



Teaching Students What It Means to Be an American: It Provides the Key to Preserving Our Liberal Democracy

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JULY 2024

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Almost 250 years after the nation's founding, there is broad agreement that American liberal democracy is in deep trouble. The leading Republican candidate for president has tried to thwart the peaceful transfer of power and speaks of suspending the Constitution, while activists on the left shout down speakers with whom they disagree and create a climate where large majorities feel they can't speak their minds. Illiberal tendencies are worse on the political right than the left because they invoke the power of the state, while the left invokes the power of culture, but both are profoundly troubling and feed off of one another.

It has long been observed that authoritarian tendencies are greatest among those with less education and income, but today illiberalism on the left actually rises with increased education, the opposite of what one would hope. Disturbingly, the willingness to give up on democracy is much greater among young people than those who are older.

Why now? After a long period in which the Civil Rights movement helped make the country more democratic, why is America now backsliding? Central to the problem is the loss of a common American identity. White identity politics on the right, and racial identity politics on the left, make fights seem existential, which justifies cutting corners on democratic norms. Voters on the right are more likely to excuse authoritarian actions when they feel as though they are losing control of the country. Meanwhile, the left promotes critical race theory and antiracism policies that say racial oppression is a permanent feature of American life that can only be countered by discrimination in favor of oppressed groups.

These theories about the centrality of racial identity lead to an eerie convergence on the left and the right that questions a series of

fundamental liberal democratic principles. For different reasons, both sides have become skeptical about treating Americans as individuals rather than members of racial groups. They both question concepts like advancement based on merit and the possibility of discerning objective truth. The hard right and the hard left agree that school integration makes little sense; and they both, in their own ways, are skeptical about free speech, press freedom, and the freedom to read controversial books. For different reasons, they both question academic freedom, and are both willing to embrace antisemitic beliefs.

What is the path out? Historically, public schools in America accomplished two pretty miraculous objectives. By placing a priority on teaching students the importance of liberal democratic principles, they helped keep a democratic republic going for over two centuries; and by instilling a common American identity, they provided the glue that held together people whose ancestors came from all corners of the world. In recent years, K-12 schools and colleges have moved away from this vision. They've placed more focus on economic competitiveness than democratic citizenship. And many focus on a vision of American and world history that divides the racial and ethnic groups neatly into categories of oppressed and oppressors, and undercut a shared American identity through poorly implemented ethnic studies programs. This new emphasis within public schools, in turn, promotes calls on the right for privatization of public education, which will only Balkanize the country further.

This report is the first in a series that will offer nine ways to once again teach students what it means to be an American.

1. Policymakers should provide more time, resources, and accountability for students to learn their civic inheritance and shared American history. In a nation whose federal government spends 1,000 times more money on STEM education than civics, it's important to place greater emphasis on sustaining American democracy.
2. Schools should spend more time teaching what it is like to live in nondemocratic countries, where there is no right to free speech or to criticize the government. Doing so could inspire the enhanced American patriotism found among immigrant groups, who know from first-hand experience the comparative blessings of American liberty.
3. Schools should teach an honest and hopeful account of American history, which frankly recounts America's sins but also the ways in which liberal democratic norms made redemption possible. Most Americans support a middle path between the New York Times's grossly inaccurate 1619 Project and the jingoistic approach employed in some red states.
4. Schools and colleges should completely overhaul Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), and Ethnic Studies programs. At their best, these approaches can uplift students of color. But today, they too often demonize other groups. They must be reinvented from the ground up to remove grossly inaccurate and insulting race essentialist thinking.

5. Schools and colleges should teach what is distinctive and exceptional about America, its culture, and its literature. Students should ask: if a foreign country invaded America, what monuments and artifacts would be most important to try to preserve because they go to the essence of what it means to be an American?

6. Forging social cohesion is much easier when schools are integrated by race and class than when they are segregated. Policymakers should support efforts to voluntarily integrate schools through public school choice and housing policy rather than compulsory busing.

7. Community service programs in school and national service programs after high school can instill in young people a sense of purpose and patriotism. They also have the potential to bridge divides between Americans of different races and economic groups and programs should be restructured to capture that unifying possibility.

8. Schools and colleges should do a better job of teaching students the art of civil discourse. Programs and practices should be established to allow for robust freedom of speech and thought while also preserving a sense of community.

9. The federal government can support these various policies without trying to impose mandates. A race to the top program, for example, could sustain promising practices in history, civics education, school integration, and community service.

The stakes of teaching American identity are enormous. Human beings have a natural yearning for identity and a larger purpose and if educators don't provide young people with a love of country, authoritarians will offer false alternatives, often centered around race or ethnicity. The good news is that the public supports a better path. Instilling a renewed sense of American identity could inspire a "patriotism dividend" that could put the country on a better path for the next 250 years. Among the towering issues of our time, few are as important as this one.

THE DECLINE IN LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The United States is celebrating its 248th birthday at a time when people across the political spectrum agree that the country's experiment in liberal democracy is in trouble.¹ Since the nation's founding, but especially in the decades following World War II, Americans across party lines had prided themselves on some key principles. Guided by a belief in the equal dignity of individuals to human freedom, as embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, Americans had some measure of confidence that:

- Unlike many other countries, we enjoyed free and fair elections and could assume the peaceful transfer of power after those elections;
- America was a country where people were free to speak their minds. They could exercise freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of worship.
- The law should treat individuals equally, whatever their racial, ethnic or religious origins, rather than as members of a group with different sets of rights.

Those ideas are increasingly questioned. On the right, former President Donald Trump helped foster a violent attack on the U.S. Capitol to interfere with the peaceful transfer of power. He says he will be a “dictator” at least for a day, has called for suspending the Constitution, refers to the press as the “enemy of the people,” suggests immigrants are “poisoning the blood of the country,” and refers admiringly to authoritarian leaders in other countries as “strong.”²

On the left, illiberal practices are also gaining broader acceptance. Polls find that 57% of very liberal students say it is acceptable to shut down or block speakers, compared with 13% of very conservative students.³ Students say they will face “social death” for not toeing the party line on liberal campuses, so people don’t speak their minds. The idea that in a multiracial democracy, people should be judged on their own merits, regardless of background, has given way to the idea that race should, in fact, count, even in deciding which employees to lay off.⁴

While illiberalism is on the rise generally, it is concentrated in three respects.

ILLIBERALISM IS WORSE ON THE RIGHT BUT ALSO PROBLEMATIC ON THE LEFT

First, liberals are right to say the threats to liberal democracy are worse on the right, because the right’s illiberal practices are often enforced through the power of the state, while illiberalism on the left often employs the power of culture. College students and faculty members don’t command the authority that a president or governor does, and Democrat Joe Biden is not traveling around the country saying he would suspend the Constitution. Moreover, Donald Trump has greater sway with the Republican Party than the illiberal left does over the

Democratic Party. One remarkable poll found that 57% of Republicans described the January 6 violent assault on the Capital as “an act of patriotism” rather than “an insurrection.”⁵ The Republican National Committee said those investigating the January 6 attacks were participating in “persecution of ordinary citizens engaged in legitimate political discourse.”⁶

But these realities do not mean that illiberalism on the left can be ignored. The power of culture wielded on the left is real. According to a 2021 survey of 37,000 college students, more than 80% reported censoring their views some of the time.⁷ The effect is corrosive. As the *New York Times* editorial page noted, “Attacking people in the workplace, on campus, on social media and elsewhere, who express unpopular views from a place of good faith is the practice of a closed society.”⁸

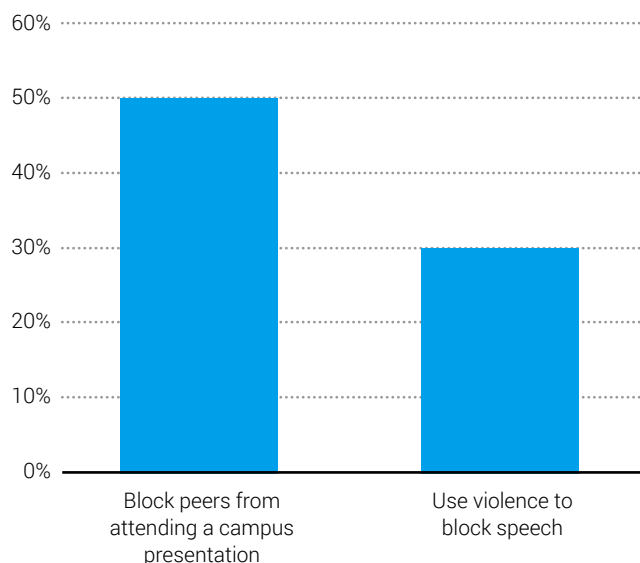
Moreover, illiberalism on the left feeds illiberalism on the right. Research finds racial identity politics and the support for racial preference programs, for example, push white Americans to the right. “Threat to one’s group,” Duke University political scientist Ashley Jardina finds, “activates one’s group identity.”⁹

Finally, it is important for progressives to confront illiberalism on the left because polls show the public does not perceive Trump as the primary threat to democracy. As hard as it is to believe, more Americans say that electing Trump would strengthen democracy than believe electing Biden would. Independents say Biden is more likely to weaken democracy than Trump.¹⁰ Speaking out frankly about left illiberalism, as well as that on the right, could help draw the lines more clearly.

ILLIBERALISM RISES WITH EDUCATION ON THE LEFT

It has long been observed that authoritarian tendencies are worst among those voters with less income and formal education.¹¹ More education would reduce illiberalism, it was believed. But a highly disturbing phenomenon comes into play on the political left. There, more education does not translate into high levels of appreciation for liberal norms. To the contrary, one often finds heightened illiberalism. For example, anti-free speech attitudes are most prevalent among students at elite colleges. According to a survey of 37,000 students from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), nationally, two-thirds of students say shouting down speakers is sometimes justified, including 72% of those at the top 20 colleges in the US News rankings. At the top 20 schools, 50% of students say it is sometimes justifiable to block peers from attending a campus presentation, and 30% say violence can be justified to block speech.¹² (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS AT TOP UNIVERSITIES IN THE U.S. THAT SAY IT'S JUSTIFIED TO:



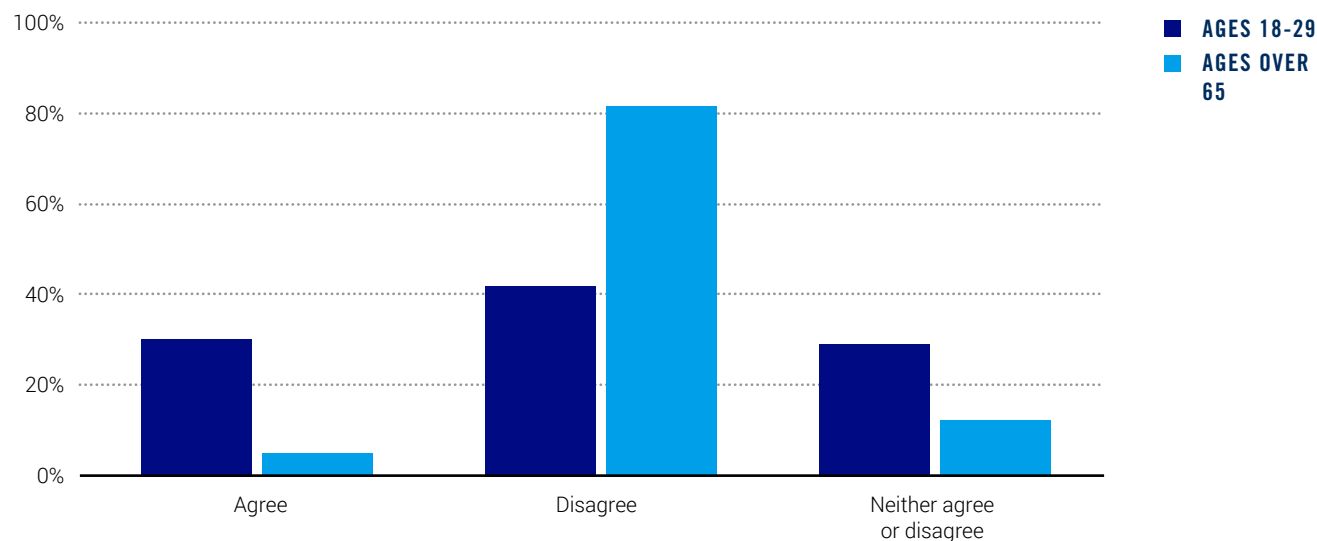
Source: Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, RealClearEducation, and College Pulse¹³

At elite institutions like the University of Virginia and Yale, even students who will become part of professions that have historically served as guardians of freedom — student journalists and law students — have been endorsing alarmingly illiberal views about speech. At UVA, editors of the *Cavalier Daily* opposed giving Vice President Mike Pence a chance to speak on campus because his words about LGBTQ students were deemed “violent” in nature and, therefore, “impermissible.”¹⁴ Meanwhile, at Yale Law School, a mob shouted down a conservative speaker because they believed it was appropriate to prevent anyone from hearing her.¹⁵ This pattern is unusual, but not completely unknown. German history shows that higher levels of education do not guarantee a liberal outlook, as “one of the most educated, most progressive, most cultured countries in the world” descended into madness.¹⁶ When it comes to thinking of ways to combat rising illiberalism, it is clear that educating students about liberal democracy cannot end in high school.

ILLIBERALISM IS WORSE AMONG THE YOUNG THAN THE OLD

Third, it is important to recognize that illiberal attitudes are more likely to be found among young Americans than old Americans. Whereas only 5% of those over 65 said “Democracy is no longer a viable system, and Americans should explore alternative forms of government,” a shocking 31% of youth ages 18-29 agreed.¹⁷ (See Figure 2). In another survey, 78% of Americans overall said democracy is “the best political system under all circumstances,” but only about half of young people agreed. Among those ages 18-25, 28% said it “makes no difference” whether they live in a democracy or dictatorship and another 19% said “dictatorship could be good

FIGURE 2: DO YOU AGREE THAT "DEMOCRACY IS NO LONGER A VIABLE SYSTEM AND AMERICA SHOULD EXPLORE ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF GOVERNMENT"?



Source: YouGov²⁰

under certain circumstances.”¹⁸ As Danielle Allen of Harvard University put it: “You can’t have a democracy unless people want one. And right now, the kids don’t particularly want a democracy. This means we are failing at one of our greatest responsibilities: generational succession.”¹⁹

THE DECLINE IN A COMMON AMERICAN IDENTITY

What is causing this decline in liberal democracy? Why now? The “great man” theory of history might point to the rise of Donald Trump, a charismatic demagogue who triggered an illiberal reaction on the left. But evidence also suggests something deeper is going on — a long-term rise in race essentialism on the left and the right and a decline in common American identity. Under this reading, Trump is a symptom rather than a cause of the problem.

Identity politics on the left and the right are related to increasing illiberalism because they make compromise almost impossible. As David French notes: “when fundamental ideas are at stake, there is an opportunity for persuasion” but when the fight is seen through the lens of identity, finding a middle ground is unthinkable.²¹ If policy battles are seen, essentially, as proxies for a larger existential war between racial and ethnic groups, both sides are more willing to cut corners and violate liberal democratic norms.

While it is wrong to suggest that Donald Trump’s support among working-class whites was driven primarily by racism, it is also true, as Thomas Edsall observes, that support among Republicans for illiberal practices such as “the use of force to defend our way of life” and the belief that “strong leaders bend rules,” becomes “stronger in direct correlation with racial and ethnic hostility.”²² It’s no accident that among those who stormed the Capitol on January 6 were several holding confederate flags.

A left-wing focus on race and gender identity is also associated with increased illiberalism. When students tried to prevent people holding conservative views from speaking on campus, the subject matter was rarely about labor policy, taxes, or the environment. That was why the University of Virginia's school newspaper endorsed canceling a speech by former Vice President Mike Pence, who took conservative positions on gay rights, but student groups do not target people like Grover Norquist for his conservative position on taxes.²³ So too, when MIT canceled an invitation of a geophysicist to give a lecture about climate change, it was not because of his position on scientific issues but because he did not believe race should be a factor in college admissions — a position supported by 73% of Americans in a 2019 Pew Survey. "In other words," says David Brooks, "the views of the large majority of Americans are not even utterable in certain academic parts of the progressive subculture."²⁴

RISE OF WHITE IDENTITY POLITICS ON THE RIGHT:

The increase in white identity politics on the right has been widely noted. After almost a half-century in which Republicans felt it necessary to downplay explicit racial appeals in favor of more subtle references, Donald Trump revived a deep thread of white identity politics more openly than any politician since George Wallace.

Aided by widely publicized projections that white Americans would soon become a minority, theorists on the far right said Democrats were facilitating illegal immigration in order to "replace" the white population. On the far right, some now explicitly argue only a subset of Americans are fully American.²⁵ Replacement theorists suggest something very important is being lost from American society as the racial, ethnic, and

religious makeup of the citizenry diversifies. They fear that Black, Brown, Asian, Jewish, and Muslim Americans are "replacing" — rather than living alongside — white Christians.

Donald Trump fully exploited these fears. He rose to prominence stoking the racist idea that President Barack Obama, born in Hawaii, was not an American citizen.²⁶ In 2016, he doubled down. While border security and illegal immigration were legitimate issues to raise, in announcing his candidacy, Trump unfairly painted Mexican immigrants with a broad brush, declaring: "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."²⁷ Trump then proposed a religious test for immigration, calling for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States."²⁸

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump also famously criticized a federal judge presiding over a lawsuit against Trump University on racial grounds. He suggested an Indiana-born jurist of Mexican heritage, Gonzalo Curiel, was incapable of being neutral in the suit, by virtue of his ethnic origins. Paul Ryan, Republican Speaker of the House said, "Claiming a person can't do their job because of their race is sort of like the textbook definition of a racist comment."²⁹ After Trump was elected, he felt emboldened. In August 2017, he said there were "very fine people" among those who marched in Charlottesville neo-Nazi "Unite the Right" rally.³⁰ In January 2018, he said he wanted to limit immigration to America from people who lived in what he called "shit-hole" countries.³¹ As part of the 2024 presidential campaign, he repeatedly accused migrants of "poisoning the blood of our country" and threatened the mass deportation of millions of people.³²

RISE OF RACIAL IDENTITY POLITICS ON LEFT

Some on the left reacted reasonably by saying Trump was wrong, we're all Americans. But too often, others intensified their focus on identity politics that emphasizes difference.

Critical Race Theory and Antiracism

Beginning with Trump's presidency, two bodies of academic work — critical race theory (CRT) embodied by thinkers like Derrick Bell, and anti-racism, embodied by researchers like Ibram Kendi — moved from the fringes to mainstream thought among leaders in progressive nonprofits, parts of the media, and education establishment. Sometimes the media would portray CRT and anti-racism as simply a continuation of the civil rights movement — as uncontroversial efforts to make Americans more fully recognize that the legacy of slavery and segregation persists.³³ But that missed the truly radical nature of the movements.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Barack Obama venerated the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and knew that free speech rights offered a promise of progress. They believed that the arc of history bent toward justice. In a speech in Selma, Alabama, in 2015, Obama declared that while racism had not been banished, "we do a disservice to the cause of justice by intimating that bias and discrimination are immutable, that racial division is inherent to America. If you think nothing's changed in the past 50 years, ask somebody who lived through the Selma or Chicago or Los Angeles of the 1950s. Ask the female CEO who once might have been assigned to the secretarial pool if nothing's changed. Ask your gay friend if it's easier to be out and proud in America now than it was thirty years ago. To deny this progress, this hard-won progress — our progress — would be to rob us of our own agency, our own capacity,

our responsibility to do what we can to make America better."³⁴

In contrast to the aspirational approach of King and Obama, critical race theory holds a deeply pessimistic view of race in America. It says America is defined by racism, and always will be. Racism isn't something that people struggle with and try to overcome. It is endemic and permanent. Given that premise, many of the major advancements of the Enlightenment are suspect: the importance of debate through free speech, the idea that advancement should be based on merit rather than nepotism or other factors; the idea of a neutral rule of law that does not depend upon the identity of the parties involved in a dispute; and the development of the scientific method which seeks to establish objective truth beyond subjective feelings. These values and norms, CRT suggested, should not be respected because they are used by white people to maintain their power. A leading CRT theorist, Richard Delgado, wrote that CRT "questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law."³⁵

For example, extremists on the left justify limiting classroom discussion of ideas related to race, gender, and sexual orientation on the theory that words constitute "violence." In a 1993 book, *Words that Wound*, four CRT scholars argue that words can be "assaultive" and argue for breaking down the traditional conduct/speech dichotomy when thinking about what constitutes protected speech. They argued: "Words, like sticks and stones, can assault; they can injure; they can exclude."³⁶

Another major theme of CRT is that oppression is "intersectional." If taken to mean that Black

women facing both racism and sexism have an especially tough burden that is additive, the theory is surely reasonable. But some take the idea further and divide the world into categories of oppressed and oppressor, and suggest that ideas and actions have greater or lesser validity depending upon the identity of the speaker or actor.³⁷

Anti-racism, meanwhile, posits that there can be no neutrality on race; no aspiration of color blindness and non-discrimination. A person is either racist or anti-racist. A racist includes anyone who is not supportive of racial preferences. Indeed, anyone who believes the government should treat everyone the same, regardless of race, is engaging in “colorblind racism.”³⁸ Kendi argued that all racial disparities are the result of racial discrimination.³⁹ If New York’s exam-based Stuyvesant High School is 75% Asian, and 58% of college students are female — as is true — something nefarious is afoot.⁴⁰ If discrimination is the explanation, racial preferences are the only appropriate response. Kendi argued the “only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.”⁴¹ Kendi’s approach goes far beyond the already unpopular idea that racial preferences should provide a *temporary* remedy to past discrimination. Instead, he advocates perpetual rounds of back-and-forth discrimination — in which society treats people not as individuals, but as members of racial tribes, possibly for generations to come.⁴²

DEI Trainings

The press often also said that CRT is an academic theory that is not taught in public schools. On one level, this was technically true. But both CRT and antiracism approaches have

a great deal of real-world impact. Their influence is felt in education schools for teachers, and DEI workshop trainings for educators, businesses, and nonprofits. (The impact of CRT and antiracism is also manifested in the reinterpretation of American history discussed later in this report.)⁴³

Both of these efforts took very valid ideas — that diversity and inclusion are important values and that American history must fully and frankly acknowledge the role of slavery and segregation — but, under the influence of CRT and antiracism, took on a much harder edge.

Because CRT posits that racism thoroughly infuses most structures in America, some DEI trainings sought to dismantle things that most Americans would consider admirable qualities, such as punctuality and striving for excellence in reading and writing. DEI trainings at one elite private school taught that “individualism, worship of the written word and objectivity” were “characteristics of white supremacy.”⁴⁴ For a time, even the venerable Smithsonian Institution posted a chart describing “objectivity,” being on time, and appreciating the written word as particular aspects of “white culture.”⁴⁵ The Smithsonian withdrew the posting after an outcry, but to this day, Montgomery County, Maryland public schools use Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun’s ideas that “perfectionism,” “worship of the written” a “sense of urgency” and “objectivity” are elements of “White Supremacy Culture.”⁴⁶

At Penn State, one white faculty member in the English department alleged that DEI officials created a hostile work environment by, among other things, requiring faculty to watch a video entitled, “White Teachers Are a Problem.” In a preliminary ruling, a Black federal judge and

Obama appointee Wendy Beetlestone let the case proceed in part based on allegations that on several occasions, the plaintiff “was obligated to attend conferences or trainings that discussed racial issues in essentialist and deterministic terms — ascribing negative traits to white people or white teachers without exception and as flowing inevitably from their race.”⁴⁷ In 2022, a Yale professor said Joe Biden decision to work while having COVID “epitomizes white supremacy urgency in the workplace.”⁴⁸

Some progressive organizations think that they are promoting “inclusive” practices when they elevate identity to the point of determining “the order of who should be allowed to speak based on the perceived degree of marginalization.”⁴⁹ Every issue comes to be viewed through a racial lens. Even race-neutral economic policies — such as the minimum wage — are framed as being good or bad based on how they will affect different racial or gender groups rather than how all Americans will be affected.⁵⁰

Social critic Walter Benn Michaels captured this mindset in a story about a Harvard student who was discouraged that his classmates did not seem interested in supporting the efforts of custodians and food workers to win higher wages. But then the student used a racial angle and began to get traction. “[T]he only way I can get them at all interested in this thing is by saying, ‘Most of these people are black,’” the student said. Michaels concluded: “Harvard students can’t see underpaid workers as a problem unless they can see the problem as racism.”⁵¹

UNSETTLING ILLIBERAL PARALLELS BETWEEN THE LEFT AND RIGHT

White identity politics on the right and racial identity politics on the left are by no means

symmetrical in their motivations. White identity politics is rooted in slavery, segregation, and racial oppression, while CRT and antiracism, at their best, are trying to undo the harms of subjugation. But that does not mean that CRT and antiracism provide the best thinking about how to advocate for disadvantaged groups; to the contrary, they are, in many ways, counterproductive. Indeed, despite their differing motivations, anti-racist and CRT thinking on the far left have led to some strange and unsettling parallels with the white nationalism that Donald Trump has been elevating; “One is the yin to the other’s yang,” Yascha Mounk of Johns Hopkins University notes.⁵²

Skepticism about Treating People as Individual Americans

Right-wing extremists have always believed in the centrality of racial differences, while liberals historically pushed back. Susan Neiman argues: “Since the Enlightenment, liberals and progressives have insisted that there’s a common humanity that goes beyond differences of tribes and clans.” Universalism was “the very first principle that distinguishes left from right.”⁵³

But today, there is often a bizarre convergence of left and right around racial essentialism. It is not hard to imagine KKK members nodding their heads in agreement about leftist racial essentialism which posits that there was something distinctively white about the importance of the written word. Indeed, some Black educators were deeply disturbed by anti-racist trainings. A *New York Times* reporter who profiled white anti-racist theorist Robin DiAngelo, author of the bestselling *White Fragility*, interviewed a Black educator named Deonca Renee who was working to try to expand access to A.P. classes in New York City to disadvantaged communities. Renee told the reporter: “The city

has tens of millions invested in A.P. for All, so my team can give kids access to A.P. classes, and help them prepare for A.P. exams that will help them get college degrees, and we're all supposed to think that writing and data are white values?"⁵⁴

Skepticism about Merit and Objective Truth

There was also overlap on the far left and far right about the validity of merit and the idea of objective truth. Trump, who placed family members in key positions in his administration and was deeply skeptical of experts who were part of what he called the "deep state," was more impressed by raw power than merit. Part of the hard anti-racist and CRT left agree. Leading CRT scholar Derrick Bell rejected the idea of merit as a "smokescreen," a clever ploy used by white people to maintain dominance. A few years ago, the KIPP charter schools abandoned its "Work Hard. Be Nice" slogan, over a fear that it reflected "white supremacy culture," even though polls found that 80% of parents, across racial lines, like the idea of their kids working hard and being nice.⁵⁵ California Community Colleges adopted a policy that faculty should employ the principles of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility, including the idea that "merit is embedded in the ideology of Whiteness and upholds race-based structural inequality."⁵⁶ In some circles, saying the best-qualified person deserves the job became seen as a "microaggression."⁵⁷ In San Francisco, leftists on the school board said that student admissions to Lowell High School, which had long been based on merit, should instead be decided by lottery.

The Trump administration offered "alternative facts." The race essentialist left offered "my truth," which could very well be different than "your truth."

Skepticism about School Integration

Agreement sprung up, too, around a skepticism of school integration efforts. The far-right had never liked desegregation and fought it tooth and nail, oftentimes violently and with massive resistance. CRT founders, drawing upon ideas of the Black Power movement, also rejected school integration.⁵⁸ Their idea was not, as King had argued, that racial integration of schools and neighborhoods was necessary to dispel myths; integration, Derrick Bell said, only subjected Black people to more intense discrimination by whites. School desegregation wasn't a means, as Thurgood Marshall argued, for people to come learn what they have in common; instead, CRT preached that white people would never accept Black people.

Skepticism about Free Speech, Press Freedom and Freedom to Read

The strange overlap between the far left and far right also extended to issues of free speech, freedom of the press, and attitudes toward book banning.

During the 2016 campaign, Trump promised to "open up" the nation's libel laws to make it easier for politicians to sue the press. He also revoked the press credentials of critical reporters from newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and *Politico*, which the New York Times noted was "an almost unheard-of practice for a modern presidential candidate."⁵⁹

And instead of allowing high school and college students to read about, discuss, and debate the merits of CRT, and clearly instructing teachers not to engage in indoctrination, the instinct of right-wing governors was to ban discussion of it entirely. Florida passed the "Stop W.O.K.E." act, to ban critical race theory. A federal judge struck down the law, declaring it "positively dystopian."⁶⁰

In some states, books about Roberto Clemente, Anne Frank, and Ruby Bridges were removed from school libraries.⁶¹ A South Carolina teacher was reprimanded for assigning Ta-Nehisi Coates's book, *Between The World and Me* after students reported her.⁶² In Virginia, some sought to ban the teaching of Toni Morrison's award-winning "Beloved."⁶³ Texas state officials barred educators from teaching concepts that cause "discomfort, guilt [or] anguish."⁶⁴

For their own reasons, race-essentialists on the left were equally skeptical of free speech and of certain books. At William & Mary, students with Black Lives Matter blocked an ACLU official from speaking, shouting, "Your free speech hides beneath white sheets."⁶⁵ Left-wing college students protesting the war in Gaza were deeply hostile to the press as well. *The Washington Post* reported in May 2024 that at City College of New York, a protester [held] a sign reading 'death to mainstream media.'"⁶⁶

In Washington State, a group of teachers refused to teach Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, because they said the book "centers on whiteness."⁶⁷ PEN America issued a report in 2023, which documented the many ways in which book banning can occur on the left. Sometimes it is because publishers cancel a book's publication entirely over issues of "cultural appropriation," which holds that only people of certain identities can write about certain topics.⁶⁸ To be sure, it is deeply offensive if white people paint their faces Black or dress up like Native Americans in a manner that ridicules them. But the prohibition against cultural appropriation goes further, suggesting authors should stay in their ethnic lanes. "The ultimate endpoint of keeping our mitts off experience that doesn't belong to us," the author Lionel Shriver said, "is that there is no fiction. All that's left is memoir."⁶⁹

Skepticism about Academic Freedom

An illiberal convergence has also emerged on issues of academic freedom. The right has long been skeptical of the rights of liberal-dominated faculties at leading universities. In recent years, state officials in Florida have sought to prevent professors at public universities from testifying on issues of public importance such as voting rights.⁷⁰ Rather than seeking to curb the excesses of some diversity, equity, and inclusion practices, Texas legislators flatly banned funding for DEI offices at public universities.⁷¹ Texas state officials have also sought (unsuccessfully) to curb tenure protections for professors at public universities in the state, a move that would have undercut academic freedom.⁷²

The left has traditionally championed academic freedom and balked at compelled speech more generally. During the reign of Senator Joe McCarthy in the 1950s, for example, higher education leaders proudly stood up against the idea that their faculty should take loyalty oaths as a condition of employment.

Now, however, the left has pushed colleges to ask prospective candidates to take a 21st-century loyalty oath to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI).⁷³ This might have seemed reasonable enough — professors should value diversity, and be inclusive — but as implemented, the practice too often becomes a political litmus test in which would-be faculty members have to attest allegiance to the idea that racial preferences are the only fair path forward for America. If they don't, they can face dire consequences.⁷⁴ One high-ranking University of California at Davis official declared, "In these searches, it is the candidate's diversity statement that is considered first; only those who submit persuasive and inspiring statements can advance for the complete consideration."⁷⁵

This requirement also butts heads with the traditionally liberal principle that compelling speech is anathema to freedom of thought. In the famous case of *West Virginia v. Barnette*, Justice Robert Jackson held that compelling students to salute the American flag is unconstitutional. He wrote: "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein."⁷⁶

Harvard Law professor Randall Kennedy, a strong supporter of civil rights, argues: "Candidates for academic positions at Harvard should not be asked to support ideological commitments. Imagine the howl of protest that would (or should) erupt if a school at Harvard asked a candidate for a faculty position to submit a statement of their orientation towards capitalism, or patriotism, or Making America Great Again with a clear expectation of allegiance?"⁷⁷

Almost half of large universities require job applicants to write diversity statements, but in May 2024, MIT announced it would stop requiring faculty applicants to make such statements. "We can build an inclusive environment in many ways, but compelled statements impinge on freedom of expression, and they don't work," MIT's president, Sally Kornbluh said.⁷⁸ Harvard followed soon after.⁷⁹

Openness to Antisemitism

Finally, there is an uncanny way in which right-wing and left-wing race essentialist thinking results in an overlapping embrace of antisemitism. As Walter Russell Mead notes, the U.S. has been a "uniquely hospitable home for Jewish citizens" historically because of a belief in "the American Way," which brings

together peoples from across the world and treats them as individual Americans. The illiberal left on college campuses and white nationalists marching in Charlottesville reject this view. "Both sides worship ethnicity, despise the American way, and hate Jews."⁸⁰

Right-wing racism against Black people has always sat alongside a hatred of Jews; the KKK despised both as did marchers in the 2017 Unite the Right rally, chanting "Jews shall not replace us." Donald Trump has long trafficked in antisemitic stereotypes, and in November 2022, he hosted notorious antisemites Ye (Kanye West) and Nick Fuentes, at Mar-a-Lago.⁸¹

Among left-wing race essentialists, the source of antisemitism is different. If one takes Ibram X. Kendi's views, that all racial and ethnic disparities are the result of racism, then the fact that Jews (or Asian Americans) as groups, outperform white gentiles in various academic arenas suggests something underhanded is going on.

The implications of dividing racial and ethnic groups neatly into undifferentiated classes of people who are either oppressed or oppressors became vividly clear after October 7, when Hamas slaughtered hundreds of Israeli civilians, including women and children, and many left-leaning peace activists. Within hours of the attack, 34 Harvard student organizations put the entire blame for the attack on Israel. It raised the question, as former Harvard dean Harry Lewis noted, of where colleges have gone wrong in teaching students. Why was antisemitism not a serious problem in "hospitals or libraries," he wrote, but nevertheless a major issue on campuses like Harvard's?⁸² In an article entitled, "Reaping What We Have Taught," Lewis pointed to the curriculum. Harvard students were fed a steady diet on the need to "decolonize" and

examine the “intersection” between categories of oppression. “When complex social and political histories are oversimplified in our teachings as Manichean struggles...a veneer of academic respectability is applied to ugly old stereotypes of Jews as evil but devilishly successful people.”⁸³ The worldview, as Peter Wehner notes, meant that “murdering children or raping women isn’t intrinsically bad; its morality depends on who is doing the murdering and raping. And those who are ‘privileged’ are in no position to criticize those who are not.”⁸⁴

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

If American K-12 and higher education has in recent years contributed in exacerbating the challenges to liberal democracy, historically, public schools and colleges have provided the very foundations of American democratic life — and can again.

THE TWIN MIRACLES OF PUBLIC EDUCATION HISTORICALLY

Throughout American history, public schools helped America accomplish two interlocking goals. They helped create an educated citizenry, capable of self-governance by providing young people the skills to make choices about leaders and the disposition to love liberty. In addition, schools helped forge a new common American identity for people who came from all over the planet.

Founded to Teach Democratic Citizenship

America’s founders knew that they were creating something new, which entailed risks. Before the Declaration of Independence, historian Robert Kagan notes, there had never been a government which had declared that all men had

natural rights as individuals.⁸⁵ As Fareed Zakaria writes, “It is astonishing to remember that when America’s Founding Fathers were constructing their experiment in government, they were virtually alone in a world of monarchs.”⁸⁶

As they sought to create a new democracy, which provided ultimate sovereignty to the collective views of average citizens through the franchise, they knew it was crucial to educate individuals so they would not fall prey to demagogues who would convince them to give up their liberties. America’s elaborate constitutional system of checks and balances provided one set of important constraints on the power of the demagogue, but an educated populace would provide a second bulwark.

Thomas Jefferson argued that general education was necessary to “enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.”⁸⁷ Jefferson noted, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”⁸⁸ The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 proclaimed that because knowledge was necessary for self-governance, “schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”⁸⁹ Education would help nurture intelligent voters who could discern serious leaders of high character from con men but it would do something else as well: instill a love of liberal democracy, a respect for a free press and free religious exercise, and for the rights of political minorities.⁹⁰

Over time, American leaders returned again and again to the importance of education to the survival of liberal democracy. In 1938, when dangerous demagogues were erecting totalitarian regimes in many parts of the world,

Franklin D. Roosevelt noted: “Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.” He continued: “It has been well said that no system of government gives so much to the individual or exacts so much as a democracy. Upon our educational system must largely depend the perpetuity of those institutions upon which our freedom and our security rest.”⁹¹

The courts recognized the role of education as well. In a 1952 Supreme Court case, Justice Felix Frankfurter, noting the central role of public schools in our system of self-governance, said teachers should be regarded “as the priests of our democracy.”⁹² All nations, the late historian Paul Gagnon noted, provide an excellent education to “those who are expected to run the country,” and, therefore, the quality of that education “cannot be far from what everyone in a democracy needs to know.”⁹³

Institutions of higher education, both public and private, recognized their role as well. The nation’s oldest university, Harvard, declares that its fundamental mission is to “educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society.”⁹⁴

Provided Glue for A Multiracial Society

Because the United States embarked not only on an experiment in democratic self-governance but also one in which people of many different nationalities could participate, it faced a separate challenge of creating a multiracial and multiethnic democracy among what author Heather McGee calls “ancestral strangers.”⁹⁵ This would not be easy. As the University of Virginia’s E.D. Hirsch notes, “The American experiment, which now seems so natural to us, is a thoroughly artificial device designed to

counterbalance the natural impulses of group suspicions and hatreds.”⁹⁶ Albert Shanker, the late president of the American Federation of Teachers, suggested that a Martian visiting the United States at the time of its founding “would not have given the country much of a chance of surviving. He would have predicted that this new nation, whose inhabitants were of different races, who spoke different languages, and who followed different religions, would not remain one nation for long. They would end up fighting and killing each other.”⁹⁷

If young children ended up going to separate schools — some for Germans, others for the Irish, others for Chinese, and still others for Armenians — the country could lose its unity and might disintegrate. (The separation of Black students was, of course, one of the tragic mistakes of American history.) These students might grow up as adults to form different political parties based on ethnic or religious lines that would have contributed to division, or worse. Indeed, Barbara F. Walter of U.C. San Diego finds that in societies where political parties organize around identity rather than ideology, the likelihood of civil war increases measurably.⁹⁸

Instead, the modern founder of American public education, the 19th-century educator Horace Mann, suggested the creation of common public schools, open to rich and poor and people of different ethnicities, where they could come together and learn a set of shared values. As a result, Shanker said, disintegration “didn’t happen. Instead, we became a wealthy and powerful nation — the freest the world has ever known....Public schools played a big role in holding our nation together.”⁹⁹

Secret Sauce: Teaching American Identity

Importantly, though, public schools could only succeed at their dual purposes of promoting democratic citizenship and social cohesion if the content of what they taught furthered those goals. How could this be done? For Shanker, there was a simple answer, which he explained at a conference of education and business leaders. Former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander recalls the scene: the president of Notre Dame, Edward Malloy, “brought the discussion to a complete stop by posing this question: ‘What is the rationale for the public school?’” Alexander recalls: “After what seemed like an eternity of embarrassed silence,” Shanker spoke up and “provided the answer: to teach children what it means to be an American.”¹⁰⁰

While Shanker understood that teaching students to be literate and numerate and giving them the skills to get good jobs and be productive members of society are all important, he knew that the preeminent purpose of public schools was to teach children what they have in common as Americans. What they share is two things: “a common set of values and beliefs” to which they aspire; and a particular land.

Teaching Common Liberal Democratic Values

For most nations, place is central to identity, but because Americans come from the furthest reaches of the planet and may have lingering attachments to other places, the ideas and values of America play an outsized role in forming national identity. What are those shared values?

In the United States, as Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick argue, schools have been charged with teaching values that “include loyalty to the nation, acceptance of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as venerable

founding documents, appreciation that in America, constitutional rights sometimes trump majority rule and the majority rule is supposed to trump intense desire, belief in the rule of law as the proper grounding for a legal system, belief in equal opportunity as the proper grounding for a social system [and a] willingness to adhere to the discipline implied by rotation in office through an electoral system.”¹⁰¹

Over time, the ideal of social mobility embodied in what we call the American Dream, has also become central to American identity, which is why we reference the dream as “American,” even though Kenyans and Canadians surely have similar aspirations. And because we are each endowed with dignity, over time Americans came to recognize that we have the right not to be discriminated against based on such factors as race, religion, sex, or nationality. Needless to say, the full vision of equality was initially curtailed — the franchise did not extend to women, people of color, or white men without land — but over time, Americans have come to recognize that equality and liberty apply to Americans of all walks of life.

The forging of American identity requires a delicate balance. Because a central driver of American identity is liberty, it would be antithetical to the ideal to try to compel people to give up their racial, ethnic, or religious identities that give meaning to their lives apart from their shared identities as Americans. As Yascha Mounk put it, we want a society “in which compatriots from many different ethnic and religious backgrounds can embark on a meaningfully shared life without giving up on what makes each of them unique.”¹⁰² Unlike France, for example, Americans do not compel Muslim women to forgo wearing a hijab in common public spaces.

American leaders have often gotten the balance wrong, most notoriously when boarding schools were created for Native American students that were designed to erase their attachments to indigenous culture. But at its best, America has said that a thriving civic culture of religious and cultural institutions, from Irish American clubs to Black churches to after-school Chinese language programs would help nourish and enliven a pluralistic democracy. But alongside those multiple identities, as Shanker argued, public schools should help create a unique American identity that comes from a commitment to shared ideals. Ultimately, as Barack Obama famously said in his 2004 speech to the Democratic National Convention, “There is not a Black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America — there is the United States of America.”¹⁰³ The ideal balance is to impart the sensibility that Darren Walker, the president of the Ford Foundation, has expressed. He wrote that as a Black, gay man who grew up poor in Texas, “each of my identities has shaped my experience,” but “no identity has had a greater impact on my life or its trajectory than my identity as an American, with all that entails.”¹⁰⁴

The Importance of Place

Of course, America is not only an idea. An Australian who fully subscribes to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution is not an American if he has never set foot in the United States. Barbara Jordan, who chaired a 1995 National Commission on Immigration Reform, knew that being an American was also rooted in a place, with clear national boundaries. The valiant fight for freedom in Ukraine reminds us of the power of ideas joined to a place. As Francis Fukuyama notes, “With their bravery,” Ukrainians “have made clear that citizens are willing to die for liberal ideals,

but only when those ideals are embedded in a country they can call their own.”¹⁰⁵

While people should strive to be citizens of the world who respect the rights of all humankind, it is also true that national borders have legal meaning and create a special bond among peoples. If borders have “moral significance” as Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel observes, it would mean “we owe more to our fellow citizens than we owe citizens of other countries.”¹⁰⁶ Students should be taught American ideals but also recognize that part of what makes them able to enjoy American citizenship is the fortunate accident of living within the nation’s borders.

FAILURES IN RECENT YEARS

In recent years, the evidence below suggests, American schools and colleges have fallen seriously short in their tasks of teaching democratic citizenship and a common American identity.

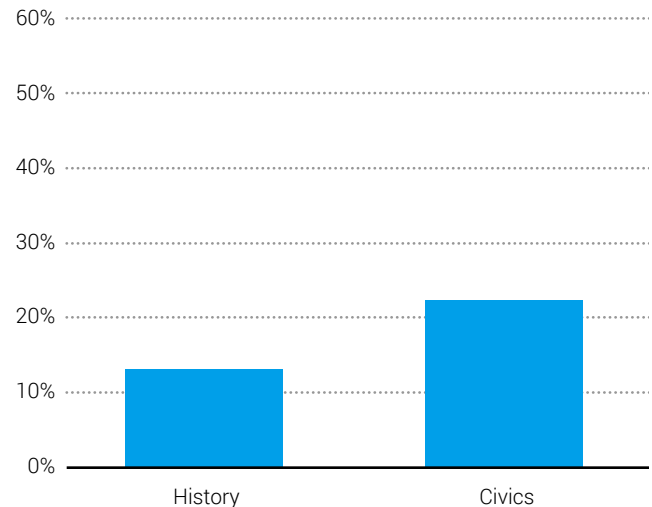
Lost Focus on Teaching Democratic Citizenship

Prior to the rise of Donald Trump, many leaders and institutions reduced their emphasis on the ways in which public education must teach citizenship, turning primarily instead to education’s role in training future workers. President Barack Obama, for example, highlighted the idea that “A world-class education is the single most important factor in determining not just whether our kids can compete for the best jobs but whether America can out-compete countries around the world. America’s business leaders understand that when it comes to education, we need to up our game. That’s why we’re working together to put an outstanding education within reach for every child.”¹⁰⁷

In a telling sign, in 2013, the governing board of the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) dropped fourth- and twelfth-grade civics and American history as a tested subject when it needed to save money.¹⁰⁸ Overall, the federal government has devoted roughly 1000 times more resources to STEM education than to history and civics.¹⁰⁹ A 2018 Center for American Progress report card on “The State of Civics Education” found that some states did not even require students to take civics education classes in high school, and when they did, it was typically just one semester. Only a few states required community service. Most did not require that students pass a civics exam before graduating.¹¹⁰ As of 2024, eight states required high school students to pass a version of the civics test that immigrants seeking to become naturalized citizens must pass.¹¹¹ The test is very basic, however, asking such questions as why the U.S. entered World War II. Some 96% of immigrants pass on their first or second try.¹¹² Educator Robert Pondiscio argues that perhaps the test should be required for elementary school graduation.¹¹³

The inadequate commitment to civics education has yielded predictably dismal results for many years now. Two-thirds of Americans cannot name all three branches of government.¹¹⁴ The Institute for Citizens and Scholars concluded that only one-third of American adults would pass the U.S. citizenship test.¹¹⁵ In May 2023, the U.S. Department of Education reported that scores on the latest eighth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress in American history and civics fell to historic lows — just 13% were proficient in U.S. history and 22% in civics in the 2022 exams¹¹⁶ (See Figure 3)

FIGURE 3: PERCENTAGE OF U.S. EIGHTH GRADERS IN 2022 WHO WERE PROFICIENT IN:



Source: National Center for Education Statistics¹¹⁷

Lost Focus on Teaching Common American Identity: the 1619 Project and Ethnic Studies

The minimal emphasis on civics education reduces the formation of a common American identity as well. The same can be said of the teaching of American history and the rise of sometimes troubling forms of ethnic studies.

The Dystopian 1619 Project

The New York Times's 1619 Project, published in magazine form in 2019 and then expanded into a book and other products, epitomizes the changing way in which American history is conceived by many on the left. It is infused with elements of Critical Race Theory and antiracist thinking, claiming, for example, that “Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country.”¹¹⁸ In 2020, the 1619 Project was being taught in all 50 states and in 4500 classrooms.¹¹⁹

To its credit, the 1619 Project includes some research that is illuminating and helps broaden an understanding of the past. But there is also

a great deal that is inaccurate and driven by a larger political agenda.

The brutal history of American slavery and segregation is horrific by any measure — and needs to be taught. There is no need to exaggerate the history. But the 1619 Project did so time and again, unleashing one egregious error after another. The project was widely debunked by mainstream historians and by numerous critics.¹²⁰ Many on the right called out the exaggerations, but so did liberal outlets such as the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* itself. Four mistakes in particular stand out.

First, the original magazine article claimed 1619 rather than 1776 represented America's "true founding."¹²¹ The author, Nikole Hannah-Jones, did not say 1619 was "an additional founding," date, as some have persuasively argued that Reconstruction represents; it was the "true" founding. Slavery, rather than the Declaration of Independence, was claimed to be at the very center of the American story, because 1619 provided "the seed of so much of what has made us unique."

What was the logic? Was it because the U.S. invented a system of chattel slavery? No. The *New York Times Book Review's* analysis of the 1619 Project, by Adam Hochschild, noted that the book could leave readers "with the impression that the heritage of slavery is uniquely American. It is not...From ancient Egypt to czarist Russia, from sub-Saharan Africa to the Aztecs, forms of slavery have blighted nearly every continent."¹²² The displacement of 1776 with 1619 as the "true founding" was also astonishing given that the Declaration of Independence, issued in a world ruled by kings and queens, was such a pivot point in world history.¹²³

Second, to diminish the miracle of 1776, the 1619 Project falsely claimed that the preservation of slavery was a primary impetus for declaring independence from England. Mainstream historians denounced this fallacy. Historian Leslie Harris, who helped fact check the 1619 article, pointed out the error to the *New York Times* in advance but was ignored.¹²⁴

Third, the *New York Times's* 1619 Project felt the need to falsely claim that Black people were "for the most part...alone" in their fight for civil rights. This error neatly erased the reality that white people allied with Black people in the abolition movement, fought for the Union in the Civil War that liberated enslaved people, and played an important role in the Civil Rights movement.¹²⁵

Fourth, the 1619 essay concluded by saying that Black people who descended from slavery are "the most American of all."¹²⁶ The essay did not make the entirely justified claim that Black Americans, by fighting for all Americans to live up to American ideals, contributed enormously to making America a better country, as they surely have. Instead, it felt the need to rank Black people as "the most American." Saying some are more American than others is, of course, the language of the right-wing. Imagine how a young Hispanic or Asian American child would react to reading that they are less American than Black Americans. It was history's version of the academically fashionable term "BIPOC," now also adopted by many in corporate America, that ranks minorities, with Black people first, Indigenous people second, and Asian and Hispanic last in the queue, lumped together as people of color.

Why make all these errors and false claims? Carlos Lozada (now a *New York Times* columnist) noted in his *Washington Post* review of the book

version of the 1619 Project that the author had a very clear political goal: cash reparations for Black people. Lozado wrote: “The *New York Times*’s 1619 Project is now enlisted in the service of a policy agenda and a political worldview.” He quoted author Nikole Hannah-Jones’s concluding chapter. “It is one thing to say you do not support reparations because you did not know the history, that you did not understand how things done long ago helped create the conditions in which millions of Black Americans live today,” she wrote. “But you now have reached the end of the book, and nationalized amnesia can no longer provide the excuse.”¹²⁷

When all these errors and criticisms came to light, the *New York Times* did not apologize and make corrections, but instead offered what it called a “clarification” of the story. How did the highest reaches of the culture respond? Remarkably, the 1619 Project received the Pulitzer Prize. To this day, the *New York Times Book Review* includes weekly ads for 1619 literature. The Chicago Public Schools adopted the 1619 Project analysis as part of its required curriculum.

The Misleading Red State Mythologies

If the 1619 Project was deeply flawed, the Trump Administration’s response — the 1776 Report — was actually worse. Indeed, if the *New York Times* editors had paid conservatives to come up with an absurd version of the American story in order to make the 1619 Project look good by comparison, they would likely have produced something very much like what the Trump administration did.

The 1619 Project, for all its flaws, included some interesting new research and ways of approaching historical issues. The 1776 Project offers no such thing, only a blatant political

agenda: to elevate ideologically conservative thinking. While the document properly demonstrated why 1776 is America’s true founding, it also commits monumental errors.

Consider its treatment of America’s “Progressive” era. The Progressives of the late 19th century and early 20th century strengthened American democracy in innumerable ways. They fought for the right of women to vote, and the direct election of U.S. senators (rather than election by state legislatures), thereby broadening the franchise. They fought for campaign finance laws and civil service protections to clean up government and reduce systems of crony capitalism and political patronage. Observers since Aristotle have recognized that having a broad middle class strengthens democracy, and Progressivism did just that, enacting worker compensation, minimum wage, and child labor laws. Progressives also reduced the danger that concentrations of wealth can lead to unhealthy concentrations of political power by establishing anti-trust laws and the federal income tax and estate tax. In short, the Progressive movement was one of history’s great drivers of American democracy. Astonishingly, the 1776 Project turns that history upside down and lists early 20th-century “Progressivism” as a *challenge* to American principles on par with such genuine threats as slavery, fascism, and communism.¹²⁸

Princeton historian Sean Wilentz, who was critical of the 1619 Project for its inaccuracies, said the 1776 report “reduces history to hero worship. It’s the flip side of those polemics, presented as history, that charge the nation was founded as a slavocracy, and that slavery and white supremacy are the essential themes of American history. It’s basically a political document, not history.”¹²⁹ Fortunately, the “1776

Project” curriculum appears to be taught in few schools. In 2022, the curriculum had been adopted by only “several dozen” schools.¹³⁰

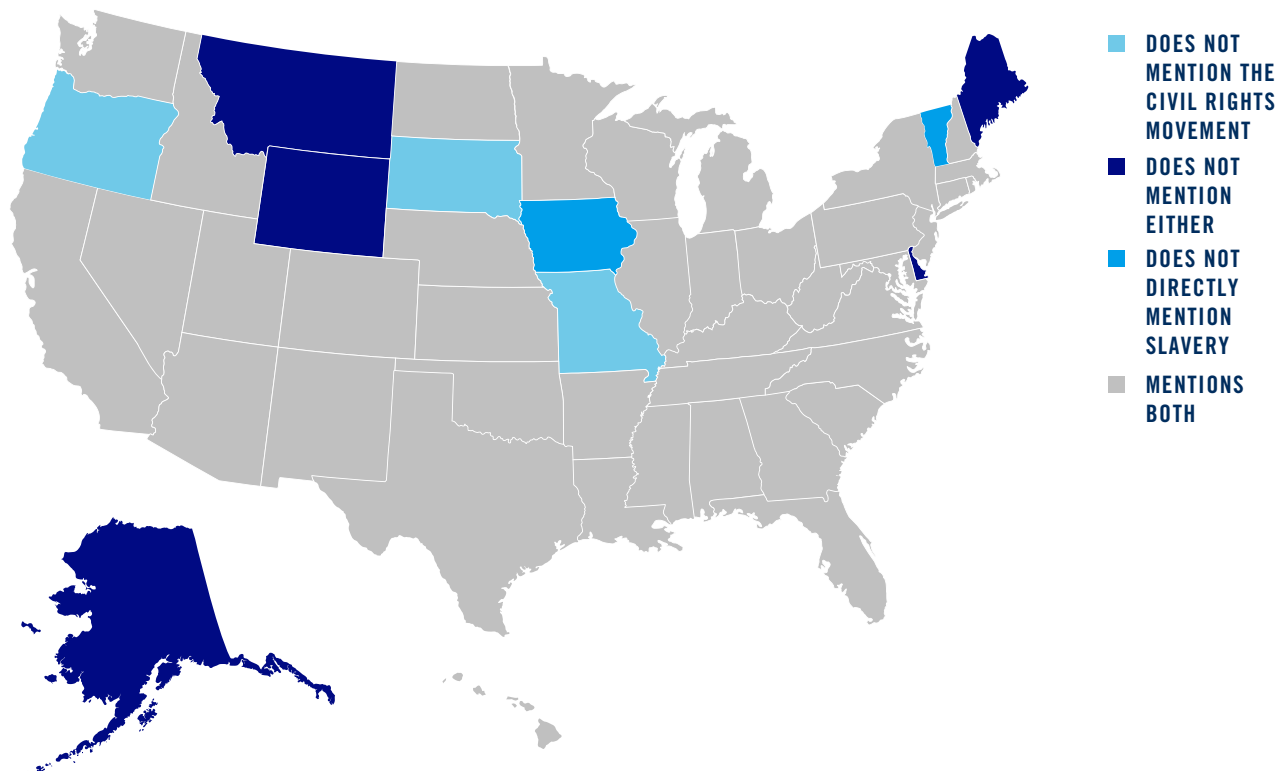
However, while the adoption of the Trump curriculum is not widespread, a right-wing tilt in American history standards in some states continues to hold sway. A 2020 CBS News investigation found that seven states do not directly mention slavery in state standards, and eight states do not mention the civil rights movement.¹³¹ (See Figure 4). These flawed efforts, just as surely as the 1619 Project, fail to give students a full and accurate accounting of American history that is necessary for the healthy formation of American identity.

The Explosion of Race-Essentialist Ethnic Studies

In recent decades, American schools and colleges have seen a skyrocketing in the number of ethnic studies courses offered. If well designed, these classes can have a salutary effect on students, but if poorly conceived, they can undermine a common American identity.

Some 21 states have passed laws requiring instruction in ethnic studies.¹³³ By 2025, all California high schools must teach ethnic studies, and by 2030, students must take ethnic studies in order to graduate.¹³⁴ Ethnic studies classes can play an important role in teaching students of all backgrounds about the neglected contributions of the various ethnic

FIGURE 4: U.S. STATE SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS



Source: CBS News¹³²

communities that are so important to American history. Some of these programs, however, present twisted realities. The distortions are sometimes an outgrowth of CRT's pessimism about the perpetual state of racism. The theory is that if racism is permanent, one can't hope for much of white people, so it is better to arm oneself with power and identity. In Montgomery County, Maryland, for example, policymakers have proposed a new social studies curriculum, which "strengthens students' sense of racial, ethnic and tribal identities," a role usually taken on by families, after-school clubs, and religious institutions, as opposed to public schools.¹³⁵

Going back to the early 1990s, liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. warned in his book *The Disuniting of America*, that some ethnic studies classes were engaging in false histories in order to boost the self-esteem of minority students.¹³⁶ Today, some classes even promote antisemitic ideas. In Menlo-Atherton High School in Silicon Valley, for example, an ethnic studies teacher ludicrously claimed that the United Nations considered the creation of Israel illegal. Another lesson slide used an antisemitic trope of a hand guiding a puppet.¹³⁷

Too often, these courses were not balanced with a curriculum to promote a common American identity. Robert Pondiscio reviewed the mission statements of the nation's 100 largest school districts and found the words "patriotic," "patriotism," "America" and "American" didn't appear in any of them.¹³⁸ It is telling that as the teaching of American identity has declined, so have levels of American patriotism. In 2023, only 39% of those polled said they were extremely proud to be American, down from 70% in 2003, when the 9/11 attacks were relatively fresh in mind.¹³⁹

GROWING PRIVATIZATION AND FURTHER BALKANIZATION

There is another substantial risk associated with distorted history, like the 1619 Project, and the rise of divisive types of ethnic studies classes: they inadvertently help to undermine the entire enterprise of public education and can pave the way to privatization.

Albert Shanker recognized that support for public schools hinged on their ability to reflect broadly held American values. "Americans have always seen public schools as places where children from various groups would learn to live together and value each other and where they would be acquainted with the common civic culture," Shanker said. "If public schools become places where children learn that, fundamentally, they are not American, there will be no reason for taxpayers to continue supporting them. And there will be little to hold society together."¹⁴⁰ Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo captured the conservative worldview when he said, "If our kids don't grow up understanding America is an exceptional nation, we're done. If they think it's an oppressor class and an oppressed class, if they think the 1619 Project [is right], and we were founded on a racist idea — if those are the things people entered the seventh grade deeply embedded in their understanding of America, it's difficult to understand how Xi Jinping's claim that America is in decline won't prove true."¹⁴¹

Conservatives have, in recent years, used this argument to make remarkable inroads in dismantling public education. Support for public schools is eroding at an unprecedented rate — and education's culture wars appear to be a big part of the explanation. Student enrollment in public schools is down.¹⁴² School

privatization programs are on a tear. In March 2023, one conservative observer noted that the right had more success with these efforts “in the past three months than over the past three decades.”¹⁴³

Critics of public schools, long advocates of private school vouchers, have switched to “education savings accounts” as the new mechanism for funneling public funds to private education. In 2023, universal ESA programs were adopted in states such as Florida, Iowa, Arkansas, and Utah.¹⁴⁴ As of March 2023, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) had identified 72 voucher and tax credit programs that exist in 33 states.¹⁴⁵

Evidence shows that recent success with privatization efforts are driven by the perception that schools are feeding left-wing ideology to students. The right used to suggest that vouchers would improve student test scores (always a dubious empirical claim), but today their leading argument is that public schools are unrepresentative of mainstream American culture and are, in some cases, exaggerating America’s ills to the point of caricature.¹⁴⁶

The real danger here is that privatization won’t restore American values but rather undercut democracy further by reducing social mobility and increasing Balkanization. Most research finds private school vouchers are unlikely to improve social mobility.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, it is neither the role nor the purpose of private schools to foster a love of democratic values. Most private schools are religious, which means their fundamental purpose is to impart their religion’s tenets — not an appreciation for democracy.¹⁴⁸ Nor is their mission to impart a shared American identity, which is why in states like North Carolina, public funds have been used to support

very divisive practices that undercut democratic principles about treating all Americans with dignity. Public funds have gone to private schools that openly discriminate based on religion and sexual orientation. One school said it “will not admit families that belong to or express faith in non-Christian religions such as, but not limited to: Mormons (LDS Church), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims (Islam), non-Messianic Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, etc.” and “will not admit families that engage in illegal drug use, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality (LGBT) or other behaviors that Scripture defines as deviate and perverted.”¹⁴⁹

In sum, we are on a disastrous course. Some on the left are using curriculum to undermine what we have in common as Americans. And some on the right attack public schools that have been America’s primary vehicle for promoting social cohesion and democratic values. It’s critical to move forward, instead, on a third path: supporting public schools that once again teach kids what it means to be an American.

NINE WAYS TO TEACH STUDENTS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AMERICAN

If In the sections below, I sketch nine ideas on how public schools and colleges can help instill students with a meaningful and healthy American identity that embraces a reflective — rather than knee-jerk — form of patriotism.

There are two primary ways to encourage children to discover the importance of democracy: by teaching them explicitly through a curriculum in subjects such as civics, history, and literature, and by showing them implicitly, through policies such as school integration, and initiatives around civil discourse and community service. Both the implicit and explicit curricula are important, as teacher and union leader Adam

Urbanski has noted, because “you cannot teach what you do not model.”¹⁵⁰

The ideas outlined below are a summary of concepts that will be developed in much greater detail in a series of subsequent Progressive Policy Institute reports. These ideas build upon the existing work of a number of important groups that have been toiling in the fields of civics and history education for some time. These include bipartisan groups such as the Institute for Citizens and Scholars, the National Council for the Social Studies, which has created the College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework;¹⁵¹ CivXNow, founded by Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, which represents a coalition of more than 100 groups that support civics education;¹⁵² the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, which has analyzed the strength of state academic standards for civics and U.S. history;¹⁵³ and the Educating for American Democracy (EAD) initiative, which has created a powerful roadmap for American history and civics education.¹⁵⁴

RECOMMENDATION 1: DEVOTE MORE TIME, RESOURCES AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR LEARNING AMERICA’S CIVIC INHERITANCE AND SHARED HISTORY

Children automatically love their parents but don’t automatically love their country.¹⁵⁵ Each generation must be taught the genius of our civic inheritance, and the struggles, as well as the triumphs, in living up to the lofty ideals. This will require devoting more time and resources to teaching civics and American history, and adopting accountability measures to ensure students are learning what they need to.

To begin with, students need more than one semester of civics in high school, and the federal

government needs to commit to closing the gap between the support it provides for civics and STEM.

Critically, students and teachers must know that learning the material “counts.” High schools should require passage of civics exams as a graduation requirement. And colleges should adopt their own, more rigorous exams. In Indiana, for example, former Governor Mitch Daniels instituted a requirement at Purdue University, a public institution, that all students pass a college-level civics exam in order to graduate.¹⁵⁶ In those states where adding a new civics test at the K-12 or collegiate level is politically challenging, given complaints about over-testing of students, reading tests that are already being administered could embed civic content into those assessments.¹⁵⁷ Because reading comprehension is about the content of what is tested as well as decoding words, such a requirement will encourage schools to devote time and resources to civics.

This proposal builds on a move the College Board made back in 2014, when it announced that some of the readings from the redesigned SAT exam would include founding texts of the country, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the writings of James Madison and Martin Luther King Jr. Sandra Day O’Connor applauded the move, because it meant savvy test takers would study those sorts of documents in order to be prepared.¹⁵⁸

RECOMMENDATION 2. TEACH IMMIGRANT-LEVEL PATRIOTISM THROUGH COMPARATIVE CIVICS

Immigrants are famously patriotic, in part because they have first-hand experience with

living in other societies that don't always share America's commitment to individual rights.¹⁵⁹ George Orwell noted that Western apologists for Stalin "can swallow totalitarianism because they have no experience of anything except liberalism."¹⁶⁰

American students may not know that four-fifths of the world's population lack the ability to stand up to their government, as citizens in the United States can, without fear of reprisal.¹⁶¹ Students should be taught what it is like to live under different systems of government. This comparative approach will help students appreciate that the core ideas that make up the American Creed embrace a set of practices that are not just "different," but better than non-democratic systems. As the Albert Shanker Institute noted in one report, children will come to see "that democracy is the worthiest form of human governance ever conceived."¹⁶² Students will realize that there is a reason that when people seek to risk their lives to leave their countries they invariably seek out liberal democratic societies such as the United States, rather than places that fail to properly balance liberty and equality interests, such as China, Russia, or Venezuela.¹⁶³

Whereas education in a free society is normally geared toward equipping students to think intelligently for themselves, when discussing the principles of democracy, the scales tilt toward imparting the wisdom of the ages. Educating students about the values of liberal democracy is more akin to a teacher laying out a set of norms for the classroom — such as respecting one another — because democracy itself provides "a common framework for resolving our differences even as we respect them."¹⁶⁴ It may not be proper for a teacher to weigh in on topical issues such

as abortion or the appropriate level of taxation in society, but it is a different matter when teaching a set of background rules for debating those substantive issues.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

PROVIDE AN HONEST AND HOPEFUL ACCOUNT OF AMERICAN HISTORY AND WHAT MAKES AMERICA EXCEPTIONAL

American history needs to be taught accurately, to avoid the cheerleading of Donald Trump's 1776 Commission and the relentlessly and unfairly pessimistic view of the 1619 Project.

An accurate historical accounting, as the Albert Shanker Institute noted, should include the warts — slavery, the disenfranchisement of women, Black people and those without property, the Triangle Shirt Waist fire, Japanese internment, the persecution of gays, and McCarthyism, among others — but also discuss the movements to abolish slavery, to gain women's suffrage, to establish worker safety, and to promote civil rights and civil liberties. The Shanker Institute observed: "From the accounts of these transformations — and of the individuals, the organizations, the movements that fought for them — students will recognize the genius of democracy: When people are free to dissent, to criticize, to protest and publish, to join together in common cause, to hold their elected officials accountable, democracy's magnificent capacity for self-correction is manifest."¹⁶⁵

President Barack Obama brilliantly captured this balance in his 2015 speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the march from Selma to Montgomery. Obama remarked that the clash between civil rights marchers asking for the right to vote and the Alabama police who sought to

deny them, was “a contest to determine the true meaning of America,” in which the vision of “a just America...ultimately triumphed.”

The marchers were called Communists, and unpatriotic. “And yet, what could be more American than what happened in this place?” Obama asked. “What could more profoundly vindicate the idea of America than plain and humble people — unsung, the downtrodden, the dreamers not of high station, not born to wealth or privilege, not of one religious tradition but many, coming together to shape their country’s course?”

Selma, Obama said, “was not some outlier in the American experience.” He continued: “The American instinct that led these young men and women to pick up the torch and cross this bridge, that’s the same instinct that moved patriots to choose revolution over tyranny. It’s the same instinct that drew immigrants from across oceans and the Rio Grande; the same instinct that led women to reach for the ballot, workers to organize against an unjust status quo; the same instinct that led us to plant a flag at Iwo Jima and on the surface of the Moon.”¹⁶⁶

White students need to realize that through much of American history, white people often acted viciously toward Black people. But they also need to see that some white people did the right thing. As Heather C. McGhee and Victor Ray note, teachers should present history in a way that white students can ask, “Do I want to be like the hundreds of protesters in the black and white photograph, yelling at Ruby Bridges, a 6-year-old Black girl, as she tried to integrate a public school? Or do I want to be like the hundreds of white students who boarded buses for the South to register Black voters during Freedom Summer?”¹⁶⁷

RECOMMENDATION 4: COMPLETELY OVERHAUL DEI AND ETHNIC STUDIES

DEI and ethnic studies, as institutionalized, have become highly corrosive and should be completely overhauled. As they stand, these programs often call on students (or adults in employment settings) to demonize fellow Americans, attribute moral content to skin color, and undermine a common American identity. They can become especially destructive when they seek to tear down racial and ethnic groups that are disproportionately successful in certain realms, such as Asian Americans and Jewish Americans.

Of course, the broad values of diversity, genuine equal opportunity, and inclusion are ones all Americans should support. We want to tap into the talents of people of all backgrounds so they can soar. We want policies to recognize that individuals who have faced disadvantages and managed to overcome obstacles deserve special recognition. And we want to provide inclusive environments where all are made to feel welcome, whatever their background. Likewise, ethnic studies, at its best, can amplify the contributions of individuals who, because of their racial or ethnic background, saw their stories ignored by earlier generations. For these reasons, DEI and ethnic studies programs should not be completely abolished as some on the right are suggesting. But they do need to be rebuilt from the ground up.

Today, many DEI and ethnic studies suggest that individuals in those groups should be held to different standards than others. Under this worldview, members of those ethnic groups placed in the “oppressor” category can do no right and those in the “oppressed” bucket can do no wrong. DEI too often translates into lower expectations for minority students — “the bigotry

of low expectations” — and low expectations for maintaining discipline in schools.¹⁶⁸

Given new legal constraints handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court, diversity efforts in college admissions should be reformed to treat students as individuals rather than as members of racial or ethnic groups. At the same time, to recognize that the ongoing legacy of racial discrimination has made Black, Hispanic, and Native American students more economically disadvantaged, on average, individual students who have overcome economic disadvantages deserve special consideration in college admission.¹⁶⁹ Economically disadvantaged white and Asian students should also be rewarded for overcoming obstacles.

This economic approach will be less divisive than racial preferences. As civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, a close advisor to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., argued: “Any preferential approach postulated along racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual lines will only disrupt a multicultural society and lead to a backlash.” By contrast, he argued, “special treatment can be provided to those who have been exploited or denied opportunities if solutions are predicated along class lines, precisely because all religious, ethnic, and racial groups have a depressed class who would benefit.”¹⁷⁰

With respect to ethnic studies, educators need to strike a balance. As *Educating for American Democracy* asked: “How can educators teach ‘America’s Plural Yet Shared Story?’; that is to say, how are the perspectives of different groups of Americans honored while also identifying ‘a common story, the shared inheritance of all Americans?’”¹⁷¹

RECOMMENDATION 5: TEACH WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE AND EXCEPTIONAL ABOUT AMERICAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE

A big part of American identity centers around the nature of the U.S. Constitution and U.S. history, but those are not the only things that make America different, even exceptional. Identity is also associated with culture, including a country’s customs and norms. When one travels abroad, apart from language and accent, what it is about an individual’s manner or attitude that makes one immediately recognize them as American? What are the best texts from American literature that capture the culture and help inform the creation of an American identity that students of all races, creeds, and colors can appreciate as their own?

Students should be taught the literature on American Exceptionalism, from Alexis de Tocqueville and Seymour Martin Lipset to Bernard Bailyn. Modern political thinkers on the right and left point to the immigrant story of America as central to the country’s distinctiveness. Conservative Marc Thiessen argues: “The reason we can make the audacious claim that we are an ‘exceptional’ nation is because we are the first in human history not built on blood and soil but on an idea: the idea of human freedom.”¹⁷² Meanwhile, on the left, Rep. Ro Khanna (D-Calif.) made essentially the same point: “What makes America exceptional is that we are a nation not founded on blood, not founded on creed.”¹⁷³

As a nation of immigrants, the question then becomes, as de Crevecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* famously asked: “What then is the American, this new man?”¹⁷⁴ A series of contemporary writers and journalists point to different facets of the American experience as distinctive. Humorist David Sedaris turns serious

when he defines hope as a particular form of “American privilege” that Americans don’t necessarily recognize at home, but do when they travel abroad. Romanian women, he writes, may not be particularly well off, but “they never look particularly disappointed, as if they never dare get disappointed.” He says: “In America, the talk now is all about white privilege, but regardless of race, there’s American privilege as well, or at least Western privilege.” It comes down to “That spark you feel when an idea comes to you — This could work. I can actually make this happen!” It’s no guarantee of success, but there are plenty of places in the world “where nobody has it.”¹⁷⁵

George Packer points to the ethos of equality, “the first truth of our founding document, the one that leads to all the others,” which is manifested in everything from an insistence on one person one vote to the American instinct to call others by their first names, a custom unusual for citizens in many other countries.¹⁷⁶ In a similar vein, Fareed Zakaria focuses on a rebellious spirit. “The United States’ core character remains one that encourages attacks on power and hierarchy, celebrates the upstarts and cares little for tradition and established practice... Somewhere in there is the country’s secret sauce for enduring success.”¹⁷⁷

David Von Drehle marvels at America’s success in exporting its music, television, and films. What makes “America exceptional is its irresistible pop culture, which has saturated the world so completely that it seems at this point almost unremarkable.”¹⁷⁸ Students should ask: What about America makes this possible?

As part of the exploration of American identity, students should examine American literature, from Herman Melville and Mark Twain to Toni Morrison. As with American history, students

should also examine the dark side of American culture. Why do we have so many guns, such high incarceration rates, such high levels of segregation and low levels of social mobility?

In thinking about what makes America distinctive, students should engage in a thought exercise. If the United States came under military attack, what key symbols and monuments would deserve special protection in order to preserve an understanding of America? The Statue of Liberty? The National Archives housing the Constitution and Declaration of Independence? Skyscrapers as monuments to commerce? If schools are going to require ethnic studies classes, they should also devote time to ensure that students have a full appreciation of what makes America exceptional, and what holds the American people together.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

INTEGRATE PUBLIC SCHOOLS THROUGH PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE AND HOUSING POLICY

One key principle undergirding modern American democracy is that we all are deserving of an equal vote no matter our race or class or gender. Racially and economically integrated schools underline the democratic message of equality, while segregated schools can teach the opposite: that some citizens are more deserving than others. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” that “segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.”¹⁷⁹

Integrated schools can also help students forge a common American identity. Demagogues can more effectively inflame passions against those they deem as “others” — Muslims, Mexican immigrants, or African Americans — when there are large audiences who do not personally know

many members of these groups, partly because they were raised in communities and schools that were almost exclusively white and Christian. The profound lesson of the gay rights movement, for example, is that only when gay Americans openly came out as neighbors, coworkers, and classmates did efforts to demonize homosexuals lose their potency. So too, a large body of research finds that integrated schools can reduce prejudice and racism that stems from ignorance and lack of personal contact.¹⁸⁰ As Thurgood Marshall noted in one Supreme Court case, “Unless our children begin to learn together, then there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together.”¹⁸¹

Socioeconomic and racial integration can also increase social mobility, which gives hope to people who might otherwise become disillusioned and more vulnerable to unscrupulous appeals by a demagogue. Low-income students who attend economically mixed schools are between one and two years ahead of low-income students in high-poverty schools in fourth-grade math tests included in the National Assessment of Educational Progress.¹⁸² These economically integrated schools are often also racially integrated, helping foster the democratic message that students are all equally American.

To advance both social mobility and social cohesion, schools should be integrated intelligently – relying on public school choice, incentives that attract children of different backgrounds voluntarily, and through housing policy, not through compulsory busing. While the U.S. Supreme Court has declared programs that base school assignments on race as divisive and unconstitutional, 171 school districts and charter school chains now use socioeconomic status as a basis for integration. Examples range from Charlotte, North Carolina, to High Tech High

charter school in California.¹⁸³ In 2022-23, the D.C. public school system, including traditional public schools and charter schools, adopted an “Equitable Access” option that prioritized at-risk students for lotteries. Charter schools were more likely than traditional public schools to participate; 62% of schools offering equitable access were public charter schools.¹⁸⁴

Housing policy can also play an important role in promoting economic and racial integration of schools. Because 73% of students attend neighborhood public schools, efforts should be made to reduce the exclusionary zoning policies (such as bans on multifamily housing and large minimum lot size requirements) that drive economic segregation in residential and school settings. Efforts to relax zoning restrictions have drawn bipartisan support in a variety of states, where liberals concerned about exclusion and conservatives concerned about government overregulation and property rights issues have coalesced to support change.¹⁸⁵

In addition, many communities have adopted inclusionary zoning policies, which require developers to set aside a portion of new developments for low-income and working-class families of all races in exchange for a “density bonus” – the ability to recoup profits by building more housing than zoning laws normally allow. These policies can be a highly effective strategy for improving opportunity. One study found that an inclusionary zoning law boosted academic achievement of students far more than spending extra money in high-poverty schools. This, in turn, boosts social mobility, which is good for democracy.¹⁸⁶

Finding voluntary ways through housing and schooling policies to bring students of different races, nationalities, and incomes together to

learn can, in the words of Justice Stephen Breyer facilitate “the kind of cooperation among Americans of all races that is necessary to make a land of three hundred million people one Nation.”¹⁸⁷

RECOMMENDATION 7: CAPTURE THE UNIFYING POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY AND NATIONAL SERVICE

Community service programs during middle and high school, and national service programs after graduation from high school, can nurture a sense of purpose among young people, a devotion to causes larger than themselves, and serve to address pressing societal needs. They also have the potential to foster not only a sense of duty to country, but also bring those of different backgrounds together in order to foster a common American identity.

To give students a chance to know the satisfaction of contributing to the community, and learn from those with different backgrounds, the state of Maryland has, since Kathleen Kennedy Townsend was lieutenant governor, required community service of all graduates.¹⁸⁸

Maryland’s current Governor Wes Moore has extended this idea further to ramp up a Service Year Option for recent high school graduates to devote a year to paid public service.¹⁸⁹ Moore, who was elected Maryland’s first Black governor in 2022, is an Army veteran who points out that wealthy students often take a “gap year” before college in order to help them transition to adulthood. Moore’s state-funded service year opportunity opens up that chance for students of all economic backgrounds to do so. He said that in the Army, “we were all under a common bond, and it didn’t matter whether or not we went to college, or voted as Democrats or Republicans,

we had a shared mission. We had a common purpose.”¹⁹⁰

In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton created the AmeriCorps program, which sponsors a diverse group of participants to provide needed public services. Part of the hope was to bridge racial and economic divides among Corps members, the way the U.S. military has. Early on, research found that “two-thirds of all corps members serve alone at their service sites,” making the bridging function difficult.¹⁹¹ A more recent study covering the years 2016-2020, however, showed marked improvement in this arena. Typically, more than three-quarters of Corps members served on teams with others, and many expressed greater confidence in interacting with people of different races and ethnicities after their experience.¹⁹² New programs should continue to emphasize providing opportunities for interaction across lines of difference and serve as glue to help hold our society together.

RECOMMENDATION 8: TEACH K-12 AND COLLEGE STUDENTS THE ART OF CIVIL DISCOURSE: VALUING COMMUNITY WHILE ALSO WELCOMING FREE SPEECH

Throughout K-12 schooling and college, students must be taught the underlying rationale for the principles of free speech — both its importance and the parameters necessary to maintain a functioning educational community. Students should be taught that in a liberal democracy, change is best achieved by working out differences and disagreements peacefully, and that trying to exercise a “heckler’s veto” is not a form of speech but rather an attempt to prevent speech. Democracy puts faith in the collective wisdom of millions of people, and those individuals will make better decisions if they are acculturated to the idea that they learn

best when they hear all sides of an argument, and listen respectfully, and when the press is free to both report on and criticize powerful leaders. K-12 schools and colleges must not only teach but model these values by sponsoring healthy debates, in respectful arenas, where people do not try to shout one another down. They also should provide students the chance to write for independent school newspapers, where they can learn firsthand the importance of free speech and holding officials accountable.¹⁹³

Students should be taught to appreciate and follow four key free speech principles.

First, a line divides conduct from speech. Words are not “violence,” even if they are hurtful. Allowing the listener to exercise a veto over the speech of others based on their subjective feelings inhibits the robust exchange of ideas. Only when words directly incite violence, as in “Kill the Blacks” or “Kill the Zionists,” does it cross over into unprotected speech. Moreover, actual violence, as well as the destruction of property, is not protected speech, even if committed in the course of an otherwise peaceful protest.

Second, there are longstanding and appropriate restrictions on the “time, place, and manner” of speech to protect the larger educational functioning of a school or university.¹⁹⁴ Students have a right to protest peacefully but cannot disrupt teaching during class or shout down or block other students from hearing a speech. The “heckler’s veto” is not protected speech because it frustrates the exchange of ideas.

Third, there is a line between speech and harassment. If someone uses a student’s biological pronoun out of a religious belief, he or she should not be expelled, but repeated taunting and bullying a transgender student is grounds for discipline. Chanting “From the River to the

Sea” may be a horrific message (because Jews who live in Israel likely have no other place to go and the goal can only be achieved through death and violence). But the words are nevertheless protected political speech. On the other hand, cornering a Jewish student and repeatedly shouting “Globalize the Intifada” at him is not protected speech. No one has the right to harass.¹⁹⁵

Fourth, breaking rules nonviolently during political protest is a time-honored strategy of civil disobedience. But part of the bargain is that the protestor accepts the consequences, as Dr. King did. Protest that crosses over into violence is not civil disobedience.

RECOMMENDATION 9: PROVIDE FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR STATE AND LOCAL PRO-DEMOCRACY EFFORTS

What can the federal government do to advance liberal democratic norms and foster social cohesion? Nations such as France have a national curriculum, but the American public is unlikely to tolerate national standards, much less a uniform curriculum. Instead, the federal government can take three important but much less intrusive steps to support teaching students what it means to be an American.

First, the federal government can support for the development of state and local efforts to strengthen American identity. One interesting effort is the Civics Secures Democracy Act, cosponsored by Senators Chris Coons (D-Del.) and John Cornyn (R-Texas) to provide \$1 billion in civics education to states and nonprofits in the form of formula grants.

The bipartisan effort was defeated, however, by far-right conservatives who claimed it could be used to advance critical race theory.¹⁹⁶ But there

may be politically viable alternatives that place guardrails against such use of funds. A Race to the Top program, for example, could prioritize funding for states that use broadly accepted practices that will deepen American identity, such as teaching students what it is like to live in nondemocratic societies.

Second, the federal government could provide additional support for voluntary school integration efforts that provide the opportunity for families to choose to attend integrated schools. The Biden Administration, for example, has supported a modest Fostering Diverse Schools initiative that provides funding to school districts and charter schools that voluntarily take steps to integrate schools across economic and racial lines.¹⁹⁷ And the federal government has long supported funding for local magnet schools that bring children of different backgrounds together.

Third, the federal government could revisit efforts to ensure that the AmeriCorps program can further social cohesion by voluntarily giving corps members of different backgrounds the opportunity to serve together and learn from one another.

CONCLUSION: THE STAKES

The stakes for reviving American identity are enormous. We are currently on a very bad path. And the failure to change course could be catastrophic. The good news, as outlined below, is that there is broad public support for finding a better way. And if we are able to instill a healthy and reflective patriotism in our young people, the country could for years to come achieve a tremendous “patriotism dividend.”

THE FAILURE TO INSTILL AMERICAN IDENTITY COULD FEED AUTHORITARIANISM

Some on the left today are so skeptical of patriotism and embracing American identity that they see flying the American flag as signalling support for Donald Trump.¹⁹⁸ Polls show many Democrats scoff at the idea of American Greatness.¹⁹⁹ But this stance represents an enormous mistake. Because liberal democracy offers people freedom and choice, and is “agnostic about the purposes of life,” it can feel sterile and is vulnerable to authoritarians who offer a substantive vision of community.²⁰⁰ American patriotism, a belief that “the great diversity of individuals can experience a sense of a common purpose” can provide liberals with a fighting chance to respond.²⁰¹ As Stanford University’s Francis Fukuyama notes, “Liberals around the world have lost ground to populists by ignoring the broad moral appeal of national identity.”²⁰²

Duke University’s Ashley Jardina observes that the need to identify with a group — to have “a psychological, internalized sense of attachment” — is a deeply human impulse.²⁰³ A cultivated American identity around shared values is to be greatly preferred to the most likely alternative for many Americans — a white Christian nationalism that excludes by race and religion.

THE PUBLIC SUPPORTS A BETTER PATH

Fortunately, the American public broadly supports the idea that a common American identity should trump the race essentialism of the far right or far left. Most oppose right-wing racism. As political analyst Ruy Teixeira noted in 2017, research showed that “the underlying trend toward racial liberalism continues.”²⁰⁴ Just as it had been wrong to assume that after Barack Obama’s election, America had entered a “post-

racial” era, it was wrong to say that the election of Trump signaled that America was shot through with racism.

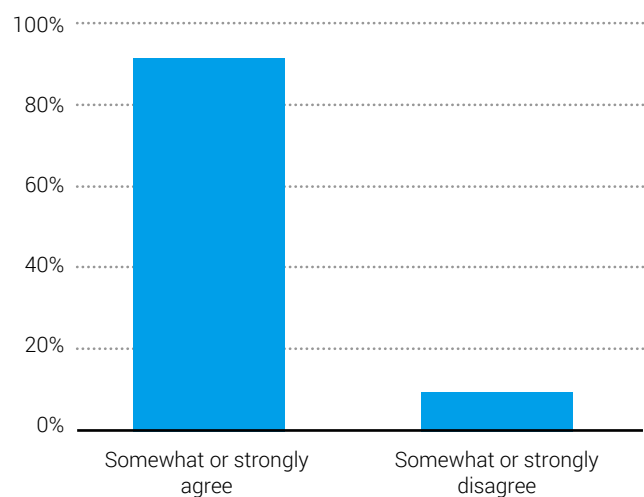
Polls show 94% of white Americans reject white nationalist views.²⁰⁵ According to Jardina, when asked what makes someone “truly American,” the vast majority of whites reject the idea that being white is important.²⁰⁶

Americans reject left wing extremism and race essentialism as well. In one poll, about five times as many white people said people were “too sensitive” in conversations about race than “not sensitive enough.”²⁰⁷ In another poll, 80% of Americans, including large proportions of communities of color, said “political correctness is a problem in our country.”²⁰⁸ Even in liberal bastions like San Francisco, average voters have begun to rebel against left-wing extremism. In a city where Joe Biden won 85% of the vote in 2020, a little more than a year later, 70% of San Francisco voters, including large numbers of Asian Americans, supported an effort to recall the school board members who had vilified Abraham Lincoln and abolished merit-based admissions to Lowell High School.²⁰⁹

When it comes to the teaching of history, there is broad agreement on rejecting extremist interpretations. A December 2022 report from More in Common “Defusing the History Wars,” finds that the disagreements between Republicans and Democrats on how to teach American history are much smaller than each side perceives. Republicans believe a majority of Democrats want schoolchildren to feel ashamed of American history, when in fact 9 of 10 Democrats want kids to see the Declaration of Independence and Constitutions in a positive light and be proud of figures like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. (See

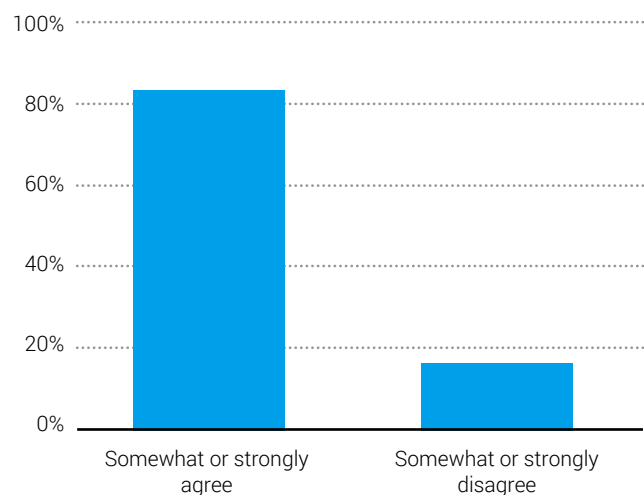
Figure 5). Meanwhile Democrats believe most Republicans want to whitewash American history and ignore slavery and segregation when in fact 8 of 10 Republicans say school children need to learn about these subjects.²¹⁰ (See Figure 6).

FIGURE 5: DO DEMOCRATS BELIEVE THAT “ALL STUDENTS SHOULD LEARN ABOUT HOW THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE AND THE CONSTITUTION ADVANCED FREEDOM AND EQUALITY”?



Source: More in Common²¹¹

FIGURE 6: DO REPUBLICANS BELIEVE THAT “IT’S IMPORTANT THAT EVERY AMERICAN STUDENT LEARN ABOUT SLAVERY, JIM CROW, AND SEGREGATION”?



Source: More in Common²¹²

THE POSSIBILITIES OF A PATRIOTISM DIVIDEND

Taking steps to strengthen American identity and patriotism can pay enormous dividends. In some countries, stoking nationalism can be dangerous, but the U.S. presents a different case. As Marc Thiessen argues, “we need not fear the rise of nationalism in America. In most countries, nationalism is based on ethnicity. But ours is a creedal nationalism — a commitment to the supremacy of the American idea.”²¹³ A stronger American identity, bound to American ideas, only strengthens liberal democracy. And instilling patriotism can also foster social mobility and common security.

Patriotism and a shared communal identity provide the emotional appeal necessary for change, as George Orwell noted.²¹⁴ That’s certainly been true in America. The labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein observes: “all of America’s greatest reform movements, from the crusade against slavery onward, have defined themselves as champions of a moral and patriotic nationalism, which they counterpoised to the parochial and selfish elites who stood athwart their vision of a virtuous society.”²¹⁵

Will American liberal democracy survive another 250 years? Anti-democratic ideas and practices are gaining currency on both the far left and the far right, often motivated by surprisingly similar ideas that center race rather than national identity. Each generation needs to be taught democratic values anew to know what truly defines them as Americans. Among the towering issues of our time, few are more important than this one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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