

# Civic Education: Three Early American Political Science Association Committees and Their Relevance for Our Times

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In 1996 Elinor Ostrom, then-president of the American Political Science Association appointed a Task Force on Civic Education for the Next Century. The Task Force was presented as a response to a specifically modern problem: the loss of social capital in the preceding 25 years. Its creation emerged from “deep concerns about the viability of democracy in America” emanating from the current decline in political participation with a substantial gap opening between older and younger citizens’ participation patterns (“Civic Education for the Next Century” 1996). The Task Force was to address issues of civic education and engagement by developing instructional resources for upper-division high school and lower-division college students.

Civic education was an important APSA concern from the organization’s founding in 1903 up until the early 1920s. For the first two decades after its inception, the Association played an influential role in analyzing the problem of adequate training for citizenship at the elementary and secondary level. The 1905 Annual Meeting in Baltimore featured a section devoted to the topic. A year later, a Committee of Five was appointed to investigate high-school government instruction.<sup>1</sup> In 1911, a Committee of Seven received a similar charge.<sup>2</sup> At the 1920 Meeting, a third task force was ap-

pointed, chaired by Harvard professor William Bennett Munro.<sup>3</sup> Some idea of the caliber of group members can be gleaned from the fact that each committee contained at least one future APSA president.

After the third group reported in 1922, the topic of civic education seems to have become less salient for the organization. A hiatus of over 15 years ensued before the APSA appointed a fourth task force in 1939 (American Political Science Association Committee on Cooperation with the National Council for the Social Studies 1939).

Reviewing the work of the three early committees yields some insights for the contemporary debate on civic engagement. In several respects these Progressive Era analyses prefigure the strategies current scholars see as cutting-edge approaches to using education to combat apathy and cynicism. To the extent that these approaches actually are useful, we can only gain by exploring early pleas for reform. To the extent that the early ideas were implemented but were unsuccessful at changing civic engagement, we might want to ask why this lack of progress occurred.

In this article I analyze the early committees in terms of their view of civic education at the time they were writing and their goals and strategies for reform: What problems did the early committees see in the teaching of civics? What were their aims in trying to improve teaching? How did they intend to reach their objectives? Answering these questions will permit comparisons with contemporary reform efforts.

## No Golden Age

Even a cursory glance at the early materials shows that our century

contains no period when the scope and content of elementary- and high-school civics satisfied academic political scientists. From the turn of the century to the twenties all the APSA-sponsored investigations of precollegiate civics education expressed dissatisfaction with the reigning educational models and unease with the type of citizens they were creating.

A speaker at the 1905 APSA session on education said flatly “the beginner in political science brings to his work only a very meager equipment” (Schaper 1906, 266). Having tested engineering students at ten universities, Schaper labeled the general level of knowledge exceedingly low and proposed improvement for its “salutary effect on citizenship” (288).

The Committee of Five asked rhetorically

Is it not a curious fact that though our schools are largely instituted, supported and operated by the government, yet the study of American government in the schools and colleges is the last subject to receive adequate attention? (American Political Science Association Committee of Five 1908, 221)

This Committee linked poor preparation at the early levels to the plethora of bad politicians and weak public servants its members believed dominated turn-of-the-century American government.

The Committee of Seven sent a survey to elementary and high schools and found that they devoted insufficient time to civics (American Political Science Association Committee on Instruction 1916). J. Lynn Barnard (1916), a member of the Committee, lamented that schools did not educate efficient citizens even though more young people

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wanted to practice good citizenship than in earlier times.

The 1920 Committee characterized high-school civics instruction as superficial and ill-organized. It concluded that, at best, courses handed students a smattering of unrelated facts that prepared them poorly for citizenship (“The Study of Civics” 1922).

## Education for Citizenship

The early political scientists objected to inadequate education because they believed that better instruction would produce better citizens. Their primary focus was to increase the pupil’s desire and ability to perform citizenship duties. As one Committee of Seven member explained, “From the beginning to the end of teaching, the chief aim should be to get the child to perform his part in civic life” (Hill 1914, viii).

Modern political scientists are split between those who want to create a polity of active citizens working for the community (e.g., Barber 1984) and those who posit the citizen as passive customer intent on individual satisfaction (e.g., Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Executive Office of the President 1993, 1994). The three early committees all upheld the importance of active citizenship. They wanted to use education to produce engaged adults who would act for the good of the state and the entire society. A member of the Committee of Five wrote that

there is no satisfaction in life so great as devotion to the welfare of the state. All private satisfaction seems small when compared with that of a man who has gained the confidence of his fellow-citizens through honest action and personal sacrifice. (Reinsch 1914, iv-v)

One member of the Committee of Seven noted,

the good citizen in the completest sense is one who does not allow himself to become so engrossed in the process of making a living as to lose sight of those other duties of good citizenship that he owes . . . to society generally and above all to the state” (Barnard 1916, 30–31).

Munro (1915) argued that active citizens are the first essential of efficient administration.

The Committee of Seven is the most emphatic in keeping to the orientation of active citizenship. This committee shows some debt to the New York City Bureau of Municipal Research’s concept of the efficient citizen who, viewed as an owner of the public service, cares for the enterprise as a whole and will not simply use civic knowledge for his or her own selfish interests (New York City Bureau of Municipal Research 1908-1913).<sup>4</sup> But the Committee limits the role of the citizen in a way that does not appear in the early Bureau literature by making reference to a dichotomy between policy and technique. In the Committee’s view, everyone can (and should) get involved on issues of policy; but citizens must defer to experts on technical issues. Without defining the boundaries of the technical, the Committee’s report goes so far as to say that in technical matters “no one but an expert is qualified to form an opinion of any value whatever” (American Political Science Association Committee on Instruction 1916, 34). Citizens have to learn humility in the face of expertise.

Any reader of the early literature must be struck with two omissions. The first relates to gender. Both the Committee of Five and the Committee of Seven met at a time when women could not vote. Committee members cite participation in elections as an important citizen duty. Because the reports say that education is supposed to prepare people to carry out civic duties, it is odd that no mention is made of how females’ exclusion from fulfilling this obligation might affect their schooling. The omission is particularly surprising because the Committee of Five report briefly discusses differences in the number of male and female high school teachers and principals in different states, and the Committee of Seven contained a female member, Mabel Hill, who was an administrator at various girls’ schools. These committees knew that gender was a salient educational variable, yet they refrained from dis-

cussing it in the context of strategies for instruction in civics.

A second omission deals with tone. No report whispers any doubt that this particular committee could make a difference. These reports abound in optimism. They exemplify can-do philosophy. Every pronouncement affirms that educational improvement can change civic life. For the writers of these reports, school matters. No second thoughts, no hesitations appear about whether proper instruction at the elementary and secondary levels can have key repercussions on adult behavior.

## Experiential Learning

All of the task forces inveigh against rote learning; the practice of having students memorize passages from constitutions and textbooks met universal disdain. The Committee of Five spends a good part of its report arguing that history classes are no place to teach civics. They recommended that schools establish separate government courses that offered practical education to enable people to meet their civic duties. Such government courses would borrow natural science methodology. Students would be sent into the community to observe phenomena and report on them: Instead of reading about the history of juries, students would watch a jury get impaneled.

The Committee of Seven report refers readers to an article by William Allen who had worked at the Bureau of Municipal Research and who argued that schools should teach languages and civics in the same manner:

The way to study German is to begin to talk and read German, not to talk and read English about German. . . . So the way to teach civics . . . is to give boys and girls “chores” or tasks that compel them to feel for civic ideals—i.e., to discharge and not merely read about civic duties. (1916, 154)

The way to mold citizenship behavior, according to the Committee of Seven, is to give young people a chance to act like good citizens. Even at the elementary level this

means cooperating with civic organizations or government agencies on projects such as beautifying empty lots (an early exposition of service learning). It means having pupils work on projects in groups where they have to interact with each other to make important decisions (Munro 1922).

One member of the Committee of Five endorsed forming "Boys' Republics" during summer vacations. In this attempt to teach the meaning of cooperation, sixty to eighty boys would rent land near the town and subdivide it among themselves, with each boy growing the crops he likes. The boys would elect a seven- to nine-person council to make rules, a mayor and police force to enforce them, and a judge to preside over a quasi-court in case of disputes (Reinsch 1914). The boys would arrange their own government. For the first time in their lives, politics would matter on a daily basis; they would be forced to see how different political actions affected them personally and how they affected the whole boys' community. Such an action-centered approach was seen as requiring a change in teacher training, away from instructing potential civics teachers in history alone and towards giving them a better understanding of government.

J. Lynn Barnard, a member of the Committee of Seven, also sat on a special committee of the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. That body published concrete strategies for fostering student interest in activism at the local level that could be used by classroom teachers without much change. For a unit on water supply, the committee suggests asking pupils these questions:

If you suspect that your water supply may be polluted, how will you proceed to verify your suspicions? If you find that it is polluted, what should you do about it? What should your father do about it? . . . If your community needs a new water system, how may a citizen proceed to arouse public opinion in the matter? . . . What kinds of reports should a water commis-

sioner render, and whose business is it to read them? Why? (National Education Association 1915, 23)

For a unit on education, these questions are asked:

What changes have been made in your high school course of study in the last ten years? . . . What changes would you suggest in the content and methods of teaching the studies you are taking to make them more useful to you? (29)

An issue of contention among the reports is whether teachers should focus students' attention on national, state, or local governments. Both the Committee of Five and the Committee of Seven favor the local option. These reports assume a child's key interests lie close to home. A national focus involves too many abstractions. Since local examples are more likely to be concrete (e.g., the police officer on our block, the sanitation workers who keep our neighborhood clean), they will be more likely to elicit greater empathy and interest and spur greater behavioral change. In addition, local and state governments were seen as the ones that largely determined the conditions under which people lived.

The Munro Committee of 1920 opposed a local focus. Its report sees the national government playing the key political role in reality. This dramatic shift in emphasis might have proceeded from the national government's assuming an increased role over time, but this hardly seems likely. It is doubtful that a relevant shift in local/state/national functions occurred in less than ten years. More likely, the preference changed because the Munro Committee met shortly after America's participation in World War I and the other committees finished their work before America entered the conflict. Understanding defense and international issues loomed larger as civic duties for a committee whose members were touched by a major war.

## Analysis and Conclusions

In several respects, the problems noted by early committees and the solutions they suggested are similar to problems and solutions at issue today. The early committees saw a polity with too many apathetic citizens who were unwilling to engage public questions; such apathy is an impetus for concern in our own time. The early committees expected that experiential education involving service projects would help correct the problem; that idea is popular in contemporary literature as well (e.g., Barber and Battistoni 1993). Two of the early committees urged increased educational emphasis on the local community; Ostrom's 1996 call for a task force also suggests that increased concern with local entities is educationally useful.

This congruence at the level of content cannot eliminate intergenerational differences in scope and style. The early reports might not be congenial to some modern readers because they cover only a part of the material contemporary educators understand to fall under the rubric of civics and they cover that material in a determined tone that might seem strident to some people.

The modern view is that a civics course has three goals; it should increase student knowledge about politics, make pupils better citizens, and increase their understanding of their rights and the rights of others (see, for example, Langton and Jennings 1968). The early documents eliminate almost all concern with individual rights. Their worry about increasing pupil knowledge comes not as a stand-alone concern but as a result of their authors' shared belief that such an increase would change pupil behavior in ways that would resonate into adulthood. Members of the early committees were fervent in their attempt to promote active citizenship.

Modern readers might prefer a broader and more nuanced message, one that took more account of rights and that addressed possible problems in implementing a shift to more active citizenship. These disparities in tone and scope, however, do not



eliminate the congruities that do appear in strategies for developing better citizens.

At the very least, acquaintance with the early reports may save contemporary writers from the hubris of thinking they have invented a new path to reconstruct education. In some important strategic aspects, the Progressive Era efforts are congruent with the guiding principles of current attempts at reform. It seems similar requests for educational change have been raised off and on in the political science community for over eighty years.

Recognizing this redundancy precipitates the question: Why are problems of civic engagement still around? If education can correct the problem, and experiential education and local focus are the ideas that work, why have they not worked already? How could Langton and Jennings (1968) find that completing a high-school civics course barely affected a pupil's political knowledge or participative orientation?

We can discard some answers immediately. Failure to have an impact was not due to APSA's distancing itself from K-12 teachers and administrators. A member of the precollegiate constituency sat on both the Committee of Five and the Committee of Seven.

Failure did not result from a lack of concrete instructional and assessment techniques relating to active education. While the committee reports themselves are too short to contain many specific suggestions, they reference related materials that offer classroom teachers detailed guidance.

A possible answer is that schools implemented the early reform prescriptions in a weak rather than a strong form and only intense shifts in education could have increased civic engagement. An observer in the 1920s reported that the early APSA committees had some impact on civics textbooks and teachers' presentation of material, spurring greater coverage of the way governments actually worked and less discussion of the history of states and constitutions, but getting change beyond that point was always difficult (Brown

1929). A civics curriculum anchored in service and civic experience never took hold. Schools continued to teach about civics; using Allen's analogy, we might say that the English conversations simply concentrated on modern German rather than the Medieval variety.

The lack of strong change can prod us to question the political savvy of our organizational predecessors. The political scientists living in the first two decades of this century considered themselves the experts of their day in the workings of government. Yet, that expertise did not extend to knowing how to proceed to effectively change school systems.

The current interest in educational issues opens the question of whether more intensive service-oriented curricula can be developed in our era. It is hard to answer this question with the unalloyed optimism of the early committee members. The results of their efforts remind us that interesting ideas do not necessarily get implemented in the way their originators envisioned. Repeated calls for the same educational reforms seem standard in many disciplines. A recent study of efforts to reform introductory physics courses shows waves of commissions and task forces repeatedly making almost identical proposals. From 1956 to the present, each succeeding commission identified the same problems as its predecessor and then offered similar suggestions for reform—almost as if it were working in a historical vacuum (Coleman, Holcomb, and Rigden 1998). Large institutions are often dominated by inertia, so that change of great magnitude is very difficult. Reforming any entrenched educational practice seems to be difficult.

In our field, a unique additional obstacle may be that many teachers themselves are politically apathetic and cynical. Such teachers may implicitly impart these attitudes to students regardless of the formal course offerings. Newmann (1987) argues that schools often foster apathy by conducting a curriculum of cynical realism wherein students are implicitly told that democratic ideals are constantly violated through greed

and incompetence. The lesson is that savvy folk know that they cannot make a difference; only fools get involved. If these are teacher attitudes, even curricula that formally emphasize service would not engender a love of civic engagement.

The contemporary political science community is not united behind the idea of active citizenship. For those scholars and teachers who hold to a customer model of citizenship, a lack of civic engagement may not be crucial. The early committees do not write as if they expect dissent within their own professional ranks; modern educators echoing early suggestions about cleaning up lots might find some of their own colleagues chastising them for coercing students to perform service rather than allowing them to spend that time in private-sector jobs. Neither at the university nor high school level are teachers necessarily going to agree philosophically with the idea of mandatory service. This lack of disciplinary unanimity could sabotage efforts at change.

The issue of how the current APSA's practical political skills stack up against those of its Progressive Era predecessors must also be addressed. If our professional association has an appetite for change, can it persuade local educational authorities to undergo the dislocation of significant reform? Does the modern Association have a track record of spearheading such ground-level change? The record would seem to indicate that the earlier groups had closer ties to the K-12 administrative world; both the Committee of Five and the Committee of Seven included representatives of this constituency, while the current Task Force on Civic Education for the Next Century is composed completely of university-level academics. The historical inclusion of precollegiate administrators would seem to suggest that, if all other relevant factors are equal, the earlier groups should have had an easier time getting their points across than would the current task force.

Ironically, for all their optimism, the early reports send us the cautionary message that using education

to change civic participation is more easily outlined than accomplished. Their actual message is that, if you propose a curriculum that promotes active citizenship in a society where

apathy reigns, the reforms implemented are likely to produce only diluted versions of the envisioned changes. The authors of these reports, however, would be the last people to

want us to learn from this irony that we should not follow up on their efforts. I see them as people who would expect us to use their lack of success as a goad to spur us on to one more try.

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## Notes

1. The five members were James James, Isidor Loeb, Paul Reinsch, William Schaper, and James Sullivan. The first four taught at the university level; Sullivan was a high school administrator.

2. The seven members were J. Lynn Bar-

nard, Edgar Dawson, Walter Fleming, Charles Grove Haines (chair), Mabel Hill, Frank Horack, and James James. All members except Hill taught at the university level; she was a secondary school administrator. James also sat on the Committee of Five.

3. Fifty-eight people signed the Committee report that appeared in the *American Political Science Review*.

4. For an analysis of the efficient citizen concept see Schachter (1997).

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