

Civic Education: The Backbone of Democracy



Polarization During the Trump Era

On July 4, Trump's Freedom 250 organization hosted the Great American State Fair in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution. Framed as an exposition of "the people, traditions, innovations, and spirit that make America the greatest nation on Earth", the two-week long event featured an array of lackluster activities that can be chalked up "to an apolitical hodgepodge of history and Americana."

The problem with Trump's celebration was not that it failed to deliver an arousing spectacle. Rather, it was that he sought ownership for his side of politics over the past, present, and future meaning of America. Freedom 250 was founded in 2025 in opposition to America250, a bipartisan organization stabilized by Congress in 2016 that had been tasked with coordinating the celebration. Contrary to Freedom 250's claims on its website that the fair includes "more than 150 exhibits from all 56 states and territories," at least 11 states refused to take part, highlighting the fractured nature of the celebrations and country. This partisan participation reflects the zero-sum language of winning and losing that often pervades contemporary politics.

Civic Education

Lost in the divided celebration of the U.S. 250th anniversary is the founding father's emphasis on civic education as the antidote to political dysfunction. Civic education has been a pillar of education in the U.S. since as early as 1790. In 1798, Benjamin Rush argued for the teaching in colleges of the "usual arts and sciences" but also, the "science of government", with the hope that it "is possible to convert men into republican machines," such that they may "perform their parts properly, in the great machine of the government and state." The question is whether our institutions are living up to this mission. Even among the founding fathers there were contrasting opinions. Jefferson and Madison were concerned less with national identity than in holding governmental institutions accountable and protecting individual rights. Civic education goes beyond providing insight into our country's history and political institutions, emphasizing the importance of both compromise and political differences while providing participants with the skills and experience to combat polarization.

Harvard University Professor Danielle Allen highlights the concept of "reflective patriotism," first devised by Alexis de Tocqueville, to describe the process of civic education. "The reflective patriot," Allen writes, "appreciates the power of free institutions to open pathways of possibility, while bringing clear-eyed realism to where the country has and hasn't lived up to its ideals, along with embracing correction and reform." Fortunately, Allen notes that civic education is growing steadily in the United States, and here we highlight several organizations leading the way.

Active Organizations

Recommitting ourselves to a common ground of being constantly inquisitive about one another and engaging with contrasting viewpoints is difficult in the wake of political polarization. Regardless, a robust network of organizations is actively working to resolve existing and prevent future ideological cleavages.

The Constructive Dialogue Institute is a nonprofit that provides higher education institutions, workplaces, and civic and religious institutions with extensive resources to “equip the next generation of Americans with the skills to bridge divides.” *Perspectives*, just one of the many programs offered, is a self-paced online learning experience, with content spanning 6 modules. The program is multifaceted, allowing for independent learning with the self-paced structure, also providing guidance through peer-to-peer conversations and assessments.

CivxNow approaches the debacle of civic education at its root, attempting to spur “bipartisan federal and state legislation that supports implementation of state and local policies that reimagine and deliver relevant, inclusive, and engaging K-12 civic learning”. Founded by Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman to serve as a U.S. Supreme Court justice, the nonprofit is a cross-partisan coalition aimed at ensuring civic learning for all, with the further goal of sustaining democracy. Based on the principle that “work at the state level needs to be driven by state actors”, CivxNow works directly with coalition affiliates across 29 states.

Other nonprofits take on a broader goal of defending democracy, focusing on the significance of bipartisanship. Braver Angels, a New York based nonprofit, provides forums for students from different communities to find common ground through mediated discussions. To quantify its impact, the organization boasts more than 73,660 participants, 7,220 events, and 15,390 members. Interestingly, Braver Angels’ scope is broad, spreading civic education to the arts, faith, and media among other fields. Additionally, the Bipartisan Policy Center, is aimed at bipartisan legislative advancement of pressing issues through direct lobbying and campaigning. The center proves that enduring policy is built on collaboration, honing in on the issue areas of economics, energy, human capital, housing, and health.

Conclusion

U.S. history has been plagued by gross injustices, and the unfolding of events we’re witnessing with the Trump administration today are no different. While it’s easy to become discouraged by legislative branch policy deadlocks, it’s crucial to recognize the work already being done by organizations to foster democratic virtues and experiences in a new generation of citizens. As Justice Sandra Day O'Connor said, “The practice of democracy is not passed down through the gene pool. It must be taught and learned anew by each generation of citizens.” Civic education empowers young people to have a stake in the direction of their country, to recognize that they can have a political impact.