

Reflecting Upon Democracy in a Moment of Transition:

The Role of Higher Education in Fostering Citizenship

Elizabeth C. Matto, Ph.D.

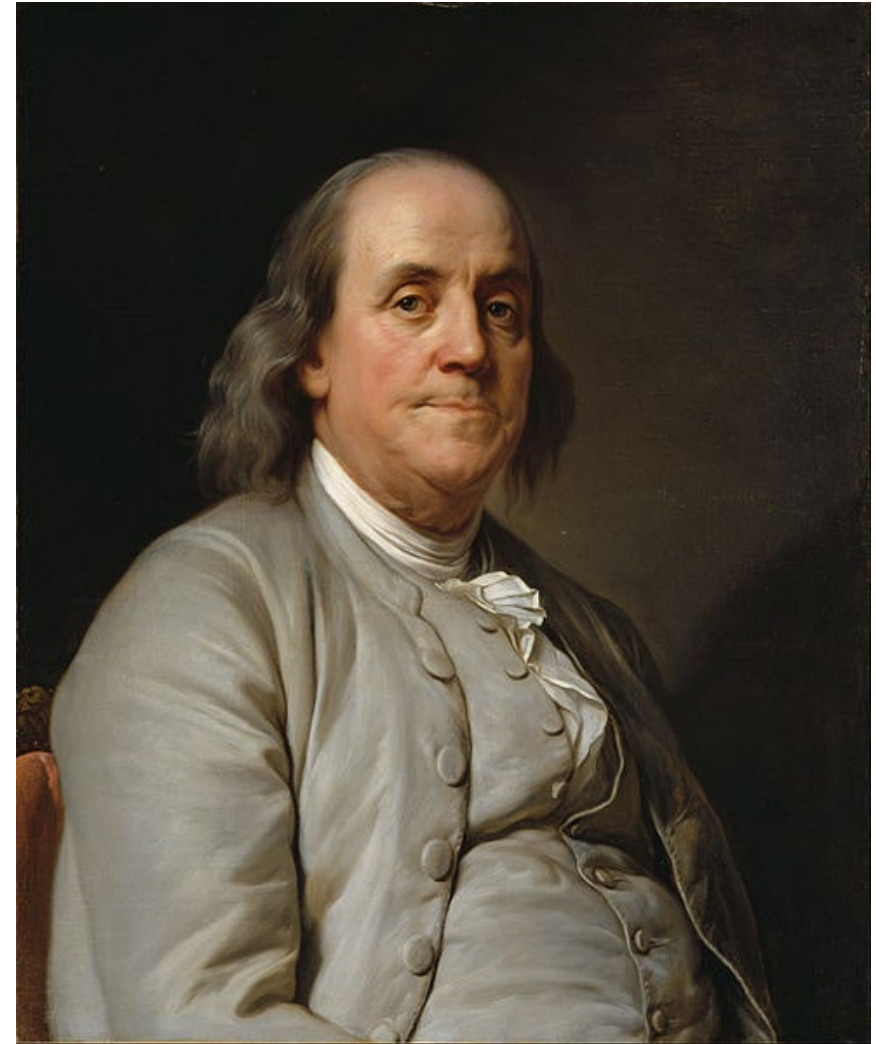
Director, Eagleton Institute of Politics



Independence Hall



“A republic,
if you can
keep it.”



Plan

American democracy today -
promise & peril

Conceptualizing democratic
citizenship

Fostering active citizenship
in the next generation



Smithsonian National Museum of American History

Health of American Democracy

Less than half of the respondents (49%) stated that American democracy **does** a good job representing the people

45% said that American democracy **does not do a good job** representing the people

76% said American democracy is currently under threat with each party offering very different versions of how or why it's under threat

Times/Siena Poll, October 27, 2024

Health of American Democracy

Forty-seven percent are “**very worried**” and 39% are “**somewhat worried**” about the future of America’s democracy.

Most believe that the tone and nature of politics has become **less respectful** (86%) and that **political violence is a major (59%) or at least minor (28%) problem** in the United States currently.

Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling, November 1, 2024



U.S. Capitol

Health of American Democracy

Majorities endorse “the basic principles of democracy when they are put in abstract terms” but **that “consensus breaks down completely” when “broad principles are translated into more specific propositions.”** (Prothro and Griggs 1960)

In a 2017 study, Republicans were twice as likely as Democrats to hold that **“when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Congress and govern without Congress.”** Results were reversed in 2014 when the White House was controlled by a Democrat (Feierherd, Lupu, and Stokes)

A majority of Republican respondents **labelled Democrats as immoral** and 63% held that, compared with other Americans, Democrats are **“more unpatriotic.”** On the other side of the aisle, 47% of Democrats said that Republican were immoral compared to other Americans and 75% **characterized Republicans as closed-minded.** (Pew Research Center, 2019)

Linking Our Revolutionary Ideals to Our Contemporary Practice



U.S. Supreme Court

“ . . .it shouldn't be shocking, but the scope and the brazenness with which our administration has acted is the shocking part.”

Sarah Binder, THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION Democracy in Question podcast “How do America's founding principles apply to democracy today?” Thursday, February 27, 2025

Fostering Democratic Citizenship

“Democracy needs to be born anew every generation, and education is the midwife.”

John Dewey (1859-1952)



Fostering Democratic Citizenship

Civic preparedness is multifaceted. . . .

. . . . amounts to more than possessing political knowledge

. . . . also entails being equipped with the skills to be a democratic citizen

. . . . disposition to be democratic citizens



How Do We Envision American Democracy?

“It is easy to see that the minds of almost all the inhabitants of the United States move in the same direction and are guided according to the same rules; that is to say, they possess, without ever having gone to the trouble of defining the rules, a certain philosophical methodology common to all of them.”

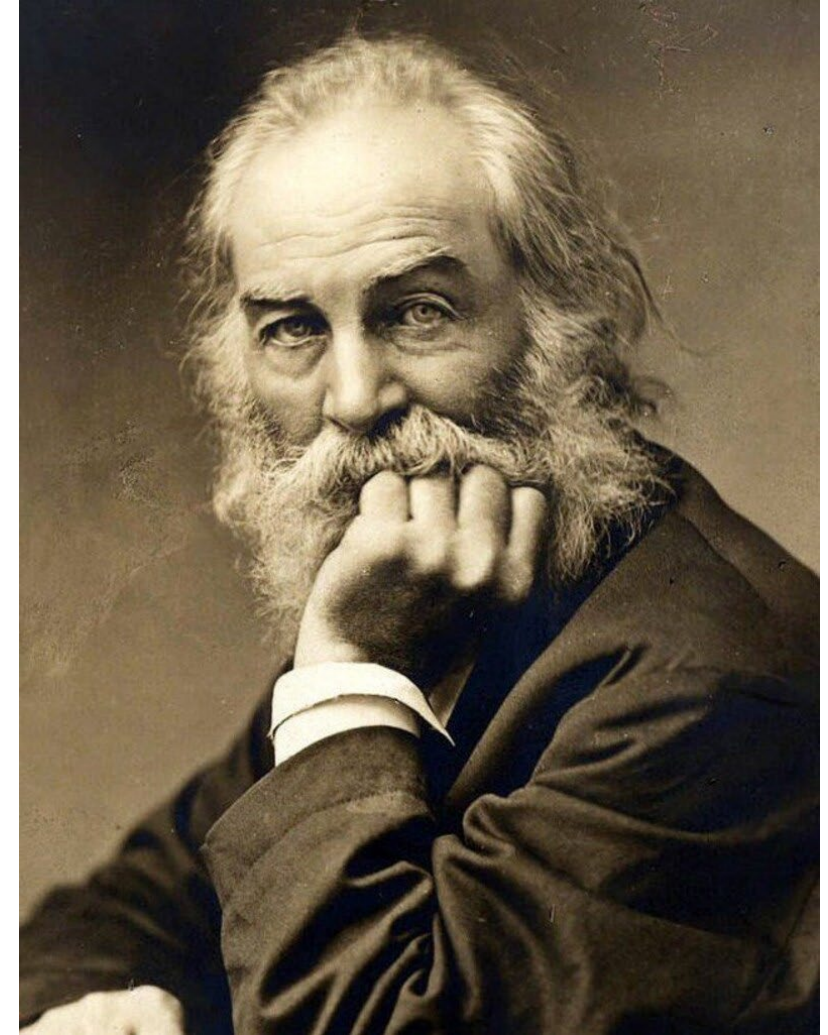
Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*



Smithsonian National Museum of American History

Envisioning Democratic Citizenship

“Did you too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruits in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between men, and their ... Democracy in all public and private life”



Teaching Students to Think Like A Democratic Citizen

A shared understanding of and commitment to the United States Constitution and the governmental structure that emanates from it.

A commitment to disseminating accurate information and fostering the productive exchange of ideas that a system of self-government requires.

Ensuring that institutions and practices of democracy are accessible and respected.



Smithsonian National Museum
of American History

Teaching Students to Talk Like a Democratic Citizen

Cultivating a willingness and a facility with engaging in political discussion . . . disagreeing without being disagreeable



National Constitution Center

Teaching Students to Vote Like a Democratic Citizen



Vote and Help
Others Vote

Smithsonian National Museum of American History

Teaching Students to Speak Out Like a Democratic Citizen

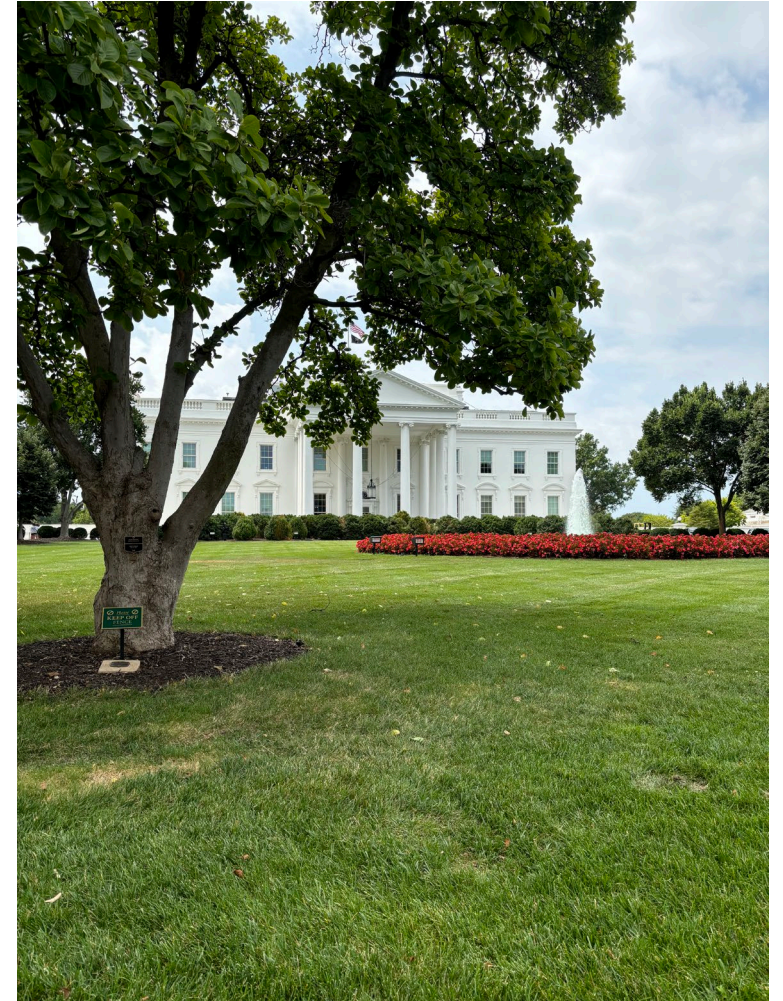
Holding Public Officials Accountable



Smithsonian National Museum of American History

Teaching Students to Get in the Arena

Running for Office Serving the Public



White House

Threats Against Higher Education

Our ability to conduct research, teach, and speak freely is under threat. This may be an existential moment for higher education.

Colleges and universities are a key part of the fabric of American society. What we do is critical to the U.S. economy, technology, public health, and scientific advancement more generally.



Smithsonian National Museum
of American History

“First They Came for Columbia”

By Ryan D. Enos and Steven Levitsky, Contributing Opinion Writers

<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2025/3/14/enos-levitsky-harvard-columbia-trump/>

A New Model for Teaching Democratic Citizenship



We the People
of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union,
establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence,
promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty
to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution
for the United States of America.