

Fault Lines in American Culture: The Case for Civic Debate

H. Michael Hartoonian and Richard D. Van Scotter

The social landscape of the United States can be mapped by using a series of cultural fault lines. This topography portrays conditions that descriptions of the surface fail to illuminate. Many of these schisms are the by-product of ideological positions that diminish personal responsibility and thoughtful civic discourse. If left unattended, these fault lines will continue to divide and diminish the republic. If they are understood and addressed, the United States could experience a rebirth of liberty, harmony, and prosperity.

Fissures on the Social Landscape

The cultural fault lines can be traced to gaps and imbalances in our socio-economic system even though our political democracy cherishes such values as liberty, equality, fairness, and justice. Here, we highlight several fault lines.

One glaring gap is the *unequal distribution of incomes* and wealth despite efforts to provide economic opportunity, universal education, and job training. Since the late 1970s, real incomes of middle-class families (adjusted for inflation) have declined by more than 7 percent, while income and wealth accruing to the most affluent have increased sharply. The underlying causes are no mystery: declining labor union membership, fewer high-paying manufacturing jobs, more low-income service jobs, a highly speculative investment and banking industry, a regressive national tax system, and tax laws that favor the wealthy. Today, the richest one percent of U.S. households earn as much each year as the bottom 60 percent put together.¹

A by-product of wealth inequality is the cultural fracture created through *housing patterns* segregated largely by income. Increasingly, the wealthy live in neighborhoods laced with 5,000-square-foot homes or larger, surrounded by walled-in or gated security. Many travel extensively abroad while sheltering incomes and capital gains in foreign banks. They are hardly citizens of the United States in a communal, unified sense, as in *e pluribus unum*.

The *healthcare* fracture is particularly demanding on individuals, businesses, and governments, creating a bifurcated society of “haves and have-nots” for a vital human need. The United States devotes a larger share of its Gross Domestic Product to healthcare than any other industrial nation, yet has disappointing aggregate results because of its uneven distribution. Private insurance companies, pharmaceutical firms, and healthcare providers benefit at the expense of businesses that offer medical benefits and families who pay confiscatory premiums (often for capricious coverage), while the uninsured are left with “third-world”

quality care. America’s costly system remains discriminatory, wasteful, and ultimately unsustainable.

Education as a Bridge across Fault Lines

It is a given that people will hold different points of view on important issues. In a nation as diverse as the United States, differences can be profound. Perhaps the most important rationale for public schools is to provide citizens with the ability to debate and resolve differences so that a more perfect union can be created. Historically, Americans have taken pride in the idea that their public schools offer responsibilities and opportunities to all. However, the schools have uneven outcomes as the result of social and economic disparity. As a result, our nation suffers from an intellectual fissure that separates the “privileged few” from the “disadvantaged,” the knowledgeable person from the individual with “low-information,” and the high-skilled from the low-skilled worker.

Despite this, comprehensive, universal education has been and should be a driving force in developing a middle class that manifests a common responsibility for maintaining national security, a productive economy, building a good society, and sustaining democracy. *Education holds the key to mending national fault lines*, but too often it is sidetracked from its essential purpose—citizenship.

Despite noble civic goals traced from Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and John Dewey to a host of modern scholars, the nation's schools now primarily attempt to serve the economy by producing young people with workplace skills. This purpose reveres what can be called *economic utility* with its faith in the market system and its aim to prepare students for the workplace. Its assumptions are that if a student pays attention in school, learns pertinent information and skills, and behaves correctly, he or she will be rewarded with a high-paying job. If a person gets a job, then what? This individual will have disposable income to consume things. While economic utility postulates that you are what you do for a living, *consumerism* says you are what you accumulate. One might think that schools would explicitly oppose such aims, because education is supposed to free the mind from the bondage of materialism.²

Education is separating Americans in ways not observed even a few decades ago. The rise of home schooling, charter schools, online learning, and other choices that appeal to a consumer mentality weaken the essential reason for the common school. Such options tell families and students that schools are here to serve personal interests and arm individuals with skills and information. This does not necessarily abet private schooling, but it does privatize the minds of people and diminish the function of schools to sustain our democratic republic. It can be said that *schools exist not to serve a public but to create a public; without a conception of the public good, public schools make no sense.*

The Power of Debate

The fundamental purpose of education in America, particularly public schools, is to nurture, maintain, and sustain our democratic republic. A means to doing this *is to help students understand that America is essentially an idea sustained through rigorous and intelligent debate.*

As such, America is an experiment that is open to unfilled human possibilities and democratic potential. This belief is not an attempt to instill a sense of national pride based on the belief that America is superior to all other countries, as some curricula do. Rather, it is a unique and youthful nation whose life is sustained by continuous arguments. As political scientist Susan Herbst poignantly explains:

We need to teach young people how to argue with vigor, intelligence, and panache. We need to create a culture of argument, and we need to do this on a mass scale throughout our public and private schools. If we cannot teach our children how to reason and articulate their ideas, they will find themselves in the same dysfunctional bind their parents live in.³

Democratic Value Tensions

If the United States is an argument, what is the argument about? In its early history, the argument was over whether or not such a republic could be developed and sustained on a grand scale. In many ways, this nation, from the beginning, has been the stage for a dispute over the merits of democracy and whether or not it is possible to have a nation that is truly governed “by the people, for the people, and of the people.”

At a deeper level, the history of the United States can be seen as a persistent argument, launched at the time of the American Revolution and still carried out, by discourse among its citizens that centers on four sets of value tensions:

- Law vs. Ethics
- Private Wealth vs. Common Wealth
- Freedom vs. Equality
- Unity vs. Diversity

While each value set is inherently in conflict, they also possess a vital synergy. For example, private wealth is never fully realized, nor secure, without a robust

common wealth. Likewise, our freedom is impoverished if not accompanied by a sense of equality that provides a moral infrastructure in which to encase that freedom. Similarly our laws are never good unless guided by a higher conscience. And the quest for cultural unity is inconsistent with democracy if it does not also recognize the rich diversity of our increasingly pluralistic society.

All public issues entail conflict and compromise that can be resolved through the lens of these value tensions. A democracy is defined by how well the people balance the conflicting values.

Law and Ethics. Laws that help us govern and ethical principles that guide behavior are not always in harmony. This dissonance and tension can lead to change, a better legal system, and a good society. The consequences hinge on how intellectually prepared we are to resolve such paradoxes. Important political documents and statements often illustrate this discord.

The tension between law and ethics has been a constant theme of the history of the United States. The American Revolution was the culmination of an extended debate between ethics (an appeal to higher principles as a rationale for independence) and law (British sovereign authority over the colonies). During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, Martin Luther King, Jr., in his letters from the Birmingham jail, made it clear that sometimes the law must be broken so that society can manifest more ethical behavior. In these and many other cases through our history we have debated why and how to bring a better balance between law and ethics.

Private and Common Wealth. At the time of the American Revolution, people understood that their personal well being was intimately connected with the welfare of the community. In effect, the concepts of private wealth and public or common wealth were

finely meshed. To early Americans, “happiness” was understood to be a by-product of the well-lived life. It meant living beyond oneself and giving of one’s talents to make the community better.

America’s quest for *private wealth* has been a driving force behind the nation’s economic development. Yet, investment in the *common wealth* or public infrastructure—schools, highways, bridges, water systems, electric grids, gas utilities, libraries, and parks—also benefits businesses and enhances private wealth.

Freedom and Equality. Perhaps the pivotal tension throughout the history of the United States has been the argument between freedom and equality. Democracy, at its best, is a continuous struggle to balance these ideals. Our history can be read as attempts at one time to promote freedom over equality and at others to favor the reverse. Like a swinging pendulum, one value or the other seems to be more popular and persuasive during a particular cycle of history.

Like other value tensions, an emphasis on either freedom or equality results in too little of the other. Freedom from slavery after the Civil War was of small value until the debate for equality was engaged. An imbalance is undemocratic and bad for the republic. For example, when the conventional wisdom favors freedom, the power and resources of a society tend to flow into the hands of the few. In turn, those in power develop rationales to justify this distribution in the name of merit, efficiency, and economic growth. Left unattended, this imbalance of wealth and power undermines democracy and threatens to destroy the nation. However, when the pendulum swings, the national tendency is to favor redistributing wealth in the name of compassion and economic justice. In its wake, personal freedom tends to suffer. While laws were enacted to protect workers, house

the poor, and promote civil rights, they often resulted in a heavier hand for government.

In a democratic republic, citizens need to continue the debate regarding the need for freedom to achieve knowledge, justice, and wealth. It is society’s task, which is to say the task of all of us, to ensure that these elements are fairly distributed.

Unity and Diversity. Take a dollar bill from your wallet or purse. Displayed on it is a symbol of this nation—*e pluribus unum*. From Latin, this means “Out of many ... One.” The individual is highly prized in our society, yet a person must exist within the constraints of society—with its obligations and requirements as well as its support and enrichment. To understand this is to realize what it means to become an American. The question we continually struggle to address as the nature and complexion of society changes is: “What does it take to be admitted to the ‘Unum?’” In today’s political climate, immigration is a powerful issue that can be better understood through the framework of unity and diversity. The debate of democracy is about how diversity is recognized while simultaneously cherishing the unity of all people.

The democratic debate is powerful when its outcome is to bring a better balance to the four value tensions. That debate can best be conducted by those who keep an eye on other positions while basing arguments on facts, logic, and empirical evidence. *Productive debate values understanding, compromise, and transformation. It is not about winning and losing, but collaborative policymaking.*

When our debate attempts to balance these four sets of values, it holds the promise for a progressively better society. The democratic mind is capable of holding two conflicting values in mind simultaneously while noting the merits of both. This is seeing the world from a “both-and” rather than “either-or” perspective. In a healthy democracy,

citizens and their representatives attempt to bring these value pairs into balance, as they address problems. The result is the continuation of the debate to establish and maintain balance between and among all four value tensions.

Without that civil debate, democracy is threatened and may even cease to exist when arguments become stalemates. Unfortunately, this is what Americans have witnessed recently in congressional gridlock over issues, such as healthcare reform, budget policy, and the federal debt ceiling. These matters should—and can—be intelligently worked out through civil arguments and debate using our fundamental values with the intention of collaborating to resolve and balance the discrepancies. 🗳️

Notes

1. Don Peck, “Can the Middle Class be Saved,” *The Atlantic* 308, no. 2 (2011): 60–61.
2. Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Random House, Inc. 1966), 27–36.
3. Susan Herbst, *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 35 (see also Herbst, “Rude Democracy in America: Can We Overcome It?” *The Key Reporter* 76, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 8–9.

H. MICHAEL HARTOONIAN is scholar-in-residence at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, and past president of the National Council for the Social Studies. **RICHARD D. VAN SCOTTER** is a writer and social studies educator living in Colorado Springs. The writers are authors of a digital Internet history and civics program developed under the direction of William White, with support from the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and published by Pearson Education.