

SPRINGER BRIEFS IN EDUCATION
CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Kerry J. Kennedy

Civic Engagement in Changing Contexts

Challenges and
Possibilities for
Democracy



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**SpringerBriefs in Citizenship Education
for the 21st Century**

Series Editor

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In all countries citizenship education (with a variety of different subject names) is a component of the school curriculum. Sometimes it is a school subject, sometimes a cross curriculum theme and sometimes it is focused on extra-curricular activities. Its purpose, in whatever form it takes, is to prepare students to become future citizens. This is as true in democratic societies as it is in authoritarian societies. Visions for the role of citizens in different societies will differ but irrespective of the vision, the role of citizenship education is to support it and prepare young people for the role they are expected to play in the future. Currently, however, there are two key issues that make the expected role of citizenship education problematic. First, the function of citizenship education appears simple: support the values of the society of which young people are a part, equip them with the necessary skills for involvement in that society and ensure that on graduation students can play the role expected of them. Yet even though schools may do all they can to perform this role, they are not the only influence on students. It is acknowledged that such influences are multiple: parents, peers, and traditional media being amongst the most important. More recently social media have been shown to influence students in different ways by these. Thus school purposes for citizenship education may have to contend with competing values making agreed outcomes difficult to achieve for all students. Second, the broad macro context that characterises most societies have become more unstable and unpredictable. Contentious politics, international terrorism, populism, rising nationalism, fundamentalisms of different kinds and globalisation all serve to fragment societies and detract from social cohesion. The common vision that is meant to bind societies, and hence form the basis of citizenship education, is thus under threat from different directions. Global values, versus national values, religious values versus secular values, multicultural values versus monocultural values, liberal values versus conservative values: it is these binaries, and others like them, that currently characterise social actions and social exchanges that serve to undermine the development of cohesive societies in many parts of the world. Thus this Series is designed to provide support for policymakers, researchers and teachers who have responsibility for citizenship education in their respective domains. It will help them with new thinking, new ideas and new directions to support the development of citizenship education in the volatile times characterised by the 21st century.

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I would like to dedicate this book to my co-researchers in citizenship education. I have enjoyed the research partnerships with colleagues at The Education University of Hong Kong and with many others across the globe. I am grateful and indebted to all those with whom I have worked throughout my career. The new idea, the new insight, the new learning: this is the researcher's reward. Yet such rewards are all the more so when they are shared. My thanks to all my research partners throughout the years.

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Chapter 1

Civic Engagement—What Is It and Why Is It Important?



Abstract Civic engagement is a widely used term in the civic education literature, and in this chapter, different ways of considering such engagement are considered. From an historical perspective, it is argued that civic engagement, as it took place in ancient societies such as Greece and Rome, was exclusive in nature and therefore not necessarily a prelude to modern forms. It is not until the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century that universal suffrage provides a form of civic engagement for all citizens in democratic societies. Yet broader notions of such engagement have emerged involving not only political but also social engagement. These are the standard ways of considering civic engagement. Critiques of these different forms are considered indicating both the fluidity and the pejorative nature of the construct.

Keywords Civic engagement · Political engagement · Social engagement · Good citizen

This book is a response to the multiple influences that have emerged in the twenty-first century to challenge both civic engagement and democracy. It might even be argued that these terms, that were defined in the twentieth century, have become suspect in the twenty-first century.

Having survived the so-called millennium bug problem, the new century provided a sense of optimism signalling a new start. With the collapse of European communism in the 1990s, there had been hope that Fukuyama's prediction about 'the end of history' was being realised—it seemed liberal democracy had triumphed. Yet the 9/11 attacks on the New York Trade Centre were not so much 'the end of history' as the beginning of a new era of conflict, accusation, belligerence and dishonesty. This era has involved protracted wars, global financial crises, the re-emergence of authoritarianism, accelerated political protests, extraordinary global mobility and health pandemics. The extent of turbulence stretched the limits of democratic institutions, saw the emergence of new political forces, unsettled the liberal international order and created enormous geopolitical disruptions. It is these contexts that form the backdrop to this book.

What does civic engagement mean in these contexts? This chapter will review different ways of understanding civic engagement and suggest how it may need to be understood in what could be referred to as the ‘new world order’. This will involve a consideration of the historic meanings of civic engagement and what this means for understanding modern forms of civic engagement

Historic Meanings of Civic Engagement

Very often, discussion of early forms of civic engagement hark back to ancient examples in Greece and Rome where participation in government was often encouraged. Despite endorsement from notables such as Aristotle and Plato, however, the civic participation of ancient times cannot really be equated with modern day understandings of civic engagement. This is because it was more civic exclusion than participation. In Greece, for example, women of all classes were excluded, slavery was endorsed, and immigrants were not included. Ancient forms of participation were about the engagement of male elites to the exclusion of everyone else. Hanchard (2018) described Greek:

the citizenship regime of Athens after the Persian Wars was a gendered, ethno-national regime. . . (in which) slavery, according to its proponents, made Athenian democracy practicable. (p. 2)

Democratic civic engagement, therefore, cannot be attributed to the ancients. What the West inherited from these ancient cities was not so much democracy as exclusion. This can be seen, for example, in the development of the Italian city states that were certainly not advocates for an inclusive democracy since ‘elections, in theory aiming at recruiting the most competent, in practice restricted the government to the noble and rich’ (Tangian, 2014, p. 57). It was not until the English Puritans argued in the seventeenth century for greater parliamentary representation that the faintest glimpse of democracy appeared in Europe, with the impetus coming from their Christian theology rather than the ancients in Greece and Rome.

The concept of civic engagement, therefore, cannot be traced from the exclusionary practices of these ancients. The American and French Revolutions might seem like more obvious starting places, but these were largely middle-class affairs that sought to replace one form of tyranny with another. It is not coincidental, for example, that slavery remained entrenched in the new United States after independence, and women remained an excluded group. The same can be said of the 1688 Revolution in Great Britain after which issues of gender exclusion and human enslavement remained unaddressed for over a century in the case of the latter and for over two centuries in the case of the former.

What was missing in these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political experiments was any notion that struggles against oppression were struggles on behalf of all citizens rather than the vested interests of a few. An exception was the election of the French National Convention in 1792 that allowed all males to vote in recognition