When Civility Becomes Performance: Civic Education as the Foundation of Public Reason

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Introduction

As artificial intelligence floods the contemporary public sphere with hyper-personalized content, synthetic deepfakes, and automated outrage, the traditional guardrails of democratic debate are rapidly collapsing. In response to this digital cacophony, technology executives, educational leaders, and policy experts routinely call for "digital civility" guidelines, algorithmic guardrails, and platform moderation designed to keep online interactions constructive and polite. Yet, despite these noble interventions, political polarization continues to deepen, and public trust in democratic institutions remains at historic lows (Pew Research Center, 2024).

This stalemate reveals a fundamental flaw in modern political discourse. Algorithmic moderation and politeness guidelines address only the superficial symptoms of a much deeper institutional decay. The existential threat posed by the AI era is not merely that citizens are being rude to one another across digital networks; it is that citizens are losing the very capacity for autonomous, reasoned judgment. In an age where digital outrage is frictionlessly automated, civility that functions merely as performative etiquette offers zero structural defense against manipulation.

While civility remains a vital pillar of a healthy democracy, contemporary appeals for it often misdiagnose the crisis by treating civility as an independent, plug-and-play virtue rather than the downstream expression of a deeper civic formation. Absent rigorous civic education, civility decays into performative civility—a superficial etiquette, a weaponized politeness used to quiet dissent or preserve a comfortable status quo without doing the demanding work of democratic self-government. Situated within the classical Aristotelian tradition of citizenship as the cultivation of civic virtue, democratic citizenship requires the intellectual and moral formation necessary for meaningful participation in public life.

Building upon this classical foundation through the Enlightenment and modern frameworks of Immanuel Kant, John Rawls, and Jürgen Habermas, democratic citizenship depends fundamentally upon the cultivation of *public reason*. Kant's conception of the public use of reason, Rawls's account of public reason among free and equal citizens, and Habermas's theory of communicative action collectively demonstrate that civil discourse requires citizens capable of reasoned judgment, reciprocal justification, and respectful engagement across deep ideological differences. Civility, therefore, is not simply a behavioral norm enforced by community standards; it is the visible, outward practice of civic virtue and civic maturity.

This philosophical framework is deeply woven into the American republican tradition represented by George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Dewey, each of whom recognized that constitutional government depends upon an educated citizenry formed through historical knowledge, constitutional literacy, and moral responsibility. Bringing this tradition into the twenty-first century, political theorist Danielle Allen highlights that true democratic stability requires "participatory readiness"—a shared set of civic capacities that enables every citizen to act as a co-creator of their shared world (Allen,

2023). By distinguishing superficial civility from deep civic virtue, this essay argues that democratic renewal requires far more than appeals to politeness or algorithmic guardrails. Educational institutions must reclaim civic education as the primary vehicle through which citizens acquire the habits of public reason necessary for robust civil discourse.

The Classical Roots: Civic Maturity vs. Performative Politeness

The distinction between superficial etiquette and authentic democratic engagement is deeply rooted in the Aristotelian tradition, which frames citizenship not as a passive legal status, but as an active, cultivated practice. In the *Politics*, Aristotle famously defined a citizen as anyone who shares in the administration of justice and in the holding of office, arguing that a viable polis depends upon citizens who have developed the specific virtues required for self-governance (Aristotle, 1984). Aristotle recognized that a republic cannot survive on procedural compliance alone; it requires individuals who have developed the intellectual and moral habits necessary "to rule and be ruled in turn."

When modern institutions treat civility as mere politeness, they abandon this classical demand for character formation. Performative civility asks citizens to regulate their tone while ignoring their substantive democratic obligations. It reduces the complex demands of democratic coexistence to a series of negative prohibitions: do not raise your voice, do not use offensive language, and do not disrupt the prevailing social peace.

Civic maturity, by contrast, demands that citizens develop the internal psychological and intellectual capacity to sit with deep disagreement, critically evaluate competing truth claims, and recognize fellow community members as legitimate co-owners of the democratic enterprise. Politeness avoids conflict to keep the peace; civic maturity engages conflict productively to pursue justice. Where performative civility demands passive compliance, civic maturity fosters the active agency required to sustain a free society.

The Enlightenment Architecture: The Demands of Public Reason

If civic maturity provides the character foundation for democratic citizenship, Enlightenment and modern democratic theory supply its operational language: **public reason**.

KANT	RAWLS	HABERMAS
Public Use of Reason	Reciprocal Justification	Communicative Action
Freedom to argue as autonomous citizens	Offering reasons that others can accept	Reaching mutual understanding

In his foundational 1784 essay, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Immanuel Kant established that genuine freedom requires the "public use of one's reason"—the courageous exercise of individual, autonomous judgment in open, public discourse (Kant, 1991). Kant warned against intellectual maturity being surrendered to external authorities, arguing that enlightenment requires citizens who can think for themselves while addressing a public of readers. In an age dominated by automated digital feed algorithms, Kant’s call for autonomous

public reason becomes even more urgent: citizens who cannot evaluate evidence independently inevitably become passive tools for ideological manipulation.

John Rawls deepened this framework for pluralistic democratic societies in *Political Liberalism*. Rawls argued that in a free society characterized by a diversity of moral, religious, and philosophical doctrines, democratic legitimacy depends upon the duty of "civic friendship" and the exercise of public reason (Rawls, 1993). When debating constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice, citizens owe one another *reciprocal justification*. They cannot simply impose their private convictions or sectarian doctrines through political force or numerical majorities; rather, they must present arguments grounded in political values that other free and equal citizens can reasonably be expected to endorse.

Jürgen Habermas put into practice this dynamic through his *Theory of Communicative Action*, demonstrating that democratic legitimacy emerges not from raw voting power, but from communicative discourse oriented toward mutual understanding (Habermas, 1984). Habermas distinguished between "strategic action"—where actors treat others as obstacles or tools to be manipulated—and "communicative action," where participants engage in uncoerced dialogue governed by the force of the better argument.

Taken together, Kant, Rawls, and Habermas demonstrate that civil discourse demands substantial cognitive and moral effort. It requires citizens who are capable of translating their personal commitments into shared public arguments, listening critically to opposing viewpoints, and revising their positions in light of superior evidence. Without structured civic education, citizens lack the analytical tools and emotional stamina required for reciprocal justification, leaving public debate empty of substance and governed only by performative scripts.

The American Tradition: Institutionalizing Civic Formation

This philosophical synthesis is not merely an abstract theoretical ideal; it was the foundational premise of the American constitutional experiment. The American Founders recognized that a constitutional republic could not rely solely on structural "auxiliary precautions," such as the separation of powers or checks and balances, to guarantee liberty. It required a virtuous and educated citizenry.

In his *Farewell Address*, George Washington emphasized that "in proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened" (Washington, 1796/1980). John Adams echoed this conviction in the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, writing that wisdom, knowledge, and virtue are necessary for the preservation of rights and liberties, requiring public investments in education (Adams, 1780/1980). Thomas Jefferson similarly advocated for universal public schooling, arguing that an educated public was the only secure depositary for the ultimate powers of society (Jefferson, 1787/1984).

In the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America* that the ultimate stability of American governance resided in its "habits of the heart"—the informal civic associations, municipal town halls, and local jury boxes where citizens daily practiced the art of

self-government (Tocqueville, 1835/2000). Tocqueville recognized that democratic habits are not inherited genetically; they are acquired through continuous local participation.

By the early twentieth century, John Dewey formalized this relationship in *Democracy and Education*, arguing that democracy is not merely a form of government, but "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916). Dewey maintained that every generation must recreate democratic habits anew through an educational system designed to foster critical inquiry, social empathy, and cooperative problem-solving.

Decades after Dewey warned of the dangers of passive citizenship, contemporary assessments echo his call for intentional democratic learning. The *Bradley Report* (2008) captured this ongoing challenge, noting that “America is founded not on a common ethnicity, but on a set of ideas,” and warning that “knowing what America stands for is not a genetic inheritance.” Because a creed-based nation must be “learned by the next generation,” it remains “inherently fragile” unless institutions actively remind citizens of their shared foundational principles (Bradley Project on America's National Identity, 2008).

Danielle Allen and the Modern Imperative for Participatory Readiness

To address the fractures of twenty-first-century democracy, political theorist Danielle Allen updates this tradition in *Democracy in the Time of Coronavirus* (2022) and *Justice by Means of Democracy* (2023). Allen argues that modern democratic renewal requires moving beyond passive models of civic education to cultivate **"participatory readiness"**—a comprehensive set of civic skills, knowledge, and dispositions that enables every citizen to act as an empowered co-creator of their shared society.

Allen’s work provides two vital correctives to modern discussions of civility:

1. **Egalitarian Empowerment:** Civic education cannot be treated as an elite luxury or a mechanism for teaching compliance to marginalized groups. It must equip *every* citizen with the political equality and agency needed to negotiate power, draft institutional rules, and hold political authority accountable (Allen, 2023).
2. **Bridging Social Capital and Relational Trust:** In racially, culturally, and ideologically diverse democracies, civility cannot mean avoiding painful or contentious truths. As Allen highlights in *Talking to Strangers*, true civic trust is forged when citizens develop the habits required to navigate conflict openly, cultivate "relational trust," and engage across deep differences without fracturing the political community (Allen, 2004).

When educational institutions reduce civic training to conflict avoidance or transactional skills, they betray this mandate. They produce passive political consumers who are vulnerable to demagoguery rather than active civic participants capable of public reason.

Reclaiming Civic Education for Democratic Renewal

Democratic renewal will not occur through impassioned pleas for political actors to adopt a gentler tone or by relying on tech platforms to moderate online discourse. Genuine civil

discourse is the downstream result of a deliberate, sustained institutional commitment to comprehensive civic education.

To fulfill their democratic purpose, universities, secondary schools, and civic institutions must reclaim civic formation as their primary mission. This requires a curriculum structured around three core pillars:

Pillar	**Focus**	**Democratic Purpose**
1. Constitutional & Historical Literacy	Historical origins and foundational tensions of democratic systems.	Enables citizens to understand institutional leverage points and evaluate systemic reform
2. Practiced Public Reason	Argument construction, evidence evaluation, and reciprocal justification across difference.	Prepares citizens to engage in 'uncoerced' debate rather than ideological dunking or avoidance.
3. Civic Maturity & Agency	Moral disposition to view disagreement as permanent condition of a free society.	Fosters participatory readiness and relational trust required for shared self-government.

Appealing for civility while neglecting civic education demands the fruit of a tree whose roots have been severed. By grounding public discourse in civic maturity and public reason, educational institutions can help society move past performative etiquette—and secure the intellectual habits required for enduring self-government.

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