

APSA Task Force on Civic Education in the 21st Century

Expanded Articulation Statement: A Call for Reactions and Contributions

The Task Force on Civic Education for the 21st Century seeks to engage political scientists in a discussion of the objectives, importance, and crucial concepts of civic and political education. To do so, the Task Force is establishing a discussion list, named "Civic Education for the Next Century" (APSA-CIVED), and opening the exchange with an expanded "Articulation Statement" that follows along with instruction on how to subscribe to the discussion list. The list was created and will be maintained by Michigan State University's H-Net, Humanities and Social Sciences On-Line (<http://h-net.msu.edu>), and is one of many examples of the ongoing partnership between the APSA and H-Net. Of course, reactions to the statement are welcome by regular mail, fax, and email. All of these addresses are given below. The Articulation Statement was prepared by Lief H. Carter, Colorado College.

Brief Task Force History

In 1996 Lin Ostrom, APSA president-elect, organized the Task Force and arranged funding for a mission lasting up to seven years. The Task Force held a three-day retreat in March 1997 and has met in shorter sessions several times since. We regularly exchange ideas on an in-house chat list. Our "Statement of Purpose," initially drafted at the retreat, was published in the December 1997 issue of *PS* (p. 745). A list of the current members of the Task Force follows this statement.

The Problem

We start with the evidence suggesting mounting political apathy in the United States. We see it in long and short time-series studies of such things as voter turnout and student interest in politics. The Task Force is actively examining the various research findings that may explain the dimensions of this presumably multifaceted problem. Long-term efforts to reverse these trends must obviously address many possible causes. We do, however, take as axiomatic that current levels of political knowledge, political engagement, and political enthusiasm are so low as to threaten the vitality and stability of democratic politics in the United States. We believe political education in the United States is inadequate across the board. We believe that we who have chosen to teach politics as our profession bear major responsibility for addressing the problem.

The Discussion

Last December, Task Force members took part in the following in-house survey. Each of us was asked to respond to the following item:

State in one or two sentences what you believe to be the most important single civic lesson that members of a participatory democracy must learn in order to play effective and responsible civic roles.

Twelve members responded. The twelve responses, on first viewing, ranged widely. They included such phrases as:

- "learning to lose gracefully"
- know that democracy is an ongoing and very much unfinished drama about the struggle to make peace"
- "capacity to access and critically assess governance-related and issue-relevant information"
- "why we must have rule of law"
- "tolerance of diverse opinions"
- "the efficacy of collaboration"
- "exposing students to central and political traditions of the nation"
- "play up the dignity and standing of the category 'citizen.'"

Our discussions of the responses produced agreement with Bob Putnam's reduction of the responses to the following categories:

- Teach tolerance
- Teach collaboration
- Teach analysis
- Teach our traditions.

These four responses may indeed reduce to one: Teach the motivation and competence to engage actively in public problem solving.

We would like to know how you would respond to our one-item survey question. However, we are even more interested in your reactions to one striking implication of our initial responses and these codings of them. The implication is that teaching "about government" will not itself provide the political education we need. The thrust of many of our in-house responses suggested two new and, we think, complementary directions that political education should take: 1) The importance of teaching the liberal aspirations to freedom, dignity, and equality embedded in our political history and traditions; 2) The importance of learning the practical wisdom necessary to be a competent and hopeful political actor in all social settings, many of which—e.g., corporate management, labor union organization, and church governance—have no necessary connection to the affairs of national, state, and local government.

Civic Education Network: Working Online

To complement the work of the APSA Task Force on Civic Education, the Association has introduced a web site and an email discussion list to increase dialogue and presentation of civic education materials within the discipline.

Currently under development, the Civic Education Network (CEN) (www.apsanet.org/CENnet/) will offer access to a collection of teaching and scholarly materials. Contributions from members will constitute a significant portion of the site and materials such as syllabi, lesson plans, bibliographies, essays, and online classroom exercises are sought. Other relevant materials are also welcomed.

Seeking to enhance communication between the Task Force and interested scholars and practitioners, the Association is hosting APSA-CIVED, a moderated email discussion list. The list is designed to facilitate exchange on the methods and practice of civic education and civic engagement. To subscribe to the list, please send the following email message to listserv@h-net.msu.edu:

sub APSA-CIVED yourname yourinstitution

You may also subscribe to the list via the CEN web site. For further information on the activities of the Task Force, please contact Sheilah Mann at smann@apsanet.org.

Both of these directions, if we take them seriously, imply a major reexamination of political education throughout the U.S., both in the undergraduate and in the K-12 curricula. To do so would have, as the cliché puts it, “vast consequences” for the discipline’s approach to the roles its members play as civic educators. Many of us on the task force have come to see that our disciplinary emphasis on “value neutrality” must be adjusted in the civics education classroom to reflect the need to promote and enhance basic democratic values. Our reliance on “critical thinking,” without a moral framework within which to think critically, may be part of the problem. It may feed not healthy skepticism but unhealthy cynicism and political disengagement.

Virtually every other academic discipline implicitly claims to teach its students substantive knowledge that is valuable and good. We do not by any means reject teaching the facts of political life. Recent findings suggest that active political participation correlates positively with factual knowledge about governmental and political practices. The call to “teach our traditions” is not a call to return to historical, and often oppressive and exclusionary, practices. Nor is the call to “teach tolerance” or an innocuous call to “teach values.” Tolerance, as both ancient and contemporary political experience shows, seems one of the most difficult of all political achievements.

This very difficulty leads us to believe that we must specifically teach tolerance, and the specific political virtues we associate with tolerance, if we are to teach politics as the practice of competent and effective problem solving in human groups.

In sum, we believe that the factual political knowledge we do and must teach can only become meaningful in political practice when presented within a valuational framework. We believe we must therefore teach the specific virtues on which effective political practice depends. We believe we must therefore teach the specific virtues on which effective political practice depends. We believe we must unequivocally teach the value of democratic aspirations to human liberation and human dignity. Without this framework, our descriptions of political facts and political virtues will not inspire and motivate people to the level of civic engagement that a healthy democratic polity requires.

The Member of the APSA Task Force on Civic Education are:

- M. Kent Jennings, 1998-99 APSA President, University of California, Santa Barbara
- Elinor Ostrom, 1996-97 APSA President, Indiana University
- Richard Brody, Stanford University
- Lief H. Carter, Colorado College
- Melvin J. Dubnick, Co-Chair, Rutgers University
- Jean Bethke Elshtain, Co-Chair, Divinity School, University of Chicago
- Mary A. Hepburn, Vinson Institute, University of Georgia
- Margaret Levi, University of Washington
- Richard G. Niemi, University of Rochester
- Susan A. MacManus, University of South Florida
- Ronald J. Oakerson, Houghton College
- Robert D. Putnam, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University
- Wendy M. Rahn, University of Minnesota
- Alan Rosenthal, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University
- Edward Thompson, III, California State University, San Marcos

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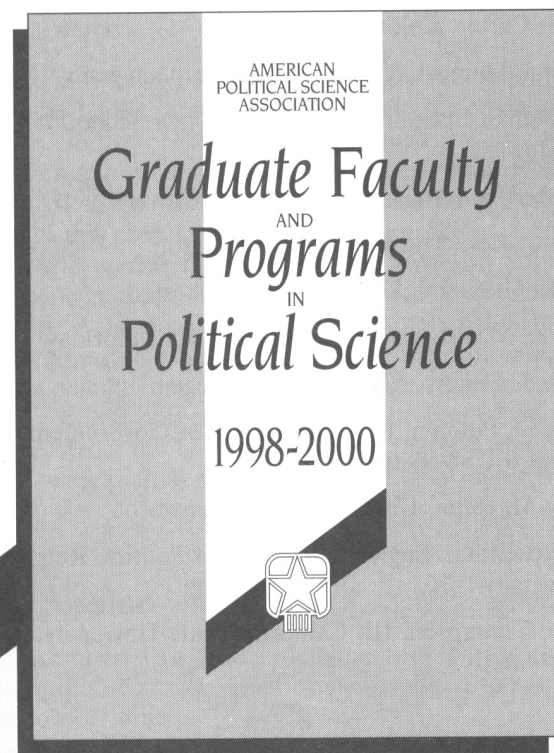
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