

The educated citizen

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President Zimmer, Provost Rosenbaum, decanal and faculty colleagues, honored graduates, family, and friends –

It is an honor as a member of the University of Chicago faculty to greet you this afternoon and to extend my congratulations, to you, the outstanding women and men who will soon receive your degrees from President Zimmer. The word “educate” derives from the Latin *educare*, meaning “to bring up,” and today in this Chapel you are surrounded by many of those who have brought you up, your family, your friends, your faculty, and your University. We are all proud of your accomplishments, and we know you will continue to bring distinction to the University of Chicago in your work from this day forward. Congratulations, and good luck, wherever your talents shall take you.

It is traditional to begin an address of this kind with a humorous story, and I shall not disappoint. This story has the additional virtue, however, that it relates to the themes I wish to develop today, on the role of the educated in a democratic polity.

I had the great, good fortune as a doctoral student to study with one of the last century’s greatest analysts of democratic politics, Robert Dahl. He is a modest man, who one day joined us graduate students around the lunch table and shared a story with us. Bob grew up in Alaska, went to college in Washington state, and one summer worked with his brother Lewis on the railroad, as a gandy dancer, repairing track. He was, he told us, all filled with enthusiasm for his studies, and so while the men worked, he treated them to a disquisition on Karl Marx’s labor theory of value in the morning and to a critique of it in the afternoon. At the end of a long, strenuous day – and a six-hour lecture on surplus value and exploitation – as the workmen trudged back to the railhead, one of the guys threw his arm around his brother, and said, loudly enough so that all could hear, “You know, Lew, your brother Bob sure is an *educated* [idiot].” So welcome, all of you, to this ancient and honorable company of educated men and women.

As an educated person, today you will begin the specific tasks for which your University of Chicago education has prepared you. Some of you will become scholars, some teachers, some leaders of government, industry, or finance, and some ministers to the sick, to the needy, or to the poor in spirit.

But whatever the specific job you will do, all of you will also assume a role in common. You will all be citizens, members of a political community, whether in this country or in another. And not just as citizens, because you are not just citizens like any other. By virtue of the accomplishments we celebrate today, you are *educated* citizens, among the most esteemed, the most learned, and the most influential members of this society or any other. Today, then, as a political scientist who has devoted a career to the study of citizen activism, I wish to examine this new role you have in common, your role

as an educated citizen. What are the rights and obligations of that role, and how should an educated citizen approach them?

Advanced education, political scientists know, has a number of highly salutary effects on democratic citizenship. Citizens who, like you, are educated through college or beyond are more likely to involve themselves in the political process. Across individuals, education is the most robust predictor of voter turnout in U.S. elections. Americans educated through college are nearly 20 percentage points more likely than Americans educated only through high school to report that they cast a ballot in a presidential election. They are also twice as likely to participate in a political meeting, twice as likely to work in a campaign, twice as likely to attend a meeting of a school board or a city council, and about two and a half times as likely to contact a member of the United States Congress. Unsurprisingly, the college educated are also 25 percentage points more likely to believe that they can be effective in politics. Education creates political competence, competence fosters confidence, and confidence encourages involvement in the processes of self government.

Education also promotes substantive commitment to democratic values. While Americans – and citizens of other democratic polities – often profess a high degree of support for core democratic practices, like the right to free speech, or the rights of those accused of a crime, they often falter in practice. For example, the General Social Survey, conducted here at the University by NORC, has tracked Americans’ tolerance for free expression for more than thirty years, asking respondents whether controversial figures like socialists, racists, homosexuals, advocates of military rule, and opponents of churches and religion should be allowed to speak or to teach. Tolerance is greatest for socialists, least for racists and militarists, and 15 to 20 percentage points greater for those who would speak than for those who would teach. Americans are very protective of tender, young minds. On every question, however, respondents educated through college or beyond are some 15 to 20 percentage points more committed to free expression in practice than respondents educated only through high school. The same is true of opinions on other matters of democratic values in practice, from the exclusion of evidence obtained by an illegal search to the classification of flag-burning as protected speech. Education tightens the connection between the abstract principles of democracy and the practical issues democracies daily confront.

Finally, education fosters political sophistication. In 1964, the political scientist Philip Converse jolted students of popular government with his study of mass belief systems. The great majority of Americans, he argued, lacked coherent and consistent opinions on important political issues. Their views were not organized by any overarching principles that could properly be called ideology; in fact, they were often unable to attach any substantive meaning even to the terms “liberal” and “conservative.” The great majority of Americans, that is, were simply adrift within the discourse of American democracy. But there were exceptions, and they were disproportionately the better educated. Educated citizens were sophisticated citizens, equipped with belief systems sufficiently coherent to guide their action and enable their understanding. Converse’s analysis has been much criticized, refined, and contested in the intervening 40

years. The American public, the consensus seems to be, is not quite so estranged from rationality as Converse would have us believe. But my basic point still holds. Whether the question is the completeness, the confidence, the coherence, or the consistency of political beliefs, the educated public is still the sophisticated public.

Your education, in short, has made you well qualified for your role as a citizen of a democracy. Educated citizens are more deeply involved in the democratic process, more sophisticated in their understanding of democracy's proceedings, and more committed to core democratic values as they are expressed in practice.

These characteristics of the educated citizen have caused some to advocate for an enhanced role in the democratic process for the most learned. The English philosopher John Stuart Mill, for instance, argued for the incorporation into the electorate of all citizens who were literate and who paid taxes, including – and this was a radical position in the nineteenth century – including women. His ideas for a liberal extension of the suffrage would more than have doubled the electorate in any democratic polity of his time.

But Mill, too, a liberal and a democrat as he was, had misgivings about the capacity for self-government of all of those carters and tinkers and shopkeepers. In a society governed by majority rule, he noted, "... absolute power, if they chose to exercise it, would rest with the numerical majority; and these would be composed exclusively of a single class, alike in biases, prepossessions, and general modes of thinking, and a class, to say no more, not the most highly cultivated." A liberal democracy, that is, a polity distinguished by a suffrage greater than any the world had ever seen, would necessarily *not* be ruled by those who were most qualified. But rather than sacrifice self-government, Mill the democrat and the liberal sacrificed equality instead. In *Considerations on representative government*, he wrote

In all human affairs, every person directly interested, and not under positive tutelage, has an admitted claim to a voice, and ... cannot justly be excluded from it. But though everyone ought to have a voice – that everyone ought to have an equal voice is a totally different proposition.... If with equal virtue, one [man] is superior to the other in knowledge or intelligence, ... the judgment, of the higher moral or intellectual being, is worth more than that of the inferior; and if the institutions of the country virtually assert that they are of the same value, they assert a thing which is not. One of the two, as the wiser or better man, has a claim to superior weight.

"It is not useful, but hurtful," he declared in summation, "that the constitution of the country should declare ignorance to be entitled to as much political power as knowledge."

To give the proper weight to knowledge, Mill proposed the simple expedient of plural voting. Where a common laborer might have one vote, a foreman might have two, and graduates of universities, members of the learned professions, and fellows of scholarly societies still more, enough extra votes, as he put it, to "[preserve] the educated

from the class legislation of the uneducated; but [stopping] short of enabling them to practice class legislation on their own account.”

As we have already seen, Mill had a point, for the educated citizen is more engaged in the democratic process, more committed to democratic values in practice, and more liable to have a sophisticated understanding of the issues facing a democratic society. Given the superior qualifications of the educated citizen, why should we not assign her a superior role in the democratic process?

In answer, let us listen to another classical liberal and small-d democrat, William F. Buckley, who famously quipped that “I would sooner be governed by the first 2000 names in the Boston telephone directory than by the 2000 members of the faculty of arts and sciences at Harvard.” Buckley’s remark is probably more revealing of his attitude toward the Harvard professoriate than his confidence in the Abbotts and Abels of Boston. Appropriately so. But it is also a pithy commentary on the collision between the egalitarian values of democracy and the elitist values of higher education, particularly coming as it does from a man who evinced little interest in anything that might be called common.

For it reveals that the premise behind Mill’s advocacy for a superior political position for the learned is that educated citizens are not just better equipped to exercise their citizenship but better able to rule, that is, to choose what is right for all citizens, the knowledgeable and the ignorant alike. And the elitism in Mill’s argument rests uneasily with the more egalitarian conceptions of democracy that resonate so strongly in the 21st century and in the United States.

Well it might, because the educated citizen is not the typical citizen, even in the United States, where access to higher education is relatively broad. Easy as it might be to miss in an environment densely populated with holders of Ph.D.s, J.D.s, M.B.A.s, M.P.P.s, M.S.s, and M.A.s, the majority of the polity is not highly educated. According to the Census, just 29 percent of the U.S. population over the age of 25 has a bachelor’s degree, only 10 percent holds any degree beyond a B.A. or a B.S., and not even 3 percent has a doctoral-level degree. The educated citizenry, that is, is an elite fraternity. If the distribution of income were identical to the distribution of education, all of you who will receive degrees today – except the handful of graduates from the College – would earn at least \$150,000.

This difference between the educated citizen and the average citizen – which further ramifies into differences in income, social standing, and life prospects – produces a divergence in their views on important social and political issues. As we have already seen, the educated citizen is more supportive of democratic rights and norms in a range of practical applications, views a democrat – even a populist democrat – would declare good.

But the educated citizen differs in other beliefs as well. Americans overwhelmingly love their country, but educated citizens, on average, are less likely to

express a reflexive and uncritical brand of patriotism. Americans overwhelmingly believe in a God, but the beliefs of the educated about the nature of their relationship with a deity focus more on the abstract and less on the personal. Finally, Americans are predominantly skeptical about the government's role in the economy, but educated citizens are still less supportive of public policies that would redistribute income, wealth, or power. According again to the General Social Survey, only one-third of the graduates of colleges and universities believe that it should probably or definitely be the responsibility of government to reduce differences in income, whereas half of those who advanced in their schooling no further than high school think it should be. In a word, educated citizens tend to think like elites: they are "free-thinkers" on matters of social belief and conscience and "conservatives" on issues of social organization. Their beliefs about the requirements of a good and just society might be right or they might be wrong, but they are no more impartial than anybody else's. The educated citizen should not expect deference on the grounds that he has superior answers to the questions of value that dominate all politics.

But if the role of the educated citizen is not to give all the answers, then what might it be? To answer this question – or at least to sketch an answer – I invite all of you to reflect for just a moment on your University of Chicago education. A friend once asked the Nobel laureate physicist I. I. Rabi about the source of his success as a scientist. "Every other Jewish mother in Brooklyn," Rabi replied, "would ask her child ...: 'So? Did you learn anything today?' But not my mother.... 'Izzy,' she would say, 'did you ask a good question today?' That difference – asking good questions – made me ... a scientist."

Wherever you were a student in the University, you learned the skills of critical reasoning, of taking received ideas and ways of the world and putting them to question. By now, it should be second nature. That discipline of asking a good question, let me suggest, that same sensibility that makes you a scientist or a humanist or an agent of the practical arts, is what gives you an important role as an educated citizen. For in democratic politics as in physics, philosophy, business, or law, as we know from lamentable experience, we won't get the right answers if we don't ask the right questions.

Congratulations, and may you always ask good questions, as scholars, teachers, or leaders, and as citizens. Thank you.