

Task Force on Civic Education

Statement of Purpose

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The Problem

Democracies, from nations to small communities, cannot survive and thrive without robust engagement in the political controversies (and the well-earned celebrations) that sustain them. Civic engagement in, and a personal sense of responsibility for, the health of our inescapably political life are the lifeblood of a liberal democracy.

And yet Americans, at this century's end seem indifferent, cynical, and perhaps afraid of politics. The evidence for the rise of political apathy and cynicism is convincing. While particular studies can be debated and their findings disputed, we take it as a given that something is amiss, both in our national political life and in our willingness to embrace the political challenges of our immediate communities.

We do not pretend to propose recovering some imagined Golden Age of universal political engagement. We have no wish to rally tens of thousands of concerned citizens into the streets. We know that democratic governments work best when they preserve our freedom to flourish in our personal lives. But we do know that too many among us find the political process distasteful. Too many of us hold that political life is in disarray. Too many of us, failing to understand the craft of politics, see politics and politicians as merely crafty. Too many of us, failing to understand the complex elements of the "art of the possible," see politics as artless, ugly, and corrupt.

An Explanation

Where does this alienation from politics come from? Some hypotheses lay the problem at the feet of the media. Others suggest that high overall levels of affluence and the absence of directly perceived challenges to personal well-being make politics seem irrelevant. This Task Force, however, believes that a very significant failure in basic political education lies behind much of today's political apathy, ignorance, and fear about politics. Political education, we believe, does not effectively teach central truths about the nature of political life. It seems unable to counter the belief that, in politics, one either wins or loses, and to win means getting everything at once, now! The sense that politics can always bring another day, another chance to be heard, to persuade, and perhaps to gain part of what one wants, is lost. Political education

today seems unable to teach the lessons of our political history: Persistent civic engagement—the slow and patient building of first coalitions and then majorities—can generate social change. This is the history of women's suffrage and, while not yet finished, it is the history of increasing protection of civil liberties. Perhaps political education fails to teach that politics is *not* a form of economics. The market allows consumers to buy what they want when they want it, but politics does not work that way. Our impatience with political compromises, with the half-measures and imperfect solutions that are the stuff of politics, may be at an all-time low.

The Task Force Mission

While many civic and professional associations have begun to respond to these alarms, political scientists and educators have something distinctive and essential to offer. Specifically, the Task Force proposes that the American Political Science Association's Civic Education Projects:

- (1) Provide and widely disseminate the clearest possible empirical description and analytical understanding of the depth and breadth of the "civic disengagement" problem.
- (2) Provide and widely disseminate the most specific possible descriptions of how, at every level of political education, we teach or fail to teach the craft and practice of politics.
- (3) Articulate concrete curricular and extracurricular steps that educators can take to teach an understanding of the craft of politics. These descriptions must detail why and how these efforts successfully reinvigorate the motivation and skill to engage effectively in political life at every level.

Effective political education cannot, single-handedly, reverse the trend toward apathy, and disengagement. But we doubt that we can restore widespread confidence in the politics of liberal democracies without it. American democracy, perhaps uniquely, depends on the civic work of ordinary people who, located in diverse, plural communities, work on behalf of their communities and seek eagerly for common goods, both heroic and mundane.