



A New Model for Civic Education in America's Public Universities: The Institute for American Civics at the University of Tennessee

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INTRODUCTION

“In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators.”

– National Commission on Civic Renewal (1998)

The Tennessee General Assembly has charged the University of Tennessee, Knoxville with establishing the Institute of American Civics. The Institute’s legislated mission is to provide a deep and comprehensive civic education for University undergraduates and the state at large, including America’s founding principles, the economic and political institutions that maintain our American democracy, and the basics of civic participation.

In addition, the Institute is to model civil discourse and purposeful pluralism for all Tennesseans by embracing viewpoint diversity and the free exchange of ideas. The Institute’s mandate is strengthened by the overwhelmingly bipartisan support it received in the legislature; the 120-6 tally across the House and Senate reflects the “no” vote of only three Democrats and three Republicans.

Pursuing the Institute’s legislated purpose provides the University of Tennessee with an opportunity to live more fully into its land grant mission and the 2021 strategic vision for the Knoxville campus. A pressing problem in the state is our political polarization, low civic participation, and retreat from civil discourse and constructive civic engagement. Indeed, our polarization and civic disengagement are impediments to addressing many, if not all, of our other collective challenges. With 55,000 students across its five campuses, plentiful instructional resources, and a physical presence in all 95 counties, the University of Tennessee is uniquely situated to help rejuvenate the political culture in the State of Tennessee.

Since its founding in 2003, the Howard H. Baker, Jr. Center for Public Policy has served as the Knoxville campus’s hub for civic engagement and education, which is partly why Tennessee legislators repeatedly noted their faith in the Baker Center as a home for the new Institute. Senator Baker’s legacy of conciliation and respect for opposing viewpoints, along with his deep patriotism and commitment to public service, provide an ideal foundation for the Institute’s activities.

As they prepare to inherit our American democracy, today’s college students are at a severe disadvantage. Many have grown up in an era of declining civic virtues in the society around them – most notably a decline in civility, compromise, and a willingness to admit that, as Senator Baker often noted, “the other fella might be right.” Institute advisor and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that the current generation of college students has been taught that they are engaged in a battle of good versus evil,

and that those who do not share their political values are to be shunned, not engaged or listened to.¹ It is a trend Arthur Brooks characterizes as a “culture of contempt,” which both Haidt and Brooks argue is a key contributor to the growing prevalence of incivility and intolerance in American politics today.² Unfortunately, our national tendency of silencing or demonizing views with which we disagree does not seem to be abating.

In a time of proliferating distrust and political polarization, the Institute of American Civics presents a remarkable opportunity to address these challenges, beginning with undergraduates on the Knoxville campus and then extending more broadly to the entire UT system and to the State of Tennessee as a whole. The University is committed to creative and bold solutions to our civic challenges and to an Institute that helps change the lives of our students, the nature of discourse on college campuses across the State, and the health of our American democracy.

UNDERSTANDING THE CIVIC LANDSCAPE

“The practice of democracy is not passed down through the gene pool. It must be taught and learned anew by each generation of citizens.”

– Justice Sandra Day O’Connor

A knowledgeable citizenry is an essential component of any functioning democracy, and prolific thinkers from Montesquieu to Thomas Jefferson recognized the importance of an educated electorate to the success of the democratic enterprise. Democratic citizenship, they recognized, relies on a certain set of skills, including the ability to reason and argue, the ability to problem-solve, and the ability to discern truth from fiction. It also relies on a robust knowledge of the institutions of the democratic system, their checks and balances, and the ways in which those institutions have brought us from the country’s founding to the modern day.³

The responsibility of educating Americans for citizenship has long fallen to institutions of higher education. As early as 1913, political science departments viewed training students for democratic citizenship as their primary duty.⁴ In 1922, a group of prominent academics, writing in the *American Political Science Review*, called for education in civics “to give the pupil an intelligent conception of the great society in which he is a member, his relation to it, what it requires of him, how it is organized, and

¹ Baker Distinguished Lecture, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, March 31, 2022.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/opinion/sunday/political-polarization.html>

³ Ron Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy*. JHU Press, 2021. See Chapter 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.105.

what functions it performs.”⁵ But in recent years, there has been an unfortunate shortchanging in attention paid to the basic tenets of our political system in higher education – a shortchanging that contributes to a weak understanding of, and support for, the basic institutions of democracy. Although universities continue to impart many skills necessary for effective democratic citizens, civic education as an explicit goal has largely fallen by the wayside. Instead, civic education has sometimes become synonymous with community service or service learning efforts, efforts that reflect a social engagement devoid of a focus on democratic systems and governance, or on affecting progress through the political system.⁶

These shifts in higher education are unfortunate, in part, because few students are arriving on college campuses with basic civic knowledge. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 24 percent of high school seniors in 2010 scored proficient or above in basic civic concepts, not much changed from the 27 percent in 2006 and 26 percent in 1998 who met this standard. The same test found only 12% of U.S. seniors performed at or above the proficient level in U.S. history. And although interest in the 2020 elections resulted in the [highest voter turnout](#) (66.8%) in more than two decades, there is mounting evidence that voters are less knowledgeable about the nature of the positions they are voting to fill. Despite some measurable progress, the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s [2021 Civics Knowledge Survey](#) found that only 56% of U.S. adults could correctly name all three branches of government and a staggering 20% couldn’t name any branch at all.

In addition to weaknesses in civic knowledge, civic participation in the United States is also well below its potential. While the country ranks highly in terms of volunteerism and philanthropic giving, engagement in electoral politics amongst the American populace remains remarkably low in international perspective. Voter registration rates in the mid-60% range are much lower than many of our peer countries.

A 2011 report by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute notes the relationship between civic education and participation. “There is a direct connection between knowing more about American history, reading and discussing current trends in that area, and then converting that interest into tangible political participation.” In other words, students with more exposure to civic education in college tend to display higher rates of democratic engagement and participation in the political process.

⁵ APSA Committee on Instruction in Political Science, “The Study of Civics,” *American Political Science Review*, 16(1) (Feb. 1922), pp. 108-125.

⁶ National Association of Scholars, “Making Citizens: How Universities Teach Civics.” January 8, 2017. <https://www.nas.org/reports/making-citizens-how-american-universities-teach-civics/full-report>

Civic Health Indicators

- Just over 1 in 3 U.S. adults know how long the term of office is for a U.S. senator and representative, according to the Annenberg Center for Public Policy’s 2021 Civic Knowledge Survey.
- Only 24 percent of high school seniors in 2010 were proficient in civics according to the U.S. Department of Education’s 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress.
- More than 2 in 5 U.S. adults in 2020 reported they believe “there’s not much ordinary citizens can do” to influence the government, according to a [survey](#) by Pew Research Center.
- Among OCED countries, the United States ranks 30th out of 35 nations for voter turnout as a percentage of the voting age population. ([Pew Research Center](#))
- Only 64% of the U.S. voting-age population was registered to vote as of 2016, compared to 92% in the UK (2019), 93% in Canada (2019), 94% in Sweden (2018) and 99% in Slovakia (2020). ([Pew Research Center](#))
- Average confidence in major U.S. institutions fell to the lowest since 1979 with an average of just 27% of U.S. adults in 2022 having a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in 16 different U.S. institutions, according to a [survey](#) by Gallup.
- In a 2022 survey, political polarization ranked as the third most concerning issue among American voters, behind only inflation and crime/gun violence. ([FiveThirtyEight](#))

“THE OTHER FELLA MIGHT BE RIGHT” – OUR NATIONAL FAILURE TO LISTEN

“He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.”

–John Stuart Mill

University students have not only been afforded insufficient opportunity to learn the structures and institutions of American democracy, but they have also grown up in a culture that has dissuaded them from developing some of its key skills and adopting some of its core tenets. Universities’ commitments to free speech, the open exchange of ideas, and academic freedom have been weakened in recent decades by a rising

intolerance of diverse viewpoints among students and faculty alike. Mill's quote makes clear the irony of these trends; in shutting out alternative points of view, we lose the ability to sharpen our own arguments.⁷ The American statesman Thomas Jefferson also channeled this truism in the early days of the American republic, acknowledging that "reason and free enquiry are the only effectual agents against error."⁸

Pluralistic societies rely on the ability of their citizens to accommodate, negotiate, and incorporate a diverse set of ideas into the structures of self-governance. Extreme political polarization, which manifests in a refusal to hear alternative points of view, leads naturally to a paralyzed democratic process. As Ron Daniels has observed, "A democracy must find ways not only to channel the thrumming plurality of viewpoints, experiences, and dogmas in society, but also to fuse these perspectives into some approximation of a shared purpose, a public agenda, and a governable republic."⁸

Students who have been deprived of the opportunity to engage with the full spectrum of "viewpoints, experiences, and dogmas" will thus be poorly equipped to participate in, much less lead, our democratic process. And the stakes are high. If this generation of students does not learn the practice of listening and considering alternative ways of viewing important social issues, then our collective problem-solving skills will not improve. Perhaps it is for this reason that many Americans place political polarization at the top of their list of social ills. Without resolving polarization, the remainder of our concerns (the environment, gun violence, inequality, etc.) are not likely to be successfully addressed.

Examples of shunned campus visitors, faculty, and students are plentiful. As we are writing this report, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is engaged in an internal scuffle over how people and organizations with pro-life views will be treated on campus.⁹ Georgetown University Law School found itself incapable of absorbing a faculty member with conservative views earlier this year.¹⁰ Just a few months later, a group of conservative students wrote to Georgetown administrators requesting that a poet and activist slated to appear on campus be barred from speaking due to the individual's views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹¹

⁷ Mill says elsewhere: "The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race, posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of the truth, produced by its collision with error." – John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859).

⁸ Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, p. 190.

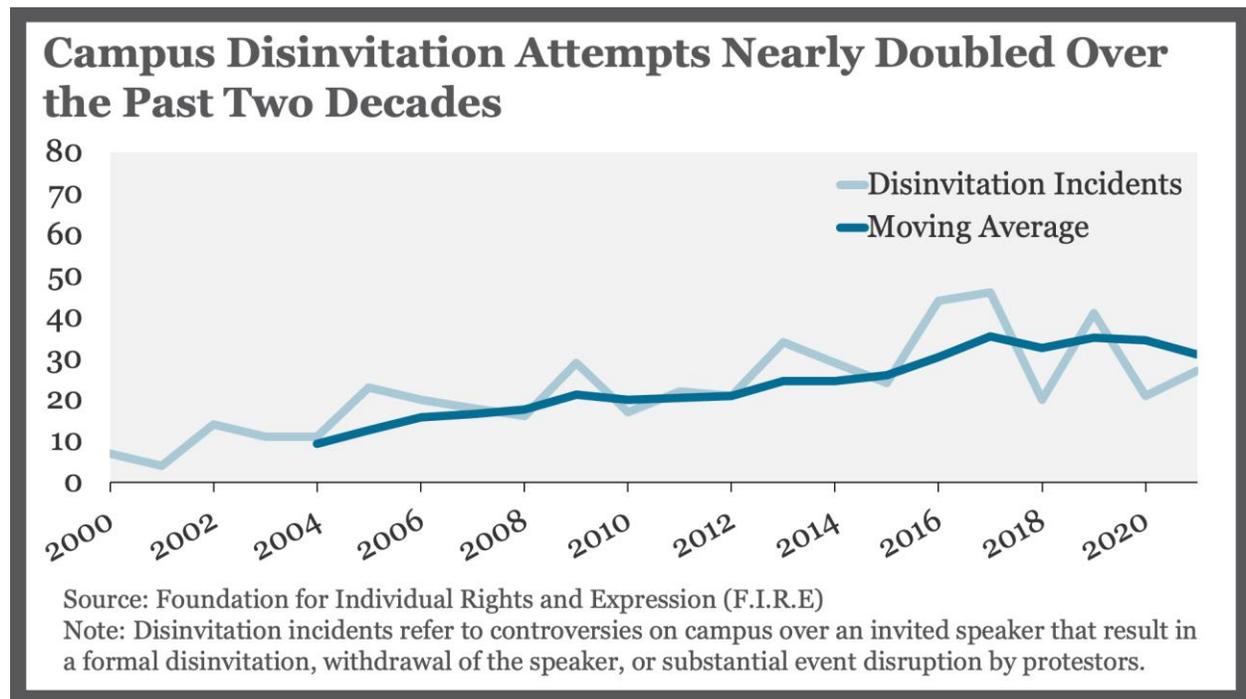
⁹ <https://www.thefire.org/repressive-executive-order-from-unc-chapel-hill-student-government-cuts-off-funding-for-pro-life-individuals-causes/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/06/us/georgetown-ilya-shapiro.html>

¹¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/05/05/after-controversies-georgetown-law-students-call-culture-shift/>

These are not rare occurrences. Scholars have documented rising intolerance of diverse viewpoints, and of the people who hold them, both on and off college campuses.

According to data collected by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (F.I.R.E), efforts by some college students and faculty to “disinvite” speakers with whom they disagree with have steadily increased over the past 15 years.¹² From 2000 to 2020, F.I.R.E documented 472 attempts to disinvite speakers at public and private American institutions. Nearly half of those efforts resulted in a formal disinvitation, withdrawal by the speaker, or substantial event disruption that prevented the speakers’ ability to speak.



The University of Tennessee does not appear in the F.I.R.E database and has a strong history of absorbing and embracing diverse viewpoints among faculty, students, and campus visitors. Our own campus climate survey reveals that students do sometimes feel as though their point of view is not valued. Five percent of climate survey respondents (236 out of 4,747 surveyed) reported observing exclusionary, intimidating, offensive, and/or hostile conduct directed toward themselves or someone else based on the individual’s political views.¹³

¹² Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, Campus Disinvitation Database (Accessed Aug. 2022)

¹³ [University-of-Tennessee-Knoxville-Campus-Climate ... https://mycampus.tennessee.edu > sites > 2018/02](https://mycampus.tennessee.edu/sites/2018/02), page 71.

CONSEQUENCES OF WEAK CIVIC EDUCATION AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION

“If one thing is clear from studying breakdowns throughout history, it’s that extreme polarization can kill democracies.”

-Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*

What are the consequences of weak civic engagement, civic knowledge, and heightened political polarization? One immediate consequence is an eroding trust in government and government institutions. Gallup’s measure of trust in American institutions reached a forty-year low in 2022 and, by mid-2022, confidence in the Presidency and the Supreme Court had fallen to 27% and 25% – with only 7% reporting they had confidence in Congress.

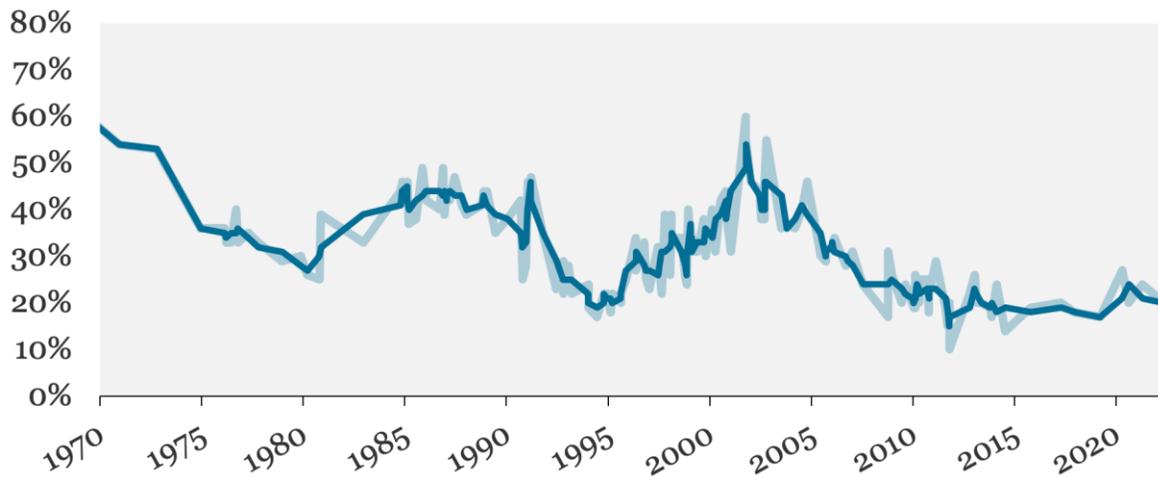
This decline in trust is matched by a reduction in satisfaction in the democratic process. In 2021, the Pew Research Center found nearly six-in-ten U.S. adults (58%) are not satisfied with the way democracy is working in America, and the same report indicated a substantial majority of Americans (85%) believe that the U.S. political system either needs major changes (43%) or needs to be completely reformed (42%).¹⁴

Gallup also found declining trust had spilled over into feelings regarding banks, corporations, labor unions, and other key segments of American society. Just in the last year, we have seen significant growing distrust of our sources of news (newspapers and television news), as well as in big banks and businesses.

¹⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/06/30/how-americans-see-their-country-and-their-democracy/>

Public Trust in Government Near Historic Lows

% who say they trust government to do what is right all/most of the time



Source: Pew Research Center

While the desire for reform is real, observers have noted that some calls for reform lack a solid intellectual grounding. For example, exasperation with the slowness of the Senate amid political polarization and several closely divided elections recently has resulted in more widespread calls for the abolition of the filibuster. A full assessment of that policy change, however, would necessarily include an understanding of the compromises that led to bicameral legislature in the first place and, accordingly, the problems it was designed to *prevent* --- not just those it causes.

It is crucial that students and citizens understand the Nation's founding principles, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, as well as the key constitutional and cultural changes that have shaped our contemporary political system.

THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOLVING THE PROBLEM

"The fates of democracy and universities are intertwined... no democracy can prosper without independent universities to forge a bedrock of objective fact, to preserve and interrogate the nation's collective past, to cultivate diverse and pluralistic communities, and to educate students in the skills necessary for active and engaged citizenship."

—Ronald J. Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy*

Though higher education has often been overlooked in favor of K-12 with respect to civics, public universities must play a large and indispensable role in renewing civic

education. This is true in part because universities are uniquely well-positioned to do so, but also because solving such problems is central to the historical mission of land grant universities. Indeed, American history is replete with examples of public universities as a mechanism for realizing civic goals, or even in defense of democracy itself.

The years following the outbreak of World War II provide an excellent example. America's research universities were the drivers behind accelerating scientific and technological advancement during the war effort, and ultimately the Allied victory in 1945. Public universities' impact on World War II was directly responsible for the creation of the National Science Foundation (NSF). From groundbreaking medical treatments to the Internet, many of the most groundbreaking innovations of the modern-era were made possible by NSF-funded research that originated in the labs of America's public universities.

In his book *What Universities Owe Democracy*, Ron Daniels notes that the role of higher education in civic education has been characterized by “bursts of civic resolve that have run aground or lost focus.”¹⁵ More recently, the historian Julie Reuben cautioned against the individual competition among universities to brand themselves versus pursuing “their core mission of creating, preserving, and disseminating knowledge for the good of society.”¹⁶

There can be no doubt regarding the recent trend among colleges and universities to stress STEM and business majors with a corresponding decline in elective coursework in the social sciences and humanities. Moreover, the remaining general education options often stress citizenship in a global rather than national context.

The challenge includes, but is certainly not limited to, acquainting students with *knowledge* of the foundations of American constitutional government and ability to think critically about them. Civic education must also teach the *skill* of functioning in a pluralistic society and amid a marketplace of ideas. This includes not only repeated exposure to ideas that challenge their own but also the ability to discuss those ideas with respect and the ability to understand, if not agree with, the perspectives of others.

These mandates are not independent of each other. A well-executed curriculum would highlight how the founders themselves struggled and compromised around their own great challenge, and how they succeeded and sometimes failed in creating a framework for governing that was responsive, inclusive, and respected basic human rights.

¹⁵ Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, p. 117.

¹⁶ Julie Reuben, “Hyper-competition is Ruining Higher Education,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 11, 2022.

“People are quite good at challenging statements made by *other* people,” Jonathan Haidt notes, but people are not inclined to challenge their own beliefs.¹⁷ With this in mind, it is precisely the role of higher education to compel students to examine their own beliefs – which is made possible by encountering contrasting viewpoints and ideas. The former president of the University of Chicago Hanna Holborn Gray summarized this principle well, writing “education should not be intended to make people comfortable; it is meant to make them think.”¹⁸

Thus the challenge is profound – to provide today’s young people and the next decades’ voters, civic leaders, and candidates with information and skills to understand and engage with a range of approaches to a good and just society. To meet that challenge, civic education is crucial.

Past Efforts to Bolster Civic Education

The Institute of American Civics is not the first attempt by higher education to address the problem of declining civic knowledge and engagement. A 2011 report on civic learning and democratic engagement commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education expressly warned of the decline in quality and quantity of civic education, calling on institutions of higher education to “embrace civic learning and democratic engagement as an undisputed educational priority.”¹⁹ But many previous efforts in higher education to address the problem of declining civic knowledge and engagement have faced considerable obstacles, failed to gain traction, or fallen short of addressing the issue comprehensively. As Ron Daniels notes, many institutions have sought to address civic education more or less solely through service learning, or “teaching students to engage the communities around them [rather] than to engage the democratic systems through which they self-govern.”²⁰ While service learning is an important part of a university education and community service a necessary facet of civic life, it is not sufficient. Service learning is not designed to supplant a more focused study of political systems and institutions of liberal democracy.

In universities where civic education is more embedded curricularly, it is often hampered by the fact that courses in civics remain optional – and thus limited to engaging students who have already demonstrated an interest in civic and political life. The Institute of American Civics at the University of Tennessee faces a similar challenge.

¹⁷ The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion by Jonathan Haidt

¹⁸ <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/university-chicago-tells-freshmen-will-no-safe-spaces/>

¹⁹ The Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement National Task Force, The U.S. Department of Education. *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future*:

<https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/college-learning-democracys-future/crucible-moment.pdf>

²⁰ Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, p. 116.

In recognition of this challenge, some scholars have challenged colleges and universities to implement a “democracy requirement” for all undergraduate students in order to reduce the deficit in civic knowledge.²¹

Finally, the embrace of civic education in universities has frequently been caught up in the very political polarization it seeks to ameliorate. On some campuses and in some state assemblies, the push for civic education has been a partisan endeavor, and the established campus entities shrouded in suspicion. (At the federal level, a current push to enhance civic education in K-12 schools and in higher education has bipartisan support.)

Perhaps it goes without saying, but an academic unit or course of study with a partisan brand is unlikely to successfully engage university students in a community of learning that allows them to learn from others whose viewpoints are different from their own. No course of study in democratic citizenship that draws students from a narrow set of political persuasions will be successful in teaching civic skills. As John Stuart Mill admonished, the more frequently our own views come up against challenge and questioning, the more we can sharpen those views – or reconsider them entirely.

A NEW MODEL FOR CIVIC EDUCATION: THE INSTITUTE FOR AMERICAN CIVICS (IAC) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

This institute is not about Republicans or Democrats. This institute is about strong civics-based education for those who want to make this world a better place, who want to be able to talk to each other and not see the R or the D next to the person’s name, who want to focus on policy and not always politics. So, I think this is great for our young people. I think it will be an excellent addition to our university system, and I think that the University of Tennessee, specifically the Baker Center, has proven to be a non-partisan, outstanding institution. It is the perfect place to house it.

–Sen. Raumesh Akbari, D-Memphis, Senate Session, April 12th, 2022

The State of Tennessee has afforded the University of Tennessee, Knoxville the opportunity to combat political polarization and enhance civic education by establishing a new Institute of American Civics.

Governor Lee first proposed funding for the Institute in his 2022 State of the State Address, noting that *“This will be a flagship for the nation – a beacon celebrating*

²¹ Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, p. 122.

intellectual diversity at our universities and teaching how a responsible, civic-minded people strengthens our country and our communities.”

Subsequently, during legislative hearings, Lawmakers from both parties spoke in favor of the Institute’s mission to strengthen civic education and participation and revive thoughtfulness, civility and respect for opposing viewpoints in our national discourse. The IAC legislation enjoyed broad, bipartisan support in the General Assembly, with members of the Democratic Party joining Republicans in speaking favorably regarding its need and the involvement of the Baker Center. In the state house, all members voted for the legislation except three Democrats. In the state senate, all members voted for the legislation except three Republicans. The final Senate and House vote tally was 120-6, with only three Democrats and three Republicans voting “no.”

The Institute of American Civics is motivated by two broad concerns highlighted previously in this document: (1) U.S. civic education and participation are weak and institutions of higher education have a responsibility to help remedy this deficiency; and (2) Our national discourse lacks thoughtfulness, respect for opposing viewpoints, and civility. As a result, contemporary college students do not have a model for participating in and consuming healthy public discourse.

"It's a great opportunity for our students to have access to an education that will provide us insight into the ideas and the institutions that make Tennessee great, that make America great."

-Tennessee Governor Bill Lee, Institute Bill Signing Ceremony, Knoxville, May 12, 2022

By statute, the Institute of American Civics (IAC) is designed to address both civic education and civil discourse/viewpoint diversity and thereby extends the work that the Howard H. Baker, Jr. Center for Public Policy has been doing since its establishment. The Baker Center already engages in civic education (Constitution Day events); civic engagement work (Vols Vote initiative); modeling civil discourse on contemporary topics; viewpoint diversity efforts; and experiential learning for undergraduates interested in public service. The work also advances the role of the University of Tennessee Knoxville in tackling some of society’s biggest challenges, consistent with the campus strategic vision.

Purposes of the Institute

As outlined in the enabling legislation, the Institute’s purposes are:

1. Foster a deeper understanding of the structures and institutions of federal, state, and local government.
2. Further the understanding of the principles and philosophies that contributed to the foundation and development of the United States and the State of Tennessee.
3. Promote civil discourse and constructive debate.
4. Enhance education in the fields of politics, economics, philosophy, American history, American government, and other related fields as appropriate with a focus on the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship; fundamental democratic principles; and the ways in which those principles are expressed in our federal, state, and local institutions.
5. Provide nonpartisan resources to students, faculty, state government agencies, and the general public regarding civic affairs.
6. Foster civic engagement through full and fair discussions that promote civil dialogue among those holding conflicting points of view.
7. Assist in ensuring that the University of Tennessee serves as a robust marketplace of ideas for all students and faculty.

The legislation provides that the institute is authorized to: hire faculty and staff; enroll students; develop and offer courses in new undergraduate major and minor programs; offer general education and honors courses; and provide and facilitate internships and other relevant experiences for students and the general public. While certain aspects of the Institute's mission and governing structure are mandated by state law and thus are not subject to change, there is ample opportunity to shape the Institute within those guidelines.

The Institute is specifically designed to build on UTK capabilities in politics, economics, philosophy, American history, and American government. The Institute will provide a resource for the UT System but will operate within the academic structure of UTK. Hence the President will have a role in providing strategic direction while the Chancellor will oversee its operation. By statute, the Institute's director will report to the Chancellor – ensuring its integration with campus programs and values and its visibility. Academic programs will be determined by UTK faculty and will be approved through standard processes, in accordance with shared governance principles, accreditation standards, and UTK policy.

Board of Fellows and Director

By law, the Institute is to be advised by a 13-person Board of Fellows. The Board is to be appointed by the UT President in consultation with legislative leaders and the Governor of the State of Tennessee. The UT President chooses the board's chair. Nine members of the board are to be or have been tenured professors or administrators or professors of

practice at an institution of higher education in the U.S. Two slots are reserved for previously elected or appointed government officials of different political parties. Two Baker Center board members will serve on the Board of Fellows to ensure coherence of mission across the two entities. The UTK Chancellor and Board of Fellows are responsible for the search for a director.

Phases of Implementation / Timeline

The Institute's Board of Fellows is to be announced on September 1, 2022 and will oversee a search for the Institute's inaugural director. The director will be hired by March 1, 2023.

The Institute will begin to offer courses to undergraduate students in the Spring semester of 2023.

Potential Scope of the Institute's Programs

When fully implemented, undergraduate curriculum program options include, but are not limited to: general education courses as part of the Vol Core Curriculum; honors versions of the aforementioned courses; a certificate in American civics that includes several courses with perhaps some civic engagement experience; a minor to include Institute courses and cross-listed courses and a possible civic engagement experience; and a major to include Institute courses and cross-listed courses and a possible civic engagement experience.

Graduate Curriculum program options include, but are not limited to: a graduate certificate in American civics and a master's degree in American civics. Potential topics for courses include, but are not limited to, the constitutional and philosophical foundations of the American republic, citizenship and civic engagement, freedom of speech and civil discourse, democratic leadership, the media's role in American democracy, and the institutions and processes of local, state, and national government.

In all cases, the principles governing the classroom environment may be just as important as the content. Faculty instructors of Institute courses and the students who enroll in them will necessarily need to adhere to principles of free expression in the classroom and will commit to embracing and seeking out diverse views on challenging topics.

CONCLUSION

“Freedom is a fragile thing and it's never more than one generation away from extinction. It is not ours by way of inheritance; it must be fought for and defended constantly by each generation, for it comes only once to a people. And those in world history who have known freedom and then lost it have never known it again.”

–Ronald Reagan, Inaugural Address, 1967

Perhaps the greatest threat facing American democracy today is the disengagement and disinterest of its citizenry. This threat is internal, not external, because democratic institutions and constitutional order are ultimately dependent upon the extent to which the people understand their purpose and value. In his 1861 book *Considerations on Representative Government*, one of the most influential thinkers and champions of civil liberty, John Stuart Mill, acknowledged as much, writing that “the political morality of the country is what we must look to if we [are to] know in whom the really supreme power in the Constitution resides.”

In other words, the staying power of American democracy and the many freedoms it bestows are dependent upon the circumstances and context in which it exists. If too few citizens share a broad understanding of the value and philosophical underpinnings of democratic institutions, it's not unreasonable to envision a time when a majority of Americans do not argue or vote for their preservation – lending America vulnerable to what the nineteenth century historian James Bryce characterized as tyrants, “not against the masses, but with the masses.”

As outlined in this paper, an abundance of survey data shows that trust in government is declining at a record pace and basic knowledge of democratic institutions remains woefully inadequate. An increasing number of Americans are coming of age during a time of intense political polarization and civic decay, deprived of a model for the type of civic engagement and political discourse that was once a distinguishing feature of America's democracy.

By investing in more robust civic education and facilitating the free exchange of ideas, institutions of higher education, through enterprises like the Institute for American Civics, can play a pivotal role in reclaiming the values that foster successful democratic governance and ensure it persists.