laws

MDPI

Article

The Problem of Civic and Liberal Education: Legislative and Civil-Society Remedies for Our Era

Gregory A. McBrayer

Department of History & Political Science, Ashland University, Ashland, OH 44805, USA; gmcbraye@ashland.edu

Abstract: This paper addresses the current state of civic education legislation in higher education. While state-level legislation that aims to improve civics in colleges and universities in the United States is laudable, such laws run the risk of meeting students too late and so must be coupled with renewed legislative focus on civic education at the elementary and secondary level. Civic education aims to make good citizens, to cultivate students' love of their country, and this may be difficult to effect by the time students reach college. Laws mandating and forbidding certain content from being taught in history and civics classes is also considered. Further, I aim to show the deleterious effect an impoverished civic education has on liberal education, drawing, principally, on lessons from Socrates's understanding of education as we find it in the writing of Plato.

Keywords: civic education; liberal education; civics institutes; Socrates; state legislatures; state-level education policy

Citation: McBrayer, Gregory A. 2024. The Problem of Civic and Liberal Education: Legislative and Civil-Society Remedies for Our Era. *Laws* 13: 75. https://doi.org/10.3390/laws13060075

Academic Editor: Patricia Easteal

Received: 23 September 2024
Revised: 19 November 2024
Accepted: 25 November 2024
Published: 29 November 2024

1. Introduction

A few years ago, I was able to offer a course on rhetoric. The students reported that they learned a lot from the class, and I did as well. But one of the lessons that I learned is that I frequently had to teach points of grammar, because many students have had deficient educations in English grammar, and a grasp of grammar is a prerequisite for the study of rhetoric. If you do not know where a conjunction is supposed to go, for example, you can employ neither the rhetorical technique of suppressing one intentionally (asyndeton—as in the case of the Gettysburg Address: "of the people, for the people, by the people") nor the technique of proliferating conjunctions where they are grammatically unnecessary (polysyndeton—as in the case of Genesis 7: "and every living substance… both man and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the earth). Now, I should hasten to add that my own education was deficient in this regard, though I have a special place in my heart for the sole English teacher I had in high school who taught grammar, Mrs. Watson. To be honest, it was not until I began to study Greek that I began to have anything even approaching a command of English grammar—and this was after I graduated from undergraduate studies. And my case is not unique. Many students today arrive on campus with a passing understanding of basics of grammar.

In recognition of the fact that many students arrive at university with a deficient understanding of English, many institutions of higher learning have begun to develop introductory and remedial courses in English grammar and composition. On the one hand, it cannot be denied that this represents a sad state of affairs. But on the other hand, these institutions ought to be praised for not ignoring this deficiency and taking up the task that should have been carried out at secondary school, if not even before. In this case, we see colleges and universities picking up the slack. In an ideal world, all students would come to college with the requisite command of the English language to be able to turn to rhetoric.

Just as students come to college without a command of English grammar, they are increasingly arriving on college campuses lacking basic civic literacy. While this deficiency has been noted for more than a generation, the evidence shows the matter is getting worse

(Bloom 1987, pp. 29–30; Nussbaum 1997; Guttman 1987/1999, pp. 53, 105–6; Neal and Martin 2000). As a result, many scholars now rightly speak of a crisis in civic education and often look for legal remedies to the problem (Carrese 2024a; Sikkenga and Davenport 2024). In response to the crisis, colleges and universities are rightfully becoming increasingly involved in civic education, sometimes of their own volition and sometimes in compliance with mandates from state legislatures.

After all, the current decline in civics education in primary school—evidence for which has been long documented and lamented—has myriad negative effects. Fortunately, despite the deep divide in this country on countless policy questions, there is renewed bipartisan agreement among the public on the importance of civic education (iCivics 2022). And increasingly, just as colleges and universities have turned to teaching remedial English, so too do we find institutions devoted to civic education. To name just a few, there is the Civitas Institute at the University of Texas, created by the UT Board of Trustees; the Salvatori Center at Claremont McKenna College, the Kinder Institute at the University of Missouri, and the Ashbrook Center, at Ashland University, where I work. All of this work should be commended.

And there are others, as follows: the Political Theory Institute at American University, Tufts University created a major in "Civic Studies". Roosevelt Montas runs the "Freedom and Citizenship" program at Columbia University. The list could go on.

Further, and most importantly from a legal perspective, there is the new wave of civics institutes created and funded by state legislatures to be housed at prominent state public universities. As of the 2023 legislative cycle, there have been thirteen such departments, centers, or colleges created across eight states. The School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership (SCETL) at Arizona State University, the first of its kind, was founded in 2016. Others have followed, sometimes explicitly following SCETL's model (Carrese 2023). The Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education at the University of Florida (SB 266. Fla. Stat. 1004.6496) and the Institute of American Civics at the University of Tennessee (TN SB 2410. 49-9-1101) were created in 2022. The year 2023 saw the creation of the School of Civic Leadership at the University of Texas, Austin, which houses the Civitas Institute (TX SB 2030 Section 67); the Institute for Governance and Civics at Florida State University (SB 266. Fla. Stat. 1004.6499); and the School of Civic Life and Leadership at the University of North Carolina (HB 259-2023 Appropriations Act, Sec. 8.5). In the same year, the Ohio state legislature created five civic institutes, as follows: the Salmon P. Chase Center for Civics, Culture, and Society at the Ohio State University (Ohio Rev. Code § 3335.39); the Center for Civics, Culture, and Society at Miami University (Ohio Rev. Code § 3339.06), the Center for Civics, Culture, and Society at Cleveland State University (Ohio Rev. Code § 3344.07); the Institute of American Constitutional Thought and Leadership at the University of Toledo (Ohio Rev. Code § 3364.07); and the Center for Civics, Culture, and Workforce Development at Wright State University (Ohio Rev. Code § 3352.16). Two other centers have also been created by and funded by the states, including the Civic Thought and Leadership Initiative at Utah Valley University (HB 327, 53B-29-302), housed within the Center for Constitutional Studies. And in Mississippi, the state funded the Declaration of Independence Center for the Study of American Freedom at their flagship state university, the University of Mississippi (SB 3000, Section 45).

These legislatively created civics institutes are great news for advocates of civic education. However, our optimism should be tempered. For what a state legislature gives, it can also take away. The Institute for Regional Analysis and Public Policy at Morehead State University, where I worked earlier in my career, was created by the state legislature and closed later by university administration that was unsupportive of the institute's work, for example. The new legislatively mandated departments and colleges, and even several of the centers, control their own tenure lines. This fact makes it more likely that they will have a sustained effect on curricula, degrees, and research in their home universities and beyond, even if a subsequent legislature were to reduce or withdraw funding. For the most part, the institutes are being created in states with Republican-controlled legislatures (Storey

and Storey 2024). But there has been open bipartisan support for two of the institutes of civic thought and leadership, Arizona's SCETL and Tennessee's new center (Carrese 2024b). More recently, the Democratic governor of Arizona and Democrats in the legislature have supported renewal of the funding for a second state budget cycle, in 2024. Still, the newly created institutes thus run the risk of committing the same errors that state colleges and universities have been guilty of, just from the opposing political perspective. That is, they could become needlessly partisan, conservative reflections of left-leaning and progressive-dominated academic departments. It would be far better if these institutes could strive for political neutrality, or at least some approximation of balance, in order to retain their legitimacy as well as the bipartisan support many of them enjoyed in their creation. A lot will depend on the prudent leadership of the directors of these institutes.

Support for a more traditional education is not limited to the general public, state legislatures, and civically minded academics. Public intellectuals of greater renown, also, both on the left and right, recognize the importance and centrality of civic education. Intellectuals like Allan Bloom (Bloom 1987, p. 29), Benjamin Barber (Barber and Battistoni 1998; Barber 2003, pp. 233–37), Robert George (George 2006), Cornell West (Silverbrook 2017), Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1997), and Michael Sandel have all supported civic education.[1] As Mark Bauerlein approvingly notes, "Michel Foucault's syllabi were exemplary cases of classical education. There could be no 'archaeology of knowledge' (ie Foucauldian critique) until the knowledge was obtained in the old-fashioned way" (Bauerlein 2023). Similarly, Jacques Derrida recognized a classical education had to be undertaken prior to "deconstruction". Otherwise, what exactly, is one deconstructing?

As a matter of practical politics, on questions of funding and curriculum, advocates for civic education ought to look for allies wherever they can be found. Whether civic education is being promoted as a good in itself or as a body of knowledge that has to be "deconstructed", partisans of civic education ought to take whatever they can get. There are grounds for hope: in the Educating for American Democracy report issued in 2021, there is a growing national consensus on guidance for K-12 history and civic education with leadership across center-left to center-right views, e.g., from Danielle Allen of Harvard to Chester Finn of the Fordham Institute and Hoover Institution and David Bobb of the Bill of Rights Institute.[2]

Undoubtedly, in the current situation, we ought to welcome teaching civic education at the college level, but we ought also to recognize the problem it poses. Insofar as we tend to think civic and liberal education overlap or even complement one another in a liberal democratic society, we tend to be less critical than we perhaps ought to be in thinking through their relationship (Foster 2022). But we must admit there are costs. Most obviously, time spent on civic education crowds out time that could be spent on liberal education (just like time spent learning grammar crowds out higher literary purposes). But it is not simply a matter of time; civic education may even be in some tension with liberal education, even in a good and decent country like our own.

Yet despite or perhaps even because of the tension between civic education and liberal education, the former contributes to the latter. But how does civic education contribute to liberal education? Too often, we can fall into the trap of thinking that civic education is simply a body of knowledge one must know before one can embark on the journey of liberal education (hence the term "civic literacy"). One has to know a little bit of the Bible or Roman history to be able to appreciate a piece of art or to understand Shakespeare. Similarly, one has to know the history of the U.S. before one can critically evaluate it. This seems fine up to a point. But while knowing the basics of U.S. government and history

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=na-_GXHtm-I (accessed on 23 September 2024).

[2] https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/ (accessed on 23 September 2024). The report emphasizes Tocquevillean reflective patriotism, explicitly, which I discuss shortly, and it does not recommend basic civic or historical knowledge alone (although it does recommend these as the foundation for a proper civic education); indeed, the report points toward liberal education by recommending that, in grade-band appropriate ways, civics be taught through raising and discussing questions about important civic and historical knowledge.

is undoubtedly a part of civic education, it is not the whole of it and is far from being its most important. Treating civic education as a body of knowledge that we must impart misses the most important purpose of civic education, which is to produce good citizens. Civic education is meant to instill a devotion to one's country in its citizens. It is meant to foster, as Tocqueville calls it, "reflective patriotism" (Tocqueville 2000, pp. 225–26). Does this harmonize with or contribute to liberal education? If so, how?

What is usually missing from the discussion is an account of how moral and civic education prepares one *psychologically* to pursue a liberal education.[3] Civics is not just a body of knowledge one explodes or deconstructs later. A deficiency in civic education cannot be treated like a deficiency in English grammar. Rather, a proper civic and moral education helps to form attachments and shape our moral judgments. It is not enough merely to know things about our country; we have to believe that our country, even if imperfect, is, on balance, good and just. We have to have formed an attachment to justice and our country before we can engage in meaningful liberal education. We cannot pursue a liberal education without these prior moral and civic attachments. Accordingly, in our current situation, the prospects for liberal education are dim.[4]

Civic education provides not just the information requisite for a genuine liberal education, but also cultivates habits and predispositions of soul that prepare one best to pursue a liberal education. Let us simply say that civic education is that education which best equips someone to be a serious or excellent citizen. As for liberal education, let us call it an education that has as its aim "the formation of the best possible human being" (Bruell 1991, p. 75).

In order better to understand the relationship between civic and liberal education, I turn to Socrates, the "citizen-philosopher and educator par excellence" (Bruell 1991, p. 76). I focus on two passages in Plato: the curious ending of the *Apology*[5], and a short passage from the *Protagoras*.[6]

2. Socrates on the Necessity of Civic Education

At the end of Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, after Socrates has been convicted, and after he has been sentenced to death, he is allowed to speak to the jury. And his penultimate topic is the education of his own sons. Socrates implores the Athenians to pain his sons, "the very same way I pained you"—he exhorts them to become his sons' educators (*Apology of Socrates* 41e). Many commentators have noted the irony of Socrates, the gadfly of Athens, turning his sons over to be educated by the very city whose defective understanding of virtue he perpetually brought to light and who ultimately puts him to death. Even if it is somewhat ironic, Socratic irony often masks a deeper truth. In this case, Socrates intimates that the young need a solid civic education.

The fact that potential students of liberal education must have some kind of an elementary as well as civic education partly explains Socrates's usual choice of interlocutor. Socrates claims that he was always concerned with the affairs of others, going around to each citizen and privately exhorting him to care for virtue (*Apology of Socrates*, 31b. Note well that he claims to speak to citizens—those who have been formed by the city). Indeed, apart from unconventional types like rhetoricians and sophists, most of Socrates's recorded conversations are with young male citizens. On the one hand, this should be quite obvious; Socrates needs interlocutors who are at least of average intelligence and who can follow, to some degree, a conversation. But, on the other, less obvious, hand, Socrates needs his interlocutors to have formed some moral and political opinions about the world before he

[3] "Reflective patriotism" is one of three "civic virtues" the *Educating for American Democracy* report recommends as central to excellent American civics. The other two emphasized are "civic friendship" and "civil disagreement".

[4] Of course, there is also a crisis of liberal education (Schramm 2018). Our current crisis may be understood as a particular manifestation of a broader modern one. That is, while modernity offers new opportunities for liberal education, it also poses unique challenges to it (McBrayer 2023).

[5] A translated version can be found in West and West (1945).

[6] For a translated version, please see Plato (2004).

can engage in his dialectical educational efforts. He cannot work with a blank slate. That is not to say that he needs his students to have been civically educated so that he could pull the rug out from under them and turn them into cynics or vulgar conventionalists. That is the task of the sophists. Socrates seeks rather to liberate the minds of his students while fostering the retention of a healthy respect for the city. This healthy respect, let us call it, in the spirit of Tocqueville, "reflective patriotism", avoids the uncritical jingoism of the unthinking patriot, on one hand, and the contemptuous cynicism of the sophisticated intellectual, on the other.

We see the contrast between Socratic education and cynical education played out most clearly in Plato's *Protagoras*. There, a young companion of Socrates, Hippocrates, arrives early at Socrates's house. His excitement at hearing the news of a major public intellectual's arrival in Athens prompts his early hour visit. Socrates makes a very big deal out of the potential danger to which Hippocrates exposes himself, both to Hippocrates himself and to an unnamed gossipy comrade to whom he later narrates the story. Socrates expresses his concern that this public intellectual, the sophist Protagoras, may corrupt Hippocrates. "You are about to entrust your own soul", he tells Hippocrates, "to the care of a man who is, as you assert, a sophist. . . [yet] you know neither to whom you are handing over your soul, nor whether you do so to something good or bad" (312c). Socrates emphasizes the effect this teacher will have on Hippocrates's soul. Education is not merely about imparting knowledge, or filling up an empty vessel with data. Rather, education shapes the soul, or misshapes it, so students are in need of teachers who can provide the soul its proper nourishment (313d). Furthermore, Socrates sounds perhaps uncharacteristically conservative, chastising Hippocrates for failing to confer with his father and brother or any other companions before turning himself over to be educated by a sophist.

Nevertheless, Socrates agrees to go with Hippocrates to see Protagoras after a while, since it is still very early in the morning. They eventually arrive at Callias's house, where Protagoras is speaking, and they engage in a series of arguments. But I will focus on Protagoras's so-called long speech (320c8-328d2), which consists of a story (*muthos*) and an argument (*logos*). This story makes clear the damaging effects of the kind of cynical, iconoclastic education Protagoras provides, and also shows how it forecloses the path to wisdom.

Since he recognizes the explosive character of his teaching, and despite early exclamations of openness and honesty, Protagoras prefers to conceal his teaching by telling a story whose moral must be uncovered.[7] The purported purpose of Protagoras's long speech is to show that virtue is teachable (including, avowedly, civic virtue, 319a). In the mythological part of his speech, Protagoras tells the story of human origins. Let me briefly summarize it. Humans, along with all other mortal beings, were created underground by gods, who mixed together fire and earth to make them (note we are purely material beings). And then the gods put two stooges, Forethought and Afterthought (Prometheus and Epimetheus), in charge of distributing powers to each species. By the time Afterthought/Epimetheus got around to human beings, his bag of powers was empty; mankind was "naked, unshod, without bedding and weapons" (321c). As a result, Prometheus stole the arts and fire, but human beings still could not get along and the species was at risk of extinction. Out of fear that the species might die, Zeus ordered Hermes to go distribute shame and justice to all human beings, but he also set it down as a law to punish those who were unjust (so apparently not to all). The fact that we punish, avers Protagoras as he returns from his storytelling, reveals our opinion that virtue can be taught, because it would be unreasonable to punish people if they were not capable of learning it.

Protagoras then turns to his argument, the non-mythical part of his speech. Cities and parents hold virtue to be teachable, he says, and they invest enormous energy in the endeavor:

[7] This is despite the fact that he says he will not use concealments (316d-e).

> "Beginning from their earliest youth and continuing so long as they are alive, [parents] both teach and admonish them. As soon as he understands the spoken word, nurse and mother and attendant and the father himself earnestly strive to see to it that the boy will be the best possible, teaching and demonstrating, with regard to every deed and speech, that one thing is just, another unjust; and that this is noble, that shameful; and that this is pious, that impious: 'Do these things!' 'Don't do those!' And if he willingly obeys, [fine], but if not, then they straighten him out with threats and blows just as if he were warped and bent wood" (325c-d).

So, according both to his story and to his argument, we all agree that virtue is teachable. And to the extent that Protagoras, also, is a teacher of virtue, he differs "just a little" from the way parents and cities teach it (328a-b). The cynical character of this teaching is not evident at first blush. But if Protagoras differs "only a little" from parents and political communities, why must he teach virtue in private homes, and why did earlier sophists have to conceal what they taught, as he declares they did?

Just a little scratching reveals precisely what Protagoras is up to. While his myth mentions the gods and notes their role in human development, the careful listeners in his audience (or careful readers) would note the darker, more cynical lesson behind the story. The gods do not care for human beings, and we humans are alone, unprotected, and vulnerable. The gods have left us weak and defenseless, and the only way we can survive in the world is to rely on our own ingenuity and toughness (or, to use Protagoras's terms, wisdom and courage). All the other moral virtues—justice, piety, and moderation—are a sham. Our parents and our countries (cities) have beaten us into conformity, and, in the best cases, from their point of view, the beatings become internalized and develop into a sense of justice and shame.

The political and the religious education that we receive from our community is not education in any meaningful sense. Rather, the city—and our parents—seek to tame us, to instill a sense of shame and justice in us that makes us just, moderate, and pious. And the city and our parents "straighten us out" with threats and beatings (325d). They do this so that we will become tame and useful citizens; they do not have our well-being in mind. Civic, moral, and religious education are meant to trick us into forgoing our individual pursuit of our own well-being for the sake of the well-being of the community. The city is not natural or divine; rather, it rests solely on force and fraud. Protagoras aims cynically to reveal the sad but true state of affairs to his prospective students, and thus he teaches us to despise our parents and our city. And now that he has done so, he is going to teach us how we really ought to live; he is going to teach us how to get away with pursuing our own good always—unencumbered by considerations of justice, moderation, and piety.

Socrates tries to draw out that this moral and political cynicism prepares one psychologically for intellectual or philosophical cynicism. Socrates aims to protect Hippocrates and young men like him from the morally corrosive effects of Protagoras and his ilk. Knowing Hippocrates's interest in Protagoras has already been piqued, he accompanies him to visit Protagoras. And instead of simply handing Hippocrates over, Socrates converses with Protagoras and defeats him in speech. The defeat surely makes him a less attractive teacher. Apart from Protagoras's morally pernicious teaching, Protagoras's philosophy also points to an epistemological crisis, although this is only playfully alluded to in the *Protagoras*. One would need to look to the *Theaetetus* for a possible resolution of the epistemological problem posed by Protagoras.

Instead of turning to that dialogue, let me offer another example from the opening of Plato's *Republic*[8]. Here, we see a group of largely cynical youths who confess to having been talked half to death by sophists like Thrasymachus and countless others (*Republic* 358c-d). Glaucon, by his own admission, has been unrelentingly badgered into a kind of sophist-induced cynicism regarding the goodness of justice. Socrates, of course, does

[8] For a translated version, please see Plato (1987).

his best to educate these youths, but the prospects for liberally educating a cynical young person are rather dim (as I think many teachers today would perhaps reluctantly admit). Rather, the sole youth whose attention Socrates seems to capture fully, who is open to education, and who we learn later has turned to philosophy, is Polemarchus (*Phaedrus*[9] 257b). It is no accident, I would suggest, that Polemarchus bursts into the discussion about justice by jumping to the defense of his father.

The cynical, sophisticated education that extinguishes respect for family and country infects the soul; cynicism spreads like a cancer and leads youths similarly to despise not only their parents and their country, but also attempts to understand. If justice and the moral virtues are a sham; if our country, like all countries, rests on accident, fraud, and force; and if those who are supposed to love us most deeply, our parents, deceive us about moral virtue, what likelihood is there that there are genuine teachers of intellectual virtue? Cynics regarding justice become cynics regarding the truth.

We may be surprised to learn that our cynical Protagoras professes to teach *civics*![10] But in fact he teaches the young how to become powerful by showing them that justice is a sham, their country is hypocritical, and there are only power relations. We should therefore be on guard against some self-professed teachers of civics and history, for not all teachers understand that the goal of civic education is to produce good citizens. And while we can draw the obvious parallel between Protagorean education and the 1619 Project, for example, we should also recognize the danger that a Protagorean pedagogical strategy might result in a kind civics institute that I recommend *against*—one that is visibly partisan, and which might be defunded by a state legislature the moment political winds shift.

In contrast with Protagoras's version of civic education—exposing the political community to rest on force and fraud—Socrates indicates that the liberal education he pursues does not lead to moral (or intellectual) cynicism. According to him, "a noble and good man often compels himself to become the friend and praiser of someone, to love and praise him—as often happens when, for example, a man is alienated from his mother or father or fatherland or any such thing" (346a). Socratically educated human beings praise their county like they would their parents. They compel themselves to see what is good in their parents, and their countries, even after they have been liberally educated.[11]

A passage from the *Cyropaedia*, by Xenophon[12], another student of Socrates, illustrates what a liberally educated love of one's county can look like—what I called "reflective patriotism" above. There, Xenophon tells of a young Armenian prince named Tigranes who became the devoted student of a certain wise man (*Cyropaedia* III.1.14). We learn that Tigranes' father, the King, killed this wise teacher on the charge that he corrupted Tigranes by causing him to having more affection and admiration for himself than for his father (*Cyropaedia* III.1.39). The King believes that Tigranes's liberal education has destroyed his filial devotion, and, insofar as his father is the king, it has also destroyed his civic devotion. However, shortly before we learn about Tigranes and his father's execution of his teacher, the King of Armenia has just been caught trying to revolt against Media. Cyrus has just re-conquered the rebellious subject in battle, and has decided to hold an impromptu trial to decide the King's guilt and punishment. The trial reaches a quick verdict and sentence: the King is guilty of revolting and subject, by his own understanding, to death. At this point, the supposedly rebellious Tigranes, who has been watching quietly, intercedes on his father's behalf, revealing his affection for his father. He manages, by hook or by crook, to save his father's life. He convinces Cyrus to allow his father and the rest of his family to continue to live by appealing to Cyrus' advantage. Thus, even while the King may be

[9] For a translated version, please see Plato (1998).

[10] That is, he professes that he makes men good citizens (319a), the definition of civic education I have been using.

[11] According to Dustin Gish's interpretation of the *Republic*, Socrates's philosophical investigation of justice prepares the way for engaging virtuously in politics. Thus, liberal education provides the foundation for civic education (Gish 2023). This is not necessarily incompatible with my argument. Consider Alfarabi, *The Attainment of Happiness* §55 (Alfarabi 2001).

[12] For a translated version, please see Xenophon (2001).

correct in his assessment that Tigranes loves the wise man more than his father, he fails to recognize that Tigranes still loves him, too. Tigranes demonstrates his affection for his father by coming to his aid. Tigranes' father is, for all practical purposes, the regime in Armenia, insofar as a king is the regime in a monarchy. We thus see that a Socratic education does not necessarily destroy one's loyalty to one's regime or one's father. Indeed, Tigranes' Socratic education has given him greater abilities to defend his father: Tigranes clearly employs something like Socratic dialectics to save his father, and his healthy objectivity allows him to see clearly his father's flaws and thus to account for them when coming to his defense (*Cyropaedia* III.1.15). In other words, Tigranes has become a critical supporter of his political community, one whose higher allegiance is to philosophy but who nonetheless remains loyal to his father and to the political community of his birth.

3. The Current Situation

Socrates helps us to see why civic education must necessarily precede liberal education. Indeed, on this question, all of the Socratics agreed.[13] We have to take moral and political claims seriously; we have to form moral and political attachments, before those attachments can be submitted to rational inquiry, before Socratic inquiry can have any hold over our souls. Cynical youths who have formed no such attachments—souls without longings—have nothing personally or psychologically or spiritually at stake in a liberal education.

We have to take matters such as justice, love, friendship, and even our country's laws seriously before we can be irritated by Socrates's relentless questioning. Otherwise, we may just yawn and say, "whatever" (Bartlett 2003, pp. 101–2). The strong desire to seek self-knowledge is strongest in those who hold strong opinions and who have come to see and to be pained by a dim awareness that their beliefs may be false.[14]

There is a problem with our current situation. Since liberal education requires civic education as a precondition, and since many young people today lack such a formative civic education, what are we to do? The obvious answer is that we should offer civic education at the college and university level to help remedy the deficiency. And many of us are a part of such an undertaking, and many state legislatures are taking new steps in this direction as well. But, as I have already hinted, I am afraid offering civic education at the post-secondary level may be too late. Deficiencies in civic education cannot be remedied like math and grammar. "No amount of so-called higher education", one advocate of liberal education remarks, "is likely to be able to make up for what is lacking *at earlier stages*... there is an emotional bond to our country and what it stands for that must, in most cases at least, precede and accompany further education in its political principles if that education is to have its greatest impact" (Bruell 1991, p. 81).[15]

As I mentioned above, many state legislatures have nobly begun to address the deficiencies in civic education by creating new centers, departments, and institutes at public universities. These projects are sorely needed and poised to provide a salutary function within universities and within the states they serve. But these endeavors to remedy higher education need to be coupled with legislation at the state level. The new standards for "Social Studies" in Ohio, for example, requires the use of primary and secondary sources of information for high school students.[16] Getting students to read the Declaration of Independence and Constitution for themselves, instead of simply relying

[13] "In regarding such a preparation, a moral-political preparation, as a necessary preliminary to engaging in theory or philosophical science—for such is my contention, that he did regard that preparation as necessary—Aristotle was following in the footsteps of his teacher, Plato, and of the Platonic Socrates". Bruell (2006, p. 3).

[14] A caveat: perhaps those who are taught to despise their country still have a passionate attachment to justice that can be submitted to Socratic dialectics. Maybe this is still possible. However, as the Socratics aim to make clear, moral and political cynicism tend to carry over to one's expectations from a liberal education—or, in the highest case, philosophy.

[15] Emphasis mine.

[16] https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Social-Studies/Model-Curriculum-for-Social-Studies/SSMC_AmericanHistory.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US (accessed on 23 September 2024).

on textbooks to summarize them, is a good start. Other states should consider similar legislation.

As a second-order consideration, mandates are a bit of a mixed bag and by no means a panacea. On the one hand, it is hard to argue against bills, like South Carolina's "REACH Act", a law that requires all undergraduate students in South Carolina to take a class that includes studying the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, five Federalist Papers, and at least one document foundational to the African-American Struggle.[17] Similarly, Georgia Code 32-171 says, ". . .no undergraduate student in any college or university shall receive a certificate of graduation or a degree without successfully completing course work or previously passing a satisfactory examination on the history of the United States and the history of Georgia, and upon the provisions and principles of the United States Constitution and the Constitution of Georgia".[18] Surely, the state of civic education would be much improved of all undergraduate students in the U.S. have studied the documents these laws prescribe. In theory, laws like these sound like a sound idea, but as a practical matter, humans are pretty crafty when it comes to avoiding what they are told to do. Faculty may comply with the letter but not the spirit of the law. That is, a faculty member could ostensibly teach the Constitution through a Marxist lens, or through the lens of "Game Theory" or along some other behavioralist lines. Neither of these seems to meet the legislative intent. Nevertheless, many states have such requirements and maybe, on the whole, the effect is positive.

Similar efforts are underway at the elementary and secondary level. Texas, for example, has passed two controversial bills: Texas's K-12 Bill #1, "Informed American Patriotism", which prescribes certain subjects be taught, and Bill 2, which has been called the "anti-critical race bill", because it aims to push back against the 1619 project. While the outright prohibition against teaching some subjects might run afoul of free speech in some cases, it is difficult to see how the state has an interest in subsidizing an educational endeavor that is not only historically inaccurate but that also aims to produce cynical students who only see their country as a perpetuator of injustice (Bynum et al. 2019). By way of a secondary observation, at the elementary and secondary level, at least, mandates can run into potential conflict with parental rights. As Joseph Griffith argues, parents typically love and know their own children, so parental educational rights benefit children, parents, and the political community (Griffith 2024, pp. 4–5). The state, he recognizes, has general authority to set some standards for the education of the young, insofar as they are future citizens, but parents have considerable discretion in directing how their children will be educated.

At the end of the day, the state does have to legislate in matters of education, and some amount of coercion seems inevitable, some prescription of what citizens need to know to be members of the political community. All political communities educate with a view to the perpetuation of the government, as Aristotle notes:

> "One should educate with a view to each sort [of regime], for the character that is proper to each sort of regime both customarily safeguards the regime and establishes it at the beginning—the democratic character a democracy, for example. . . Further, in relation to all capacities and arts there are things with respect to which a preparatory education and habituation are required with a view to the tasks of each, so it is clear that this is so also with a view to the actions of virtue" VIII.1.1337a14 and ff.

And while we, as members of liberal democracy, may bristle at the notion of legislative mandates, of the government telling students what they must learn, we cannot help but notice the long history of support for coercion in matters of education; after all, not all forms of coercion are created equal.

[17] https://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess124_2021-2022/bills/38.htm (accessed on 23 September 2024).

[18] https://www.usg.edu/curriculum/georgia_legislative_requirements#:~:text=Georgia%20Code%2032-171%20states,examination%20in%20United%20States%20history (accessed on 23 September 2024).

But that is not how our cynical sophist, Protagoras, views the matter. As he lays it out to prospective students, at any rate, all civic and parental education is coercive and therefore bad; any compulsion in matters of education is necessarily malicious. In the supposed interest of liberating his students, he wants to unshackle them entirely, as though there were no benefit to children whatsoever from have a prescribed education. In so doing, Protagoras exhibits a lack of awareness of the extent to which the political community makes his way of life possible—just like so many academics today who do not realize their dependence, which is especially obvious at taxpayer-funded state universities but also at private schools that depend on tuition from students' parents. Protagoras fails to recognize that, especially for the young, some compulsion must be allowed and is even necessary.

To deny this would be to trust the cultivation of students' minds entirely to the uncultivated and to trust that an uncultivated mind will bear fruit. But if the mind is to be cultured, or cultivated, there must be someone cultivating of it. Otherwise, it is "as if someone would say that the cultivation of a garden may consist of the garden being littered with empty tin cans and whiskey bottles and used papers of various descriptions thrown around the garden at random" (Strauss 1989, p. 313). Gardens must be tended to. Even kindergartens.

In contrast with Protagoras, Socrates recognizes this must be the case. We see this, briefly, in his defense of parents and country in the *Protagoras*, but it is even clearer in the *Republic*. In the allegory of the cave in Book VII of the *Republic*, prisoners are put in bondage and forced to look at the shadows on the wall of the cave. They are rewarded and punished for how well or poorly they are able to make out the shadows they are compelled to behold. But the alternative, for the few who manage to escape, is not an education free from compulsion. The prisoner who is released from his bonds, ostensibly by someone who himself has been released (no mention is made of how this first philosopher manages to throw off his shackles), he must be compelled to answer once he is made to become aware, however dimly, that the shadows on the wall are not real, and he must be compelled to look at the light itself, and dragged into the light to see the things that truly are. In education, according to Plato, at any rate, the alternative is not between freedom and compulsion (mandates); rather, the alternative is between competing sources of compulsion. Some compulsion in matters of education can be salutary.

But perhaps we do not want to take Socrates or his teacher Plato's word on the matter. Plato, after all, was famously no fan of democracy, so we might be inclined not to accept his account of the necessity of compulsion in matters of education in a regime such as ours. Fortunately, Thomas Jefferson, the most powerful apostle democracy has ever had, according to Alexis de Tocqueville, also recognized that some subjects and texts simply had to be taught if the republic was to endure (Tocqueville 2000, p. 249). Jefferson supported mandated curriculum not just at the elementary level, but also for university students at public universities. He saw no tension whatsoever between democracy and state-prescribed curriculum; to the contrary, he thought the perpetuation of a democratic republic depended on citizens having received a particular kind of education. As he says in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, "In every government on earth is some trace of human weakness, so germ of corruption and degeneracy, which cunning will discover, and wickedness insensibly open, cultivate, and improve. Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories. And to render even them safe their minds must be improved to a certain degree" (Peterson 1975, p. 198). At the primary school level, citizens must be instructed in "their rights, interests and duties, as men and citizens, [these] being then the objects of education in the primary schools, whether public or private".[19]

Mandates undoubtedly have a place in education in a democratic republic. And while the matter is not central to my argument regarding the relationship between civic and

[19] Jefferson's "Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia", 4 August 1818 (Jefferson 1984, p. 459). For an excellent discussion of Jefferson on civic education, see Foster (2024).

liberal education, we should be skeptical that top-down approaches from state legislatures will be effective. Perhaps there are other ways to influence civic education. For example, perhaps states could incentivize, rather than mandate, some forms of civic education and engagement[20]. While some level of prescription is no doubt necessary, grass roots undertakings, while slower and perhaps less satisfying immediately, are equally if not more likely to be effectual. This is why Ashbrook's Teachers Programs provides continuing professional development for middle and high school teachers that focuses on content and the importance of incorporating primary texts in teachers' curricula. We tend to think that once teachers are exposed to these methods and documents, they see the superiority over textbooks and lectures. It has the added benefit of being much less partisan: we let the primary documents speak for themselves. That is, instead of reading texts through a Marxist lens, or a Game Theoretical lens, or any other "theory", we simply read the texts with teachers (and students) and have them wrestle with the texts and thinkers to see what those texts aimed to say. In the end, there really is no substitute for teachers willingly making use of primary source material in U.S. History and Civics classes. Rather than reluctantly submitting to mandates, we try to persuade teachers that there really is no rival to going directly to the original source rather than reading through the lenses of intermediaries who may or may not have agendas, biases, and blind spots.

To return to the post-secondary level, instead of looking to inculcate civic education in our students, perhaps we should seek out students who already have some level of civic education. Perhaps for these students, their education can be, "deepened by the learning appropriate to that stage. At the college level, this would include the assiduous study of the fundamental documents of American democracy as well as the writings of those who have reflected most adequately our politics and way of life. The Declaration of Independence, The Constitution, the Federalist papers, and writings of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and de Tocqueville would be included on any such list" (Bruell 1991, p. 85). Of course, I am not advocating leaving students behind who lack civic education; I am just trying to encourage us to be realistic about which students will benefit most from continued civic education and to make an honest assessment about their prospects for liberal education.

Furthermore, improved civic education at the post-secondary level can have a multiplying effect. These students will go out into local, state, and national politics. Some will become teachers. The Ashbrook Center, where I work, has a graduate program that aims to educate high school and middle school teachers of history and social studies. The program aims to reach elementary, middle school, and high school students, but it does so indirectly by educating their teachers and encouraging teachers to incorporate the study of key primary documents in their pedagogy. Ashbrook's website, Teaching American History, a resource making primary documents available free of charge to teachers and students, has millions of visitors every year.[21] For civics at the post-secondary level to be effective, it must consider secondary and tertiary effects.

While I have argued that civic education ought to aim to foster reflective patriotism, I do not mean to imply that the principles of the United States, and the founders themselves, should be exempt from criticism. Indeed, "the questioning of America is not un-American; it is part of the very core of what it means to be a patriotic American" (Pangle 1985, p. 31). Criticism should be tempered (or perhaps anchored) by a civic education that lauds our virtues and also moderates demands for justice in this world. Holding up the U.S. to an impossible standard is a recipe for cynicism. Frederick Douglass could praise Lincoln, all while recognizing his shortcomings. He could still call him a statesman, the highest honor for a politician, even in the light of Lincoln's faults. No one person meets the demands of

[20] Of course, I refer here and have been discussing mostly the curricular content of reformed and more robust civic education offerings. This is separate from the question of how to *incentivize* colleges and universities to ensure that their students receive more practical opportunities to write, assemble, and perhaps even protest on campus in a manner worthy of citizens. For a thought-provoking if controversial take on possibilities that include adjustment of tax exemptions at colleges and universities receiving federal dollars, which is also consistent with recent work by Vincent Phillip Munoz, see Morrow et al. (2024).

[21] https://teachingamericanhistory.org/ (accessed on 23 September 2024).

perfect justice, and it is unreasonable to suppose any single society could either. "When America fails tests that no civil society has met or ever will meet, morbidly self-hating and indignant cynicism about America replaces the burdensome intellectual as well as moral duties of patriotism in a harsh and complex foreign environment" (Pangle 1985, p. 32).

The critical account of our country must follow love of country; one cannot begin there. We are all well aware of the movements, like the 1619 Project, that lead to this self-hating, indignant cynicism. And while it is easy to see the harmful effect of these movements to civic health, its effect on liberal education is equally deleterious.

But for the student who has received a solid civic education, as the student advances and begins to pursue liberal education, the canon must expand, as the inclusion of Tocqueville already indicates. "An educated attachment to American democracy must include, then, awareness of its blemishes and flaws—not those which are held to consist in insufficiently rigorous application of its principles; rather, it is the principles themselves which have to be looked at in this light. And for this purpose, the use of the writings of non-democratic thinkers (I don't say anti-democratic, but non-democratic) of our past, of the philosophic tradition, is probably indispensable" (Bruell 1991, p. 86). Tocqueville recommends the study of Latin and Greek classics in democracies for these same reasons (Tocqueville 2000, pp. 450–51).

4. Conclusions

I have spoken in this article about the problem of civic and liberal education in our current situation. The character of the problem, as I understand it, is that liberal education requires a preliminary civic education that forms and shapes our attachment to our country. And although I have not discussed it much, religious education probably holds some place in this discussion. In any event, students increasingly arrive on college campuses lacking anything like a serious civic—moral and political—education; the evidence abounds. This means that most students arrive on campus unprepared for a liberal education—not intellectually but psychologically. The best we can do in the present situation is to try to provide a remedial civic education and to foster a love of our country and then gradually try to help students who show themselves to be psychologically prepared to pursue a liberal education to do so. Only then can we hope to have graduates who are both civically and liberally educated. The need for each is an urgent matter.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

Alfarabi. 2001. *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*. Translated by Mushin Mahdi. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Barber, Benjamin. 2003. *Strong Democracy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Barber, Benjamin R., and Richard M. Battistoni. 1998. *Education for Democracy*. Dubuque: Kendall Hunt.
Bartlett, Robert C. 2003. Souls without Longing. *The Public Interest* 150: 101–14.
Bauerlein, Mark. 2023. *Twitter*. January 7. Available online: https://twitter.com/mark_bauerlein/status/1611805306220167174 (accessed on 23 September 2024).
Bloom, Allan. 1987. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Basic Books.
Bruell, Christopher. 1991. Liberal Education and Education for Citizenship. In *Recovery of American Education: Reclaiming a Vision*. Edited by Stephen M. Krason. Lanham: University Press of America, pp. 75–86.
Bruell, Christopher. 2006. Aristotle on Theory and Practice: Part Two. *A Talk Delivered at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, Unpublished work.
Bynum, Victoria, James M. McPherson, James Oakes, Sean Wilentz, and Gordon S. Wood. 2019. Letter to the Editor. *The New York Times*, January 19.

Carrese, Paul. 2023. *A New Birth of Freedom in Higher Education: Civic Institutes at Public Universities*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.
Carrese, Paul. 2024a. Civic Thought and Leadership: A Higher Civics to Sustain American Constitutional Democracy. *Laws* 13: 19. [CrossRef]
Carrese, Paul. 2024b. How Civics Can Remedy Higher Education's Decline. *National Review Online*. Available online: https://www.nationalreview.com/2024/02/how-civics-can-remedy-higher-educations-decline/ (accessed on 23 September 2024).
Foster, Luke. 2022. Can the Great Books Serve the Common Good? Tocqueville on Aristocratic Education in a Democratic Age. *Tocqueville Review/Revue Tocqueville* 43: 181–201. [CrossRef]
Foster, Luke. 2024. Constituting the American Higher-Education Elite: Rush and Jefferson on Collegiate Civic Engagement. *Laws* 13: 38. [CrossRef]
George, Robert P. 2006. What Colleges Forget to Teach: Higher education could heal itself by teaching civics—not race, class, and gender. *City Journal*. Winter. Available online: https://www.city-journal.org/html/what-colleges-forget-teach-12914.html (accessed on 23 September 2024).
Gish, Dustin. 2023. Liberal Education as Civic Education: The Philosopher's Curriculum in Plato's Republic. In *Liberal Education and Citizenship in a Free Society*. Edited by Justin Buckley Dyer and Constantine Christos Vassiliou. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, pp. 103–47.
Griffith, Joseph K., II. 2024. "Long Recognized at Common Law": Meyer and Pierce's Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Precedent on Parental Educational Rights and Civic Education. *Perspectives on Political Science* 53: 1–12. [CrossRef]
Guttman, Amy. 1987/1999. *Democratic Education: Revised Edition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
iCivics. 2022. New Poll Shows Strong Support for Civic Education Across Party Lines. *PR Newswire*. October 27. Available online: https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-poll-shows-strong-support-for-civic-education-across-party-lines-301660642.html (accessed on 23 September 2024).
Jefferson, Thomas. 1984. *Jefferson: Writings*. Edited by Merrill D. Peterson. New York: Library of America.
McBrayer, Gregory A. 2023. The Paradox of Liberal Education and Modernity. In *Liberal Education and Citizenship in a Free Society*. Edited by Justin Buckley Dyer and Constantine Christos Vassiliou. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, pp. 393–420.
Morrow, Eric, Casey Thompson, Payton Jones, and Boleslaw Z. Kabala. 2024. Incentivizing Civic Engagement at Public and Private Universities: Tax Exemptions, Laws, and Critical Dialogues. *Laws* 13: 32. [CrossRef]
Neal, Anne D., and Jerry L. Martin. 2000. *Losing America's Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: The American Council of Trustees and Alumni.
Nussbaum, Martha. 1997. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Pangle, Thomas. 1985. Patriotism, American Style. *National Review*, November 29, pp. 30–33.
Peterson, Merrill D. 1975. *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*. New York: Penguin.
Plato. 1987. *Republic*. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books.
Plato. 1998. *Phaedrus*. Translated by James H. Nichols. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Plato. 2004. *Protagoras and Meno*. Translated by Robert C. Bartlett. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Schramm, Peter W. 2018. On Reclaiming Liberal Education in the Universities. In *Education in a Democratic Republic: Essays in Honor of Peter W. Schramm*. Edited by Christopher Flannery and David Tucker. Ashland: Ashbrook Press, pp. 85–91.
Sikkenga, Jeffrey, and David Davenport. 2024. *A Republic, If We Can Teach It: Fixing America's Civic Education Crisis*. New York: Republic Book Publishers.
Silverbrook, Julie. 2017. Democracy and freedom of thought: An interview with Dr. Cornel West and Dr. Robert George. *Washington Times*. October 15. Available online: https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/oct/25/democracy-truth-seeking-and-freedom-of-thought-an-/ (accessed on 23 September 2024).
Storey, Jenna Silber, and Benjamin Storey. 2024. Will Republicans Save the Humanities? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Available online: https://www.chronicle.com/article/will-republicans-save-the-humanities (accessed on 23 September 2024).
Strauss, Leo. 1989. What is Liberal Education? In *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*. Edited by Leo Strauss and Hilail Editor Gildin. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 311–20.
Tocqueville, Alexis de. 2000. *Democracy in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
West, Thomas, and Grace Starrey West. 1945. *Four Texts on Socrates*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Xenophon. 2001. *Education of Cyrus*. Translated by Wayne Ambler. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.