The Queen of the May, Emily Schwak, at Beecher Street School, whose student body consists of half Americans of Italian descent and half of Americans of Polish descent, Southington, CT. May, 1942. Photographer: Fenno Jacobs. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Farm Security Administration—Office of War Information Collection [LC-DIG-fsac-1a35007].

Chapter 9

Is Patriotism Good for Democracy?

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Is patriotism good for democracy? Or does a commitment to patriotism threaten democracy? Educators do not agree on this issue.

Chester Finn (former assistant secretary of education in the Reagan Administration) argues that after September 11, "American education has generally made a mess of a teaching opportunity" by focusing on "tolerance and multiculturalism, not civics and patriotism."[1] In an essay titled "Patriotism Revisited," he worries that "it's become a compulsion to pull down America rather than celebrate and defend it."[2] This view aligns with William Damon's perspective that "too many students today learn all about what is wrong with our society without gaining any knowledge of our society's great moral successes. To establish a sound cognitive and affective foundation for citizenship education," Damon writes, "schools need to begin with the positive, to emphasize reasons for caring enough about our democratic society to participate in it and to improve it. Schools need to foster a sympathetic understanding informed by all the facts and energized by a spirit of patriotism."[3]

Other educators see a problem related to patriotism that is very different from the one described by Finn and Damon. Rather than worrying that there is excessive criticism of the United States in schools and a lack of patriotism among

youths, they point to pressure, exerted in the name of patriotism, on individual citizens and groups to refrain from criticizing the actions and policies of the U.S. government. In addition, they note a growing set of global problems that require international cooperation.[4] These considerations lead some to flat out reject patriotic sentiments in favor of commitments to global citizenship and principles of international human rights.[5]

Is there a problem or not? And if there is a problem, which problem is it? Are schools turning students into critics of the United States who can't appreciate the country's strengths? Or is the opposite occurring? Is the push for patriotism in response to 9/11 leading students toward patriotic commitments at the expense of critical analysis and an appreciation of the need to protect human rights and democratic principles? Unfortunately, we have little data to draw on when thinking about these issues. Schools systematically monitor the number of eleventh graders who know the difference between equilateral and right triangles, but we often rely on journalists' interviews with three or four students to assess what high school students think about patriotism and democracy.

For this reason, we decided to take a systematic look at high school seniors' views on patriotism and its relationship to democracy. In doing so, we are hoping to reframe the discussion. "Is patriotism good or bad?" The answer is not one or the other but "It depends." The values, priorities, and behaviors associated with patriotism can vary dramatically. Some forms of patriotism are profoundly democratic, and other forms can undermine democratic ideals. It is therefore very important that we clarify the factors responsible for these different outcomes.

In sorting through the ways to make these distinctions, we found it very helpful to consider the two standards provided by John Dewey for a "democratically constituted society": 1) "How numerous and varied are the interests that are consciously shared?" and 2) "How full and free is the interplay with other modes of association?"[6] In other words, a democratic society requires that citizens recognize their common interests and that they fully and openly discuss their differing perspectives on issues related to these common priorities.

The implications for a democratic vision of patriotism are substantial. Patriotic commitments in a democratic society should be motivated by and reinforce recognition of the variety of interests that citizens have in common. In addition, these patriotic commitments should not constrain what Dewey called "free and full interplay" and what we might call informed debate and discussion that considers a wide range of views.

What does this mean for students and for schools? We believe that schools should work to promote a democratic vision of patriotism that is based on Dewey's two standards. In the following sections, drawing on the work of the Harwood Institute and on studies by Robert Schatz, Ervin Staub, and Howard Lavine, we discuss a set of criteria that can help us determine the degree to which students' patriotic commitments align with the needs of a democratic society, as envisioned by Dewey. Specifically, we focus on three dimensions of patriotic belief: commitment to country, attitudes toward critique of country, and active involvement. Then, using this framework as a guide, we share findings from our study of the patriotic commitments of California's high school seniors.

Commitment to Country: An Uncertain Support for Democracy

It is common to define patriots simply as those who love their country.[7] Why would such a commitment be controversial? Individuals love their families more than they love strangers. They also tend to feel a stronger sense of connection to the town they are from than to a town they have never visited. Shouldn't we expect most individuals to love their country—and to love it more than they love other countries?

Frankly, this isn't the point. The important question is not whether it is common or "natural" to love one's country, but whether such commitments are desirable. After all, jealousy is also a rather common or "natural" emotion, but that doesn't make it a virtue. Indeed, in some cases, one could argue that patriotism is a vice. The term's etymology—loyalty to the fatherland—has nothing to do with a commitment to democracy. Both fascist states and democracies desire loyalty.

To say this is not to deny the potential of patriotic commitments to serve as a support for a democratic society. In line with Dewey's framework, patriotic commitments can support democratic goals by developing a sense of shared interests and a commitment to act. More specifically, patriotic commitments may lead individuals to better balance their own interests with those of the broader society by helping them integrate societal interests into their own sense of what's important.[8] In addition, patriotic commitments (especially when informed by recognition of shared interests) may motivate citizens to actively engage in the civic and political life of the community—a key need in a democracy. Finally, if one's love of country is based in part on recognition of the desirability of life in

a democratic society, such patriotic commitments can help citizens identify with the nation's democratic ideals. "The American trick," Benjamin Barber writes, "was to use the fierce attachments of patriotic sentiment to bond a people to high ideals . . . to be an American was also to be enmeshed in a unique story of freedom."[9] In short, there are democratic visions of patriotism, ones that focus on loyalty to democratic principles and practices and that emphasize lateral connections to other citizens rather than hierarchical commitments to the nation.

Unfortunately, some forms of patriotism that emphasize shared interests fail to meet Dewey's second criterion for a democratic society—full and free interplay. Indeed, the emphasis on shared interests can become problematic if not balanced by engagement with a broad range of groups and perspectives. R. Freeman Butts explains it this way: "At its best, patriotism binds the diverse elements of American society into an integrated whole, fostering mutual acceptance of citizens as a common political order. At its worst, patriotism can degenerate into a nationalistic chauvinism."[10]

Thus patriotic commitments are an uncertain support for democracy. The key question is not whether one is a patriot. It is the form of one's patriotic commitments that turns out to be of prime importance. In order to assess the role schools in a democracy should play with respect to patriotic aims, it is therefore necessary to clarify some other dimensions of patriotic beliefs. We do so below.

Attitudes Toward Critique: Blind and Constructive Patriots

Among those who study and theorize about patriotism, the question of whether patriotic commitments foster democracy often highlights a crucial distinction—between blind and constructive patriotism.

Blind Patriotism

Blind patriots adopt a stance of unquestioning endorsement of their country—denying the value of critique and analysis and generally emphasizing allegiance and symbolic behaviors.[11] Studies also indicate that blind patriots frequently engage in nationalism—asserting their nation's superiority and supporting their nation's dominance over others.[12] Blind patriotic commitments are well captured by comments like "My country, love it or leave it" and by notions that it is "unpatriotic" to criticize one's own country. This form of patriotism is inconsistent with educational and democratic institutions because its intolerance of criticism signifies a lack of "free and full interplay." This perspective obscures the value of reasoned debate and fails to recognize analysis and critique as engines of improvement. Thus, while some forms of patriotism might broaden citizens' concerns to include the whole nation rather than just themselves, their family, and friends, blind or nationalistic patriotic commitments can narrow one's concerns in dangerous and antidemocratic ways.

Constructive Patriotism

Rather than embrace blind or uncritical forms of patriotism, constructive patriots applaud some actions by the state and criticize others in an effort to promote positive change and consistency with the nation's ideals.[13] For example, imperialistic actions, though often advantageous for the imperialist nation's citizens, should be rejected as inconsistent with democratic values. Rather than view critique or debate as unpatriotic (as a blind patriot might), constructive patriots consider a wide range of perspectives and enact what Ervin Staub calls "critical loyalty."[14]

From the standpoint of democracy, this orientation is essential. The point is not to downplay the value of civic knowledge or the promise of America's democratic commitments to equality and justice. Rather, it is to help students use their love of country as a motivation to critically assess what is needed to make it better.

Active Patriotism

If we are interested in determining whether patriotism is good for democracy, there is one more distinction to make—whether a patriotic commitment to one's country requires active participation. While both blind and constructive patriots love their country, neither type is necessarily actively engaged in civic or political life. Both blind and constructive patriots can discuss their perspectives in coffee shops and bars, for example, without acting in any way that substantively supports the nation. Such behavior differs markedly from the kind of active engagement a participatory democracy requires.

Active patriots, whether blind or constructive in their orientation, are those who take it upon themselves to engage in democratic and civic life in an effort to support and sustain what they feel is best about the

country and to change features they believe need improvement. Their actions may begin with, but will move beyond, voting. Their forms of engagement may include PTA meetings or political protests. Active patriots may volunteer with the elderly or work on a campaign. Their love of country and their desire for it to thrive are demonstrated by their deeds.[15]

Patriotism Among High School Seniors

Drawing on these criteria for a democratic vision of patriotism, we now attend to students' perspectives. Specifically, we describe findings from the California Survey of Civic Education—a survey of high school seniors we developed to inventory students' civic commitments and capacities as well as the opportunities schools have provided to foster them. The survey is part of a broader school change initiative called "Educating for Democracy: California Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools."[16]

In the spring of 2005, we gave the survey to 2,366 high school seniors from a very diverse set of twelve California high schools. We assessed students' commitments and capacities in the spring of their senior year because at that time they were completing their state-funded public schooling and they had reached or were reaching voting age—becoming eligible to assume the full responsibilities of citizenship. One component of the survey measured the different kinds of patriotic commitments we discuss in this chapter.[17] In an effort to probe more deeply, we also conducted 10 focus groups with fifty students from five of these high schools. Though the survey is clearly an early step in the effort to understand patriotic outcomes, our hope is that it will help move the conversation forward by providing useful indicators of student commitments and their relationship to a democratic vision of patriotism.[18]

Commitment to Country

In our focus groups, students frequently expressed strong patriotic commitments. As one student told us, "I definitely love America. I don't think we're a bad country. We try to help people—of course we have our flaws, and sometimes our reasons for doing that are sketchy, but I think overall we try to do our best and help. We have so many rights, and I can't imagine living anywhere else."

Seventy-three percent of the seniors we surveyed agreed, for example, that "the United States is a great country," while only 10% disagreed (the remaining 17% were neutral). And their level of agreement declined only slightly—to 68%—when the statement became "I have a great love for the United States" (with only 12% disagreeing).[19] Thus, while we will argue that high school students' vision of patriotism should be developed to better align with the responsibilities of democratic citizenship, it seems clear that there is little reason to worry that students are being turned into critics who focus on the country's shortcomings and fail to appreciate its strengths. For the most part, California's adolescents endorse patriotic sentiments.[20]

Constructive Patriotism

In focus groups, many students also expressed a clear sense that patriots sometimes offer critiques in an effort to improve the country. One said, for example, "I think a lot of people get confused and say being patriotic means that you think America is perfect. I think being patriotic is trying to make a difference in your country because you care so much about it. Whether you're Republican or Democrat doesn't matter, it's just that you want to make it a better country."

Some students also distinguished between supporting the country's principles and supporting its particular practices and policies. As one young woman explained, "I like the moral ideas that America has. I don't like how they are going about it."

Our survey results were consistent with these sentiments. For example, 68% agreed with the statement (with only 11% disagreeing) "I oppose some U.S. policies because I care about my country and want to improve it." Similarly, 69% agreed that "if you love America, you should notice its problems and work to correct them." (Only 12% disagreed.)

Active Patriotism

As discussed above, patriotic citizens in a democracy must do more than express their love for the country or talk about ways it could improve. For democracy to work, citizens must also be willing to act. Less than half of the students we surveyed, however, shared this belief. Indeed, in response to the statement "To be truly patriotic, one has to be involved in the civic and political life of the community," only 41% agreed. This response is similar to what the Harwood Institute found when it first asked this question

of adults in 2002. These findings also mirror findings of numerous other studies of both youths and adults. Participation in many forms of civic and political engagement has declined markedly over the course of the past several decades. To a significant degree, we seem to be a nation of spectators. The risk this tendency poses to democracy is substantial.[21]

Blind Patriotism

Our survey indicates that, for many students, commitments to patriotism are associated with antidemocratic orientations that emphasize blind or uncritical support for the country. For example, more high school seniors agreed (43%) than disagreed (29%) with the statement "I support U.S. policies because they are the policies of my country." In fact, even when we asked students more pointedly whether they thought "it is un-American to criticize this country," 22% agreed and 21% were neutral. Thus 43% of the high school seniors in our sample, having completed required courses in U.S. history and in U.S. government, failed to reject this patently antidemocratic stance.

These findings do not demonstrate that California's high school seniors are blind patriots, but they do indicate that patriotic sentiments rather than analysis may often guide assessments of the nation's policies and practices—as well as responses to critiques by others.

A Democratic Vision of Patriotism

Unfortunately, while the majority of students in our sample endorsed statements associated with love of country, few of these high school seniors endorsed all three of our other indicators of democratic patriotism. Indeed, only 16% expressed that they were committed patriots, endorsed active and constructive patriotism, and rejected blind patriotism.[22] We would not expect every student to consistently support these four criteria for a democratic vision of patriotism, but 16% is hardly impressive. If patriotic education consistent with the demands of democracy is a goal for our schools, it appears that we are coming up quite short.

Two Problems in Need of Attention

While there are clearly limits to what this survey can tell us, it does provide some guidance. First, it appears that some of the most impassioned remarks related to schools and patriotism overstate the case. Schools are neither

turning students into critics of the United States who cannot appreciate its virtues, nor are they failing to help students recognize the role critique can play as a means to make society better. At the same time, the fact that only 16% of the diverse group of students we surveyed in California expressed consistent support for a democratic vision of patriotism is cause for concern. We have identified two problems, in particular, that deserve our attention.

Problem 1: Passive Patriots

Many students fail to appreciate the importance of civic participation. Only 41% of students surveyed believed that loving one's country requires being civically or politically active. This finding parallels other studies that highlight young people's increasingly passive conceptions of "good citizenship."[23]

Fortunately, recent research is beginning to provide a clearer sense of curricular approaches that promote commitment to active engagement. These include instruction in history and government that emphasizes the importance of informed civic engagement, as well as such strategies as service learning, discussing social problems, and the use of simulations. Creating a school climate that allows students to participate in meaningful aspects of school governance, to be active in afterschool clubs, and to openly discuss controversial issues in the classroom also appears efficacious.[24] Of course, given the current emphasis on No Child Left Behind and related standards, whether schools will choose to focus on such priorities and will do so effectively is far from clear.

Interestingly, one argument for patriotism is that a commitment to one's country will lead to active engagement. Indeed, we see evidence from our survey that supports this claim. Fifty-four percent of those who say they love their country endorse the value of civic and political engagement, while only 34% who do not agree that they love their country endorse the value of civic and political engagement. This finding would seem to back up the proposition that a sense of patriotic commitment motivates citizens to be more active.

Problem 2: Patriotic Commitments Sometimes Lead to Blind Patriotism

While committed patriots may be more civically and politically active, patriotic commitments do not appear to help with the problem of blind

patriotism—indeed, at times they appear to contribute to it. Our survey indicates that those who say they love their country are three times more likely than those who do not (28% vs. 9%) to endorse the idea that it is "un-American to criticize the country." In short, love of one's country seems to be distracting some students from recognizing the need for critique in a democracy.

Reflecting a similar pattern, the value of critique is endorsed by high school seniors when it is framed as a way to make the country better. For example, 68% agreed with the statement "I oppose some U.S. policies because I care about my country and want to improve it" (only 11% disagreed). But when a conflict is implied between patriotism and critique of the country, comfort with critique drops markedly. In fact, more students agreed (42%) than disagreed (38%) with the statement "There is too much criticism of the U.S. in the world. We, its citizens, should not criticize it."

Thus, for a significant number of students, invoking notions of patriotism appears to lead them to want to stifle critique. This finding makes the need for educators to strengthen students' understandings of both patriotism and democracy quite clear. To do so they must ground commitments to patriotism in appreciation of our country's democratic ideals and practices rather than in a sense of blind loyalty.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that policy makers are considering such issues. Margaret Nash, who recently examined how state education policies attend to patriotism, found that many states include patriotism among their list of goals, but often without specifying how to promote patriotism or what exactly this goal entails. To the extent that they do specify a means of fostering patriotism, however, Nash found that reciting the Pledge of Allegiance is the most common strategy.[25] Indeed, following 9/11, when the interest in patriotism surged, 17 states either enacted new pledge laws for schools or amended current policies.[26] As former Senator S. I. Hayakawa (R-Calif.) once commented, "Patriotic societies seem to think that the way to educate children in a democracy is to stage bigger and better flag saluting."[27]

This tendency isn't surprising. The pledge is our nation's most explicit patriotic exercise, and the practice has long been integrated into the school day. Unfortunately, reciting the pledge is inadequate. The problem is not that saying the pledge is a symbolic act. Symbols have a place in society. The problem is that symbols can complement, but not substitute for, substance.[28]

What Educators Can Do

Educators can do a great deal to foster understandings of patriotism that support democratic values and practices. Rather than "teaching" students to love their country, teachers need to help students build an explicit connection between their "love of country" and democratic ideals—ideals that include the role of informed analysis and, at times, critique; the importance of action; and the danger of blind loyalty to the state.

Clearly, countless opportunities exist, especially in literature, history, and government courses. Teachers can deepen students' love of country by explaining the value of democratic ideals. We should teach about key instances in which the implications of patriotic commitments were debated and about the actions of critics who, in support of our ideals, worked to change the country. We should teach about the sacrifices patriotic citizens have made and consider our debt to them. We also need students to learn about those who may have used the rhetoric of patriotism to constrain liberty and stifle dissent. True to the demands of democracy, this curriculum will engage controversial issues and will require debate, discussion, and analysis. Even when broad democratic principles are agreed upon, not all will agree about the implications of such principles in particular instances. This curriculum should examine the past and should also rely on current events. To support students' recognition of the need for participation in a democracy, opportunities for action may also be included. Our goal here is not to lay out a particular curriculum—though we do believe that such a curriculum should be developed. Our point is that attention to patriotism and democracy should become sustained and coherent components of the broader school curriculum—just like other important learning objectives. Right now, with only 16% of students consistently endorsing commitments associated with a democratic vision of patriotism, it appears that we have much work to do.

This effort deserves the attention of teachers and principals and of those in district, state, and federal offices that shape curricular priorities. Students' patriotic commitments can develop in ways that meaningfully support and enhance our democratic society. Alternatively, some kinds of patriotic commitments can undermine our most precious values. Citizens do not instinctively or organically develop understandings of patriotism that align with democratic ideals. Educators have a role to play—helping students to think carefully about forms of patriotism that support our democracy and forms that do not.