In this chapter Eamonn Callan updates the conversation about American civic education begun by Diane Ravitch in chapter three. Ravitch described the centuries-old struggle for civic education between those who wished to educate youth for their appropriate role in a democratic state (e.g., Webster) and those who aimed to foster a citizenry that could exercise their civic freedom and decide their own individual and collective futures (e.g., Jefferson). Drawing on recent empirical research, Callan describes a contemporary voting public bereft of fundamental political knowledge—and lacking in motivation to remedy their ignorance. Indeed, many people seem to believe that the “common good” is so obvious to all that the public arena is simply a space where private interests compete for the spoils of power. The resulting political vacuum is consequently vulnerable to being filled by a political elite, deciding for a deferential citizenry whose role is reduced to “ensuring through elections an orderly transfer of power among rival groups among the elite.”

Callan worries both about the unwarranted trust in the capacity of elites to protect democracy and the abandonment of hope in the capacity of citizens. He argues instead for “rational social hope” as an alternative to either utopianism or cynicism and shows how teachers can educate in ways that mitigate civic vice and promote civic virtue. If one accepts Callan’s position, it appears that in twenty-first century America Webster has trumped Jefferson. Regardless of whether you agree, the differences in view remain fundamentally important to our talk about education.

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American Democracy, Education, and Utopianism

EAMONN CALLAN

Citizens must be politically informed and engaged if they are to have stable and just democratic government. Although American political institutions may be stable, they are still far from being either sufficiently just or democratic, and the political ignorance and passivity of the American citizenry is a huge obstacle to improving its political institutions. These are controversial but widely shared beliefs, and for those who share them, the idea that civic education must be a major engine of social progress exerts a powerful attraction. For if Americans are to become more enlightened and active citizens, they must learn to be so, which is but another way of saying that better citizenship requires better political education in its broadest sense.

But the argument just sketched does not mean that high hopes for democratic progress through education in contemporary America are any better than utopian fantasies. Realistic hope would seem to require that the distance between the object of hope and the real world of contemporary citizenship not be too great. Unfortunately, the distance between them, in this case, is vast. Are such hopes then merely utopian? That is the question I want to pursue here.

The Real World of American Citizenship

The idea that ordinary citizens are politically incompetent, perhaps irrevocably so, is as old as democracy itself. But the idea was given strong empirical impetus with the publication of Phillips Converse’s seminal essay, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics” in 1964. Converse showed that only a tiny fraction of the American electorate (4%) could reliably explain their policy preferences in terms of the abstract ideas, such as liberalism and conservatism, which structured debate among political parties. Almost half of the electorate evaluated parties and candidates simply on the basis of the favorable or unfavorable treatment they expected in the event that a particular candidate or party were elected, though these expectations were often grounded in nothing that could be called evidence. Nearly 17% comprised “those respondents whose evaluations of the political scene had no shred of policy significance whatever.”

75 callan
Converse’s portrait of the American electorate was based on data from the 1950s, one of the more ideologically quiescent decades in recent American history. But the portrait has proved remarkably durable in subsequent investigation. Surveying four decades of research since Converse’s path-breaking work, Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter note the following: “Many of the facts known by relatively small percentages of the public seem critical to understanding—let alone effectively acting in—the political world: fundamental rules of the game; classic civil liberties; key concepts of political economy; the names of key political representatives; many important policy positions of political candidates or the political parties; basic social indicators and significant public policies.”

Donald Kinder’s verdict on the same body of research is, if anything, even more blunt and damning: “when it comes to politics, most citizens are ideologically innocent: indifferent to standard ideological concepts, lacking a consistent outlook on public policy, in possession of genuine opinions on only a few issues, and knowing damn little.”

The propensity to know damn little extends to even the most important current affairs. Consider some facts about the magnitude of American political ignorance in the 2004 Presidential election. A Harris poll published just a month before the elections showed some alarming results: 41% believed that Saddam Hussein helped to plan and support the hijackers who attacked the United States on September 11, 2001; 38% believed that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction when Iraq was invaded; 37% believed that several of the hijackers were Iraqis; 62% believed that Saddam Hussein had strong links to Al-Qaeda.

A charitable explanation is arguably available for the last of these wildly false beliefs. After all, since 9/11 the President and other senior officials had repeatedly asserted that there was a strong link between Saddam and Al-Qaeda. But the number is still shockingly high, because in August of the same year the final report of the bipartisan 9/11 Commission had stated unequivocally that no evidence existed of operational links between Saddam’s regime and Al-Qaeda. The final report received massive publicity throughout the nation. A reasonable inference is that the 62% who continued to believe otherwise were either ignoring news that had a crucial bearing on the merits of the original decision to go to war or were utterly credulous when it comes to the word of senior government officials.

One cannot be so flattering about the sizable minorities who adhered to one or more of the other three surprising beliefs that the Harris poll disclosed. At the very end of September 2004, immediately
before the poll was conducted, the Iraq Survey Group report was published with much fanfare, and it declared that Saddam’s WMD program had been essentially destroyed in 1991. By then even the most avid supporters of the war in the government and media were citing other reasons for its justification. But over 40% of the American electorate had not caught up with reality. As for those who believed that Saddam was directly implicated in the 9/11 attacks or that Iraqis were among the attackers, no possible source for their beliefs that has the slightest intellectual respectability was ever available. The mass media in America is no doubt shot through with partisan bias, and reckless speculation may often pass for established fact, but no credible source of news would have endorsed such beliefs in the fall of 2004 or earlier.

A final irony deserves emphasis. Many of these Americans who preferred urban tales to readily accessible facts in figuring out why their country was at war in 2004 were Kerry rather than Bush supporters. Twenty-three percent of Kerry’s supporters believed that Saddam planned and supported the Al-Qaeda attacks, and 31% believed that some of the bombers were Iraqis. But that is perhaps not surprising. In an electorate as radically detached from reality as this one, maybe many Kerry supporters thought they were supporting a more fervent warmonger than his opponent.

Almost a third of Americans do not like to learn about politics, and some curious but very widespread beliefs may help to explain some of this antipathy. A particularly provocative recent study claims that American citizens generally tend to assume that the common good is transparently clear, so that widespread public deliberation is unnecessary; that political conflict is a sign of selfish interests impeding the common good; and that compromise and accommodation in law-making attest to unprincipled bargaining and corruption. These beliefs form a coherent package. For there can be nothing worth learning about politics once its object, the common good, is simply there for all of us to see without any serious cognitive effort. And if I believe that what government should do is so easily grasped, then I am primed to think that those who disagree with me about politics are morally obtuse, liars, or both. The inevitable give and take of the legislative process must appear to be a sordid means of dividing the spoils of power if I assume that all could agree on how power should be used if they only looked beyond their own petty sectional interests.

We may like to take some solace in the fact that increased education correlates with greater political knowledge and engagement. Delli Carpini and Keeter, for example, are anxious to reject the claim that the
masses cannot be politically enlightened. Yet even they are unsettled by how durable American political ignorance has proven notwithstanding big strides in average educational attainment since the 1950s: “In spite of [these strides], aggregate levels of political knowledge are about the same today as they were forty or fifty years ago.” Of course, educational attainment is not the same as achievement, and with better quality educational provision, America would doubtless have a more enlightened electorate than it currently does. Delli Carpini and Keeter may also be right that educational progress has partly offset the effects of social trends that would otherwise have led to an even more spectacularly incompetent citizenry. But where there is room for optimistic, though reasonable, speculation about the prospects of democratic improvement, a reasonable pessimism is equally available. And that pessimism is the breeding ground of democratic elitism.

Democratic Elitism

Converse did not draw any implications from his study about how political institutions in the United States might be revised. But his portrait of a thoughtless, almost absurdly ill-informed electorate is no great distance from the derogatory depiction of the masses that had been the centerpiece of arguments for elite democracy famously championed earlier in the century by Walter Lippmann and Joseph Schumpeter. For both Lippmann and Schumpeter, the only way to fortify government against populist subversion was through institutions that severely constrained opportunities for participation and left wide latitude for expert decision making.

In 1928, the eminent American journalist Walter Lippmann made the following observation about the need to confine the role of ordinary citizens in a democracy: “The public must be put in its place so that it may exercise its own powers, but no less and perhaps more, so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd.” The same metaphor of sub-human impulsivity would echo some years later in Joseph Schumpeter’s claim that “the electoral mass is incapable of acting other than as a stampede.” For both Lippmann and Schumpeter, the democratic herd had to be tamed and shepherded by a political elite to whom the herd must learn to show an appropriate deference.

There are differences in Lippmann’s and Schumpeter’s conceptions of elite democratic rule, but their common ground is the endorsement of a vast asymmetry of power between an insular political elite and a deferential citizenry whose role is confined to ensuring through
elections the orderly transfer of power among rival groups within the elite. As Schumpeter noted, “voters . . . must not withdraw confidence too easily between elections and they must understand that, once they have elected an individual, political action is his business and not theirs. This means they must refrain from instructing him about what he is to do. . . .” According to Schumpeter, a citizenry vigilant in protecting its rights and alert to the possible abuse of power is a threat to stable government. Political back-seat driving is the besetting sin of such citizens: “All that matters here is that successful practice in great and complicated societies has invariably been hostile to political back-seat driving—to the point of resorting to secret diplomacy and lying about intentions and commitments—and that it takes a lot of self-control on the part of ordinary citizens to refrain from it.”

The educational implications of the argument here are striking. The democratic herd is susceptible to political back-seat driving, perhaps especially when elites wisely dupe them through secrecy and outright lies. But the herd must be taught to suppress any propensity to criticize their betters on such occasions by practicing an arduous self-control. The elite is to be trusted, not the herd’s own untutored thoughts about the value of candor and transparency in government.

At this point, we should worry that the elite are better placed to be wolves to the herd instead of its benign shepherds. For it surely requires a very reckless faith in the incorruptibility of elites to suppose that they will rule in the interests of the herd when the sheer ignorance and docility of the latter make them such easy prey. The fatal problem with elitist conceptions of democracy is not so much that they are extravagantly pessimistic about the possibilities of civic education for the masses but that their optimism about the virtue of elites is utterly reckless.

Yet if elitism is not a viable means of securing democracy against the incompetence of ordinary citizens, it does not follow that they really are competent after all, or that feasible educational intervention could make them so. And therefore the charge of utopianism against proponents of civic education remains, even though exponents of elitist democracy who might press the charge have no credible alternative to democratic regimes that enable widespread participation. We confront a dilemma. An ignorant and politically apathetic electorate is unsuited to the responsibilities of a democracy that requires extensive participation, and it is uncertain that educational progress can create an electorate equal to those requirements. That uncertainty casts grave doubt on the standard view of civic education as the engine of democratic progress. On the
other hand, institutional reforms that would narrow the scope of participation to forestall the dangers of mass incompetence merely intensify the vulnerability of ordinary citizens to the abuse of power by elites.

Social Hope and Utopianism

I want briefly to argue that we should grasp the first horn of the dilemma. The educational aspirations that a strong commitment to universal civic education implies are best understood as a matter of rational social hope, and to act on such hope is not to run afoul of utopianism.

I said earlier that realistic social hopes would seem to require that the distance between the object of hope and the world in which it is to be pursued not be too great. The truth in this is easy to see. Excessive hopes easily give way to a self-defeating passivity and cynicism when the world disappoints us, as it almost inevitably will, or they engross us in the pursuit of unattainable goods when we would be better occupied with worthwhile goals that are closer to hand. The need to avoid these evils gives the charge of utopianism its moral force. But their avoidance does not mean that all distant ends or ideals are to be condemned.

Ambitious ends can usefully mark a horizon of aspiration, even when the horizon remains distant from our best efforts. A medical researcher might see finding a cure for some particular cancer as her very raison d'être. She fails. But she relieves some suffering along the way, and she helps to pave the way for other scientists who may succeed where she has failed. Would her life have been better had she set her goals more modestly so that her hopes and accomplishments converged? A positive answer might seem right if we found her near the end of her life wracked with despair at her failure to achieve all she had hoped for. But even that might not be a decisive reason to regret the reach of her hopes. Perhaps she needed high hopes to motivate her work, and maybe those hopes gave her life a sense of zest and adventure it would otherwise have lacked.

Consider now the practice of a social studies teacher in high school who believes that citizens should be expected to think critically about the decisions they face, to strive for mutual understanding in dialogue with those who disagree with them, and to maintain their moral independence against the pressures of tribal conformity. Unfortunately, the students she teaches already think about politics, to the little extent that they do so at all, in the manner of the smugly ignorant median voter.
depressingly described by American political science. Does that make her educational values utopian?

Not at all. The chasm between her educational values and the political attitudes of her students certainly makes a huge difference to what she might rationally expect to accomplish in her class. But it makes no necessary difference to the ends that she might hope her teaching will serve. Perhaps she should see her most urgent purpose as the mitigation of vice rather than the cultivation of virtue. Thus she might find it necessary to put much effort into disturbing her students’ political complacency by revealing its dangers in a society where the workings of the state profoundly affect all our lives. The decision to go to war (or to forgo war in the face of aggression) might lead to the death of people they love or even their own death.

But she might also sensibly worry that efforts to mitigate civic vice without any appeal to opposing virtues or ideals are unlikely to yield much durable good. And so she might try to communicate to students some sense of what a democracy worthy of their pride and allegiance might look like. I doubt that she could get far in doing so without helping them to achieve at least some rudimentary grasp of the disparate range of moral values that sound political judgment must encompass, the possibility of reasonable disagreement among citizens who balance such values differently, and an appreciation of the terrible evil that may follow from the careless use of great power.

The teacher I have described acts in the hope that civic education will conduce to a more just and democratic America, even if the current practice of citizenship is generally appalling. That is to say, she hopes that the collective efforts of teachers, journalists, political activists, and the like will in the future suffice to create a citizenry whose self-government is adequately grounded in relevant information, understanding, and civic virtue. Of course, her hopes may well be disappointed. But the value of the ideal to which she tries to contribute, and the more immediate good of what her students actually learn because her pedagogy is motivated by that ideal, make it more plausible to regard the hope as a virtue rather than as a disabling fantasy.

NOTES

1. Many thanks to Corinne Callan for helping me to make my argument intelligible.


11. Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, What Americans Know, 199.

12. Ibid.


16. Ibid., 295.

17. Ibid.