

Article

Civic Thought and Leadership: A Higher Civics to Sustain American Constitutional Democracy

Paul O. Carrese 

School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287, USA; paul.carrese@asu.edu

Abstract: Multiple civic crises facing American constitutional democracy—deepening political polarization and dysfunction, loss of confidence in major institutions and professions, and collapse of confidence in higher education—can be simultaneously redressed by restoring traditional civic education in universities and colleges. A nascent national reform in public universities, establishing departments of civic thought and leadership, reintroduces a blend of classical liberal arts and American civic education. This restores a core mission of truth-seeking and Socratic debate to universities, while providing the higher civics needed to perpetuate the American legal and constitutional order through non-partisan, non-ideological preparation of thoughtful citizens and leaders with the necessary civic knowledge and civic virtues, including commitment to the rule of law and American constitutionalism.

Keywords: America; civics; civic education; constitutional democracy; higher education; leadership; liberal arts; patriotism; rule of law

1. The American Crisis: Perpetuating Our Political Institutions

As America approaches the 250th anniversary, in 2026, of its political founding in 1776, three contexts suggest the deepening of an American civic crisis. The first is the persistence of affective or negative polarization across party lines, and the persistent appeal of the demagogic former President Donald Trump along with a strongly emotive opposition to him—altogether indicating an unhealthy political order (Kleinfeld 2023). Books expressing grave concern about the health and even survival of American constitutional democracy have been bestsellers for many years, prominent among them *How Democracies Die* by two Harvard professors (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mounk 2018). Perhaps more telling is *The Bill of Obligations* by foreign policy expert Richard Haass, which sounds the alarm about America's civic disintegration, in part because the absence of a healthy constitutional order and civic culture removes the national consensus that experts like Haass, elected and non-elected, need for crafting and sustaining American national security strategies and foreign policies. Haass, who served in the presidential administrations of both parties and as president of the Council on Foreign Relations, opens his call for a greater emphasis on “habits of good citizens” by diagnosing “the crisis of our rights-based democracy” and “democratic deterioration”. For several years, he has argued that the “most urgent and significant threat to American security and stability stems not from abroad but from within, from political divisions that for only the second time in U.S. history have raised questions about the future of American democracy and even the United States itself” (Haass 2023, xi, see xi–xix, pp. 1–35).

The second context is that decades of polling on public confidence in American institutions and professions, measuring the legitimacy of the American political and civic order, register steady decline into record low rankings. Only the military has above 50% support among national institutions, but it too has suffered a decline in recent decades (Saad 2023). Measures of patriotism toward America itself also have steadily declined,



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and the drop among young people is alarming; Gallup recently registered only 18% of respondents aged 18–29 as “extremely proud” to be American, down from over 40% in 2015 among an 18–34 age cohort (Habeshian 2023). America itself is deeply underwater with our younger citizenry.

A third context, strongly related to the second, is a precipitous drop in confidence regarding higher education, which for a century has grown in prominence as an American civic institution; one consequence of the latter being that college graduates constitute the great bulk of American political and civic leaders. Gallup recently registered only 36% of respondents holding “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in American higher education, a 20% drop from just eight years ago. Most significantly, self-identified independents now join self-identified Republicans in experiencing sharply declining confidence in colleges and universities (Blake 2023).

There are several causes to any such complex, national-scale phenomena as deepening polarization and political anger, declining constitutional-civic legitimacy, and declining confidence in higher education. Further, it could be expected that political and cultural conservatives would locate an overlapping zone of causes for these phenomena in the strong ideological tilt in higher education, across the past half-century, toward what is arguably now approaching a 10:1 predominance of liberal-progressives to conservatives across all faculties in all institutions; with perhaps a skew of 15:1 or more across the humanities and social science disciplines, and in elite liberal arts colleges (Shields 2018; Abrams and Khalid 2020; Abrams 2022; Magness and Waugh 2022–2023). It is striking, therefore, that in recent years several prominent academics of the center and center-left have identified the neglect or repudiation by colleges and universities of traditional civic education as a cause of America’s polarization and declining civic health. Among the first was Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, in his 2020 book *Higher Expectations* identifying the near-disappearance of a serious civic education requirement as the top deficit or failing that 21st century American higher education needed to redress (Bok 2020).

Still more surprising, Ronald Daniels, the president of John Hopkins—America’s first research university, designed to supersede the traditional liberal arts approach to educating civic and societal leaders—argued in his 2021 book *What Universities Owe Democracy* that at least one course in liberal arts knowledge of liberal democracy, and of American constitutional principles and ideals, should be required for every college and university graduate. Daniels further argued that these institutions must provide experiences of civic virtues such as civil disagreement and reasonable pluralism about important civic and political issues (Daniels et al. 2021). Most recently, and more pointedly still, two leaders of Stanford University’s new emphasis on required liberal arts and civic education argued that by abandoning civics in recent decades, American colleges and universities became a source of the civic ignorance and angry polarization undermining America’s civic culture (Satz and Edelstein 2023). Yale political science professor Steven Smith also worried that “[c]olleges and universities were once considered the custodians of our most important civic values”, that “[f]ields like history, political science, and literature once were thought of as a preparation for a life of national service” and had considered an enlightened American patriotism “not indoctrination into an ideology, but a component of an educated mind”—but now campuses deride patriotism as jingoism and fail to provide any serious civic education (Smith 2021, pp. 7, 188–203).

These non-conservative voices are advocating a view that in fact was well known to the founders of the American constitutional order (Dyer 2024), and pointedly echoed by Abraham Lincoln in his first public address, in 1838, on “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions”. The storied response by Benjamin Franklin at the close of the 1787 Constitutional Convention to a query about what form of government the convention recommended—“A republic, if you can keep it”—expressed a concern also strongly evident in the pro-ratification essays of *The Federalist*, repeatedly noting the fragility of popular governments and constitutional orders, democratic or republican. However, after the

American constitutional order survived a civil war, and more than a century later had led a global alliance of liberal democracies to victory in the existential struggle of the Cold War, elite American opinion had apparently concluded by the 1990s that this form of government had locked in its success and perpetuation. An Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment confidence in the momentum of rationalist progress, particularly the Kantian and Hegelian concept that “History” has a direction and momentum of itself—as the accumulated, irreversible human agency of rational progress toward liberal political and economic freedom and equality—was focally embodied in Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History* (Fukuyama 1992).

America’s rocky road since the 1990s, which has seen America and the world facing the growing presence of illiberal or anti-liberal views and, in America, illiberal deeds and words on both left and right, has recently prompted some consideration that Lincoln’s warning in his 1838 address to the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois offers permanent wisdom. Two decades before a civil war erupted in 1861, Lincoln warned of increasing political violence and lawlessness, both by those opposed to and those supporting slavery, and those animated by other political controversies. He predicted a temptation to seek refuge in authoritarian, demagogic figures who promote themselves as restorers of order. In recent years, writers particularly vexed by Donald Trump have cited this element of the address. Yet elite American voices less frequently recur to the major cause Lincoln identifies for this constitutional disintegration and civic crisis: a decline in civic education and particularly civic knowledge, including a rational, constitutionally informed patriotism (Lincoln 1838). Ignorance of and lack of patriotic regard for the law and the Constitution was, he argued, the root of the lawless violence rising in America. His proposed remedy: a renewed emphasis on just such civic knowledge and informed patriotism about America, grounded in both reverence for and rational study of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and American law generally (Smith 2021, pp. 103–5, 201). Also largely overlooked today is Lincoln’s strong charge, therefore, that if the American republic fails it will not be by foreign conquest, but rather due to our own failings and consequent disintegration: “If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide”.

The charge of civic suicide, caused more by reckless carelessness than intentional self-destruction, apparently did not seem hyperbolic in an era that considered self-government under a constitutional republic a fragile achievement, and all the more so in a dangerous, unpredictable world. A long, horrific civil war confirmed the sobriety of Lincoln’s warnings and his charge. The perilous decline of American civic health in our own time, coupled with the precipitous decline in public confidence in higher education, suggests we should soberly reconsider his proposed remedy: to prioritize a rational and patriotic civic education in American constitutionalism, as well as the civic virtues required for citizens and leaders to operate our constitutional order, and thrive, in a still dangerous world. Regarding K-12 public school education in civics and history, a recent national report strove to forge a national consensus view, spanning center-left to center-right views of the history and political science components of educating American citizens and aspiring citizens, released in 2021 as *Educating for American Democracy* (EAD). Danielle Allen of Harvard and Peter Levine of Tufts were the most prominent center-left scholars leading the study; they invited me to join as a co-author, and the study involved further conservative scholars such as Allen Guelzo of Princeton, James Stoner of Louisiana State University, and education policy expert Checker Finn. The concept of civic education employed in the EAD study’s balanced effort is useful for assessing the presence, and adequacy, of civics in higher education as well. Indeed, the report calls for renewal of this approach to civics in the entire “ecosystem” of K-16 education:

A self-governing people must constantly attend to historical and civic education: to the process by which the rising generation owns the past, takes the helm, and charts a course toward the future. The United States is the longest-lived constitutional democracy in the world, approaching its 250th anniversary in 2026,

an occasion that calls for both celebration and fresh commitment to the cause of self-government for free and equal citizens in a diverse society.

Education in civics and history equips members of a democratic society to understand, appreciate, nurture, and, where necessary, improve their political system and civil society: to make our union “more perfect”, as the U.S. Constitution says. This education must be designed to enable and enhance the capacity for self-government from the level of the individual, the family, and the neighborhood to the state, the nation, and even the world.

The word “civic” denotes the virtues, assets, and activities that a free people need to govern themselves well. When civic education succeeds, all people are prepared and motivated to participate effectively in civic life. They acquire and share the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for effective participation ([Educating for American Democracy 2021](#), p. 9).

Leaders in American higher education should consider the non-ideological calls of leaders like Bok and Daniels, and this recent report on K-12 civics, in the wake of the recent resignation of two Ivy League college presidents and a board chair, at Harvard and University of Pennsylvania, as they consider how to respond to demands—from liberals as well as conservatives—to confront ideological imbalance in higher education and diversion from its core missions. Center and center-left voices, including Penn professor Jonathan Zimmerman, have recently criticized the abuses and failings predictably generated by an academic monoculture in which faculty and leaders fall into left-progressive groupthink rather than endeavor to vet their scholarship, judgments, and policies via rigorous argumentation across diverse views ([Barro 2024](#); [Zimmerman 2024](#)). Zimmerman, an historian of American education, had earlier called for restored focus on educating citizens—because our “college and universities were founded to ready people for the tasks of collective self-government: reason, deliberation, and tolerance. If you haven’t noticed, those skills are in short supply right now” ([Zimmerman 2023](#)). The dean of a new college on civic thought and leadership, at the University of Texas Austin—a rare conservative leader at a Public Ivy—recently entered this debate by arguing that efforts to re-prioritize a higher civics in American universities can provide both a worthy education for students and restore public trust in higher education ([Dyer 2024](#)).

In fact, this call from a Texas higher education leader is part of a nascent national reform movement in American higher education to establish new departments or colleges of civic thought and leadership at public universities. It has gained sufficient presence to warrant deeper consideration in itself. A broader set of stakeholders in higher education should consider its prospects for simultaneously redressing America’s civic crisis and the widespread perception of failings in universities and colleges. It is noteworthy that in recent years some private institutions, most notably Stanford University and Johns Hopkins, have moved to establish a civic or democracy education requirement for all undergraduates. This reflects a restoration of the traditional liberal arts spirit in these research universities, and to some extent the spirit of the Lyceum movement in the 19th century, the occasion for Lincoln’s prophetic warning—a movement, to use Tocquevillian terms, to form an association in civil society dedicated to the self-improvement of Americans as self-governing citizens. The Stanford Civics Initiative recently developed a course on “Citizenship in the 21st Century” which university faculty and leaders have approved as a required course for all Stanford undergraduates ([Stanford Civics Initiative n.d.](#)). The SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins has established a minor in Civic Life as an option for students, and is leading the effort—as advocated by President Daniels—to establish a democracy education requirement for all Hopkins students ([SNF Agora Institute n.d.](#)). It is nonetheless significant that in public universities a more ambitious effort is developing: the establishment of new departments and colleges devoted to the study of civic thought and leadership as an American civics appropriate to higher education. Private as well as public institutions might consider the particular emphasis this reform movement places

on restoring American civic knowledge, along with intellectual diversity and Socratic heterodoxy, in the 21st century American university.

2. Restoring a Higher Civics: Civic Knowledge and Virtue over Civic Engagement

In 2016, Arizona established the first department of civic thought and leadership at a public university. I served as founding director of the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership (SCETL n.d.) at Arizona State University, and after its first half-decade, recounted its origin story and the three main missions we had developed: a rigorous blending of classical liberal arts education and American civic education to prepare leaders for service in the public and private sectors and civil society; public speaker programs that feature civic discourse and civil disagreement on important academic and civic topics; and support for renewal of civics and history education in K-12 schools (Carrese 2023). This reform, of a funded mandate by a state government to prioritize a higher civic education, has now spread to a total of thirteen public universities in eight states. As more recently argued by Justin Dyer, the UT Austin dean, along with other scholars supporting this reform, there are particularly strong grounds to restore the civic mission of public universities governed and funded by state governments (Storey and Storey 2023). Restoration of the traditional civic mission of public universities—to provide a blend of liberal arts and American civic education to future leaders—offers even to left-leaning administrators and trustees, amid the legitimacy crisis facing higher education, a path toward meeting their enlightened self-interest. Scholars Benjamin and Jenna Storey, in both academic and more public writings, further suggest that private universities and colleges should consider this practical, already proven, model of reform that aims to recover a core academic mission, restore intellectual diversity, and restore public trust both by meeting a civic need and rebalancing higher education toward intellectual pluralism and heterodoxy (Storey and Storey 2024).

These scholars argue that, for the past half-century and more in American higher education, faculty as well as administrators and trustees have either forgotten or deliberately neglected the fact that phrasing about civic education is widespread across the charters and mottoes of our public universities. The 1789 charter of America's first public university, in North Carolina (established at Chapel Hill), included education in "social duties" as a main aim (North Carolina General Assembly 1789). The University of Virginia, founded in part by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, is better known for such a civic mission in its original charter. This model subsequently spread across the American states, and across the decades of the 19th and 20th centuries, as new universities were established. As the Storeys note, "The mottoes of many of our colleges and universities reflect this view, such as the University of North Carolina's Light and Liberty, Ohio State's Education for Citizenship, and the University of Texas's Education Is the Guardian Genius of Democracy" (Storey and Storey 2023, p. 2). Ohio State was founded in 1870, UT Austin in 1883, indicating that for a century after the American founding and the founding of North Carolina as the first public university, this blend of liberal arts and civics held sway.

Yet Johns Hopkins was founded in 1876 as a private research university, partly with the aim to supplant this traditional mission of liberal arts and civic education in both public and private institutions. As Daniels recently documented in *What Universities Owe Democracy*, this new model has succeeded in supplanting the older approach, but with unintended consequences. Daniels and his Hopkins co-authors argue that the new model of research university imported from Germany did not intend to undercut the provision of civic education altogether, but to offer it in a new mode, through emphasis on knowledge of the new disciplines and new dimensions of modern scientific, technological, and economic affairs increasingly dominant in modern industrial societies. Unintended or not, this and other progressive, secularizing changes in American political culture across the past 150 years have chipped away at the traditional civic mission of public and private higher education. As Jon Shields and Joshua Dunn documented in their study of the declining presence of conservatives in higher education, political science and several other

disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have aggressively or quietly repudiated this traditional blend of liberal arts and civic education in recent decades (Shields and Dunn 2016). The new view in these fields, about their own disciplines as well as general education requirements, held that civics was not a real academic field, and was merely a subject for K–12 schools. Further, universities and colleges replaced civics with an emphasis on civic engagement. Some scholars, such as Peter Levine, argue for a balanced conception of civic engagement that includes civic knowledge of the American constitutional order and its political development and Levine even invokes civic virtues and patriotism along with the more typical educational terminology of skills, habits, and attitudes (Levine 2007). Most advocates of civic engagement, however, ignore or eschew these more traditional elements in their emphasis on democratic engagement and progressive activism (A Crucible Moment 2011; College Civic Learning n.d.). This politicized, ideological mode of civic engagement in universities, colleges, and scholarship eventually came to dominate what little space remained for civics and history education in K–12 schools.

Higher education leaders should now work to restore prioritized space for higher education's core academic missions of pursuing knowledge and truth, debating contested ideas in properly academic ways, and teaching the next generation of civic, economic, intellectual, and social leaders for American constitutional democracy. New national organizations like Heterodox Academy have argued in a non-ideological and trans-partisan spirit about the suppression of these traditional missions and ideas, and the exclusion of important debates and viewpoints (Heterodox Academy n.d.). The recent exposure of ideological orthodoxy at several Ivy League and other elite campuses, including in the Congressional testimony of the university presidents, indicates that this strong leftward shift is seen by a broad public as violating a public trust, given that both public and private institutions proclaim they educate leaders for America, and receive enormous federal funding and societal status in return.

Arizona leaders discerned these problems in 2016, and took a constructive step to restore at a public university the kind of civic education once central to all American colleges and universities. The legislature and governor, as ultimate custodians of public education in the state, mandated the establishment at Arizona State University (ASU) of a separate department by name—The School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership (Carrese 2023). Eight years later, a national reform movement by state legislatures and governors (in some cases state boards of regents or trustees) to mandate and fund separate departments or colleges, and some centers or programs below the department level, includes Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah (Storey and Storey 2024). These departments, colleges, and centers aim to provide the blend of classical liberal education and American civic education that had long prepared civic-minded leaders for public life, the private sector, and civil society. The public authorities in these states argue that a higher civics should at least be an option in publicly governed and funded universities.

The ASU School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership (SCETL n.d.) states its first mission as providing a rigorous interdisciplinary education—through its own faculty, courses, and degrees—in political and moral thought; American civic and constitutional thought; economic thought; and leadership and statecraft (SCETL website, see About). A second mission is to provide space for intellectual diversity and civil disagreement, both in coursework and in a public-speaker series, other speaker events, and student experiences; its main speaker series is The Civic Discourse Project. A third mission is to support the renewal of K–12 civics and history education through teacher preparation, teacher professional development workshops, and curricular materials. The departments, colleges, and centers that have adapted the SCETL model mostly undertake all three of these missions. Here it is worth noting that ASU leaders and a distinguished advisory board of scholars they formed (discussed below) prioritized the spirit of restoring Socratic debate and discourse about the school's themes rather than conceiving the new department as a space for politically conservative ideas. Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* captures

this approach to citizenship preparation for free societies and also the spirit of higher education itself; [Haidt \(2012\)](#), not accidentally, was a cofounder of Heterodox Academy. My own scholarship in political philosophy had explored the intellectual and political virtue of moderation—wariness about taking any idea to an extreme, and the need to balance or reconcile multiple important principles—as a crucial but recently neglected element of Enlightenment thought, and of the founding of American constitutionalism; so there was mutual agreement among ASU leaders and the SCETL founding director about the complex, Socratic approach to liberal education and civic education we should develop ([Carrese 2016](#)).

The Storeys and Dyer have been joined by Peter Berkowitz, Hoover Institution fellow and commentator on American higher education, in efforts to articulate the philosophy that should inform these institutes of civic thought and leadership, including their curricula and research ([Berkowitz 2024](#)). Their writings constitute a nascent public discussion about the blend of intellectual and civic virtues that study of civic thought and leadership should offer to students, and American higher education. These virtues include: civil disagreement about important academic and civic ideas; knowledge of and truth-seeking about the foundational principles and historical development of free government, particularly American constitutional democracy; practical experiences for students of service, leadership, and civic discourse; and motivation to lead and serve in American life, in whatever path a student might choose. In just a short few years the new entities established across the country indicate a prospect that the presence itself of these colleges, departments, and programs can shift the academic and civic culture on the campuses that have established them, and beyond. The SCETL idea spread to other states within just two years, and now a larger concept is developing of a new field of civic thought and leadership embodied in different-but-related kinds of academic units across higher education. Further, the early success of SCETL at ASU prompted the Arizona Board of Regents to establish a new graduation requirement for students in all of Arizona's public universities: study of American institutions, ideals, and self-government ([Alonso 2023](#)).

A shared emphasis for these advocates of a higher civics is that study of civic thought and leadership marks a restoration of space for traditional liberal education in American higher education. The Storeys argue that “[u]nlike many forms of liberal education understood as great books education”, civic thought and leadership “asks students to understand their humanity through the lens of their work as citizens”. Study of their actual political and social contexts points toward consideration of “how living up to citizenship’s inherent commitments requires fundamental inquiry into perennial human questions”. So designed, a higher civics is “a kind of liberal education, aligned with Marcus Tullius Cicero’s elucidation of the *artes liberales*—arts that enable one to live as a free person, capable of engaging with others in self-government” ([Storey and Storey 2023](#), p. 6). For Dyer, civics is “a central part of a liberal education in its original sense: the education befitting a free person. It rests on open inquiry, reasoned debate, and freedom of thought and speech, all in the pursuit of truth”. American civics is “anchored in the study of Western civilization and American constitutionalism, and it fosters a patriotism that is spirited, thoughtful, and open to critical self-reflection” ([Dyer 2024](#)). For Berkowitz, the new departments, colleges, and centers of civic thought and leadership “must accord with the governing aim of liberal education, which is to cultivate citizens who understand the principles that undergird, and who can contribute to the maintenance of, free and democratic political institutions” ([Berkowitz 2024](#)). These scholars agree that a higher American civics draws on a range of academic disciplines, from political science, history, economics, and law to philosophy, literature, and classics, but is not dominated by any one, and this blending and balancing aims at a sum greater than the parts. Its fundamental orientation toward preparing American citizens to understand, operate, and lead in a constitutional and civic order grounded in a philosophy of natural rights means the restoration within these disciplines of space for more traditional ideas. All of them have shifted strongly leftward in the past half-century

and are predominantly skeptical of the constellation of ideas informing America's natural rights constitutionalism and democratic republic.

Here a distinction must be kept in mind between the political versus the intellectual modalities of the terms conservative and traditional. Some faculty at the thirteen public universities where civic thought and leadership units are established have protested that these are political projects by Republican politicians; and other voices have joined this condemnation. In this view, the new entities are not just conservative but "right-wing", and constitute a political attack on academic freedom and the institutional integrity of higher education (Saul 2018; Pettit 2023; Amesbury and O'Donnell 2023). As to the politics, it is noteworthy that the Institute of American Civics, established at University of Tennessee Knoxville in 2022, earned strong bipartisan support in the legislature. SCETL at Arizona State University in more recent years has earned renewed annual funding with votes from Democratic legislators and, in 2023, support from a Democratic governor. However, the deeper misunderstanding lies in the view that an intervention by a state's ultimate governing authorities to restore a traditional civic mission to public universities, both to meet a current civic need and redress educational deficits and imbalance, is by definition a partisan political intrusion. As noted, the independent affirmation in recent years of this traditional approach to a higher civics by prominent scholars, academic leaders, and public intellectuals from the center and center-left, including Bok, Daniels, Smith, Haas, and the *Educating for American Democracy* report, demonstrates that these recent reforms are not *per se* ideological or partisan. Even a progressive institution like the American Bar Association has recognized, amid our current civic disintegration, the need for democratic citizens to rise above minimum civic responsibility toward the higher capacities marked by the seemingly conservative terms "civic virtues" and "civic duties" if America is to restore its civic health (Callaway 2018). It is not only the Storeys or Dyer who invoke education in a kind of patriotism appropriate to America as a political order founded on ideas and individual natural rights. The Storeys cite Alexis de Tocqueville's endorsement of the "reflective patriotism" he observed in Americans when visiting the New World—blending gratitude for their country and its principles with insistence upon argument and questioning, pointed toward both government and their fellow citizens (Storey and Storey 2023; also Carrese 2023). The *Educating for American Democracy* report, in its non-partisan and national consensus effort, invokes "civic virtues" to include civil disagreement across political and philosophical views; civic friendship among Americans regardless of partisan and political differences; and "reflective patriotism" both in classrooms and beyond. The report defines such patriotism as "appreciation of the ideals of our political order, candid reckoning with the country's failures to live up to those ideals, motivation to take responsibility for self-government, and deliberative skill to debate the challenges that face us in the present and future" (*Educating for American Democracy* 2021, p. 12). The report concludes on this very note: "Passing on a love and understanding of American constitutional democracy to future generations is an urgent civic necessity. We are all responsible for cultivating in ourselves and the young the reflective patriotism needed to navigate the dangerous shoals we now face as we chart a course between cynicism and nostalgia" (EAD Report 22).

Interestingly, Berkowitz warns as a conservative that civic thought and leadership should tread carefully regarding the intellectual versus narrowly political implication of any reference to the field as "conservative". In response to the Storeys arguing in an opinion essay that "conservatives" should view the rise of these departments, colleges, and centers in just the way "the left" had developed new disciplines and fields in recent decades to include women's studies and African-American studies, Berkowitz counsels that "conservatives should reject the left's politicization of teaching and learning". They should not conceive of civic thought and leadership as conservative "in the narrow partisan sense of furthering a right-wing political agenda". Rather:

Civic thought programs should be conservative in the larger sense—devoted to preserving the treasures of Western civilization and other civilizations and

transmitting them to the next generation. Such preservation and transmission, it must be emphasized, can only be accomplished by those who have learned to weigh the evidence, seek out and grasp the truth in contending opinions, and craft persuasive arguments. Conservatives should emphasize that civic thought programs are the best means in the present circumstances for restoring a traditional liberal education, one which serves the public interest by forming young men and women capable of exercising their rights effectively and preserving and improving free and democratic institutions (Berkowitz 2024).

The point is worth making explicitly, but the Storeys and Dyer articulate this same view: that civic thought and leadership is traditional or conservative in an appropriately academic sense, and is not an ideological project to indoctrinate a political orthodoxy. Dyer states that while civic thought and leadership “is not a value-free social science, neither is it partisan. If anything, it is pre-partisan”. The necessary foundation for reasonable views on current policy issues is to “acquire knowledge of the character and basis of the political institutions we have inherited and must now steward as Americans” (Dyer 2024). In their academic proposal for a field of civic thought, the Storeys argue against any orthodoxy about the civic and political questions that form one part of the inquiries: “The practical questions that animate Civic Thought can serve as common points of orientation for many branches of inquiry without subjecting the freedom of research and teaching to a hegemonic intellectual system or an ideological litmus test”. Indeed, “scholars of Civic Thought” should “emphasize prudence and persuasion in their modes of presentation”, as part of learning from great theorists and practitioners of a free civic life precisely how to forge common, consensus views amid the pluralism that characterizes a free political community. The study of such great figures can teach “how to persuade people of things those people do not wish to see, yield before the more comprehensive views others may present, and gather diverse human beings for the sake of action”. Thus the new colleges, departments, and centers should feature “[s]eminar-style classes that embody the conversational pursuit of truth” and “occasions for rhetorical presentation in which students must strive to master the logical, ethical, and emotional aspects of persuasion” (Storey and Storey 2023). If, in their briefer opinion essay, the Storeys focused on the strategy and tactics of reforming higher education—while referring readers to their fuller academic argument for the restoration of liberal arts and American civic education via a new academic field—the larger recommendation nonetheless was academic: intellectual conservatives concerned by intellectual imbalance and the lack of a higher civics should “do what scholars have always done”, namely “to create new disciplines” that redress important omissions (Storey and Storey 2024).

3. Leadership Education and the American Balance of Theory and Practice

Two further points of disagreement in this nascent academic discussion deserve further analysis, but space permits only mention of the first so as to briefly address the second. The first concerns the proposal by the Storeys that civic thought and leadership should be a new academic field or discipline; the second concerns the name of such a field, which the Storeys define as Civic Thought; Dyer defines as Civics or American Civics; but which this article, the astute reader will notice, has defined as Civic Thought and Leadership. On the first point, Berkowitz responds that these new units of civic thought and leadership should not seek to be a new field or discipline, because “conservatives should reject the left’s compartmentalization of the curriculum” via creating “new disciplines” in the social sciences and humanities that are so narrow they almost are fated to become ideological camps teaching a political orthodoxy and activism. Instead, he argues, civic thought “must be grounded in liberal education” broadly conceived, so as to draw upon “the wisdom that is gleaned from, and the toleration and humility that are developed by, study of history, languages, literature, the principles of politics and economics, and the leading opinions about ethics and faith”—and then scholars and students should apply such broad, complex learning to contemporary issues. A further discussion might reply to Berkowitz’s worthy

concern by analyzing why the institutional realities of American higher education today require a new field of civic thought and leadership, instantiated in separate departments and colleges, precisely as a path for restoring a balanced liberal arts education on American campuses—given that the humanities and social sciences disciplines he mentions are now so strongly tilted against the Socratic, and traditionally civic, learning that civic thought and leadership provides. For example, it seems unlikely that the disciplines of political science and history will restore of themselves space for a more respectful, if still Socratic or argumentative, stance toward America, to include regularly employing the words American, or constitutional, or republic, rather than simply “democracy” when addressing civic education; nor can we expect these and related fields to restore space for a friendlier, Tocquevillian stance toward the central place of religion and faith in American civic life, both historical and contemporary. A further reply might analyze the constructive model of the new field of Science, Technology, and Society as an interdisciplinary, integrative, broad-minded remedy for a deficit recognized in higher education; one that required new degrees and departments, in a new field, including at the PhD level. However, discussion of the second disagreement, as to whether “leadership” should be included in the headline concept of this new academic field (for those persuaded this national movement is a field), is a better complement with the main lines of analysis offered here thus far.

A major deficit these new departments of civic thought and leadership are redressing is an intellectual imbalance in higher education against traditional conceptions of the humanities and social sciences. In the past half-century, these disciplines have narrowed the range of worthy topics and now overwhelmingly favor more recent, and more progressive, modes of inquiry and content. To take just political science and history: study of political philosophy in a more classical and historical mode, and of American constitutionalism and American political development, have shrunk as political science became at once more mathematized or narrowly analytical and more post-modernist, while study of political, diplomatic, and military history and of Western civilization have shrunk as history became more progressive and post-modernist. The space for the study of America shifted toward the quantitative and empirical at one extreme, or more post-modernist and critical at the other, with a focus on Western imperialism, colonialism, slavery, and the fight for civil rights. Thus, a more particular benchmark of the intellectual shift and new orthodoxy, directly connected to America’s current civic disintegration, is the status of studying the American founding, our ideals and constitutionalism, and the founders and subsequent political leaders in our history who rose above leadership to statesmanship. Voices from both center-right and center-left have noted that all such approaches have declined precipitously in these disciplines in recent decades (see [Shields and Dunn 2016](#); [Mounk 2018](#); [Smith 2021](#), pp. 188–203; discussed further below). The shift in these disciplines is quite deliberate. The Storeys and Dyer in fact refer to the importance of these new departments of civic thought and leadership for preparing American leaders who can understand, appreciate, and perpetuate our constitutional order and civic culture, and they propose a broad, interdisciplinary, and non-ideological study as the best foundation for leadership in a pluralist society and complex system of government and civil society. However, the Storeys may not fully appreciate how valuable it is to keep leadership in the headline conception of this new field precisely for maintaining breadth and balance in its research and teaching; particularly a healthy balance between theory and practice. That latter balance is missing from most of the humanities and social sciences today; several (such as economics) are dominated by extremes of abstraction and dogmatic theory, but many are marked by extreme theory coupled with the opposite extreme of indoctrination in activism against Western civilization and the American political-economic order. The middle ground of a dynamic balance between theory and practice in the human sciences, each tempering and grounding the other, mostly is gone. It is no accident, regarding this recent academic transformation, that a hallmark of the American political order as founded is the moderate disposition toward a mutual balancing of theory or ideals with practice or prudential arrangements—precisely what higher education now mostly neglects or disdains.

The conception of Civic Thought proposed by the Storeys emphasizes preparing American citizens for the joint responsibility held by self-governing citizens, thus the intellectual and civic virtues of thoughtful deliberation, civil persuasion, and mutual accommodations. This approach is excellent, but incomplete for understanding America's complex constitutionalism and democratic republic, let alone for sustaining it. It overlooks the deliberate emphasis in our constitutionalism on distinct offices calling for leadership and even statesmanship (as opposed to administrative or bureaucratic positions), as well as the implicit opportunities for the distinctive role of the leading citizen apart from the fellow-deliberating citizen. For example, they rightly invoke the lessons to be learned from great civic figures who excelled in persuasion about the challenges of self-government and advocacy for justice: "The conversations of Socrates and Catherine of Siena and the speeches of Cicero and Frederick Douglass should be analyzed and imitated as models of how to seek truth in common with others" (Storey and Storey 2023, p. 8). Yet most of these figures never held high executive office, as, say, a consul or president, governor or general. Yes, Socrates was a soldier, Catherine a diplomat, Douglass a great civic leader and eventually a diplomat, and Cicero briefly was a consul and proconsul, while his predominant service was as a senator and magistrate. The study of deliberative excellence by fellow citizens, legislators, or diplomats should be balanced by study of great executives and the founders of institutions, their deeds as well as writings and speeches. From Thucydides and Plutarch, through Aquinas on kingship, on to the speeches and deeds of Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt—and arguably also the great opinions of a Chief Justice Marshall, and the essays by Hamilton in *The Federalist* on the single executive and the judiciary—such study of leadership, statesmanship, and statecraft is both enriching and a healthful complement to study of civic thought and the deliberative duties of citizenship. The senior diplomat turned professor of humanities Charles Hill (Hill 2010), in his efforts to recover the tradition of grand strategy and statecraft, argued that theory, and hoped-for ideal circumstances, must be grounded in the realities, constraints, and demands of high office with its burdens of decision-making amid inadequate information and time. Further, as America has descended into democratic self-worship, and the focus on democracy has brought a deepening descent into populism of ever more extreme degrees, it is a tonic to recall the warnings against democratic excess—and the concomitant defense of republicanism, discrete high constitutional offices, and complex constitutional forms in balance with consent of the governed—offered by great minds and statesmen, from Thucydides to Montesquieu and America's Founding Fathers. The dynamic balance between the study of civic thought and of leadership is mutually enriching and tempering and, in the spirit of genuine liberal arts education, would more effectively prevent descent into ideological orthodoxy and indoctrination toward activism. Given the call by the Storeys to prepare citizens for judging leaders and office holders, the proper prominence for the study of leadership is also necessary for understanding the capacities needed for fulfilling the duties of particular constitutional offices, to include the most exposed and demanding of them. Further, such education in leadership, statesmanship, and statecraft shapes the more ambitious souls that might seek these offices toward commitment to serve the constitutional order, and the consent of the governed, above their own desires or designs. Washington and Lincoln used to be celebrated in American civics and civic ritual in part for the character each forged to turn their immense ambition for greatness toward serving our republic.

Another recent work, in addition to Hill's *Grand Strategies*, that articulates this needed nexus between liberal arts and leadership education is Timothy Fuller's excellent collection *Leading and Leadership* which ranges from Cicero and Plutarch on statesmanship to the greatness of Washington, Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Fuller 2000). A final and pertinent consideration is that the Founding Mission Statement of the first of these new departments, the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership at ASU, proposes this dynamic balance between study of theory and practice. It was drafted in 2016 by Harvard's Harvey C. Mansfield, one of the distinguished scholars from Harvard,

Notre Dame, and Stanford that ASU leaders formed into an advisory board for launching the school. Mansfield was a good match for explaining the coherence of topics in the school's rather long name because, as a scholar of political philosophy, his books and translations have focused on philosophers who also were statesmen—Burke, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville—as well as his appreciation for America's founders, our founding political science, and (the title of one of his books) *America's Constitutional Soul*. The SCETL Founding Mission Statement opens with the need in American higher education to redress “an atmosphere of a certain conformity of opinion” and “an obvious lack of debate”. It immediately posts, however, a warning against a counter-ideological project: “the solution is not to bring in more politics and greater contention from outside, thus disturbing the peace necessary in a university for study and scholarly inquiry” (SCETL 2016). The statement then addresses the dynamic balance between the liberal arts spirit of civic thought and the particular attention to American constitutionalism and civic duties implicated by the use of both “Civic” and “Leadership” in the school's mandated name. It states the school's fundamental ambition “to introduce a new level of debate over the large questions of life that always arise”. These include the best forms of politics and government, economics, and individual life, as well as questions about the character of knowledge itself and of moral choice. After indicating that the questions are as important as the many proposed answers, the school is pledged to “approach them in two ways”. The first could be called classical liberal education: “to look beyond the time and borders of our present society to the great thinkers who have contended for the high status of teachers of humanity”. The kinds of “poets” and “philosophers” to be studied are indicated by citing “Homer, Dante and Shakespeare” then “Plato, Marx and Nietzsche”. The statement then devotes twice as many words to the second approach, which could be called civics and leadership, beginning with this paragraph:

The other way of studying the fundamental questions is to look within ourselves to the American leaders, both intellectual and political, who have inspired us. Here we turn from the human task of thinking for oneself to the civic vocation of contributing to our common life. As citizens our students face the responsibilities of the nation and the world that will be theirs when their time to lead arrives. We need to know what principles and institutions have made us Americans and whether they need to be reformed or reasserted.

The statement then turns, in its penultimate and longest paragraph, to what could be called a higher civics, with a particular emphasis on American leadership. Study of the American founding, one defined by ideals and principles, leads to consideration of the current emphasis on democracy—but framed, it seems, to question that emphasis: “Ours is the most thorough and enduring democratic society in history, and yet we debate its faults”. The School's studies should ensure that criticisms are adequately grounded: “We need to see how the ideas of the Founding Fathers were both invoked and reformed through the succession of leaders after them: by Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, Martin Luther King and Ronald Reagan—and let's not forget Mercy Warren, Abigail Adams, Edith Wharton and Betty Friedan”. The section on civics and leadership then concludes by further indicating the distinctiveness and the higher, reflective patriotism of such study: “Nor can we fail to mention the two greatest books on America—*The Federalist* and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*”. The statement's brief final paragraph begins by noting the scope and ambition of the new endeavor: “In sum, our new school looks outward to humanity and inward to America”. However, that striking summation should not displace Mansfield's striking guidance for the study of America not as a democracy but as a constitutional republic with democratic features, with great founders and leaders, as well as a great founding political science, constitutionalism, and political culture that drew the admiration of a philosopher-statesman like Tocqueville—all of this as a higher civics of civic thought and leadership. This approach is entirely heterodox amid the current social sciences and humanities fields that are indifferent or hostile to the American experiment. American ideals, constitutionalism, its founders, and

several leaders across 250 years deserve serious questioning, debate, and considerations as to needed reform, but from a premise of respectful regard. A signature element of the School's heterodoxy, Mansfield implies, is a needed appreciation for founders, leaders, and statesmen and stateswomen of both action and thought.

4. What Universities Owe America—And Themselves

The SCETL Founding Mission Statement defends a new space in American higher education for study that can improve both the theoretical, universalist inquiries about larger civic truths of self-government and the particular, civic study of our American way of life, government, and leadership by strongly integrating the two. Academia and our broader elite culture need to consider a shift toward more respectful study of American ideals and constitutionalism, both as a matter of restoring a central focus on the university's truth-seeking mission and to confront what universities owe to the American constitutional democracy that offers them so much prestige, security, and prosperity. Having noted a few academic leaders and public intellectuals who, entirely independent of the nascent movement for civic thought and leadership, have argued for similar needed reforms to American higher education amid our country's continuing civic disintegration, it is also worth noting the even earlier contribution by scholar and public intellectual Yascha Mounk. Hardly a conservative, but perhaps a beneficiary of Mansfield's heterodox presence while he was a doctoral student in Government at Harvard, Mounk has argued that one cause of America's descent into, in his phrasing, an anti-democratic populism that could elect a figure like Donald Trump is the precipitous decline of civics in American education, from schools through universities. He reports being struck by the absence, during his Harvard training, of any encouragement to use political science for teaching undergraduates to become thoughtful citizens, or for addressing concerns of the broader American citizenry (Mounk 2018, pp. 244–52). He laments the loss of any commitment in higher education to "raising citizens", to imparting civic knowledge and a sense of "civic duty". Describing a healthier American political life from the time of George Washington's call for Congress to establish a national university for elite civic education of "the future guardians of the liberties of the country" until well into the Cold War era, he laments: "Civics was an integral part of the educational system, from nurseries all across the country to the faculty lounges of the nation's leading universities. As a result, most citizens had a better understanding of the practices and a deeper commitment to the principles of liberal democracy, making them far less likely to give credence to conspiracy theories based on lies or disinformation". From Horace Mann's founding rationale for public schools in the mid-19th century as preparing intelligent citizens for "a republican form of government" to the U.S. Supreme Court's affirmation in the 1986 case *Bethel v. Fraser* that public schools "must prepare pupils for citizenship in the Republic", Mounk charts a contrast to the recent social science and humanities disciplines, and university schools of education, which emphasize the failings of America, thus they either ignore civics or "turn civics into an anti-civic enterprise". He calls for the restoration of "the mission the Founding Fathers gave to anybody who occupies the high office of citizen" to uphold our institutions and political culture, which today requires an effort "to rebuild a country in which writers aim to spread the values of liberal democracy; civics stands at the core of the curriculum; [and] teachers at all levels spare no effort to impart a deep understanding of the Constitution and its intellectual moorings to their students".

America and our system of higher education face grave deficits, but such voices from center-left to center-right in the past decade offer some hope. These could be swelled during the opportunity provided by the commemorations of America 250, now beginning to mark in 2026 the semiquincentennial anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Educators at all levels, in particular, should ask whether we are part of the problem of America's civic coarsening and decline, and whether we should question recent academic norms—predominantly skeptical of patriotism and of America, and emphasizing civic engagement over civic knowledge—to consider, instead, a higher civics more conducive

to American civic strength and health. It also is significant that two “public Ivies”, UNC Chapel Hill and UT Austin, have joined this national reform movement to establish civic thought and leadership. Further, Zimmerman is not the only Penn professor to call for restoration of civic education, truth-seeking, and healthy heterodoxy in the Ivy League. Thousands of Penn faculty and other academics have supported the recent Penn Forward plan, which includes reviving traditional liberal arts and civic education in the context of calling for a return to the university’s core truth-seeking mission (Penn Forward 2023). The recent “Faculty for Yale” statement calls for similar reforms, and its website also lists what it considers similar faculty statements and efforts at Harvard, Columbia, and University of Chicago, as well as at Penn (Faculty for Yale 2024). Mansfield recently has urged Harvard colleagues and other academics, in the wake of the Harvard president’s resignation, to take steps toward recovering the core missions of a university (Mansfield 2024), but since early 2023 he has not been so lonely in publicly articulating such reforms, after establishment of the Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard, of which he is a member. The leaders of the Ivies, and of other prestigious universities, should consider establishing departments, colleges, or centers of civic thought and leadership to make institutional space for students, faculty, alums, trustees, donors, and community members to participate in the restoration of the excellent education and research—and the cultivation of intellectual and civic virtues—that both higher education and American civic culture so deeply need.

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