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CAMPAIGN FOR WORKING AMERICA

How Teaching American Identity Can Strengthen Working America

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ABOUT PPI'S CAMPAIGN FOR WORKING AMERICA

The Progressive Policy Institute launched its Campaign for Working America in February 2024. Its mission is to develop and test new themes, ideas, and policy proposals that can help Democrats and other center-left leaders make a new economic offer to working Americans, find common ground on polarizing cultural issues like immigration, crime, and education, and rally public support for defending freedom and democracy in a dangerous world. Acting as Senior Adviser to the Campaign is former U.S. Representative Tim Ryan, who represented northeast Ohio in Congress from 2003 to 2023.

Since 2016, Democrats have suffered severe erosion among non-college white voters and lately have been losing support from Black, Hispanic, and Asian working-class voters as well. Since these voters account for about three-quarters of registered voters, basic electoral math dictates that the party will have to do better with

them to restore its competitiveness outside metro centers and build lasting governing majorities. The party's history and legacy point in the same direction: Democrats do best when they champion the economic aspirations and moral outlook of ordinary working Americans.

To help them relocate this political north star and to inform our work on policy innovation, PPI has commissioned a series of YouGov polls on the beliefs and political attitudes of non-college voters, with a particular focus on the battleground states that have decided the outcome of recent national elections.

This report is the seventh in a series of Campaign Blueprints that can help Democrats reconnect with the working-class voters who have historically been the party's mainstay.

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INTRODUCTION

American liberal democracy is being threatened in a way not seen in generations, in large measure, because white identity politics on the right, and racial identity politics on the left, make fights over policy seem existential. When policy battles appear to be part of a larger war rooted in a clash of ethnic and racial identity groups, both sides are more willing to disregard long-standing liberal democratic norms.

On the right, Donald Trump tried to disrupt the peaceful transition of power after he lost the 2020 presidential election, and he talks of suspending the Constitution if he becomes president again. Left-wing activists, meanwhile, shout down speakers and create a chilling environment where people feel they can't freely speak their minds.¹

Pundits often assume that working Americans, who must prioritize kitchen-table economic concerns, don't care about these systemic issues. In fact, however, working Americans are especially affected by the breakdown in national unity and the decline in patriotism that serve as root causes of the erosion in liberal democratic beliefs.

To begin with, the decline in American patriotism directly offends the value systems of many non-college-educated voters. Polls reveal a patriotism gap between progressive elites and working Americans of all races. While 69% of working-class voters said that America is the greatest country in the world, among progressive activists, only 28% agreed.²

It is good news, therefore, that Vice President Kamala Harris has, in her campaign for president, embraced a full-throated patriotism

that puts her on the side of working Americans. At the Democratic convention, Harris advanced a powerful vision of liberal patriotism that identified the United States as “the greatest democracy in the history of the world.” She said America is an inspiration to people across the planet because in this country, “anything is possible. Nothing is out of reach.” She called for national unity, declaring, “We have so much more in common than what separates us.” She didn’t mention white privilege, and instead focused on “the privilege and pride of being an American.” She concluded that America has “the most extraordinary story ever told.”³

Some highly educated elites may believe their less elevated view of America is related to a greater degree of sophistication and knowledge of America’s sins. But in fact, racial minorities, who presumably have an acute cognizance of racial injustice, are very likely to express patriotic feelings. Some 62% of Asian Americans, 70% of Black Americans, and 76% of Hispanic Americans said they were “proud to be an American,” compared with just 34% of progressive activists.⁴

To the extent that many non-college-educated voters have immigrant roots, their patriotism may actually be based on a higher level of sophistication about the realities of the world outside the United States than educated leftists who are quick to find fault with the United States. Polls find that immigrants have more patriotic beliefs than those who were born in the United States.⁵ This patriotism may well stem from their first-hand experience with the repressive systems of government that are found in many other countries.

In addition, the decline in American patriotism and social cohesion is bad for non-college-

educated Americans because it inhibits their efforts to fight for a fairer society. Emphasizing racial division typically hurts working Americans. In fact, the oldest story of American politics is one in which conservatives use racial division to keep working Americans from cooperating across racial lines to smooth out the roughest edges of democratic capitalism.⁶ By contrast, the great advances for working-class people have come when Democratic politicians, such as Franklin Roosevelt, appealed to patriotism and national unity. As John Judis and Ruy Teixeira note in their book, *Where Have All the Democrats Gone?*, New Deal Democrats “extolled ‘the American way of life’ (a term popularized in the 1930s); they used patriotic symbols like the ‘Blue Eagle’ to promote their programs. In 1940, Roosevelt’s official campaign song was Irving Berlin’s ‘God Bless America.’”⁷ Only when Americans feel a sense of common mission is their sense of a shared responsibility for the fate of their fellow Americans activated.

Finally, non-college-educated voters are particularly hurt by a decline in American identity and patriotism because these realities are being used by right-wing advocates to undermine American public education — which has historically provided a critical path for social mobility for working Americans. In recent years, race-essentialist left-wing ideologies, such as critical race theory, which sees racism as endemic and permanent, and anti-racism, which posits that the only remedy to discrimination is more discrimination, have had an enormous impact on teacher schools of education, which then translates into what young public schoolchildren are taught. These approaches have understandably promoted a backlash. The appropriate response is to institute broadly-supported teachings that frankly acknowledge

America's history of slavery and segregation, but also teach that because of our liberal, democratic structures, redemption has been possible.

Right-wing advocates, however, have used the cultural disconnect between what most Americans believe and left-wing indoctrination by some teachers as an excuse to discard the entire enterprise of public education. In the past few years, red states have adopted an unprecedented number of school privatization initiatives. Evidence shows that recent success with privatization efforts is driven by the perception that schools are feeding left-wing ideology to students.⁸

Privatization, in turn, hurts working families in two ways. First, research shows that private school voucher programs can cause a decline in academic achievement compared with public district and public charter schools, robbing working-class students of the skills they need to advance.⁹ Second, a system of private school education, in which 80% of students will go off to be educated in particularly religious traditions, with no mandate to teach common American values, removes one of the few remaining vehicles in America for forging social cohesion and national unity.¹⁰

What is to be done? In an in-depth Progressive Policy report, I outline nine ideas for local, state, and federal policymakers can adopt to help public schools — and colleges — return to the central goal of public education.¹¹ The primary mission, encapsulated by the late president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, is to “teach children what it means to be an American,” by which he meant “a common set of values and beliefs” expressed most vividly in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.¹²

1. Policymakers should provide more time, resources, and accountability for students to learn their civic inheritance and shared American history. In May 2023, the U.S. Department of Education reported that scores on the 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 percent in civics in the 2022 exams.¹³ Today, the federal government spends 1000 times more money on STEM education than civics; it needs to place more resources on efforts to sustain American democracy.¹⁴ Critically, students and teachers must know that learning the material “counts.” Most states do not require that students pass a civics exam before graduating.¹⁵ They should.
2. Schools should spend more time teaching what it is like to live in nondemocratic countries. American students may not know that four-fifths of the world's population lack the ability to stand up to their government without fear of reprisal, as United States citizens can.¹⁶ Once they do, 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.¹⁷ Teaching these lessons could inspire the enhanced American patriotism found among immigrant groups, who know from their own lived experience the comparative blessings of American liberty.

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3. Schools should teach an honest and hopeful story of American history, which frankly recounts America's sins but also the ways in which liberal democratic norms made change possible. Most Americans support a middle path between the politically motivated and slanted histories of the far left and far right. They reject the *New York Times's* dystopian and grossly inaccurate 1619 Project and the jingoistic approach employed in some Red states that whitewashes history. 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?"¹⁸
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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, which associates certain broadly held values — such as the importance of punctuality, and working hard — as somehow being manifestations of "white

supremacy."¹⁹ They should also reject the belief expressed by anti-racist theorist Ibram X. Kendi that all racial disparities are the result of racial discrimination, and that the "only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination."²⁰ Schools and colleges should recognize that some students face more obstacles than others — a reality connected to our nation's history — but that remedies should be inclusive of economically disadvantaged people of all races. 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."²¹

5. Schools and colleges should teach what is distinctive and exceptional about America, its culture, and its literature. Students should be taught the greater thinkers on American Exceptionalism, from Alexis de Tocqueville and Seymour Martin Lipset to Bernard Bailyn. If part of what makes America different is that we are a nation founded on ideas rather than blood, students should grapple with the question that de Crevecoeur's Letters from an American Farmer famously posed "What then is the American, this new man?"²²

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? The Statue of Liberty? The National Archives housing the Constitution and Declaration of Independence? Skyscrapers as monuments to commerce?

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6. 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. In addition, voters who attended integrated schools are more likely to be inoculated against the appeals from a demagogue who demonizes groups, such as Mexican Americans or Muslim Americans, because these voters may have come to know members of those groups as classmates. Policymakers should support efforts to voluntarily integrate schools through public school choice and housing policy rather than 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.²³
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7. 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. For decades, for example, Maryland has required community service of all high school graduates.²⁴ And a new program in the state provides young people with the chance to participate in a community service year. Governor Wes Moore (D-Md.) explains that when he served 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.”²⁵ AmeriCorps was founded by President Bill Clinton with similar aspirations to instill patriotism and bridge divides. Such programs deserve strong support.

8. Schools and colleges should do a better job of teaching students the art of civil discourse so they can come to realize that the appropriate response to speakers they disagree with is not attempts to shout them down or block others from hearing their views, but tough questioning and rigorous debate. Students should learn through lessons and practice the key principles of free speech in a democratic society: That words do not constitute “violence” and that actual violence is not protected free speech; that speech should be protected, but appropriate “time, place,

and manner” rules provide an appropriate way to balance the need for expression and the functioning of an educational institution; that there is an important distinction between protected political speech and harassment, which is not protected; and that civil disobedience is an important strategy for those seeking change, but it must remain nonviolent, and the bargain provides that protesters must accept the consequences of their rule-breaking. Understanding these distinctions can allow for robust freedom of speech and thought while also preserving a sense of community.

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9. The federal government has an important role to play in promoting liberal democratic values without micromanaging what occurs in thousands of schools across the country. A race to the top program, for example, could sustain a number of promising practices put in place at the state and local levels. These could include some of the policies and initiatives outlined above. Federal policymakers can provide grants to states and localities that develop curricula that teach the warts of American history, but also the

“genius of democracy” that allows for self-correction.²⁶ They could provide grants to model programs that teach students what it is like to live in societies where freedom of expression and religion are not tolerated. They could provide funding for voluntary school integration efforts, of the type included in President Biden’s Fostering Diverse Schools Initiative.²⁷ And federal policymakers could provide financial support to expand national service programs, with a specific intent to encourage projects in which AmeriCorps members of differing racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds work side by side to solve pressing social needs.

At a time when Americans are divided, patriotism is declining, and liberal democratic norms are threatened, working Americans, more than college-educated Americans, take appropriate pride in the special contributions of their country. The extreme right and left have for too long engaged in a seesaw of bad policies that foster illiberalism. Policymakers can and should nurture and foster the expansion of programs that will strengthen social cohesion, restore social mobility, and sustain American’s grand experiment in self-governance.

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The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton's "idea mill." Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

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