise in the democratic process. But this pattern would only materialize if the schools gave suitable emphasis to democratic processes. If our claims are correct regarding the educational system's inordinate emphasis on abstract governmental arrangements at the expense of operational procedures, there would be no reason to expect educational attainment to track with the perceived importance of debate and compromise.

Figure 2 provides evidence that this is exactly the case. As Figure 2a indicates, those with more education are *not* more likely to rate debate and discussion as very important. The differences across educational levels are slight and statistically insignificant, and they provide absolutely no indication that education encourages people to value debate. The story is the same for the perceived importance of compromise (see Figure 2b). Again, no overall pattern across educational categories is apparent. With more education does not come a greater appreciation of compromise. Education may help with knowledge, interest, involvement, and support for constitutional arrangements, but there is no evidence it helps foster an appreciation for the nitty gritty of democratic politics.

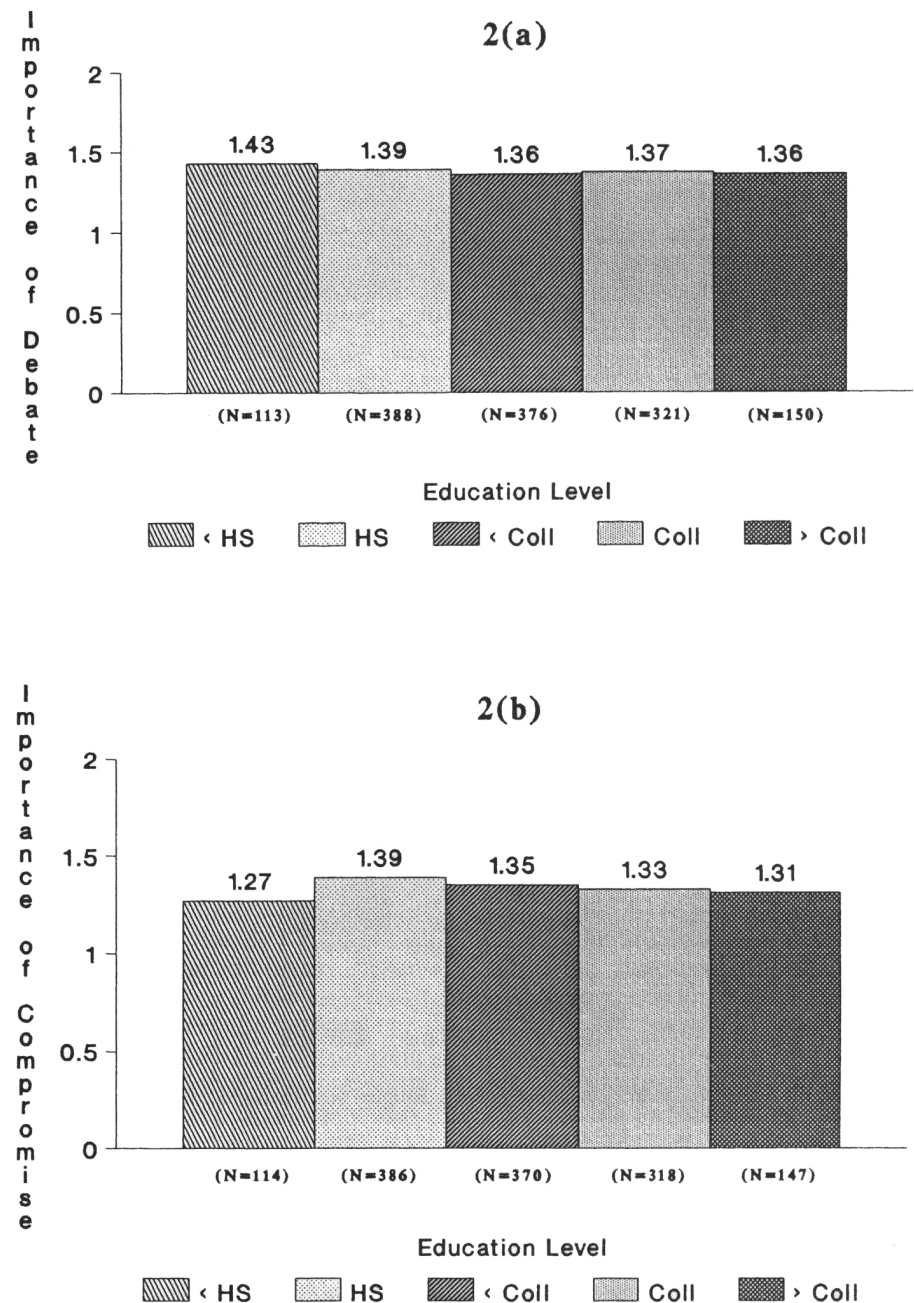
### Desanitizing the Civics Curriculum

In preparation for this article, we reviewed several widely used civics and government texts designed for grades 8–12. We do not intend this to be a screed against high school civics texts. Indeed, in some respects, the books are better than we thought they would be, though they tend to be suffocatingly definitional and conceptual. Still, the key point is that perusal of these texts does nothing to disabuse us of the notion that currently used curricular material does little to help students develop an appreciation of actual democratic processes.

One popular ninth-grade civics

FIGURE 2

Education and Appreciation of Democratic Processes



Source: Perceptions of Congress National Survey, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995

book, for example, devotes only a single short chapter (out of 25) to public opinion and interests. It begins with definitional differences between such concepts as revealed and concealed opinion and between a block association and a tenants' group. Then, after a diatribe against politicians who use glittering generalities, the chapter concludes, ironically, with a series of glittering generalities about how "the vote of

every individual helps determine who wins or loses an election" (Hartley and Vincent 1983, 229). The unavoidable realities of politics in a large, modern, diverse society never come to life.

We believe the orientation of secondary government education needs to be altered to give greater emphasis to the following items:

1. Public opinion is badly divided on most key topics of the day.

On almost every major issue, opinion about the best solution varies widely from group to group and region to region.

2. Since our government is a representative democracy, this divided public opinion will naturally be incorporated into decision-making processes, thereby creating problems—even if we were blessed with the most noble, well-intentioned public officials.
3. Partially due to the size of the country's population and the disinterest of its citizens, but also due to the complexity and specialized nature of many issues, interaction with public officials will often involve paid representatives of interest groups rather than ordinary people. But these so-called special interests are *not* totally divorced from the rest of us. They are, in fact, the voices of certain ordinary people. Seventy percent of the population belong to at least one interest group, and 40% belong to two.
4. Debate is not a bad word. It is good to talk about differences rather than to fight about them. If we all agreed, perhaps we would not need to debate, but we do not all agree. We should talk with each other in order to understand our differences and to try to convince others that we are correct.
5. Compromise, likewise, is not a bad word. It is not "selling out on principles" but is almost certainly necessary in order for us to reach some agreement even though we start out with a sometimes bitterly divided public opinion. The ability to compromise is essential in democratic government.<sup>1</sup>
6. Working through to a solution, using democratic processes, is bound to take a long time, especially when the issues are complex. It would be far quicker if someone would come along on a white horse and tell us what to do. Since we are not fond of this particular option, we must learn to put up with a pace that can charitably be called deliberate.
7. Finally, and most generally,

conflict is not the end of the world. When we see politicians in conflictual situations, we can hope they conduct themselves in a constructive fashion, but we should never entertain a realistic hope that conflict can be banished from the system. Even partisan conflict has its place. Our system is set up on conflict—conflict among the three branches of government, between the House and the Senate, and among the individual members of those bodies. Since we are not all in agreement with each other, conflict will always be a part of democratic reality.

### Incorporating Recent Trends in Secondary Education

Stressing the preceding concepts would have additional benefits. Secondary education now takes seriously the need to incorporate treatments of diverse groups, particularly those identified by race and ethnicity, just as it takes seriously the need to teach and assess students in fashions other than traditional lectures preceding traditional paper and pencil tests. The movements toward diversity, participatory education, and outcome-based assessment have had undeniably good consequences.

Unfortunately, to the extent the textbooks we reviewed are any indication, these features are occasionally presented in a superficial fashion. Including numerous pictures and vignettes involving racial and ethnic minorities is a start but only that. Never do the books convey the fact that along with different genders or along with different skin coloration frequently come fundamentally different policy predispositions.

On average, women are more opposed than men to spending money on national defense. On average, African-Americans are more liberal and more suspicious of local authority figures than whites. Rather than using such facts to drive home the differences existing in a diverse democracy, the tone of the textbooks is saccharine, almost phony. They seem to say, "yes, we

have all these different peoples within our borders, but, if we all believe in the Constitution and if we all vote, we will have a happy country."

Would it not be preferable to let students know from an early age that preferences, whether based on racial groups or otherwise, will frequently lead members of society into conflict, and that democracy constitutes an attempt to solve this conflict peacefully and constructively? The shift in emphasis we are suggesting fits nicely with the movement toward attention to diversity but takes it to a more authentic level.

Similarly, this shift in emphasis fits nicely with the movement toward more imaginative methods of student involvement and assessment. Courses stressing the realities of democratic processes would lend themselves to a variety of small group interactions, videotapes, and, especially, simulations. Guest speakers from interest groups, political parties, and political campaigns would help students to see politics as an intriguing set of actions rather than as a set of mind-numbing definitions and lists. Students could be asked to keep a journal and even to make contact with an elected official or political movement of some sort—and assessment could and should be modified to reflect the nature of the material.

The possibilities are endless, and no doubt many of these activities are going on now in enlightened classrooms across the country. But apparently there are not enough of these activities, or perhaps they have not been integrated with the theme that democracy has winners and losers, and that a key element of democracy is that the losers must do more than constantly bemoan the sorry state of everything: they must continue to play the game.

### Conclusion

People are hardly in a mood to celebrate or even to tolerate politics just now—and why should they be? They have not been taught how to. They have not been taught that

the politics they so despise is driven by their own diversity and by their own desire for liberty, progress, and self-government. They have not been taught that achieving solutions is going to mean compromises that will probably deny each of us from getting all we had wanted. We need to start teaching these facts in earnest.

We have focused in this essay on the need for a shift in emphasis at the K-12 levels, but it is also the case that a shift is needed at the post-secondary level. Figure 2 reveals no improvement in appreciation for debate and compromise once students have the benefit of college courses. Political science professors need to consider a reorientation just as much as high school civics teachers. Even the civic education movement, with its heavy emphasis on the need to encourage participation, misses the point. Participation alone will do little to solve problems. What we are advocating is democracy appreciation, not participation. Naturally, we hope the result might be greater participation, but such participation should be driven by an understanding of the nature of democratic processes and not by avuncular descriptions of civic obligation.

Though the post-secondary political science community certainly needs to do a better job of getting the message across, the real differences, as is so often the case, can be made by those who connect with students at the formative K-12 stages. This is where an educational system oriented toward the gritty actuality of democratic politics rather than toward pristine constitutional design would, in the

long run, decrease the cynicism and the sense that everything in government has gone irrevocably wrong.

It would be beneficial for students to realize at an early age that some of the things that seem to be wrong are a natural part of democratic politics. People may claim that our proposal would merely teach students to be cynical earlier, but it is not cynical to recognize that people disagree and that working toward solutions is going to be difficult. Insulating our young people from political reality likely leads to increased bitterness when they eventually become aware of the actual practice of politics.

More could be done by all of us to show students the unavoidable other side of working through problems in a representative but divided society. Making students aware of both civics and barbarics would not magically turn a negative public into a positive one, but it is an important step toward a public that appreciates the governing process. A reverential attitude toward the Constitution serves little purpose if it is accompanied by sneering contempt for the actions taking place within its confines. It is easy to venerate a document; it is harder to appreciate an action; it is extremely difficult to tolerate inaction born of diversity. Yet all these are parts of democracy, and this is the message we must carry to students.

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## Notes

\* Some of the analyses presented here are based on data collected with financial sup-

port from the National Science Foundation (SES-91-22733).

1. An anonymous reviewer raised a point related to this discussion. Individual politicians "routinely take positions that differ from their opinions. Almost any really controversial issue will drive politicians to do this . . . citizens know this and are often made uncomfortable by it. After all, shouldn't politicians 'stand for what they believe?'" When politicians compromise on issues, citizens may have a similar reaction that politicians are not standing on principle, rather than seeing compromise as a necessary part of a representative democracy.

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## About the Authors

**John R. Hibbing** is professor of political science at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. His articles on legislatures and voting behavior have been published in numerous journals, including the *American Political Science Review*, the *Journal of Politics*, and the *British Journal of Political Science*. He is author of *Choosing to Leave* (1982) and *Congressional Careers* (1991), and a coauthor of *Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes toward American Political Institutions* (1995). He has also served as co-editor of the *American Politics Quarterly* and the *Legislative Studies Quarterly*.

**Elizabeth Theiss-Morse** is associate professor of political science at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. She has published research on citizenship, political tolerance, and methodology. She is a coauthor of two books: *Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes toward American Political Institutions* (1995) and *With Malice toward Some: How People Make Civil Liberties Judgments* (1995).