

Democratic Theory and the New Undergraduate Political Science Major¹

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The Final Report of the APSA Presidential Task Force on Rethinking Political Science Education [APSA Presidential Task Force (APTF) 2024] cites indices of global democracy and freedom that show increasing numbers of authoritarian governments and illiberal democracies. Also said to be in democratic decline are liberal democracies such as the United States (Economist Intelligence Unit 2024; Gorokhovskaia and Grothe 2024). To counter these trends, the APTF report recommends that the undergraduate political science major “should provide students with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for ethical and engaged citizenship at local, national, and global levels” (APTF 14).

Over its long history, the discipline of political science has pursued multiple teaching and learning goals for undergraduates, including civic education, practical training for careers in public service, and critical thinking (Ishiyama, Bruening, and Lopez 2006). The current context within which political scientists teach includes repeated warnings about democracy at risk. As Mounk (2022: 154) writes, “The events of recent years make it painfully clear that it is naïve to assume that countries such as the United States are virtually certain to remain democracies. But even if they avoid the worst-case scenario of full democratic breakdown—as very well they might—the serious democratic backsliding that grips them now is likely to make the lives of millions of people far more perilous.”

Whereas many political scientists would agree that something should be done about democracies in danger, it is not clear why political science education should center its efforts on promoting civic and political engagement. We examine some of the APTF’s key assumptions and aspirations. Animating the report is a vision of a “participative, inclusive, and democratic” (APTF 17) multiracial society (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023). Looking at the U.S. from the standpoint of democratic theory, we address the desirability of having a highly involved citizenry

and offer contrasting ideas of what a multiracial or multiethnic (we will use the terms interchangeably) political community in America might look like.

Our analysis suggests that while the recommendations of the APTF are necessary, exciting, and important, the discipline should be cautious in making claims about what kinds of changes in students and democracies a civically-engaged political science major could bring. An active and informed citizenry is especially important during periods of democratic backsliding. However, a curriculum without an emphasis on values and ethics may equip students with political tools to support undemocratic practices or lead them to abandon democracy as a failed experiment and thereby risk democracy even more.

Civic Engagement and Values in the APTF Final Report

Noting increased diversity in the general population and the student body, as well as demands from students and interested parties for job-related skills—including adaptability and the ability to work with others, the APTF stated that political science majors should be able to navigate a “recently evolved multi-racial democracy” (APTF 13). The discipline can give 21st-century students the kind of education they need, the Final Report asserted. Political science attracts students of diverse backgrounds, teaches the hard and soft skills employers want, prepares students for success across a wide range of career pathways, and provides immersive experiences with real-life public problems.

Occupying a prominent place in the scholarship of teaching and learning in political science (Murphy et al. 2023), civic engagement was the discipline’s pedagogy of choice. According to Content Objective 4, political science programs should enable students to “explain and evaluate the effectiveness and ethics of different strategies of civic engagement at local, regional, national, and global levels” (APTF 16). Skill Objective 2 encourages learning how to

“engage as citizens through problem solving, collective action, and collaborative decision making at all levels from local to global” (APTF 19).

The ability to explain and evaluate effectiveness requires students to be keen analysts of power—what it is, who has it, how to use it, and how it shapes the unequal allocation of values, resources, and opportunities in society. This is specifically addressed in Content Objective 2 (APTF 15). At the same time, the APTF report calls for ethical political involvement. Otherwise, political science could be training a generation of power-seekers operating without principle or for inhumane purposes. Indeed, civic engagement skills could help curtail or overthrow democracies (Brennan 2016).

For what purposes, then, should students acquire political knowledge and skills? The Values Learning Objective section specifies how political science programs can develop students’ sense of their roles, responsibilities, and expected contributions to the communities in which they live, whether local, national, or global (APTF 23-5). It argues that political science students should be able to “demonstrate an understanding of civic dispositions conducive to democratic involvement” (APTF 24).

Civic dispositions refer to “concern for others’ rights and welfare, fairness, reasonable levels of trust, and a sense of public duty” (Gould et al. 2011). Programs should foster civic attitudes of political efficacy, empathy, civic duty, civic confidence, civic reflection, and an inclination to engage in dialogue across difference (APTF 24). These attitudes can be cultivated by solving community problems collaboratively—skills that employers also demand.

Lest there be confusion, “demonstrating an understanding of civic dispositions” is not the same as “adopting values.” The APTF does not ask programs to indoctrinate students. Rather, students should be able to recognize and discuss the values, value conflicts, and ethical dilemmas

at stake when they are civically engaged. Naturally, the hope is that such awareness will influence students to make good choices as citizens.

Optimism, Pessimism, and Political Participation in a Democracy

The APTF report's vision of a politically active community is certainly ambitious. Democratic theorists might call its desire for participative politics utopian. In the 1940s and 1950s, scholars contended that large-scale public involvement in politics was dangerous (Ricci 1970). Mass mobilization was associated with totalitarian regimes in Russia, Germany, and China. In the United States, supporters of U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy hailed his demagogic tactics and persecution of left-wing individuals (Gibson 1988). Surveys revealed that the general public was intolerant of communists, atheists, gay people, and other groups deemed undesirable (Prothro and Grigg 1960; Stouffer 1955).

Better to rely on enlightened elites, wiser and more respectful of the “rules of the game,” theorists declared. An influential, “alternative” definition of democracy emerged—“an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote” (Schumpeter 1942). Citizen activity should be limited to holding leaders accountable at regular intervals, the alternative implied (Sartori 1962).

Public passivity in a representative democracy did not necessarily mean diminished influence, Robert Dahl and pluralist scholars added (Dahl 1956/2009; Truman 1951/1971). Through the “law of anticipated reactions” (Friedrich 1937) and the ability to organize interest groups, the potential power of the mass public helped check government officials. “Potential”

was the key word. Democratic stability depended on a “civic culture” of limited involvement, wrote Almond and Verba (1963).²

However, opinions of the public’s questionable commitment to democratic values changed with the rise of social movements dedicated to freedom and justice for people of color, women, and LGBTQ+ groups (Tarrow 1996), along with the formation of “public” interest groups advocating for the environment and the consumer (Berry 1977/2016). Concurrently, trust in political leaders plummeted following Vietnam, social unrest, and Watergate (Pharr, Putnam, and Dalton 2000). Increased cynicism toward politics coincided with public disillusionment toward institutions (Brady and Kent 2022).

Notions of “democratic elitism” (Bachrach 1967; Walker 1966) were revised or discarded in favor of participatory theories advocating democracy in the workplace (Pateman 1970) and “private” spheres of activity (Rogan and Budgeon 2018).³ Scholars of intersectionality urged the breaking down of barriers to the empowerment of gender, racial, ethnic, and other identities exploited in compounded ways (Crenshaw 1989). The conservative movement of the 1960s and 1970s—organizing antifeminists and evangelical Christians, among others—complicated the picture but nonetheless expanded the political universe (Phillips-Fein 2011; Zeitzer 2010).

Widespread political participation may endanger democracy if citizens are easily misled. With notable exceptions (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966), the empirical literature showed most people are ill-informed, distracted, and narrowly self-interested (Achen and Bartels 2017; Campbell et al. 1960/1980). In response, following Barber (1984/2004), who argued for “strong” democracy,

² For a contemporary example, Christenson and Kriner (2020) highlight the power of anticipated reactions to check a president’s use of unilateral power.

³ Dahl himself acknowledged that pluralism in the U.S. was “biased” in favor of private capital. In the 1970s he advocated structural reforms to bring about greater political, economic, and social equality (Manley 1983).

scholars of deliberative democracy demonstrated how structured political discussions could promote civil dialogue and enhance voter rationality (Curato et al. 2017; Fishkin 1991).

It is in the context of post-1960s optimism about participatory democracy that the community service movement—reacting in part to Reagan-era radical individualism—arose in the mid-1980s (Saltmarsh and Hartley 2017). By establishing the Corporation for National and Community Service in 1993, the federal government boosted the effort. Service learning was institutionalized across campuses, but critics noted that volunteer activities were often detached from politics and did more for colleges than communities (Berger 2009). Beginning with Robert Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work* (1993), which introduced the idea of social capital, political science contributed to a shift toward the concept of *civic and political engagement*, focusing more on active citizenship and real collaboration with community partners (Battistoni 2002; McCartney et al. 2013).

More recently, there are renewed concerns about the relationship of mass political involvement to democracy. Paradoxically, amidst findings of declining social capital (Putnam 2001a) and eroding political trust (Citrin and Stoker 2018), political participation surged during and since the Obama years. Grassroots organizations mushroomed (Allen 2024; Putnam 2024). Voter turnout was the highest since the 1960s (American Presidency Project 2025). Extending into the 2020s, successive social movements: challenged economic inequalities (Occupy Wall Street); resisted the first-term presidency of Donald Trump (Meyer and Tarrow 2018); and protested violence, repression, and discrimination (March for Our Lives, #metoo, Black Lives Matter) (Tarrow 2021). Concomitantly, conservatives mobilized, first as the Tea Party (Skocpol and Williamson 2016) and then the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement, the latter coinciding with the rise of Trump and right-wing populist movements around the world (Norris

and Inglehart 2019; Tarrow 2022). Shaped by partisan echo chambers, social sorting, and/or ideological polarization among elites, partisanship as social identity formed and hardened in the electorate (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Hobolt, Lawall, and Tilley 2024).

Participatory democracy became enmeshed in tribal loyalties, violence, and misinformation. When Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden received 81 million of a U.S. record 160 million votes in 2020, Trump contended that the election was rigged (Yoon 2023). Violating the simplest criterion for a democracy—"a regime in which incumbents lose elections and leave office if they do" (Przeworski 1999)—MAGA followers, aided and abetted by Republican leaders, rioted at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, as Congress attempted to record Biden's victory in the Electoral College (House Select January 6 Committee 2022). Remarkably, despite an impeachment proceeding against Trump, a House investigation, and multiple legal inquiries, nearly two-thirds of Republicans polled in January 2024 believed the 2020 election was stolen (Canon and Sherman 2021; Weiner, Clement, and Guskin 2024).

The January 6 insurrection and the attempted assassination of Trump during the 2024 presidential campaign capped a decade of increased political violence. Most incidents were perpetrated by the far right (Hakim, Bensinger, and Sullivan 2024; Kalmoe and Mason 2022). For instance, Trump's rhetoric linking Asians to COVID-19, e.g., the "Kung Flu virus" (Itkowitz 2020), multiplied the occurrence of anti-Asian speech (Kim and Kesari, 2021) and hate incidents against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (Yellowhorse, Jeung, and Matriano 2022).

In a change from 2020, Trump and the Republicans embraced voting-by-mail (Corasaniti 2025) and activated low-propensity voters, including the less-informed and young men (O'Donnell 2024; Riccardi 2024). National voting turnout in 2024 was second only to 2020, and

Trump increased his vote total by over 3 million.⁴ By winning, the president-elect's supporters expressed satisfaction with election administration (Pew Research Center 2024). For once, the extremist elements of Trump's coalition—white supremacists, anti-government militias, and Christian nationalists (McCrummen 2025)—were held at bay.⁵ Meanwhile, political violence from the left may escalate (Tufekci 2024). It remains to be seen what kind of progressive or anti-Trump movements will materialize (Silverman and Craig 2025) at a moment when MAGA culture is ascendant (Edsall 2025).

Which returns us to the debate over how much involvement and control citizens should have in modern democracy. Though the APTF Final Report favors more political participation, it can also be read as a primer for political science to develop enlightened elites (APTF 26). Many kinds of future leaders, political and otherwise, could benefit from the report's recommendations (Marineau 2020). Without attention to ethical conduct, however, the new curriculum could produce unprincipled or hyperpartisan influentials.

The Irony of American Multiracial Democracy

Whether serving as leaders or followers, Americans tend to hold contradictory values of liberalism, republicanism, and what Rogers Smith (1993) named “ascriptive hierarchies” or beliefs that some groups are superior to others. These strands or “multiple traditions” interact in complex and strange ways, blunting progress toward greater freedom, equality, and democracy.

Smith's multiple traditions figure prominently in analyzing America's zig-zag journey toward multiracial democracy. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2023: 4) maintain that from the 1960s up to

⁴ In 2020, 159.7 million votes were cast. Of eligible voters, 65.9% turned out, the highest percentage since the early 1900s. The estimate for 2024 was 156.3 million and a 63.9% turnout rate (<https://election.lab.ufl.edu/2024-general-election-turnout/>).

⁵ Contradictions among MAGA, Trump's multiracial coalition, and the new Trump administration should not be ignored (Pogue 2025).

and including the presidency of Barack Obama, the United States advanced a model of a diverse society where “adult citizens of all ethnic groups possess the right to vote and basic civil liberties such as freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and association.” At the same time, people of color faced disproportionate punishment in the criminal justice system (Alexander 2012).⁶

Activated by the Tea Party, MAGA, Trump, and right-wing media outlets, Republicans radicalized into what Norris and Inglehart (2019) classified as an authoritarian-populist party.⁷ Though economic distress explained some of the party’s appeal (Norris and Inglehart 2019: 363), cultural values aligned along racial, gender, and religious cleavages provided powerful explanations for the party's transformation (Jardina 2019; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019). Party realignment by educational attainment grew, leading Republicans to attack the higher education establishment and more-credentialed Democrats as cultural elitists (Grossman and Hopkins 2024). In addition to reproductive freedom (Miller 2024; Sherman 2024), the GOP targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, “wokism,” and multicultural education (Confessore 2024). With increased intensity during the 2024 campaign, Trump promised to deport millions of immigrants, Latin Americans in particular (Ward 2024).

Nevertheless, Trump’s winning coalition in 2024 encompassed higher support from Blacks and Latinos [43% of the latter, according to AP VoteCast (Lodhi et al. 2024)], especially among men (Brown et al. 2024; Gerbaud, Harrison, and Robertson 2024). Disappointment with

⁶ A leader in promoting racial and sexual equality [*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973)], the U.S. Supreme Court pulled back on several of its historic rulings under Chief Justice John Roberts (Bridges 2022). The Court severely limited remedies for public school segregation [*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 551 U.S. 701 (2007)] and curtailed voting rights [*Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013) (Morris and Grange 2024)]. After President Trump appointed three justices during his first term, the Court abrogated abortion rights [*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, 597 U.S. 215 (2022)] and restricted affirmative action in higher education [*Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023)].

⁷ Not all populist movements lead to authoritarianism. Reflecting on 21st-century populist activities, Mansbridge and Mecedo (2019) say: “We argue that in the best circumstances, the current populist moment could produce a democratic awakening. We do not argue that we are living in those best circumstances” (73).

the Biden presidency, the cost of living, jobs, and, yes, illegal immigration (Leonhardt 2024; Sanchez 2024; Sanchez and Rosenberg 2024) were among the unifying issues. Additionally, swing voters were affected by ads criticizing Democratic support for transgender rights (Barrow and Levy 2024), indicating the continued presence of ascriptive hierarchy.

To be sure, Trump's gains among people of color in 2024 may not be the beginning of a new "racial realignment" (O'Brian 2024; Sides 2024). For example, experts predicted Latinos were ripe for partisan conversion ever since President George W. Bush won 40% of the Latino vote in 2004 (de la Garza and Cortina 2007). And yet, Latino party identification remained stable at 55-60% Democratic and 25-30% Republican through 2022 (Newport 2022). Moreover, the results of the 2024 national elections can be explained in multiple ways besides racial conflict (Brownstein 2024; Deggans 2024; Politico Magazine 2024; Tomasky 2024). Nonetheless, the ethnic composition of the vote bears watching and has implications for the APTF Final Report.

Of special interest to political science educators is the stance young adults take toward multiethnic democracy. Born between 1996 and 2010, the highly diverse Generation Z is regarded—debatably—as more tolerant of differences and socially aware than are previous generations (Dalton 2021; Lukianoff and Haidt 2019). Immersed in social media and exposed to major economic shocks and the COVID-19 pandemic, Gen Z is also more pessimistic about the future and less trusting of government (Dalton 2021; Tapper 2024). No wonder, then, that voter turnout of 18-29 year olds in 2024 dropped sharply from that of 2020 and supported Democratic candidates by only a small margin (Medina, Siegel-Stechler, and Suzuki 2025). It may be that young people are supportive of multiracial democracy but, consistent with the multiple traditions

thesis, disagree on what kind of community it should be. Likewise, President Trump's comeback suggests a multiethnic polity can be participative but not necessarily democratic or inclusive.⁸

Civic Engagement and the APTF Final Report: Proceed with All Deliberate Speed

We share the APTF's concern about the need to strengthen democracies around the globe and support its recommendation that the undergraduate political science curriculum should promote civic and political engagement in a complex, multiracial nation. Real-world experiences help students understand and apply political science concepts, bringing classroom learning to life (Matto et al. 2017). Culturally-relevant pedagogy can engage minority students by emphasizing their contributions to history and community contexts, increasing their school attendance and boosting GPAs (Dee and Penner 2017).

Beyond immediate in-school benefits, research shows that civic engagement produces substantial returns for students individually, fostering personal growth and democratic values, habits, and skills (Gaventa and Barrett 2010). Systemically, Putnam (2001b) linked high levels of social capital to positive outcomes in such areas as school performance, child welfare, and crime. Chetty et al. (2022) correlated neighborhood economic connectedness with reduction of intergenerational poverty.

At the same time, political science should couple its endorsement of greater political involvement with warnings about the frustrations and contradictions that students will encounter. As Fiorina (1999) notes, watching the players and process up close, especially the mechanics of compromise, gridlock, and unequal outcomes (Clark 2014; Gilens and Page 2014), may diminish students' trust in the system and future desire to contribute to public service. Reviews of the

⁸ An intriguing recent example of democratic "destruction through inclusion" is the electoral success of the Austrian far right (Muller 2024).

impact of civic engagement indicate that greater public involvement does not always improve governmental performance (Gaventa and McGee 2013).

Scholarship in comparative politics is important to understanding how nation-states deal with democratic dilemmas (Taub 2024). First and foremost, there are conflicting definitions of democracy, some of which we have discussed, ranging from minimalist (Przeworski 1999) to substantive, outcome-based, or “real” (James 2024). Many contemporary analyses are process-oriented, falling into the “how democracies die” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023) or rise-of-fascism (Snyder 2017; Zerofsky 2024) genre. There is also a literature of democratic salvation (della Porta 2020; Diamond 2024; Weyland 2024). Case studies of how activists and institutions recaptured democracy from illiberal regimes (Csaky 2024) or resisted authoritarian rule (Kim 2024) can inspire student activists.

Similarly, we should place struggles in the U.S. to achieve a multiracial democracy in comparative perspective. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2023) argue that few diverse societies have achieved true democracy. The post-Civil War Reconstruction period in the American South, quickly replaced by Jim Crow laws, represented an early failed attempt (Foner 2019). On the other hand, Ginsburg (2022) observes that Australia, Canada, and other multiethnic democracies did not experience the democratic backsliding or racial backlash that occurred in the U.S. Constitutional design could ameliorate ethnic conflict and promote cooperation (Horowitz 1985; Lijphart 2004). Drutman (2020), among others, advocates structural changes, such as multi-member districts in the House of Representatives, which could move the U.S. away from two-party polarization and toward a multiparty democracy (Wegman and Drutman 2025). Setting aside the question of whether such proposals could be adopted in the near term, comparative studies can stimulate students’ imagination and motivation for change.

Comparative scholarship reveals value conflicts in political practice that students as citizens should recognize. Familiar to observers of modern nativist movements in such places as Hungary (Waterbury 2020) and India (Ammassari, Fossati, and McDonnell 2022), unqualified majority rule can cancel minority rights and liberties. This is a prominent theme in American political thought (Madison 1787/1961; Tocqueville 1850/1969). Lieberman and Schlozman (2024) categorized the Republican Party as a *majority ethnic party*, based on white group identity, which executed backsliding behaviors such as vote manipulation and voter suppression. On the other hand, counter-majoritarian devices in the U.S. Constitution—Dahl’s Madisonian model (1956/2009)—can lead to “tyranny of the minority” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023).

In addition, the Framers in Philadelphia faced the dilemma, shared by all developing democracies, of how to secure public support for government while giving it sufficient strength to be effective (Diamond 1990). They created a unitary executive to promote “energy” in the constitutional structure, noting its qualities of “(d)ecision, activity, secrecy, and dispatch” (Hamilton 1788/1961). However, comparativists have documented how presidential models of democracy are more prone to instability than parliamentary models (Linz 1990; Przeworski et al. 2000). This finding is worthy of attention as American presidents exert greater unilateral power (Crouch, Rozell, and Sollenberger 2020; Howell and Moe 2023) and, in the case of Donald Trump entering his second term in office, shatter institutional and democratic norms (Pfiffner 2021; Savage 2025). All the while, constitutional and popular guardrails struggle to keep presidents in check (Driesen 2024).

Ethical contradictions and challenges abound for the civically engaged. For example, social capital is undoubtedly beneficial, but it also has a dark side (Putzel 1997). In the age of the Internet, it is easier for people of like minds to get together, for better or worse. Political groups

can be inclusive or exclusive. As January 6 demonstrated, social movements can be anti-democratic as well as democratic (Tarrow 2022).

Social media can facilitate expression of ideas and opportunities for cooperation, yet it can also enable sophistry, propaganda, and manipulation in favor of dictatorship or illiberal democracy (Gershberg and Illing 2022). Ominously, the rich and powerful, some of whom control media outlets and technology (Harrington 2024), can use lies and disinformation to delegitimize truth itself (Bufacchi 2021).

It is not hard to find examples of the clash between ideals and reality. Whether the issue is big money in election campaigns or book banning in school libraries, what constitutes legitimate speech is subject to political forces. There are plentiful value trade-offs, e.g., reconciling democracy with the administrative state (Kaufman 1956; Walters 2022), and democratic paradoxes (Honig 2007). Relevant to the post-9/11 era, the famous “paradox of tolerance” raises the question of whether “open societies” (Popper 1945/2013) can endure anti-democratic ideologies. Our point is that political science programs should help students become more aware of the philosophical puzzles they may encounter.

None of our reservations about the APTF Final Report and civic engagement are meant to discourage political science programs and students from pursuing public ends through politics. Appropriately, the APTF urges students to act ethically and responsibly. Indeed, the Final Report may elevate the importance of political theory in the political science major. If the new political science curriculum can encourage cultivation of ideas and democratic consciousness, as well as provide real-world experiences, it will go a long way toward achieving its goal of developing “aware and skilled students with strong civic identities that bend toward democracy, freedom, and social justice, so they can make a positive difference in the world (APTF 29).” More

broadly, we hope that a refreshed political science education, aspiring to the highest levels of critical thinking, ethics, empowerment, and responsibility, will strengthen civil society as guardrail to assaults against American democracy.

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