A New Approach to Civics Education


Noting that more than two-thirds of students did not reach proficiency in a civics assessment conducted in 2006, reformers claim that robust civics courses in social studies, economics, political science, and history might well produce well-informed citizens, enhance popular engagement, and increase turnout on Election Day. Less clear is how schools can foster an understanding of how a representative democracy works - and what roles ordinary Americans play in it.

In Democracy, David Moss, a professor at the Harvard Business School, provides an innovative approach to this challenge. Applying a case study method (and pedagogies designed to promote active and experiential learning) to American history courses, he claims, can give students a sound foundation of knowledge of chronology, important events, individuals, organizations, and the structures and mechanics of policy formulation and implementation. Best read along with Minds on Fire, by Marc Carnes, which shows how role-immersion games can utilize the competitive impulses of undergraduates (and their desires to internalize alternate selves) to stimulate substantive learning, Democracy should command the attention of teachers and students of all ages.

Democracy presents nineteen case studies (developed in his course at Harvard), each of which ends with a decision about to be made at a pivotal moment in our nation's history. Should President Washington sign or veto a bill to establish a national bank (and thereby vindicate an expansive view of the Constitution's "necessary and proper clause")? Should President Lincoln evacuate Fort Sumter or send provisions to Union soldiers, an act almost certain to provoke war? Should Martin Luther King, Jr. lead a march across the
Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, against the wishes of President Johnson and in violation of a federal court order? Should the legislature of Florida ratify the Equal Rights Amendment?

Presented at the end of the book, “follow-ups” to the cases invite students to gauge the implications of the decisions that were made (and, perhaps, the roads not taken). And Moss’s conclusion - that “more orderly” elections (with the introduction of the secret ballot); the achievement of near universal suffrage among adult citizens; and the dramatic expansion of the federal government “may have eroded citizens’ faith and engagement in the democracy, in ways both large and small” - is, to put it mildly, provocative.

Most important, Moss’s case studies are engagingly written, well researched, rich in content and context. Consider, for example, the chapter on race, justice, and the jury system in the post-Civil War South. As he lays out Judge Alexander Rives’ charge to two (interracial) federal juries to investigate whether the state courts of Virginia excluded blacks from jury pools because they were black, Moss reveals that in 1201 King John of England decreed that “if a Christian shall have a cause of action against a Jew, let him be tried by a Jew’s peers”; and in 1354 King Edward III proclaimed that foreigners residing in England could request “a mixed jury” that included individuals who spoke their own language. One can readily imagine students (and readers of Moss’s book) thinking hard about the meaning of the phrase “a jury of his peers,” the relevance of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, and the role of the federal government in determining the composition of state juries.

In the chapter on the initiative and referendum in Massachusetts, to cite one more example, Moss asks us to ask about the role of direct democracy in a republic based on representation. Critics of these reforms, Moss points out, claimed that big money interests often controlled the outcome - and questioned the capacity of voters to make informed decisions. They cited an election in 1908 in Oregon in which voters approved two separate initiatives introduced by competing groups of salmon fishermen, one banning the use of gill-nets downstream and the other banning fish wheels upstream, thus shutting down the industry until a federal court blocked enforcement of the two laws.

Moss believes that fierce political conflicts can be constructive if they are mediated by shared ideals. He seems to demonstrate, moreover, that in a world in which “alternative facts” are gaining traction, an informed understanding of the past can help us identify pathways to a prosperous and just democracy.