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HOW SHOULD WE THEN BE FORMED?

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Educating the Political Disciple

Kevin R. den Dulk

Dr. Kevin R. den Dulk is the Paul B. Henry Chair in Christianity and Politics and Executive Director of the Henry Institute at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Every April, hundreds of high school students, representing all US states and a few territories, converge on a large conference center on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. to prove their worth as citizens. They are winners of an intense group competition that starts for many teams in their congressional districts and weaves its way through state contests that determine the D.C.-bound teams. Over several days in the nation's capital, panels of elites grill the students about their knowledge and application of the US Constitution, whittling the field to a single champion, a team of uber-citizens.

The competition is named "[We the People](#)," subtitled "The Citizen and the Constitution." It is, in many respects, a civic pilgrimage for participants, students and judges alike. Many judges come to the ritual year after year, and they leave with common refrains about those young citizen-pilgrims. "Wasn't that heartening?" "I have a little more hope for the future with these kids as part of it." As a judge many times, I have said those words myself.

But my sentiments, and those of many of my fellow judges, do not come from a place of Pollyannaish optimism. In fact, the judges—nearly a hundred prominent academics, state and federal jurists, lawyers, and politicians—broadly share a nagging concern that the body politic is broken and the cause is not simply institutional decay or bad leadership. The civic health of the citizenry itself is in decline. We the People is heartening and hope-inducing because it reminds us that, if the body politic is only as good as its citizens, the nation will have at least a few future citizens who are good.

But why assume this premiere program of civic catechesis produces *good* citizens? Scratch just below the surface and the judges' feelings of comfort and hope reveal an underlying theory of the proper

purposes and practices of the good citizen, of not only what citizens should know but also why and how they should act. The competition is formative, and the judges are confident it forms students in the right direction. We might borrow the Augustinian language of my colleague James K.A. Smith to say that the program celebrates specific *desires* about a citizen's place in the polis and embeds those desires in a *liturgy*—a set of pedagogical rituals—that hit these teenagers' civic-minded souls right where it counts.

So does We the People, like scores of similar pedagogies, match the right liturgy to the right desires? Anyone who thinks that citizens ought to witness to the grace of Jesus Christ—that we are, [as Vincent Bacote puts it](#), *political disciples*—has an interest in that question. But while Christian theorists have given serious attention to the question of *what* a good citizen is and *why* we ought to be one, they have not devoted the same critical energy to *how* we form those citizens through the pedagogies most prevalent in formal education. That is not to say that scholars more broadly have given little attention to forming citizens—from Plato's *Republic* on, far from it! Nor have Christians been absent from the general conversation about formation, as this series in *Public Justice Review* attests. But I am nevertheless struck by how rarely modern public theologians or Christian social scientists speak to the specific approaches to citizen formation on offer in schools.

The current political moment in the United States, among other western democracies, raises the stakes of such an inquiry. On the one hand, we face a range of knotty social and political problems that affect and implicate citizens, including the interrelated challenges of partisan polarization and the decline of public trust. On the other hand, Christians often assume that non-educational institutions—e.g., churches, families—are the primary seedbeds of good citizenship (that is, if they have given much thought to citizen formation at all). That emphasis makes good sense, of course. Smith is surely right that the church inevitably molds our lives as citizens (often in its indifference, which can shape us as profoundly as its prophetic witness). Still, formation is not held by any monopoly, and our schooling systems, usually with the imprimatur of the modern state, have unfolded in history as key cultivators of young citizens.

My discussion here is neither a comprehensive inventory nor systematic investigation of civic education. It merely touches on ways that our most prominent educational frameworks reproduce rather than meet key challenges to citizen formation in the current age. The goal is to highlight overlooked gaps—gaps that should matter to Christians who seek *shalom* through their citizenship.

Forming and Re-Forming Partisans

Political divisions in the United States today are a grim testament to an underlying civic pathology. It is not strictly ideological or policy focused; our conflicts are not simply about the differences between liberals and conservatives, pro-versus-con [enter your favorite policy preference here]. The conflict is more basic, a matter of identity itself and how it connects to group membership. [On this account](#), to say we are “polarized” is to name opposing group attachments that are heavily rooted in emotion, not

merely volition or cognition; partisans have powerful affective attachments to their in-group and dislike of or even animosity toward out-groups. [Scholars have identified and carefully analyzed the phenomenon](#), noting that in the contemporary climate, partisan evaluations of “the other side” are more visceral and acrimonious than any other type of social division. Most followers of a Twitter feed will probably recognize this pattern of political tribalism, perhaps in the level of boiling blood they experience themselves.

This way of talking about polarization suggests that we do not simply “sort” ourselves through a rational calculus into partisan groups that reflect our pre-existing preferences. On the contrary, partisan identity *forms* us to see the world in particular ways. Indeed, [social scientists have found](#) increasing penetration of partisan-based decision-making into ostensibly “non-political” areas of life, including choices about housing, media consumption, marriage, parenting style, and religious congregations. As a troubling byproduct of increasing division, our level of trust, both in each other (social) and in government (political), has declined. The United States is one of many western countries that face mounting [“trust issues,”](#) a profound problem when we consider that [trust is a central component of civic culture](#) in healthy democracies. Younger people often fall into the same downward trends as their elders, but the erosions of [social trust](#) and [confidence in democracy](#) have been more precipitous than in other generations.

So what can be done? A problem that runs as deep as identity itself requires a complex response, and some analysts have offered [a few possible steps toward change](#). But historically, a common starting point is the power of formal education. In the United States, a tradition that runs from Thomas Jefferson to Horace Mann to John Dewey to later reformers of the twentieth century envisions a key role for schools in the cultivation of good citizens. A form of political hope runs through that tradition, a conviction that we will find unity in our differences, partisan or otherwise, by socializing the young into a shared faith that values liberty, equality, and the mutual accountability of democracy.

The United States, unlike other western democracies, lacks established national standards and curricula on civics, but that is largely because the federal system leaves these matters primarily to the states, and states have indeed placed stock in school-based civic education. The Education Commission of the States [reports](#) that all states have K-12 standards and coursework requirements for social studies, civics, and citizenship. A sizeable majority of states (thirty-seven out of fifty-one, including Washington, D.C.) also have mechanisms to assess civic proficiency. Moreover, despite its comparatively diminished role, the federal government has [developed voluntary standards](#) and monitored civic learning through the US Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which has measured civic proficiency at the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades for nearly two decades. (I focus here on K-12 learning, though [the challenges are often analogous](#) in the even more fragmented context of university education.)

The Blind Spots of “Civics” and “Service”

NAEP's "[civics framework](#)" is a fair approximation of how political theorists and scientists tend to think about the components that make up a democratic citizen's identity. These include [civic knowledge](#), a basic understanding of political structures and values; [civic skills](#), the capacities necessary to act responsibly in the political (and more broadly public) sphere; and [civic dispositions](#), those norms or "virtues" such as trust and tolerance that foster collective decision-making in modern democracies.

If a goal of civic education is *counter*-formation against problems such as polarization and declining trust, then a great deal is at stake not only in the content of these categories, but also how they are applied. Consider a brief sketch of two models of citizen formation in schools—what [education theorist Harry Boyte](#) calls "civics" and "service"—that reflect underlying liberal and communitarian assumptions about the good citizen, respectively.

A (classically) liberal spirit permeates the civics model, which emphasizes the knowledge and skills that individuals as rational agents must possess to relate to the state. The model therefore focuses on both deficiency and security, that is, on filling gaps in knowledge to ensure that citizens are prepared to engage government to protect and advance their interests.

I doubt that state departments of education talk about their work in terms of "deficiency and security," but they nevertheless generally emphasize the civics model. Knowledge of historical events or constitutional rights is not only substantively important, but it is also easy to measure compared to dispositions such as trust and tolerance. The NAEP illustrates the point. Even though its theoretical framework identifies knowledge, skills, *and* dispositions as features of good citizens, it primarily tests for knowledge and a few skills, an expedient to the survey instrument. As teachers know too well, the same kind of "objective" information-focused approach is the bread-and-butter of assessment mechanisms across the states.

This curricular emphasis shapes pedagogies as well. Consider *We the People*. Teams form around units, each corresponding to a set of distinctive questions about constitutional development that situates the citizen vis-à-vis the state. Students address questions about the history of political ideas, the nature of individual rights and political institutions, constitutional change, cross-national comparisons, and contemporary applications. The practices undergirding the program are mainly about cognitive processing in a competitive frame.

While *We the People* focuses extensively on *values*, including the benefits of democratic decision-making and the importance of the common good, the program gives relatively little attention to building dispositions—civic "virtues—that foster those values. To be sure, students must often settle differences over competition strategies and tactics, and they also debate substantive issues together. But teams are usually comprised of students with similar backgrounds and interests; the program does not place competitors together with members of their out-groups to simulate a real-life hashing out of conflicts across lines of deep difference.

Boyte identifies a key alternative to the “civics” model in the “service” framework, the communitarian answer to the liberal’s assumptions. Here the idea is that engagement in civil society is the best way to cultivate the good citizen. Perhaps the most familiar pedagogical form is various programs for service learning, which vary in intensity and sophistication, yet seek to foster learning about citizenship and a justice orientation through volunteer experiences. The service-based approach tends to treat the associations within civil society as a virtue incubator.

The key problem, as I see it, is that whereas the liberal/civics approach neglects important civic dispositions, the service framework neglects the relationship of citizens to the state. To be clear, the balance of the evidence suggests that service learning and other forms of school-based volunteerism can generate greater civic-mindedness later in life. And young people have met a lot of real human need through their service work. I grant that this public service fits a capacious definition of citizenship, as political scientist [Russell Dalton argues optimistically in *The Good Citizen*](#). But education that privileges citizenship as volunteerism subtly diminishes the citizen’s obligation to engage the state, partly by offering students few serious opportunities to practice that citizen-state engagement in contentious settings.

In a blunt assessment in a progressive vein, scholars [Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg suggest](#) that service-based education “is no longer about the collective activity of governing...Lessons in service have supplanted training for sovereignty.” Put more charitably, service in civil society exercises different civic muscles than such activities as voting, political canvassing, communicating with political elites, mobilizing to advocate policy change, or serving on public boards and commissions. As a result, the citizen’s role vis-à-vis the state, and the capacity to engage each other across inevitable lines of political difference, is weakened.

Toward Civic Education for Political Disciples

There are a host of questions about civic education, questions that bring us into deeper conversation about what makes the good citizen. But even this cursory survey of a small section of the educational landscape highlights the urgent need for formative discernment among political disciples. Let me offer a few takeaways:

1. **Civic pedagogy follows vision, and vision is not neutral about who and whose we are.** The civics and service approaches clearly reflect visions of the citizen. But we should be wary of any educational project that reduces image bearers of God to rational actors advancing self-interests or to volunteers closed off from their responsibility to engage the state. Citizens are neither utility-maximizers who vanquish emotion with cognition nor service-renderers who can avoid government’s role in public justice.

2. **Say “no” and “yes.”** While we ought to reject reductionist assumptions, we need not flatly discard a curriculum or pedagogy that embeds them. I do not keep judging We the People competitions simply as an exercise in civic therapy. Rights, political history, constitutional legacies—citizens must know these things to carry out their call to citizenship. And service learning that immerses students into the richness of civil society is indeed a seedbed for healthy civic dispositions, albeit an occasionally overstated one. These approaches represent indispensable features of citizenship even if they do not paint a full picture. I follow a strategy as a civic educator that attempts [to draw together pedagogies](#) to paint that full picture. I adapt and combine the cognitive and informational emphasis of, say, We the People, the affective and interpersonal focus of practices akin to service learning, and state-oriented practices ranging from student government to [Public Achievement](#)-style simulations. But this kind of borrowing happens against a backdrop of relentless Christian critique of underlying assumptions.

3. **We should neither redirect nor compartmentalize the civic mission of schools.** Formal education through schools is a fact of modern life, a nod toward increasing economic and social complexity and specialization of knowledge. In democratic settings, schools have developed a distinctive civic purpose in connecting knowledge, skills, and dispositions at key developmental moments. Yet schools are not the sole space for citizen formation, nor ought they be. This *PJR* series has noted myriad ways that the church, when it takes faithful discipleship seriously—indeed, even when it *doesn't* take it seriously—is deeply implicated in cultivating capacities and dispositions that matter to citizenship. Other civil society associations play complementary roles. Indeed, there are few better at articulating a Christian vision of the good citizen than the Center for Public Justice, which is piloting an innovative curriculum on political discipleship for adults.

The challenge is to develop the wisdom to draw carefully and sometimes selectively from civic pedagogies in ways that nurture a calling to citizenship as followers of Jesus Christ. That means we have a lot to learn about civic education.

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