Citizenship Identity and Civic Education in the United States

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The question of what makes a citizen has preoccupied philosophers, educators, social scientists, and politicians for centuries. On one level, citizenship constitutes a legal status–a formal connection to a particular nation, state, and locality, along with all the rights, privileges, protections, duties, responsibilities, and restrictions that entails. Beyond this legal realm, citizenship status defines less official, although no less meaningful, aspects of individuals' social and political lives. Citizenship is a core identity. As citizens, people develop a sense of belonging to a country and a community. They are aware of and adopt the norms and values that are endemic to their culture.

There is hardly a consensus about the meaning of democratic citizenship in the academy or in practice (see Shafir, 1998). The construct of the citizen in the United States is highly contested, and historically has undergone a variety of manifestations. This contestation is evident in the various decisions civic educators have made about what essential attributes of citizenship should be fostered. Civic education can promote particular citizenship ideals based on the attributes of citizenship that are advanced.

The variations in perspectives on civic education mirror in many ways the core points of contestation in academic studies of political socialization. Research on political socialization can be construed as providing a report card on the status of civic education at particular points in time. It also to a great extent reflects the priorities of civic educators, including their assumptions about what makes a good citizen. In an effort to shed light on the complex issues of what essential attributes of civic education are being promoted in the United States and which attributes should be fostered, it is useful to begin by briefly examining the nexus between civic

education in practice and political socialization scholarship. This examination reveals three dominant, somewhat overlapping, constructs of the citizen that have undergirded political socialization scholarship and the teaching of civic educators. Citizenship constructs that specify a more expansive role for the citizen in society have become more prevalent. However, conveying even the most fundamental knowledge that forms the basis upon which citizenship orientations build remains a challenge, even as civic educators strive to reformulate their mission to meet the increasing demands on citizens in an evolving and complex political culture.

Civic Education and Social Science

Gimpel, et al., provide a standard definition of political socialization as, "the process by which new generations are inducted into political culture, learning the knowledge, values, and attitudes that contribute to support of the political system" (2003: 13).[1] Civic education, in the context of this paper, is an element of the political socialization process that involves the active development of citizenship orientations in young people. The intellectual origins of political socialization research are positioned within debates about civic education. These debates focused heavily upon issues of pedagogical practice until the 1930s. The emphasis within academia then began to shift from training citizens to empirical investigations into the development of citizenship orientations (Sears 1990). More recent trends are moving in the direction of integrating research and practice.

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[1]Objections to the concept of political socialization have been raised due to the emphasis on the maintenance of political stability. However, as Conover (1991) observes, the status quo orientation of political socialization in the United States should be accepted as reality, and not necessarily treated as a value judgement.

Political science emerged as a discipline in the mid-nineteenth century as part of an educational reform movement sparked by the need to deal with social and political problems in the wake of the Civil War and the growing complexities of the state (Leonard 1995). Some political scientists believed that it was the discipline's moral responsibility to educate good democratic citizens and leaders. The dominant position within the academy since the 1880s, however, hardly was enlightened or optimistic about the possibilities of civic education for the mass public (Ross 1991). Ball contends that throughout the Wilsonian movement, the Progressive period, and the behavioral revolution, political scientists, regardless of their theoretical or methodological differences, were united in their "concern–or perhaps preoccupation–with the (in)capacity of citizens to govern themselves" (1995: 42). Reflecting on the ability of scientific investigations of politics to shed light on theoretical questions of democratic participation, Pool (1963) lamented that most studies of civic culture and socialization focused on people who are less trustful of the polity, less participatory, less interested, and less confident of their power to change things than social scientists think they ought to be. This observation might easily have been made today.

During the Wilsonian era, this position was manifested in the belief that the discipline of political science should act as a agent of social control serving the state, especially by training specialists in leadership and administrative science, and by producing academic researchers (Leonard, 1995). Ball's description of Woodrow Wilson's attitude toward mass civic education provides great insight into the prevailing views within political science from the1880s through the Progressive period and even beyond. "Wilson saw citizens much as a teacher sees his unkempt charges. A little learning and a lot of discipline can go a long way toward chastening

high-spirited democrats, damping down their enthusiasm, and banking the fires of radicalism"
(Ball, 1995: 45).

Political scientists during the Progressive period, in keeping with the idea that average
citizens were incapable of playing more than a marginal role in democratic governance, sought
to expose political corruption and proposed reforms. The goal was to make boss politics and
political machines less appealing to the masses, and not to enhance civic involvement (Ball,
1995). Civics texts, which were often aimed at assimilating the growing immigrant population,
downplayed the need for active participation in the political realm, and instead stressed cultural
myths, such as those associated with America dream of unlimited opportunities for all who
worked hard (Dubnick, 1998). The emphasis during these phases of the discipline's development
fell more heavily on the production of civil servants than on teaching civics to the general public.

Charles Merriam's landmark work in the 1920s and 1930s provided the impetus for the
emergence of political studies of socialization and at the same time sought to further the practical
enterprise of civic education. Merriam and his colleagues produced a series of cross-cultural
investigations which examined the development, control, and implications of civic training in
eight nations–Austria-Hungary, England, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Switzerland, and the
United States.[2] These works provided a point of departure for studies focusing on the
relationship between political socialization and political regimes. They identified the specific

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[2]The series, published by the University of Chicago Press in the 1920s and 1930s,
included the following volumes: *Civic Training in Soviet Russia*, by Samuel N. Harper; *Great
Britain*, by John M. Gaus; *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, by Oscar Jaszi; *Making
Fascists*, by Herbert W. Schneider and Shepard B. Clough; *Germany*, by Paul Kosok; *Civic
Training in Switzerland*, by Robert C. Brooks; *France*, by Carleton J. H. Hayes; *Civic Attitudes
in American School Textbooks*, by Bessie L. Pierce; and *The Duk-Duks*, by Elizabeth Weber.

qualities of citizenship that were being taught across nations. These included patriotism and loyalty, obedience to the law, respect for government and public officials, individuals' recognition of their political obligations, a minimum degree of self-control, responsiveness to community needs in stressful times, knowledge of and agreement with the legitimating national ideology, and a recognition of the special qualities of people within one's country compared to those of other nations (Merriam, 1931). Missing from this itemization is the notion that good citizens must be able to exercise judgement about political problems, policies, and ideas. Merriam, reflecting the position of John Dewey, considered critical thinking to be an essential characteristic of a good American citizen, and was concerned that civic education was not developing such skills (Dubnick, 1995).

Merriam's work promoted the importance of systematically educating democratic citizens to a generation of scholars, although the widespread implementation of his ideas both in terms of establishing a vital research agenda and instituting civic education programs in the classroom were far from realized in his day (Almond, 1995). He identified a broad range of agencies involved in the civic education process, privileging the school and agents of popular culture, especially newspapers, radio, and film. He downplayed the role of the family, an agent that came to loom too large in subsequent investigations. Merriam importantly noted that the political is constantly interacting with the nonpolitical, and that political values only make sense within the larger context of the individual in society.

Political socialization scholarship flourished during the behavioral period in political science beginning in the late 1950s, while the discipline's concern with the actual education of citizens subsided. Behavioralism's inherent emphasis on objective scientific analysis was at

odds with the concerns about practical pedagogy that preoccupied political scientists of an earlier era, including Merriam and Wilson. The dominant research methodologies employed by socialization scholars, especially survey research, created greater distance between the citizen (subject) and any real world educational goals. Hands-on approaches to assessing the value of particular civic education initiatives generally were avoided.

A spate of studies during the 1980s indicating the declining civic engagement of young Americans sparked a resurgence of interest in civic education within the academic community. Research findings showed that people under the age of thirty-five pay less attention to politics and have lower levels of political knowledge than older people (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Delli Carpini, 2002). Young people distrust politicians and have limited faith in government institutions to act in the best interest of citizens (Owen, 1999; Keeter, et al, 2002). Younger citizens are less inclined to register and turn out to vote in elections than their senior counterparts. They are unlikely to work on a candidate's campaign or for a political party, contact a public official about a policy issue they care about, or attend a political meeting to express their views (Dennis and Owen, 1999; DePledge and Bustos, 2002). In reaction to these findings, a healthy trend developed within the American scholarly community to unite research and practice in endeavors to increase civic competence among young people.

Civic Education and Constructions of the Citizen

Civic education and political socialization scholarship have left a legacy of stock citizenship constructs. These include the citizen as loyal subject and patriot, the citizen as voter, and the citizen as enlightened community participant. These constructs, while not mutually

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exclusive, prioritize particular attributes that conform to specific notions of the good citizen.

The Citizen as Loyal Subject and Patriot

Early political socialization research objectives maintained the importance of stable political regimes, and focused on formal processes of teaching and learning designed to foster regime support. The concern with transmitting regime norms across generations led to an early emphasis on preadults as the primary targets of civic education. Training focused on children learning the basic information, values, and beliefs about politics that are necessary for their later role as adult citizens (e.g. Hess and Torney 1967; Niemi, et al. 1974).

The impetus behind this perspective is articulated in Merriam's fundamental question, "How much economic pressure, or ethnic pressure, or religious or cultural pressure is necessary to induce the patriot to change his allegiance?"[3] (1931: 9). This view of the citizen hinges on the idea of civic loyalty as fostered by the state and potentially undermined by allegiances to groups operating outside the governmental realm. The use of systems models is fundamental to socialization research in this vein. Landmark studies focused on early education as the source of learned support for the political system (e.g Easton and Dennis 1969; Hess and Torney, 1967). Of particular concern was how patterns of loyalty to authority, obedience, and conformity are established.

It is essential for the citizen as loyal subject to learn about the customs, traditions, rituals, folklore, and heroes that are part of a nation's political culture, and which are passed on

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[3]It should be noted that Merriam viewed political cohesion as a point of departure for analysis, and stressed that even dramatic change is not necessarily destructive for a democratic polity. Rebellion should not be judged automatically as deviant, and conformity should not necessarily be construed as desirable.

generationally. In addition, citizens need to acquire knowledge of the formal rules, such as the

country's constitution and codified laws, as well as the unstated rules, for example, the

willingness in the United States to accept the outcomes of elections without resorting to violence.

Consenting to core American values is a cornerstone of this citizenship construct. These values

include egalitarianism and individualism, as well as those vested in the American creed which

emphasize the exceptional nature of the nation's development and its special place in the world.

Instilled in good citizens is a belief in the rule of law, the idea that government is based on a

body of law, agreed upon by the governed, that is applied equally and justly. These values

contribute to the public's diffuse support or high degree of respect for the American system of

government and the structure of its political institutions. Other core values passed on through

civic education and socialization include patriotism, the love of one's country and respect for its

symbols and principles, and political tolerance, the willingness to allow groups with whom one

disagrees to exercise their constitutionally guaranteed freedoms, such as free speech and

assembly.[4]

The Citizen as Voter

Three decades ago, Dawson and Prewitt (1969) observed that certain aspects of political

socialization, such as how American children acquire their partisan identification and voting-

related orientations, have been studied extensively, while other areas have been virtually ignored.

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[4]Capitalist economic values are embraced by the American creed, and as such conform to
the values associated with the citizen as loyal subject construct. Ideals associated with
capitalism include the need for a free enterprise system that allows for open business
competition, private ownership of property, and limited government intervention in business
affairs. Underlying these capitalist values is the belief that through hard work and perseverance
anyone can be financially successful.

Some scholars and practitioners consider political socialization to be synonymous with instilling norms related to voting behavior. Niemi and Hepburn acknowledge this fact: "Given our emphasis on both preadults and young adults, the boundaries between political socialization, public opinion, and voting behavior are likely to be ill-defined and permeable. . . . We do not see it as a problem" (1995: 15).

Underlying the citizen as voter construct is the assumption that voting is the single most important political act in a democracy. The consistently low level of voter turnout among young people is viewed as cause for alarm, as it signals that younger generations do not have a strong conventional sense of civic duty. As a result, civic education prioritizes values and activities associated with participation in elections with the goal of motivating young people to vote when they come of age. Successfully socializing young people to be future voters is challenging, as it is difficult to translate abstract political duties into concrete political orientations and actions (Riccards, 1973). Civic education efforts need to engage students in meaningful exercises that provide them with direct experience in the electoral realm, even if voting is not an option.

A drawback of the citizen as voter construct is the implicit assumption that by voting citizens are fulfilling there political responsibilities. It may not be either desirable or necessary for the mass public to participate beyond this "simple" act.

The Citizen as Enlightened Community Participant

Young people's declining interest in political affairs, especially government service, over the course of the past two decades has prompted civic educators to focus on preparing young people to become responsible participants in the community. This perspective emphasizes "enlightened political engagement" as an essential component of citizenship (e.g., Nie, Junn, and

Stehlik-Barry, 1996). Essential to the socialization of citizens is the recognition of a shared

connection to community that requires adherence to democratic norms. The practice of

citizenship is associated with a sense of responsibility that guides participation for all members

of society.   The enlightened citizen focus requires young people to acquire knowledge about

how the political system works and to develop the skills needed to keep informed about

government and public policies. They also need to acquire community problem-solving skills,

which have been demonstrated to instill in young people the belief that they can make a

difference and to stimulate volunteerism (CIRCLE, 2004).

Civic Education Imperatives

In an increasingly complex world, the challenges for civic education are compounded, as

evidenced by the requirements of an enlightened citizen. Civic education must convey the basics

about the Constitution, government and political processes to provide young people with a

foundation of knowledge that can serve as a source of political empowerment (Delli Carpini and

Keeter, 1996). As Table 1 displaying data from a 2004 study indicates, junior high and high

school civics and history classes fall far short of teaching even the basics about the Constitution

or the U.S. system of government. That leaves a tall order for civic educators seeking to promote

enlightened engagement. Young people must gain the civic skills necessary for participation.

Importantly, they must be able to critically assess and develop an understanding of politics

without giving in to cynicism and alienation.

Table 1

Course Content in Middle and High Schools

Content	Percent
The Constitution or the U.S. system of government and how it works	45%
Great American heroes and the virtues of the American system of government	30%
Wars and military battles	25%
Problems facing the country today	11%
Racism and other forms of injustice in the American system	9%
Other, all of the above, or don't know	5%

Source: CIRCLE, 2004.

Changing notions of what constitutes a hero in American society can provide insights into the challenges civic educators face in the current environment. In addition to the difficulties they have in instilling the basics, they face competition from other agents who promote values and behaviors, however inadvertently, that run counter to citizenship ideals.

Heroes embody the human characteristics most prized by a country, and are a meaningful component of a nation's civic identity. A nation's political culture is in part defined by its heroes who, in theory, embody the best of what that country has to offer. Heroes can act as civic educators because they are role models for people throughout the life course, especially youth. Traditionally, heroes were people who are admired for their strength of character, beneficence, courage, and leadership. Today, people are more likely to achieve hero status because of other

traits, such as celebrity, athletic excellence, and the ability to earn a great deal of money.

Shifts in the people a nation identifies as heroes reflect changes in cultural values. Prior to the twentieth century, political figures were preeminent among American heroes. These included patriotic leaders, such as American flag designer Betsy Ross, prominent presidents, like Abraham Lincoln, and military leaders, such as Civil War General Stonewall Jackson, a leader of the Confederate army. People learned about these leaders from biographies which provided information about the valiant actions and patriotic attitudes that contributed to their success.

Today, American heroes are more likely to come from the ranks of conspicuous entertainment, sports, and business figures than from politics. Popular culture became a powerful mechanism for elevating people to hero status beginning around the 1920s. As mass media, especially motion pictures, radio, and television, became a prominent part of American life, entertainment and sports personalities who received a great deal of publicity became heroes to many people who were awed by their celebrity (Greenstein, 1969). In the 1990s, business leaders, such as Microsoft's Bill Gates and General Electric's Jack Welch, were considered to be heroes by Americans who sought to achieve material success. Business leaders' tenure as American heroes was short-lived, however, as media reports in 2002 of the lavish lifestyles and widespread criminal misconduct of some corporation heads led people to become disillusioned (Yin, 2001).

NBA basketball player Michael Jordan epitomizes the modern-day American hero. Jordan's hero status is vested in his ability to bridge the world of sports and business with unmatched success. The media have promoted Jordan's hero image massively, beginning with the publicity he has received from advertisements for Nike. His unauthorized 1999 film

biography, starring Ernie Hudson, is entitled, "Michael Jordan: An American Hero," and focuses

on how Jordan triumphed over obstacles, such as racial prejudice and personal insecurities, to

become a role model on and off the basketball court. Young filmgoers watched Michael Jordan

help Bugs Bunny defeat evil aliens in "Space Jam." In the film, "Like Mike," pint-sized rapper

Lil' Bow Wow plays an orphan who finds a pair of Michael Jordan's basketball shoes and is

magically transformed into an NBA star. Lil' Bow Wow's story has a happy ending because he

works hard and plays by the rules.

Harris poll data indicate that Michael Jordan has been the number one sports hero in

America since 1993. In 2004, more than a year after his retirement from basketball and retreat

from the public eye, Jordan significantly outpolled second choice Tiger Woods. Examining the

top ten sports heroes reveals a great deal about the qualities Americans value. (See Table 2). All

of these athletes have multimillion dollar earnings, have signed large promotional deals, and

receive significant media exposure–both good and bad.. Between 2003 and 2004, Kobe Bryant

climbed in popularity from the seventh to sixth position on the list, despite the fact that

preparations for his trial for alleged sexual assault (which was later called off) were in full gear.

Allen Iverson is as well known for the disrespect he displays for his coaches, his violations of

team rules, and his brushes with the law as he is for his scoring ability in traffic. The survey was

fielded before Iverson's patriotic display at the summer Olympics.[5]

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[5]It is also noteworthy that no female athletes made the top ten sports heroes list. Topping
a separate list of female sports heroes were Venus Williams, Serena Williams, Mia Hamm,
Michelle Kwan, Annika Sorenstam, Annika Sorenstam, Anna Kournikova, Lisa Leslie, Michelle
Wei, Chris Evert, and Cheryl Swoops.

Table 2

Top Ten Sports Heroes in America, 2004

Rank	Athlete	Sport
1	Michael Jordan	Basketball
2	Tiger Woods	Golf
3	Brett Favre	Football
4	Shaquille O'Neal	Basketball
5	Dale Earnhardt, Jr.	Auto Racing

6	Kobe Bryant	Basketball
7	Peyton Manning	Football
8	Allen Iverson	Basketball
9	Donovan McNabb	Football
10	Derek Jeter	Baseball

Conclusion

More complicated times call for more nuanced approaches to political socialization and learning. The nature of relationships within regimes can change markedly over time as a result of formal legal adjustments and cultural adaptations. Technological innovations, for example, can instigate major societal transformations, and can have significant, often unanticipated, implications for civic learning. Agencies of socialization, such as mass media, can challenge civic educators for the attention and respect of young people. Thus, the development of critical thinking skills among young citizens as a key component of a civic education strategy is perhaps more crucial today than at any prior juncture in history. However, it is imperative that novel approaches not sidetrack the still-impending need to instill fundamental knowledge about

government and politics.

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