

Civic Identity and Feelings of Patriotism: Can we really justify education for a political identity?

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In this short critique paper, I argue that Ian MacMullen’s attempt to solve the Civic Motivation Problem fails. In his book, *Civics Beyond Critics*, MacMullen argues that we can avoid all the problematic features of patriotic love by training citizens to identify, but not love, their nation (he calls this trait “civic identification”). I argue that civic identification suffers from problems just as serious as patriotic love. First and foremost, civic identification requires, as a background, that citizens endorse or affirm a psychological understanding of the division between emotions, reasons, and reactive attitudes that is at worst implausible, and at best seriously controversial. I make this localized critique and argument about the problems with civic identification to illustrate a larger point: when proponents of civic education attempt to move away from character traits and skills that violate the fact of reasonable pluralism in society, they struggle to generate more appropriate traits that would pass the test of reasonable pluralism. Civic identification, just like patriotic love, fails to pass this test. Patriotic love fails the test because it requires an illiberal endorsement of one’s nation and its history. Civic identification fails the test for a less obvious, but equally illiberal reason: it requires acceptance of an implausible theory of human psychology and moral responsibility.

The Problem of Civic Motivation

The civic motivation problem is essentially a claim about the sort of civic participation that’s needed in a democracy, coupled with the further claim that citizens are not properly motivated to participate in the needed types of participation. Framed as a problem of practical reason, as MacMullen discusses it, there are good practical and moral reasons to participate in politics, but individual citizens do not have enough motivation to do what they have good reason to do.

For the purposes of this paper, I wish to accept the civic motivation problem as its framed by MacMullen.¹ Once we accept civic motivation as a problem, the key thing to note is that most theorists and policy-makers buy into the problem, and believe the solution is most effectively solved by some form of civic training (whether that be through civics classes, action

¹ I accept the civic motivation problem only for the sake of argument here. I myself am skeptical of a number of assumptions it requires us to take on. First, I am doubtful that the dutiful and time-consuming participation civic education proponents assume is required for democracy is actually required for democracy. Second, in doubting this claim, I am further doubtful that there is a serious disconnect between the civic motivation required in a democracy and the actual motivation that citizens have to participate in political decision-making. Finally, I see no particularly good reasons that could be justified from a politically liberal framework to suggest that there are definitively good reasons all citizens have to participate in political decision-making. This last point is just one of many examples where MacMullen (and other civic education proponents), assume they can bring in controversial moral claims about reasons and value without discussing how those claims could be justified to all reasonable points of view.

civics, service-learning, or a more holistic civic virtue habituation scheme of the type MacMullen favors). The going thought is that a civic education program can be designed which will solve the civic motivation problem in democratic citizens, while also not being intolerably invasive in citizens' lives, and without being seriously illiberal in design or content. In short, MacMullen and others are convinced that civic education can be designed and executed such that it solves problems in society without also making our society illiberal in the same stroke.² This is the assumption I seriously doubt, and wish to highlight as problematic using the local example of attempting to replace patriotic love with civic identification.

Patriotic Love and Its Problems

Patriotism, when discussed as a potential civic trait, nearly always tends to lead to worries about how problematic it is. Proponents of patriotic love, as they so often flesh out the notion of patriotism, spend quite a lot of their time attempting to explain how the concept is not as bad as it looks at first blush. There is a large and wide-ranging literature on patriotism as a concept, and although this literature is worth examining, here I wish simply to focus on the common understanding of patriotic love that MacMullen discusses.

The core thought linked to patriotic love is that just like other forms of personal love, patriotic love is defined by the broader definition of love going back to Aristotle: that a necessary condition of love is that the lover cares about the well-being of the loved object for its own sake.³ Despite this minimal definition, proponents and opponents of patriotic love clearly attach several other characteristics to love of nations. Discussants of patriotism focus on certain attitudes the patriotic person will have toward her state, certain behaviors she will tend to perform because of her patriotism, certain reactions she will likely have when her state is disparaged or praised, and so on.⁴

MacMullen takes up a particular feature that he and others assume comes along with patriotic love: that the lover will be blind to some of the faults of the object of love. MacMullen further worries that love brings along with it a certain susceptibility to irrational thoughts, feelings, and actions when a person loves an objection. Specifically, the worry goes, when a person is patriotic, she will not be as likely to think critically about her nation's (potentially checkered) history, or about current political decisions or policies it undertakes. The guiding thought is that because love in its core form is irrational in certain ways, patriotism, as a form of love, will inherit at least some of these irrationalities.⁵

Accepting for the sake of the argument that love—and therefore patriotic love—lead to some irrationalities⁶, MacMullen concludes that it would be problematic to solve the civic

² Cite MacMullen page 110, also the classic example of this project is Gutmann 1987.

³ MacMullen pg 120, see other citations from the lit there in MacMullen.

⁴ It's worth noting that these added characteristics have no obvious connection with caring about the well-being of an object for its own sake. These additional characteristics seem to slip into the discussion as authors implicitly connect patriotic love with interpersonal love and the unanalyzed assumptions of features necessary to that sort of love.

⁵ See especially MacMullen 160 and surrounding.

⁶ I personally see no good reason for accepting this claim about love. MacMullen cites no serious psychology to back up his claim about interpersonal love, let alone patriotic love. He

motivation problem by training citizens to take up patriotic love of country.⁷ The obvious worry is that if we train citizens to be patriotic, they will make poor decisions and form mistaken beliefs about their country, and because of this they will be more likely to support bad policies and vote for candidates that will not actually satisfy the central goals of a democracy.

Of course, it seems clear that we would like to avoid encouraging irrationalities in citizens, especially if those irrationalities ultimately are caused by education programs taken up to improve civic participation. MacMullen accepts this without ever coming right out and saying so explicitly, but it is clear that this is what he has in mind.

Civic Identification as an Alternative Solution

MacMullen's solution to the problem of civic motivation is to attempt to carve out a trait and educational space that maintains the positive motivational aspects (or many of them) of patriotism, while also discarding its problematic aspects. He calls his solution *civic identification*. According to him, civic identification is a trait where a person identifies with her country while not further committing to the core definitional component of love: caring for the well-being of the object for its own sake. On his view, a person can identify with her country without loving it. Identification of this kind, according to MacMullen, will include a feeling of special connection with the object and its agency, and will give rise to feelings of pride and shame associated with the actions of one's nation.⁸ This will include an emotional effect on the person related to her country, and to situations where other individuals make judgments about it. Despite these special connective feelings and the propensity to experience feelings of pride and shame, MacMullen claims, the person who identifies with her country will feel no special affection for her country, just as she may identify with herself although she feels no special affection for herself.

Most important for my purposes, MacMullen maintains that a person with civic identification will feel pride and shame relating to her country and its history and actions. MacMullen seems to draw a tight connection between these reactive attitudes and feelings of responsibility, either believing that they are identical to each other, or that feelings of pride and shame at least partially constitute feelings of responsibility. Whatever his actual view is, he writes as though the feelings associated with civic identification will entail that a person with this trait will have feelings of responsibility associated with her country.

According to MacMullen, civic identification under this description is a plausible alternative to patriotic love. In the first place, civic identification (especially the features of causing feelings of pride, shame, and responsibility) is, in his view, going to cause citizens to act so that they will feel more pride and less shame, and this will mean that they will follow through on participatory acts that will allow them to be more efficacious in political decision-

also offers scant philosophical or conceptual analysis derived reasons for thinking that irrationality toward the love's object is a necessary, or even highly probable, feature of love.

⁷ As an aside, MacMullen clearly believes that inculcating patriotic love, whatever else its problems, will help to solve the civic motivation problem. My own view is that he has not made a plausible case for this claim, but I will ignore this point for the purposes of the paper.

⁸ MacMullen pg 123.

making. In other words, citizens who identify, but do not love their country will be more likely to participate than citizens who neither identify, nor love their country.⁹

In addition, because civic identification will not bring along with it the irrationalities of love, civic identification will not be an objectionable trait to inculcate in citizens. In this way, MacMullen argues, we have found a trait that can plausibly solve our civic motivation problem (without causing any serious additional problems of its own).

Same Problems as Patriotic Love

It is my contention that civic identification suffers from the same sorts of problems that patriotic love does.¹⁰ To see the way that civic identification mirrors the problem MacMullen identifies with patriotic love, we need to note that although civic identification brings along with it feelings of pride, shame, and responsibility, MacMullen maintains that it is free of beliefs about personal responsibility for any actions that one's nation engages in, or any policies it makes. MacMullen claims, without much argument, that it is implausible to think that an individual can as point of fact be rightly described as having any actual moral responsibility for the policies and actions of her country. This, because there is so little influence she as an individual can have on the political process. MacMullen thinks that this fact is so clear that any citizen could easily become aware of it. As a consequence, MacMullen maintains that although the person who identifies with her country will feel pride, shame, and responsibility, she will not believe herself to be responsible for things that her country did or is doing. If she did believe this, MacMullen says, she would believe something that, on the face of it, would be irrational.¹¹

It should be easy to see why this creates a problem for civic identification. The view as it stands describes a person who feels pride, shame, and responsibility for the history and actions of her country, while at the same time believing that she cannot actually be responsible for the behavior of her country at all. What this trait describes is a certain cognitive and emotional dissonance within the agent. A person with civic identification, the view states, will be motivated to act because of feelings that directly defy her beliefs about her relationship to her country. In short, a person with civic identification will undermine the reflective rationality of her own emotional states and her reasons for being motivated to act politically.

As the view is described by MacMullen, civic identification says that person will be motivated to participate in politics because she feels responsible for her country's actions. However, the view also states that she will at the same time believe she is not responsible for country's actions. If such a person reflects on the connection between her beliefs and emotions (and motivations), she will see that there is no clear link between how she feels, why she is motivated to act, and what she believes. On such a picture, it looks like the person will have no actual well-founded reasons to be civically motivated. If being responsible is supposed to be the reason for participating, the person will have no reason to participate. On the other hand, if the

⁹ MacMullen acknowledges that perhaps citizens will not be as motivated as citizens who love their country, but he thinks this is the price we must pay to avoid the problems of patriotic love.

¹⁰ Again, if, in fact, love does really have the problematic features that MacMullen claims it does.

¹¹ MacMullen 132-3.

feelings of responsibility are supposed to motivate her, she will have reason to stop feeling responsible, since she is in fact not responsible, and should not believe that she is. In short, civic identification will undermine itself and the motivation it is supposed to help create.

This creates a dilemma for civic identification as a viable view. Either, the view must deny that individuals in society are not responsible for the actions of that society, or the view must deny the link between beliefs and feelings. Taking up this latter option: in essence, civic identification, must deny the judgment theory of emotions to maintain its coherence as a view and as a stable trait within agents.

On this view, emotions and feelings are working properly in a person when they are influenced properly by the person's judgment of situations. That is, a person becomes angry because she believes she has been wronged or slighted. She becomes elated when she believes her team has won the game. She becomes embarrassed when she believes she has done something mean to someone else. In addition, if her beliefs about these events change, so too will her emotions. If it turns out her team actually lost the game, she will stop feeling elated and feel deflated. If she comes to believe that she wasn't wronged or slighted, she will stop being angry at the person she initially thought wronged her. If she wakes up to discover that the mean thing she did to someone else was just a dream, she won't feel embarrassed anymore.

Now, of course, this judgment theory of emotions does not claim that emotions will react instantaneously to our beliefs, but the idea is that our beliefs do affect our emotional states, and that they rightly should. It would be irrational to go on feeling angry at someone who did nothing wrong. If ten days later, you acknowledge very clearly that you have been done no wrong, and you also very clearly continue to be angry without any remorse about that feeling, something has gone askew, according to the judgment theory.

Note that civic identification must deny this theory is a good one. This is because civic identification says that the person feels responsible for the actions of her country while simultaneously believing that she is in no way responsible for those actions. This is a classic denial of the theory.

This brings us to the real problem for civic identification as a trait. By introducing the judgment theory of emotions, I do not mean to say that that view is the correct way to understand emotions. Rather, I only need to say that this view is a plausible contender that is reasonable for many people to believe about how emotions and belief connect. The real problem with civic identification is not that it denies the judgment theory (or the individual responsibility of citizens for their country's actions—the other horn of the dilemma), but that it requires that citizens take up a controversial view about how reason and emotion works in order to properly develop the trait. From an educator or policy-maker's perspective, things are equally problematic, since endorsing the civic identification training program will require that we accept the implicit view of how reason and emotion works the trait depends on.

This point is the really problematic feature of the move from patriotic love to civic identification. Perhaps MacMullen is correct that patriotic love is likely to lead to biases in thinking and decision-making because of the love the person has for her country. Unfortunately, unless we accept a very particular and controversial theory of human psychology, civic identification will also lead to similar irrationalities. The particular irrationality will be different (instead of blind spots of judgment, we will have a disconnect between our beliefs and our motivations and emotions), but the general type of problem will apply equally

to both traits. In this way, MacMullen has not shown that civic identification can escape adequately from the problems he sees with inculcating patriotism.

An Illustration of a Larger Problem

Now, my critique of civic identification as a civic trait to inculcate in citizens is only one small example and data point about civic trait training more generally. However, in my view, this case is instructive in that it illustrates a common tendency among civic education proponents. What such proponents tend to do, is to create a theory about what skills and characteristics citizens need to effectively and properly participate in political decision-making. These theories contain a very great many kinds of assumptions which we might reasonably question. However, one type of assumption stands out: claims that might be reasonably disputed on psychological, ethical, or philosophical grounds. Civic identification is instructive because it is not only a pretty innocuous looking trait on the face of it, but it is also already a more neutered version of what is taken to be an unacceptably controversial analog trait (patriotic love). Even despite this “dumbing down,” civic identification, I have shown here, nevertheless relies on a few key assumptions about how human psychology works such that it will lead either to internal coherence problems within individuals, or at best will require that all individuals and proponents endorse some controversial theories about how reason and emotion relate to one another. Civic identification is a paradigm case of civic theorists aiming to make civic training more easily consumable, while entirely failing to realize the implicit reliance on claims that it would be unreasonable to expect everyone in society to endorse. In this way, despite all the work to avoid this result, civic identification brings along with it controversial doctrines reasonable citizens can reject. Since civic education in a democracy must contend with the fact of reasonable pluralism and cannot push forward programs that many individuals and groups in society could object to, it is difficult to see how traits like civic identification could be serious contenders for democratic education programs in a liberal society.

Of course, this is not to say that there are no traits we could come up with that could eschew background claims grounded in controversial doctrines, but if traits like civic identification struggle to free themselves of such doctrines, it is difficult to see how other traits endorsed by policy-makers and civic theorists will do any better. My own view is that civic theorists especially need to take much more seriously the assumptions they make, and to spend more of their time thoroughly analyzing the implications and requirements of the traits they suggest. It is one thing to believe that a particular trait would benefit a nation if its citizens all had that trait, it is quite another to show that the trait can stand up to scrutiny and truly pass the test of being a trait we could legitimately train into our citizens. Proponents of civic education like MacMullen spend far too little time on this latter project.