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COMMENTARY FROM THE COMMUNITY

Why college civics requirements are urgently needed

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It's the classic conundrum of democracy. Citizens in a democracy can freely elect and tolerate an authoritarian leader who stifles democracy.

It happened in Turkey, Hungary, and now — to a limited, but increasingly distressing degree, in the United States — as one views President Donald Trump's anti-democratic actions over the past year, including his attempts to suppress dissent, prosecute his opponents, and circumvent Congress in constitutionally egregious ways.

Even if one grants that the U.S. Supreme Court has so far regarded some of Trump's actions as constitutional, such as mass firings of federal employees and gutting agencies like the U.S. Agency for International Development, these actions nonetheless fall outside the realm of what other presidents of either party have done. And they elide time-honored norms of democracy in ways that have incensed both liberal and conservative scholars.

Why has there not been more outrage displayed in public opinion polls or dissent on a widespread, rather than occasional, basis?

It comes down to lack of knowledge, the Madisonian foundation of democratic citizenship.

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is whatever the United States government does. A disturbing 30% of Americans cannot name all three branches of government.

In light of these stark knowledge deficits, it is hardly surprising that most Americans have not engaged in other forms of political participation, such as protest; aren't incensed by (or even vocal in expressing support for) Trump's anti-democratic antics; or fail to understand he has deliberately bypassed powers the Constitution grants to Congress.

If the U.S. is not to gradually slide into autocracy, as can occur when democracies begin to lose their legal and normative footing, the nation must take steps to change. We must begin with the young, who in the long run face the greatest risks.

Universities should supplement high

school civics courses with more rigorous coursework. The United States should follow Ohio's example, where a civic literacy course will be required for completion of an undergraduate degree in the 2029-2030 academic year, and four universities — including Cleveland State — have civics centers.

But the content needs a reboot. Students must appreciate that democracy consists of more than voting, and that America has a long tradition of political protest that spans the civil rights and pro-life movements.

Teachers must disabuse young people of the notion that democracy is synonymous with what the U.S. government does, a classic flaw in political thinking documented by the psychologist John Jost, who has demonstrated that Americans are psychologically inclined to defend the status quo because

it serves needs of security and certainty, while denying the broader injustices in the system.

Civics courses should expand to cover media, emphasizing that democracy cannot function without a feisty news media, and that investigative news stories that uncover political corruption do not constitute bias, but are a necessary way to speak truth to power.

Finally, civics classes should give students practice talking in a civil way with those with whom they disagree. One of the problems in America is that people avoid talking about political issues, particularly when they sense a disagreement.

But if we never talk to our antagonists, we can never see them as people who hold reasonable, just opposing, positions from our own. Only if we appreciate our adversaries' views can we prevent political disagreements from disintegrating into partisan animus that leads us to view our opponents as enemies who must be stopped at any cost.

Reform of civics education is the most constructive way to prevent U.S. democracy from devolving further. For in the end, democracy is precious, fragile, and never guaranteed.

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