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Citizenship Education in the United States

A Historical Perspective

Iftikhar Ahmad



Citizenship Education in the United States

This book presents a history of the ideas and activities of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in the field of citizenship education in public schools. Examining APSA's evolving objectives and strategies in implementing citizenship education, Ahmad analyzes the complicated relationship between the teaching of government in the public schools and the APSA's changing visions of citizenship education. By offering a narrative of political scientists' ideas on citizenship and citizenship education, Ahmad reveals the impact of APSA's worldview and official policies concerning pre-collegiate curriculum and instruction in citizenship education. By providing a comprehensive history of APSA's agenda and its implementation, this book sheds light on the intersection between the pedagogical goals of political scientists and the meaning, purpose, and context for citizenship education in high schools.

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To my parents, who taught their 11 children how to be good citizens.



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Preface

Citizenship is a contested realm. In modern times every democratic society seeks to transmit its values to the younger citizens through citizenship education. Because democracies are noisier than dictatorships, diverse voices assert their conceptions of citizenship. The immanence of interest groups in democracies, or what Alexis de Tocqueville called voluntary associations, makes not only the common definition of citizenship more difficult, but it also throws a challenge to curriculum designers and classroom teachers. In democracies there is hardly any consensus on what knowledge is of most worth for preparing good citizens. Competing perspectives clash and opinions differ on what is to be included in or excluded from the school curriculum for citizenship education. Hence, by definition, citizenship education is a highly politicized terrain.

Similar to the contemporary debates on public education, in the 19th century, parents, political activists, and historians also took interest in what was to be taught schoolchildren for preparing them as good citizens. In general, the curriculum for citizenship education included the teaching of American history, civics, or community civics. Social sciences, such as political science, sociology, anthropology, and psychology, were not introduced in colleges or schools until the early 20th century. As such, few stakeholders recommended the teaching of social sciences for preparing good citizens. It would be fair to say that the teaching of social sciences for citizenship education in schools is a 20th-century phenomenon; its earliest and most ardent proponents were political scientists.

In the first decade of the 20th century, political scientists organized themselves as an interest group, namely the American Political Science Association (APSA), and thereby launched a movement for popularizing the teaching of government not only in colleges but also in secondary schools.

The conservative founders of the APSA introduced two novel but mutually contradictory conceptions into pre-collegiate citizenship education, first, in their Hegelian worldview, because the iron cage of the state was omnipresent and omnipotent, it deserved a place in the curriculum, and second, because teaching and learning about the state was no less than a scientific enterprise; citizenship education required the tools of science, that

is, political science. Hence for political scientists, science was the *sine qua non* of the study of the state as well as citizenship education.

In contrast, college and university historians, who had been in the business of citizenship education in schools much longer than political scientists, were undeterred and continued stressing teaching about the national heritage. Historians strongly recommended government as part and parcel of history courses and not as an autonomous course in the curriculum. In historians' views, the study of history, and not government, made the core of citizenship education. This subject became a major bone of contention between the early 20th-century American political scientists and historians. Who prevailed in this struggle? The fact that today almost every state in the Union requires its secondary school students to complete a course in government before graduation suggests the outcome of the struggle.

What is important to note here is that the APSA members did not necessarily hold a monolithic view of citizenship education. Neither were the succeeding generations of political scientists endorsing their predecessors' Hegelian conception of citizenship. But aside from the internal ideological contentions within the APSA, on the external front there was unity in their ranks, which resulted in a plethora of strategies and political struggle for securing a mandatory status for the teaching of government in high schools. Reports in this book provide a glimpse into political scientists' myriad efforts in pre-collegiate citizenship education. My goal is to construct a narrative from a disparate body of reports that the APSA committees put out in a sporadic fashion over a period of eight to nine decades. In doing so I perhaps raise more questions than I succeed in addressing.

By constructing a narrative from the original APSA reports and recommendations about citizenship education in schools, I have attempted to establish a linkage between political scientists' primary mission in colleges and universities and social studies education in pre-collegiate classrooms. Some would argue that establishing such a linkage may be a tall order because college professors and schoolteachers live on two distant islands with a huge gulf between them. My argument is that the APSA reports provide evidence confirming a historical linkage between the two—that the state-centric, conservative leadership of the early APSA played a pivotal role in securing a capstone status for the teaching of government in the social studies curriculum. Indeed, as the sporadic nature of the reports show, later political scientists may have been less enthusiastic in promoting their predecessors' state-centric ideology. But by no means did they give up their proprietary claim on citizenship education in schools.

Moreover, because political scientists introduced political science into the secondary social studies curriculum by way of the government course, this story is also about developments in social studies education. I seek to show how the two fields came into contact with each other and what changes occurred over nine decades in the social studies curriculum, as well as the political science discipline, and if indeed paradigm shifts in political science

in some form made any inroads into social studies and hence into citizenship education.

This work is based on my research at Columbia University and Long Island University, Post Campus, New York. Several people helped me in various ways in my venture to write about political scientists' activities in pre-collegiate citizenship education. I am grateful to Professor Stephen J. Thornton, who encouraged me to pursue the topic. I am deeply indebted to Professor Nel Noddings, whose remarkable patience, rigorous critique, and unwavering faith in me made this research possible. I am also thankful to Professor Margaret C. Crocco, whose insightful suggestions proved to be very beneficial to my project. I must thank my wife Pat, who helped me in more ways than I could count here. My son, Adam, also deserves special thanks for his patience and understanding.

If there are any errors in the book, those will be all mine.



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1 Introduction

I wrote this book to chronicle the ideas and activities of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in the field of citizenship education in public schools. It is a narrative of the sporadic efforts of the APSA committees to bring social studies curricula into conformity with their own visions of citizenship and citizenship education. I address and explain the myriad strategies employed by political scientists to foster citizenship education in pre-collegiate settings. And while most of these strategies were in the form of collaboration with schoolteachers and making curriculum recommendations, in some instances, they also took political measures that were no different than interest group lobbying.

I argue that although the APSA's early efforts were fairly successful in achieving its objective, that is, winning a capstone status for the teaching of government in high schools, this historical accomplishment may not have necessarily contributed to the preparation of democratic citizens. Hence, with this skepticism, the book examines political scientists' periodic interests in citizenship education by raising four questions: (1) What were the main objectives of the APSA in fostering citizenship education in public schools, (2) how have the paradigm shifts in political science influenced political scientists' perspectives on citizenship and citizenship education, (3) what specific proposals and recommendations did political scientists make for curriculum and instruction in public schools, and (4) what conceptions about citizenship and citizenship education did the APSA and its committees share with schoolteachers, social studies educators, and curriculum policy makers?

These questions deserve a systematic examination because most studies of citizenship education seem to pay little attention to past activities of the APSA, especially its activities concerning the social studies curriculum—a field known for having a special responsibility for citizenship education in schools. Indeed, some authors have dealt with this subject, but it seems that their analyses untenably eulogize political scientists' roles in citizenship education. First, they cite only a small number of the APSA reports, which surely portray an incomplete picture of the association's activities. Second, almost all authors erroneously characterize the APSA's activities in

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citizenship education as apolitical. And third, because political science has been evolving over decades, none of the authors on the subject contextualizes the APSA's reports and statements by delineating the shifting ideological nuances in the field and corresponding changes in political scientists' visions of American democracy, the state, and citizenship. Hence, this book raises questions and explores plausible explanations for the APSA's periodic interests in citizenship education.

Goals of This Book

My primary aim in writing this book is to construct a narrative about political scientists' ideas on citizenship and citizenship education as manifested in the APSA's reports and statements issued between 1908 and 1999. These reports and statements represent the APSA's changing worldviews and official policies concerning pre-collegiate curriculum and instruction in citizenship education.

Moreover, these documents contain crucial information and data on the APSA's agenda and kindred activities concerning the social studies curriculum and instruction. In addition, I was interested in these documents because they not only tell an interesting story about the historical relationship between political scientists and the social studies curriculum but have been a valuable resource for famous authors on citizenship education as well.

In different decades of the 20th century, writers including Rolla M. Tryon (1935), Cora Prifold (1962), Jack Allen (1966), Hazel Hertzberg (1981), David Jenness (1990), Hindy Schachter (1998), Stephen Leonard (1999), and Stephen Bennett (1999) benefited from some of these reports and statements and cited them in their research. It may be important to note that since the APSA published these documents in different decades, not every author—especially the earlier ones—could have studied each one of them. Also, literature on citizenship education suggests that later authors recognized only the best known of these documents and did not pay attention to all the documents the APSA committees had issued.

In my view there was an urgent need for cobbling up all the disparate reports and statements in one place and in some way constructing a narrative about political scientists' changing conceptions of citizenship education.

Moreover, since currently there is a growing interest in citizenship education, this book may perhaps stimulate a meaningful conversation among and between stakeholders about what knowledge may be of most worth in citizenship education. In particular, at least five groups of stakeholders may find this work interesting: curriculum policy makers, social studies historians, textbook writers, classroom teachers, and graduate students in social studies programs.

First, the book provides curriculum policy makers an alternative explanation of the meaning, purpose, and context of citizenship education in high schools.