

Opinion | Nothing Beats Polarization Like Civics Education

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Guest Essay

May 17, 2026



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By Danielle Allen

Dr. Allen is a professor at Harvard University and the author of “Our Declaration” and the forthcoming “Radical Duke: How One Aristocrat — and the American Revolution — Transformed Britain.”

Ten years ago, only one in four Americans [could name](#) the three branches of government. By 2025, [seven in ten](#) could. A decade before our nation’s 250th birthday, we were on our way to being a nation that had forgotten how to explain itself to its own children.

What changed? While most of our political news today may be very depressing, deep below that surface the profound force that is civic education is shaping our national life for the better.

Ours is a movement to educate Americans for American democracy. It teaches ideas like reflective patriotism (love of country married to clear-eyed evaluation of its successes and shortcomings), civil disagreement, how our government works and how each of us can play a part.

Frequently, when [people decry](#) the state of our politics, the conversation always lands in the same place: a lament that we just don't have civic education any more. I want people to know that this is no longer true. The decline of civic education hit bottom about a decade ago and is at last on the rebound. That fact brings me hope.

I started teaching political philosophy in universities 30 years ago. Five years into that, starting in 2000, I began working in the civic education field in both adult learning environments and in K-12 schools because I came to recognize the need was desperate.

Initially, I fell into this work largely by accident. As a young professor at the University of Chicago, I had the opportunity to help build a night program in the humanities for low-income adults. My goal was to deliver the same caliber of education as we provided to our well-prepared and often well-heeled undergraduates in the daytime.

Our solution was to refuse to compromise on the quality of the material but to be willing to compromise on quantity. We would assign only short texts. For that extremely instrumental reason, I began teaching the Declaration of Independence.

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The Declaration is fundamentally a story of human agency. People surveyed their circumstances, found them wanting, articulated principles to govern their actions and joined hands to set off in a new direction. My night students were in that class because they, too, wanted to change their lives.

The Declaration inspired conversations about personal transformation and liberation, aspirations to change dynamics in their workplaces and serious discussion of what to do about politics in the city of Chicago. The teaching experience was explosive.

Most shocking to me: my students had never previously encountered the Declaration of Independence. When I saw the power of that text for them and registered that their inheritance had been withheld from them, I made it a crusade to change that for others.

After I subsequently published a book about the Declaration, educators all over the country began reaching out asking me to make resources for their classrooms. That is what showed me the hunger for renewal in civic learning. Eventually I set up an organization to develop civic education curricular materials.

When I started as a civic ed practitioner, the work was essentially solitary. My tiny team crossed paths now and then with others similarly toiling away in relative isolation and at a small scale. Then in 2018, [CivXNow](#), a national coalition of civics education providers and organizations, was founded to advocate new civics requirements at the state level. I was thrilled to join.

A year later, I joined another group of civic education leaders to start an allied initiative, [Educating for American Democracy](#) — this one focused not on policy but on what we teach. This was at the time that the clash between the 1619 project and the 1776 project was unfolding. Instead of wading into that conflict, we focused more broadly on the idea of excellence in history and civic learning, equipping students to ask and answer, in an independent-minded fashion, fundamental questions about our nation's history, institutions and ideals.

Why had civics education reached such a nadir? Polarization among adults has been perhaps the single biggest obstacle to advancing civic learning for young people. Polarization has meant that adults could not agree on what should be taught about our country's political history, and as a result the kids had been taught nothing at all.

Our alliance tackled and beat that polarization. Our network was diverse in every dimension, including viewpoint. We had to debate our way out of our disagreements. The debates we had were a microcosm of the kinds of conversations we sought to inspire in students.

Here are three compromises we forged.

When we started discussing what should be taught, we acknowledged that we were likely to disagree about a lot. We also affirmed that despite differences of political viewpoint, we shared a sense of urgency to give students richer civic learning opportunities. Within two weeks, we were arguing over whether we were educating our students for life in a democracy or a republic.

We found that “democracy” advocates stressed values of universal inclusion, participation and popular sovereignty. Those who argued for “republic” prioritized constitutionalism, rule of law, structure and order. We compromised on “constitutional democracy.” This was no small matter. Utah, for instance, requires that students be taught we live in a republic, not a democracy.

We stumbled over ideas like patriotism and solidarity, the first mattering more to the right; the second, to the left. We settled on cultivating “reflective patriotism,” an idea popularized by Alexis de Tocqueville. The reflective patriot appreciates the power of free institutions to open pathways of possibility, while bringing cleareyed realism to where the country has and hasn't lived up to its ideals, along with embracing correction and reform.

We sparred over whether civic knowledge should always be filtered through lenses of race, class, gender and sexuality — or whether we would set aside personal and social identity by not including conventional categories. We chose to abandon both identity politics and colorblind assimilationism and instead to embrace pluralism. America has a high degree of social heterogeneity — pluralism names this fact. But pluralism is also an ethical orientation required by democracy, as James Madison argued long ago.

It is our responsibility as citizens and teachers to learn how to respect, relate and cooperate across lines of difference of both identity and ideology. The responsibility of citizens in a constitutional democracy is to ensure that pluralism fuels creativity and cultural richness rather than division. For this, the ethic of civic friendship and civil disagreement are required.

Soon we realized that the practices we were developing among ourselves were examples of the civic skills we hoped to teach. Successful civic education teaches students to defeat polarization not by teaching nonpolarizing answers to hard questions, but by teaching how to form relationships with people who may disagree with them, to identify shared values despite difference, and then to wrestle their way to new solutions and, when necessary, compromises.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor liked to note that democracy is not “passed down through the gene pool.” Rather, “it must be taught and learned anew by each generation.”

That chimes with Lincoln's famous view that the moral proposition of the Declaration of Independence — that all people are created equal — is “an electric cord” that connects all Americans from the founding generation to the present. American heritage, not blood or generational presence on these shores, consists of connection to that cord. The practices of civil disagreement are necessary to make that moral commitment real.

Of course, we've had help in bringing about this rebirth of civic learning. The Trump presidencies have provided intense project-based learning for all Americans in the powers of the presidency, the guardrails of the Constitution, the Electoral

College and the use and abuse of executive orders and impeachment processes.

But it is not the president alone who has made this difference. We, the people, have been working hard to kick start civic education and, by golly, we've done it.

[As of 2025](#), 26 states [have adopted](#) 42 policies aligned with the CivxNow State Policy Menu; 36 states plus Washington, D.C., require civics coursework in high school to graduate; and 16 state legislatures now appropriate specific funds for K-12 civic education. Civics-related professional development for educators is offered in 44 states plus Washington. Minnesota passed a civics course requirement after seven years of effort, and Indiana increased its civic education budget.

In March, as part of National Civic Learning Week, Connecticut's governor, Ned Lamont, signed a law establishing a [new civic seal](#) (to be affixed to high school transcripts) and the Alaska Senate passed a bill for a new civic education requirement in high school. Similar policies are passing with bipartisan support in state after state. A [University of Southern California survey](#) found 97 percent of U.S. adults agree that preparing students to be good citizens is a key priority, with support spanning political lines.

The arc of civic education data indicates that in 2016 this country hit a low in our failure to transmit love of democracy to the next generation. Now we're on the rebound. With some exceptions, we've largely been moving rapidly and steadily up for the past decade. By 2025, 79 percent of Americans could identify freedom of speech as protected by the First Amendment, up five points from the previous year. In that year, we jumped to 40 percent from 30 percent of Americans able to name more than one freedom in that amendment in that same year.

So many feel anxiety and dread for the future of our country, yet I can confidently report that the kids are learning civics again. They are enjoying it, and for an increasing number, their lessons support pluralism, civic friendship and reflective patriotism outside the classroom.

The future they will shape may feel distant, but I am confident that it will be bright.

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