

A New-Old Way to Explore Civic Engagement: Learning from the Past

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Abstract

The authors propose that student-centered discussion and reflection on the attributes of good citizenship and the good citizen constitute an important way to promote civic engagement. The expectations of the Framers of the Constitution and the teachings of Western political thought both hold that active and responsible citizenship is vital to the life of the political community. In this article, the authors argue that a good citizen: (1) has a vision of what their country is and what it means; (2), is willing to sacrifice their private interests for the public good, or rather their notion of the public good; (3) is willing to participate in the public domain, especially the political realm; and (4) will maintain their right to respectfully dissent and to critique the policies of those in power, recognizing the difference between country and policy or country and a particular president. The authors maintain that political polarization can be useful in the electoral cycle, but it is not good citizenship to the extent that it interferes with governing and solving the problems of the nation. Educators must communicate the message that politics and governing should not be zero-sum and that opposing sides must be able to work together to shape public policy.

*Keywords:* citizenship, civic engagement, civic education, political polarization

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There is an emerging consensus within the political science profession that educators need to do more to promote civic engagement among millennials generally and college students in particular. In their recent volume, Chod, Muck, and Caliendo (2015) reported the results of research on the effectiveness of political science classes in promoting civic engagement and of using social media such as Facebook and Twitter as civic-engagement teaching tools in political science courses. As scholars study and debate the best methods for promoting civic engagement among young adults, we propose that student-centered discussion of and reflection on the attributes of the good citizen constitute another way to promote civic engagement. Our aim is for educators to encourage students to think about constructive citizenship: what it means to them and how to be creative, active, and thoughtful citizens in representative democracy. Such reflection, we believe, could help to curb the political polarization that is rampant in politics today.

We do not claim to have all the answers about what good citizenship entails. Rather, our goal in this article is to stimulate thought and discussion by proposing some aspects of good citizenship. We base our views on the thoughts of prominent Framers of our Constitution—namely, the authors of *The Federalist*—and important works of Western political thought with which the Framers would have been familiar. We realize that these are not the only sources for ideas on citizenship, but given their prominence in U.S. history, they are worth revisiting. We also acknowledge that other viewpoints on citizenship, including those of African-American political philosophers, would possibly lead to different conclusions than those we advocate here.

The expectations of the Framers of the Constitution and the teachings of Western political thought both reflect the tenet that responsible citizenship is vital to the life of the

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political community. Thus, in the case of the United States, it is crucial to the nation, states, and communities that citizens not become so discouraged and cynical that they withdraw from active participation. It is especially important for college students and other young adults, who represent the future of civic engagement, to stay engaged in the public realm and cultivate a lifelong habit of participation. We discuss these principles later in this article, but first we consider the basic question of why civic engagement is worth promoting.

It may seem a strange, even laughable, claim to some, but as noted by contemporary political philosopher Francis Kane (1998), politics can be a noble profession. Kane argued that politics is “the activity of public community” and that “very little of what we would consider today as essential for a flourishing existence could be accomplished without politics” (p. 139-142). However, as he maintained, politics is not natural but is rooted in the human abilities to think and choose, and “must be practiced if we are to get good at it.” Indeed, politics is the manner in which society makes authoritative decisions, upholding some values or political philosophies while casting aside others, at least temporarily. This noble undertaking is an ongoing process and involves more than simply responding to crises in the community. It also requires the input of the diverse groups and viewpoints that comprise society as a whole.

One might reasonably conclude that the United States has endured because the people have risen to meet major challenges that have threatened it, while spending most of their lives pursuing their personal interests. However, is it healthy for a representative democracy if the majority of its citizens pursue a crisis-management model of citizenship, engaging in civic duties only when events call forth the need for such participation? Or is such an approach detrimental to the life of the political community? Active citizenship is the approach espoused by centuries

of Western political thought and, importantly, expected by the Framers of the nation's constitutional system.

**Learning from the Past: Perspectives of the Framers and Western Political Thought**

It is instructive to remember the challenge posed by one of the Framers of the Constitution, Benjamin Franklin (Jameson, 1906). When asked what type of government the Constitutional Convention had developed, Franklin replied, "A republic if you can keep it" (p. 618). Franklin's response may or may not have indicated his skepticism as to whether the American people would be able to maintain the republic, that is, representative government. His statement, however, does represent a challenge: The republic will last only if citizens work at it. The endurance of the republic depends on the type of citizen people choose to be. Citizenship, if it represents one of the core responsibilities a person possesses, must be thought about constantly by citizens, not just by commentators and scholars, and engaged in regularly in order to "keep the republic."

Other Framers besides Franklin, notably the authors of *The Federalist*, had expectations about the relationship between the government and citizens, and the role that the people would play under the Constitution. A few examples are illustrative. Alexander Hamilton (2000), in "Federalist No. 16," spoke of the people as the natural guardians of the Constitution. The federal government, in the process of "regulating the common concerns and preserving the general tranquility" (pp. 97-98), must interact directly with the people and address itself immediately to the hopes and fears of individuals. In "Federalist No. 52," James Madison (2000) wrote that it is essential to liberty that government have a common interest with the people; in the case of the House of Representatives, the common interest or "intimate sympathy" with the people would be guaranteed by frequent elections to the House (p. 337). In "Federalist No. 55," Madison wrote

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that the “genius” of the American people and the principles incorporated into their political character would guarantee that they would not elect to the House members bent on subverting the republic in favor of tyranny or treachery (p. 357).<sup>\*</sup> The authors of *The Federalist* believed that republican government required the citizenry to possess a higher degree of virtue than did other forms of government (p. 359).

Of particular relevance, given today’s polarized political environment, is George Washington’s (1796) warning, expressed in his farewell presidential address, about the dangers of parties and factions. Washington felt that the formation of parties, although “having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind” and “inseparable from our nature,” was the worst enemy of popular government (p. 19). Washington believed that factions could, over time, become “potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government” (p. 17). Washington wrote that “the common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it” (p. 20; see also Avlon, 2017). The spirit of faction enfeebled public administration, agitated the people with ill-founded jealousies, kindled animosities, and opened the door to foreign influence and corruption. While not taking serious issue with George Washington and his views on political parties, the authors would like to remind readers that the parties do play a vital role in representative democracy, including aggregation of interests and viewpoints into policies, recruitment of candidates, and the organization of legislative bodies at different levels of government.

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<sup>\*</sup> Federalist Nos. 52 and 55 have also been attributed to Hamilton.

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The Framers, however, were not the first to articulate these ideas of responsible engaged citizenship. Two of the most important questions in Western political thought relate to the distinction between the private and public, and the purpose of community.

First, is the private sphere more important than the public? The private coexists with the public but can threaten the public if members of the government or the citizens themselves place their private interests above public interests. The private sphere can serve as a basis for the public sphere, but the public transcends the private and is greater than the private in that it promotes the common good. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1973), the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French philosopher, went so far as to argue that people place their individual powers in common under the supreme direction of the general will, that is, the common or public interest. Rousseau thought that an individual might have to be forced to submit to the general will but that, in being forced, the individual would be liberated. Not many would go that far today, but Rousseau's point is noteworthy. Also noteworthy, 17<sup>th</sup>-century British political philosopher John Locke spoke of "tacit consent." For Locke, tacit consent meant that anyone who has possessions or enjoyment of any part of the dominions of any government has given their consent to that commonwealth and is obliged to obey its laws (Locke, 1988, pp. 347-348).

A second important theme in Western political thought is the purpose of community or of living in community. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (as cited in Barker, 1979), writing over two thousand years ago, stated that humankind is impelled by its nature to live in community, a polis. Natural impulse, combined with a common interest in attaining a share of the "good life," draw people to the polis. The good life is the chief end for the community as a whole and for each person individually. People come together and maintain their political association for the sake of life. The purpose of the state is a good quality of life, not merely life.

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The polis must therefore devote itself to encouraging goodness; otherwise, it is just an alliance. The Roman statesman Cicero (1976), who lived approximately two centuries after Aristotle, wrote that the commonwealth is the people's affair. People come together out of a common agreement about rights and law. Cicero asserted that the commonwealth should secure through its institutions and laws the pursuit of a happy and honorable life, and that the good life is impossible except in a good state. The goal of the ideal ruler of the commonwealth is the happiness of the citizens; thus, rulers should strive to make citizens secure in their resources, rich in wealth, great in renown, and distinguished in virtue. Thomas Aquinas (1949), the 13<sup>th</sup>-century scholar and clergyman, held that it is natural for humans to live in a group since a single individual could not procure all that was needed to live. The aim of the ruler should be to secure the welfare and the unity of the ruled, and a multitude gathered together should seek to live virtuously. The good life is the virtuous life. Only those who render mutual assistance to one another in living well form a genuine part of the assembled multitude. The goods secured by a person, such as wealth and health, should be dedicated to the good life of the multitude. Aquinas said that the unity of humanity is brought about by nature but that the unity of the multitude is secured through the ruler.

With this brief review of the Founders and a sampling of the works of Western political theorists in mind, we next examine the attributes of good citizenship.

### **The Good Citizen**

First, and fundamentally, a good citizen *has a vision of what their country is and what it means*. This vision serves as the basis of the citizen's engagement in the political process and comprises more than merely a safe environment in which they can pursue their private interests and basic human wants. If politics is to be a noble cause in the public interest, the good citizen



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needs to think creatively and altruistically. Thus, the vision of the country should incorporate values that lead to a better society. We acknowledge that a “better society” is hard to define. However, we argue that as America has expanded the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship to more groups, one criterion of a better society is that it continue that expansion and not unfairly exclude any particular group. An individual will probably carry their vision of what the country means throughout much of their adult life. We maintain that some flexibility, based on life experiences and the fact that America is a country in a state of constant change, is required. The experiences of World War II, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights movement changed America’s role in the world and the role of government at home. Views of America as isolationist or as an inactive government may have been supplanted in the minds of many citizens who recognized the changes that were occurring. The current debate on immigration is a more recent example of an event that has stimulated citizens to think about whether they see their country more or less welcoming of outsiders than they had previously.

Second, the good citizen *is willing to sacrifice their private interests for the public good or, rather, their notion of the public good*. The continual tension between the public and the private, between self-interest and the public or the common good, is a recurring theme in political thought. As one philosopher (Oldenquist, 1986) wrote, society “depends on a social morality which requires small to moderate mutual sacrifices of self-interest, and on extremely rare occasions, considerable sacrifices” (p. 110). Small sacrifices of time, for instance, in order to become knowledgeable about issues or to engage public officials in dialogue would thus seem reasonable. Conversely, becoming cynical and withdrawing from public affairs shows an unwillingness to make even the small sacrifice of time needed to keep the republic functioning.

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The preference for the public over the private signifies that members of the community should adopt a public-spiritedness, placing the interests of a larger entity over one's own self-interests. In some respects, this preference for the public would place an abstract distant public interest over the concrete private self-interest. Needless to say, the public interest, as suggested, can be difficult to define. Remote notions of public interest and the public good can easily give way to the more immediate and felt needs of private self-interest in spite of the praise given to the public in political theory and occasionally in political discourse.

Nevertheless, a good citizen wishes to improve the country. Not everyone will agree on how to improve the country, but resolving those differences is the real purpose of politics. Thinking of the public interest can lead to involvement and is part of good citizenship. Former U.S. Senator Bob Graham of Florida wrote that righteous indignation—the feeling of concern over an issue and the realization that democratic institutions at any level of government can address those concerns—is “the launching pad for active citizenship” (Graham & Hand, 2010, pp. 34-35). Graham stated that citizens need to consider whether their feelings of anger or concern could become a political issue. He argued that many people miss the potential for citizen action when they ignore their gut reactions to local issues. Of course, improving the country does not always involve major sacrifice (e.g., recycling), and sacrifice does not always result in improving the country (e.g., being arrested for marching with white supremacists). We argue that the good citizen is ready to sacrifice but is willing to improve the country regardless of whether sacrifice is involved.

Third, a good citizen *is willing to participate in the public domain, especially, the political realm*. Voting is part of this discourse but so is contacting public officials. Former U.S. Representative Lee Hamilton (2004) said that democracy is a process of mutual education, with

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citizens discussing among themselves and with their elected representatives what they think government should or should not do. When citizens listen to different viewpoints, they come to understand that politicians typically cannot resolve disputes quickly, and they also think beyond their own private interests toward the good of the country and the community. Hamilton said that there is a “magic about democracy”: Even when an issue cannot be neatly resolved, healthy dialogue helps citizens live with disagreement and to move on. Hamilton argued that representative democracy rests fundamentally upon informed citizens who understand the essential nature of the system and participate in civic life.

Interestingly, millennials are turning to a new model of engagement, diverting energy from the political realm. This model, according to Russell Dalton (2009) in *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*, stresses a broader definition of citizenship in which electoral participation is replaced with broader social concerns and an orientation toward activities such as helping people in America or the rest of the world who are worse off than oneself. Similarly, Craig Rimmerman (2011) discussed the “New Citizenship,” based on participatory democracy and emphasizing grassroots organizing, mobilization through community building, alliance formation, and self-help. The New Citizenship is reflected in protest politics, the rise of grassroots citizen organizations, and service-based learning (Rimmerman, 2011).

As important as this “engaged citizenship” model is, representative democracy depends on citizens who also are engaged in politics. We applaud this development that engages young citizens in efforts to improve society since it is in line with one of our principles of good citizenship. We note, however, as Rimmerman (2011) explained in his criticism of service-learning, that service-learning may fail to provide “the everyday connections to the political

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process” that citizens must have. For example, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) examined two high school courses: one course stressed participatory citizenship, with students working on local problems, such as recycling, and making contacts with local agencies to achieve a particular goal; the other course stressed social justice, with students studying the root causes of certain problems in the community and seeking solutions. While students developed different skills and perspectives in each course (i.e., technocratic and leadership skills in the participatory course and critical analysis in the social justice class) both were incomplete. It seems to us that both courses suggest that citizens need to take a broader view (have a vision as we stated earlier) and have the skills needed to work not just on a particular problem but also to become involved in politics in an effort to influence policy and improve society. Citizens must still do the nuts and bolts work of representative democracy, nationally and locally in their communities, as part of the other facets of the New Citizenship to achieve lasting results through changes in policy.

Fourth, the good citizen *maintains his or her right to respectfully dissent and to critique the policies of those in power, and recognizes the difference between country and policy or country and a particular president*. In light of the current political polarization in the United States, a closely related point is that good citizens also *respect the right of others to hold opposing views even when they are not necessarily convinced that the opposing views are the best course for the country*. Thus, good citizens recognize that they are not in sole possession of the truth and therefore must try to understand the motivations of those holding opposing views. This is especially true in governing or in any collaborative effort in which compromise with opposing viewpoints is crucial. In the electoral arena, forcefully opposing others’ viewpoints is expected. We also are not saying here that that all views are equally valid or worthy of respect. Examples would include arguments that target specific racial or religious groups or views that

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seem generally unethical. This fourth principle follows from the first principle described earlier—dissent and disagreement are based on one's view of what the country should be. John Stuart Mill (1956), a British political writer from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, asserted that society should not silence dissent. The worst offense in public discourse is to stigmatize as bad or immoral those who hold a contrary opinion. Ideally, public discussion does not involve slandering opponents but rather representing their views honestly (Mill, 1956). If politics is to be discourse, such as Kane (1998) advocated, then a thinking patriotism, ready to question but willing to give some benefit of the doubt to elected leaders and willing to try to understand the reasonable views of others, may be a good approach.

### **Political Polarization**

The ongoing indications of political polarization, such as the inter-party debates (some might call it squabbling) over almost every policy proposal, demonstrate that the parties continue to struggle to work together in order to enact policies. While not surprising, the party quarrels should be of concern to the citizenry to the extent that they interfere with sound policy making and with addressing the nation's problems. Political polarization, at least as practiced by elected representatives, is not good citizenship. As discussed previously, the willingness to sacrifice the private in favor of the public is, we argue, a fundamental tenet of good citizenship. In the halls of Congress, polarization manifests itself in the clash of two views of the public good, Democratic and Republican, with each side wanting its view to reign supreme and evidently placing little value on compromise.

Recent studies by the Pew Center (2014) and scholars Mann and Ornstein (2013, 2016) and Abramowitz (2010, 2016) have identified several sources of political polarization. These include the separation of the electorate into red and blue states, and the tendency for politicians

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to appeal to the electoral bases of their parties which can be more extreme and less willing to compromise. As E. J. Dionne (2015) of the *Washington Post* stated in a recent column on why many people miss the late former New York Senator Pat Moynihan, the profound disagreements that Americans have with one another are intellectual, moral, partisan, and ideological. To borrow from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, "the fault ... is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

As indicated earlier, politics, particularly in the view of the ancient philosophers, is supposed to be a noble calling. Decisions are made for the benefit of society, policy emerges, problems are addressed, and the nation advances. In this age of political polarization, however, politics has broken down amid policy formulation by executive order instead of legislation, threats of government shutdown, and talk of stripping the president of executive authority.

Admittedly, forceful political debate and discussion can be useful in an election cycle, when candidates and their ideas are presented to the electorate for evaluation. This process is a useful part of politics as ideas are evaluated and then selected or cast aside—although even in the electoral cycle, politics has become increasingly negative, perhaps due in part to the increased polarization of the electorate.

However, when polarization interferes with governing, it can harm democracy, resulting not only in the inability to form policies to address national problems, but also in political dysfunction and an attendant loss of optimism among the electorate. For this reason, polarization is not good citizenship. In her book *Fighting for Common Ground*, former U.S. Senator of Maine Olympia Snowe (2013) wrote about the need for moderate legislators who seek to achieve bipartisan solutions to problems. Snowe also stated that legislators must not only present their own views, but also listen to how the other side is responding to those views. For Snowe, the current state of polarization is putting America's greatness at risk.

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One may argue with the constitutional system that the Founders put in place. For example, in *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does*, George Will (1983) argued that the U.S. constitutional system is based on a flawed tenet of self-interested individuals joining together in a political community. Modern politics defines the public good as the aggregate of the results of the pursuit of private interests. In the Madisonian system, the solution to factions pursuing their own interests consisted of other countervailing factions pursuing their own interests. However, for Will, the result is that the collective sense of citizenship, of a shared fate, has become “thin gruel” (Will, 1983, p. 45; see also Will’s discussion in Chapter 2, “The Defect,” pp. 25-46). Others, however, have contended that the constitutional system is not flawed and that the Framers wisely channeled human self-interest in hopes of obtaining compromises (Lane & Oreskes, 2007).

However one may feel about the merits of the constitutional system, it is unquestionable that the Founders placed a great responsibility on those in government to do their public duty. After any election is over, legislators need to tamp down the angry feelings they may have expressed toward the other side on the campaign trail, and get to work governing in the public interest. Of course, that means, as Senator Snowe recognized, that each side will not achieve everything that it wants. Yet, as classic rockers Stephen Stills and Buffalo Springfield said in their 1967 song “For What It’s Worth,” “nobody’s right if everybody’s wrong.”

### **The Role of Education**

One of the main purposes of higher education and education generally should be to promote good citizenship. In doing so, educators engender attitudes in their students that lead potentially to long-term active citizenship and political participation. We recall Kane’s (1998) point that though politics is necessary for a flourishing existence, one must practice it to get good

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at it. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) noted that education embodies ideas about what good citizenship is and what good citizens do. They concluded that the participatory citizen is one who is prepared to work in collective, community-based efforts, while the justice-oriented citizen is prepared to analyze and understand the interplay between social, economic, and political forces in society.

Our principles of good citizenship suggest various topics for educators to consider while embodying a view of citizens as active, creative, and thoughtful. Helping students to form a vision of the United States would require discussion of the history of America and the different views of citizenship that have been dominant in different eras. The expansion of full citizenship rights to African Americans and women, and the continuing struggles of groups, such as gay Americans, to achieve those rights would be a focus of discussion for helping students to foster a vision of America that frames their participation in the political sphere.

Hillary Shulman (2015) offered one view on how educators might promote political participation, including discussion and promoting respect for others' views, among their students. Shulman argued that millennial disengagement from politics should be approached from a communication perspective. Educators should promote political talk among students and promote political efficacy—which is important for life-long political participation—by explaining issues and topics in a language that can be understood by students whose knowledge of particular topics may be limited.

We also argue that in promoting political talk and issue discussion, educators should expose their students to the diversity of political viewpoints in society, even the “fringe” viewpoints. Such exposure should help to lessen the political polarization that threatens to cripple politics. Students need to be aware of the complexity of issues and, at the same time,



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respect those who hold opposing viewpoints. Educators need to promote respectful political dialogue and help students form their own opinions while realizing that compromise with others is an essential part of politics. Promoting more cooperation and joint efforts among student political groups may be one option in helping students to appreciate that opposing political views also have merit. The important point is that educators must communicate the message that politics and governing should not be zero-sum and that opposing sides must be able to work together to shape public policy. There is an old saying that politics is the art of compromise. Students should certainly stand up forcefully for their values and beliefs; however, in today's environment, as America changes and becomes more diverse, students need to learn (and educators need to teach them) how to work with people with diverging viewpoints and to recognize that each side has something to contribute. Responsible citizenship involves avoiding arrogance when one's side wins or being a graceful loser, and then moving on to the next issue.

As mentioned earlier, service-learning is an important part of the New Citizenship. Service-learning classes could be used to discuss the sacrifice required by citizens on behalf of the country if the discussion encompasses more than just the specific project or goal that is the focus of the class. We believe that educators could use students' desire to solve problems or become involved in the community as a starting point for encouraging students to engage more actively in politics. Educators could link a particular service project to a larger policy that would be the subject of political participation. For example, students could concentrate on a controversial local issue, researching and presenting the opposing viewpoints and trying to determine if compromise can be reached, at least in the class, among the different positions. The class members could encourage compromise while not unduly sacrificing the principles they represent individually. This exercise would be helpful in encouraging respect of different

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viewpoints and mitigating (or avoiding) polarization in the governing process. Rimmerman (2011) noted that courses should allow students to think as public citizens, linking classroom discussions with concerns in the larger society. In line with our view that a good citizen controls the temptation to favor more immediate private interests over remote public interests, Rimmerman maintained that students need opportunities to connect to the larger public sphere, where they will spend much of their lives, to counter the tendency to think in highly private ways.

### **Conclusion**

The bitter presidential election of 2016 showed just how polarized the nation has become. A Pew Center (2017) survey conducted in early January 2017, shortly before President Trump's inauguration, showed that 86% of respondents described the country as more politically divided than in the past. In addition, most survey respondents expected the polarization to continue under Trump: 40% expected the country to be about as politically divided in five years, 31% thought it will be even more divided, and 24% less divided. Actions taken by both sides, including questioning the legitimacy of Trump's presidency, the flurry of moves by Trump in the early days of his administration, and the responses to those presidential actions, illustrate the polarization. To us, these findings and events show how important it is to the well-being of our representative democracy for educators and particularly political scientists to promote respectful dialogue and place the common good above the interests of party and interest groups. Teachers and political scientists should take the lead in efforts to change public perceptions of compromise as weak and principled politics as necessarily adversarial and polarizing. With the Trump administration (or any administration for that matter) initiating policies that are bound to be controversial, it is vital that discussion be civil and dissent be constructive in order for the nation

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to progress. Civil discourse and constructive, respectful dissent are the foundation of active, creative, and thoughtful citizenship. Such citizenship, we argue, is crucial to keeping the republic, as Franklin said, and to fulfilling the vision of the Framers of the nation's representative democracy.

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