

Citizenship Education

The Issue at Hand

A Republic—If We Can Keep It

We have physicists, geometers, chemists, astronomers, poets, musicians, and painters in plenty; but we have no longer a citizen among us.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The authors of this Contemporary Issues feature assume that citizenship and citizenship education are active processes and that citizenship is best learned by doing. Although these assumptions are, in my judgment, unassailable, they are also controversial, perhaps because they contrast with the "recite and memorize" conceptions of citizenship education in vogue among many federal and state education officials.

Controversy aside, the civic behavior of American adults suggests that effective citizenship programs ought to be welcomed. With each election, fewer and fewer of us select our leaders; increasingly we confuse a crude militarism with patriotism; and we regard public issues such as environmental protection and nuclear proliferation as the exclusive preserve of "special interest" groups.

In my view, three characteristics of American public culture help explain the civic quietism of the American public: (1) lack of meaningful information with which to make informed decisions, (2) lack of democratic rights in the workplace, and (3) lack of cooperative social vision.

First, although Americans are flooded with information, most of it is either incomplete or so devoid of context that it is useless as a basis for making informed political judgments. This problem has been amplified by the increasing concentration of the ownership of the mass media into fewer and fewer hands and the growing tendency of the federal government to withhold information from the public in the name of "national security" (e.g., \$22 billion of President Reagan's proposed 1987 Pentagon budget was earmarked for secret programs).

Second, all U.S. citizens possess formal democratic political rights; however, in the most important aspect of their daily lives—their lives at work—they have precious few rights and little say in their workplaces. For large numbers of Americans, this means that their daily experience contrasts sharply with democratic electoral rhetoric about the importance of individuals and their ability to control their own destinies. The fact is that the votes of most citizens do not, at present, have any direct bearing on the largely undemocratic quality of their daily lives; thus, the significance of casting a ballot is diminished.

Last, in a culture that celebrates the rugged individualist, it is hardly surprising that the development of a cooperative social vision is stunted. Our

complex and interrelated problems call for a social vision which encourages and enables individuals to work together for the common good. However, many people, faced with problems they cannot solve alone and unable to make common cause with others, simply withdraw.

These three characteristics of U.S. culture have echoes inside the schoolhouse. When children have few opportunities to evaluate important and sometimes conflicting information; when children have no possibility to think about and to participate in shaping the expectations that govern their classroom and school behavior; and when children are told again and again, directly and indirectly, that they can do well only if someone else does poorly, they are not being taught the spirit of democratic participation which a robust civic life requires.

In the bicentennial year of our Constitution it is fitting to ask ourselves whether what we are doing in schools helps students learn to participate in and to love the raucous, messy, unpredictable, and controversial process we call democracy. □

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