

**ON STATUS QUO BIAS IN CIVIC EDUCATION**

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When, if ever, should civic education in a democracy encourage children to believe in the substantive merits of one of their society's existing laws or political institutions? In other words, how should we evaluate status quo biases in civic education?<sup>1</sup> The alternative with which I want to contrast status quo bias is *not* education that is biased against the status quo (and presumably in favor of certain alternative political arrangements) but rather philosophic education (Galston, 1989, p. 90), an approach to raising future citizens that is (as far as possible) free of bias.

My paper proceeds in four parts. First, I define status quo educational bias. Second, I outline the two prongs of the liberal argument that such bias is bad for civic education: I call these the *fallibility* and *legitimacy* objections. The next two parts explore the strongest arguments in favor of status quo bias. Part III shows the possibility of constructing compelling *content-dependent* reasons, i.e., reasons that invoke the substantive merits of existing institutions, notwithstanding the fallibility objection. Part IV highlights three *content-independent* reasons, i.e., reasons that appeal not to the substantive merits of the institutions in question but merely to the fact that those institutions are the status quo: I call these the arguments from *stability, compliance, and patriotism*. I conclude that, given the limitations of philosophic education, the combined force of content-dependent and content-independent reasons will sometimes outweigh the

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "status quo" rather than "conservative" because my subject is educational bias that favors *any* existing political arrangements, regardless of where they lie on the Left-Right ideological spectrum. But, as we shall see, there are some familiar conservative beliefs (most notably the view that we are more likely to regress than to progress when we overturn institutions of some proven merit) and values (stability, patriotism, and the social order that results from widespread compliance with laws) that tend to favor status quo bias (even when the status quo is decidedly to the political Left).

fallibility and legitimacy objections to particular instances of status quo bias. Therefore, the best civic education will typically include significant elements of such bias.

### **I: WHAT IS STATUS QUO EDUCATIONAL BIAS?**

I define status quo biased civic education as *behavior by adults (including but not limited to educators acting in their professional capacity) whose (sometimes unintended) effect is to encourage children's belief in the substantive merits of a particular existing law or political institution, where that effect does not derive solely from an improvement in children's ability and/or an increase in their inclination to engage in autonomous assessment of the best arguments for and against that law or institution.* It is important to emphasize that status quo educational bias can be and often is unintended. In particular, an educator who intends to deliver philosophic education may fail because she is unaware of or unable to overcome her own biases when she describes the status quo (and potential alternatives) and/or when she presents the arguments on different sides. Indeed, unintended status quo bias is probably so pervasive that pure philosophic education about politics is impossible. Civic education will realistically always exhibit a degree of status quo bias, but the range and extent of that bias is not wholly beyond our control. The real normative questions are about how to strike the right balance in preparing the next generation for citizenship: when and to what extent is intentional status quo bias justified when we teach children about politics, and what lengths should we go to in our efforts to eliminate unintended status quo biases?

## II: OBJECTIONS TO STATUS QUO BIAS

Is status quo biased civic education ever appropriate for children *qua* future citizens?<sup>2</sup> There are two principal reasons to think that it is not. First, according to the *fallibility* objection, status quo biases in education are barriers to political progress. A democratic society's prospects for seeing and correcting its own mistakes are diminished if each new generation of citizens is systematically taught to accept the status quo. Such educational bias distorts or even short-circuits what should be an ongoing debate about the substantive merits of existing political arrangements, even those that today's adult citizens overwhelmingly regard as just and wise. In recognition of the fallibility of their collective judgments, adult citizens should educate the next generation to think critically about all the laws they will inherit.<sup>3</sup> This fallibility objection owes much to J. S. Mill's arguments for freedom of thought and discussion and his fear of excessive state control of education in chapters two and five respectively of *On Liberty*.<sup>4</sup>

Second, according to the *legitimacy* objection, the legitimacy of a state depends upon citizens' giving their autonomous consent to the institutions by which they are governed (Brighouse, 2000, 1998). Consent is not normatively significant – i.e., it does not confer legitimacy – if it is manufactured. “Consent should not simply be caused by the state itself, through mechanisms that have nothing to do with the appropriateness of the [existing political] arrangements” (Brighouse, 2000, p. 76). A state that indoctrinates

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<sup>2</sup> I do *not* ask i) whether such bias serves children's interests *qua* persons or ii) whether requiring such education violates parental rights.

<sup>3</sup> A variant on the fallibility objection observes that an existing law, although justified in current conditions, may be ill-suited to the conditions that the next generation of citizens will face. In such cases, status quo educational bias is a barrier not to *progress* but to appropriate *flexibility*.

<sup>4</sup> Mill also argues that a certain kind of status quo educational bias would fail to achieve its own goal: if future citizens are taught the supposed merits of existing institutions as “dead dogma” (Mill, 1859/1989, pp. 37-46), rather than being exposed to the full force of the reasons both for and against, their understanding of and commitment to those institutions are both likely to suffer.

children to believe in the goodness of its laws is a “political perpetual-motion machine” (Arons, 1983, p. 203), and such a state is illegitimate *even if* all its laws are in fact uniquely best. Status quo educational bias, even when it falls short of outright indoctrination, poses precisely this threat to the state’s legitimacy. And, importantly, the threat arises even when the state is not the agent of the biased education (Callan, 2000, p. 152). In addition to eschewing bias in the schools it operates, the state may therefore need to regulate private and home schools. Only if children’s education permits<sup>5</sup> them to form independent political beliefs and values can their future endorsement of their society’s laws and institutions be autonomous and therefore confer legitimacy on the state.<sup>6</sup>

Combining the fallibility and legitimacy objections: status quo biased civic education runs directly counter to the goal of enabling (and perhaps encouraging) future citizens to participate autonomously in the democratic process of reauthorizing, revising, or repealing the laws by which they are governed. As we have seen, such autonomous political participation is of civic value both *intrinsically* (because it confers legitimacy) and *instrumentally* (because it contributes to discovering and correcting defects in our political institutions). My question in the remainder of this paper is whether the legitimacy and fallibility objections to status quo biased civic education are always decisive. By exploring the strongest arguments in favor of such bias, I aim to show that it is often a justifiable component of the best civic education.

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<sup>5</sup> I would add that education should *encourage* the development and exercise of autonomy, but Brighthouse (2000, pp. 80-82) disclaims this further step as a violation of character neutrality.

<sup>6</sup> Given that we are born into particular political communities and that emigration is costly, John Rawls (1996/1993, p. 222) argues that citizens’ considered, rational, and informed endorsement of political principles must play the role of consent to political authority in liberal accounts of legitimacy. “We may over the course of life come freely to accept, as the outcome of reflective thought and reasoned judgment, the ideals, principles, and standards that specify our basic rights and liberties, and effectively guide and moderate the political power to which we are subject.”

We can distinguish two broad categories of reasons in favor of status quo biased civic education: those that appeal to the substantive merits of existing institutions and those that appeal merely to their being the status quo. Let us call reasons of the former type content-dependent and the latter content-independent. I shall discuss content-dependent reasons in part III and content-independent reasons in part IV. It is hard to imagine that status quo bias could be defended entirely without invoking content-dependent reasons, and any such reasons must confront the fallibility objection. But the various content-independent reasons are also important and can play a significant auxiliary role, especially in counterbalancing (as opposed to refuting) the objections.

### **III: CONTENT-DEPENDENT REASONS FOR STATUS QUO BIAS**

One might think that there is an obvious reason to bias children's education in favor of certain existing laws and institutions: namely, that those political arrangements are good. We worry that children who receive a predominantly philosophic education will not reason their way to supporting good laws, and we believe that we can improve the odds by judicious use of educational bias. So, should we simply conclude that there are content-dependent reasons for status quo educational bias if and only if the institution that it favors is good? This would be a singularly unhelpful conclusion. The problem we face is epistemological: we do not know which of our political institutions are good. Often we disagree. And, even when we agree, we can be wrong. This is the force of the fallibility objection.

So, much as Ronald Dworkin (1985, p. 106) proposes a “*working* theory of civil disobedience” whereby the permissibility of disobedience does not depend on “which side is right in the underlying controversy,” it seems that we need a working theory of civic education whereby the permissibility of status quo bias does not depend on the actual substantive merits of the existing law or institution for which educators would be encouraging children’s support. The theory should guide our educational policy and practice using only our *beliefs* about the substantive merits of our political arrangements, including not only the *content* of those beliefs but also their *distribution* across citizens and the *conditions* under which they were formed. A working theory takes the beliefs themselves, and not their truth or falsity (to which we do not have direct access), as its inputs. The fallibility objection rightly insists that we not confuse a belief, even a widely and strongly held belief, with the truth of that belief. But it is one thing to recognize the fallibility of our inferences from widespread belief to truth; it is quite another never to act upon such inferences in the design of children’s education. The fallibility objection highlights one important concern, namely, that an institution favored by status quo bias may be imperfect, perhaps even seriously unjust or unwise. But we should not overlook the opposite danger, namely, that by eschewing status quo educational bias we increase the chance that future citizens will unwisely or unjustly overturn the good institutions we currently have.

Consider laws that seek to guarantee basic liberal rights. Galston (1989, p. 91) argues that “very few individuals will come to embrace the core commitments of liberal society through a process of rational inquiry. If children are to be brought to accept these commitments as valid and binding, it can only be through a pedagogy that is far more

rhetorical than rational.” Hence liberal states should use status quo educational bias. But doesn’t this example simply ignore the force of the fallibility objection? We could be wrong to believe either that our society should protect basic liberal rights or that a particular existing law is a good way to codify and protect one of these rights. Under what circumstances might we have content-dependent reasons for biasing education in favor of an existing law notwithstanding the ever-present possibility that we have overestimated the substantive merits of that law? In other words, when should we have confidence in our belief that a law is good? Here is a tentative set of conditions under which, I would argue, we have strong content-dependent reasons to bias education to some degree in favor of a particular existing law X:

- i) the overwhelming majority of adult citizens believe that X is a good law.
- ii) citizens are legally permitted to express opposition to X, organize against it, etc.
- iii) today’s adult citizens were not themselves educated in such a biased fashion that an overwhelming majority would be expected to believe that X is a good law regardless of its merits.
- iv) if X disadvantages some citizens, at least a significant minority of those citizens nonetheless believe that it is justified.
- v) X has been on the books for at least a generation, and conditions i) – iv) were all satisfied one generation ago.

Some readers may believe that these conditions are too demanding, that they concede too much to the ignorance, prejudice, and selfishness that explain much opposition to existing laws. Others may wish to add to the list, concerned that

longstanding imperfect political arrangements may meet the above conditions because hardly anyone thinks to critically reevaluate them, or that discriminatory laws might meet condition iv) because some of the victims have adaptively accepted the bad reasons offered to justify the discrimination. I intend the tentative list above merely to illustrate that we can have strong content-dependent reasons for implementing or retaining status quo biased education when conditions render the fallibility objection much less potent than it often is. And, even when some or all of these conditions are not fully met, we may still have content-dependent reasons that, when combined with the important content-independent reasons I shall soon describe, are sufficient to outweigh the fallibility and legitimacy objections to status quo bias.

Of course, demanding as the above five conditions are, the fallibility objection is not entirely defused when they are met. Even under the most favorable circumstances, the overwhelming majority of adult citizens could be wrong: epistemic reliability is not infallibility. Status quo educational bias, even if employed sparingly and judiciously, will lead to the formation of some false beliefs that would not have been formed by recipients of philosophic education. But the interesting question is not whether status quo bias induces some errors. Unsurprisingly, it does. What we need to ask is whether philosophic education is less likely to lead to errors. Since the quality of a citizen's political beliefs starts to matter at the age of majority, the question is whether the opinion of adults under (something like) the above conditions is epistemically more reliable than the judgment of the average eighteen-year-old who was raised as far as possible without status quo bias. I would argue that it is.

The grounds for preferring the adults' judgment are not simply the mathematical fact that it is the view of an overwhelming majority and the greater maturity and experience of the average citizen when compared to an eighteen-year-old. There is also reason to believe that each adult citizen inherits some accumulated political wisdom through her own education's status quo biases. We assume that a considerable degree of status quo bias has been the norm in education throughout a society's history. In any generation, the political beliefs of a typical adult are therefore a function of both the status quo biases contained in her education and her own independent reasoning. Of course, throughout much of the society's history, its status quo educational biases probably did not come close to meeting the above five conditions. And, once that society has developed to the point where it has the potential to meet the five conditions with respect to some of its existing laws, its citizens may regard many of the political arrangements that were previously supported by status quo educational biases as deeply unjust – perhaps the most obvious examples are political institutions that denied equal rights to women and the members of various racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. But if, as good liberal optimists about progress and the power of human reason, we believe that independent reasoning improves the quality of our inherited beliefs (on average, although obviously not in all cases), we should expect each generation of adults to have better beliefs than the previous generation. The cumulative effect of such improvement is the so-called wisdom of ages: each generation, on average, incrementally improves on the beliefs of the previous generation (Burke, 1790/1987).

To deny the superiority of adults' judgment under suitably demanding conditions (and therefore to reject altogether the content-dependent arguments for status quo biased

civic education) requires an unrealistic faith in the capacity of each person's undirected reason to appreciate the accumulated wisdom of her ancestors. "We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason, because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of ages" (Burke, 1987/1790, p. 76). In politics, "the work ... requires the aid of more minds than one age can furnish" (p. 149).

Notice also that adults need not believe that a particular political arrangement is *uniquely best* in order to have content-dependent reasons for promoting it through education. Content-dependent reasons for status quo biased civic education can be grounded in the belief that an existing institution is a member of a 'top set' of equally or incommensurably good possible institutions or even that it is good but imperfect. A related observation helps to further weaken the fallibility objection: even if we wrongly believe that some institution is uniquely best, it may nonetheless have considerable substantive merit, and education that promotes this institution may be the best way to promote to children an important political value that the institution in question (perhaps imperfectly) realizes.

A classic conservative argument presents itself at this juncture. If we decline to bias education in favor of an existing institution, we increase the chance that future citizens will abandon or reform that institution. When the status quo has considerable merit – the institution in question, although not uniquely best, is a member of the top set or good but imperfect – there is a grave danger that any such change will be for the worse. Status quo biased education may indeed be a barrier to progress, as the fallibility objection warns us, but it is also a bulwark against regression.

In addition, civic education that is biased in favor of an existing law or institution that is not (and sometimes is not even believed to be) uniquely best might help instill the values that underpin that political arrangement, albeit presumably at the cost of making future citizens less inclined and able to fair-mindedly consider i) other, perhaps even better, ways to instantiate those values (Carr, 1991, pp. 380-381) and ii) competing values (or rival conceptualizations of the same values). This raises an important question: are political values – consider, for example, the substantive and procedural values that define liberal democracy – best taught by securing children’s allegiance to concrete institutions and practices that are particular, contestable, and perhaps imperfect ways of instantiating those values? For example, should American children be taught to believe in individual rights and limited government by teaching them to support the Bill of Rights and the practice of judicial review, notwithstanding the existence of important critiques of these institutions? Or consider John Dewey’s (1927) observation that although democracy is first and foremost an idea, it cannot exist in the world without institutional embodiment. Adapting Dewey, we might wonder whether it is possible to teach children to value democracy as an idea without first/also teaching them to value a concrete set of institutions that embody the idea. I doubt that one can cultivate students’ commitment to liberal democracy as a concept without endorsing a particular conception (or at least favoring some conceptions over others).<sup>7</sup>

But can we have our cake and eat it: teach *young* children to support the particular form in which liberal democracy is instantiated in their society, then, as the children mature, introduce them to alternative understandings and instantiations of those principles? There are two potential problems with this optimistic ‘no trade-offs are

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<sup>7</sup> See Rawls (1999/1971, p. 5) for the distinction between concept and conception.

necessary' view. First, will all (or even most) children realistically attain the level of education at which the more philosophic and comparative approach is employed? (Even if children are still enrolled in formal education when these more sophisticated lessons are being taught, will they be paying attention?) And, second, even if citizens stay the full educational course, the status quo bias of the early-years education may never be fully undone; citizens educated according to this two-stage formula may predictably retain, even after the second stage, the preference for (and belief in the superiority of) status quo institutions that was inculcated in them during the first stage.<sup>8</sup>

#### **IV: THREE CONTENT-INDEPENDENT REASONS FOR STATUS QUO BIAS**

##### **Stability**

The first content-independent reason for status quo biased education invokes the value of political stability. Political experimentation and change are not costless. Social order depends upon citizens' compliance with the demands made by their political institutions, and people are motivated to comply partly out of reverence for long-established institutions. "Far from growing weak, the laws continually acquire new force in every well constituted state. The prejudice in favor of antiquity each day renders them more venerable" (Rousseau, 1987/1762, p. 195). Political reform weakens or destroys affective motives for compliance and thereby threatens social order. And, when laws change, individual habits that used to support law-abiding conduct may no longer do so. "Law has no strength with respect to obedience apart from habit, and this is not created except over a period of time. Hence the easy alteration of existing laws in favor of new

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<sup>8</sup> Gardner (1988) discusses this "stickiness" of early beliefs.

and different ones weakens the power of law itself” (Aristotle, 1984, p. 73).<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, citizens make plans based on the existing political order – tax and inheritance laws provide obvious examples – and those plans are disrupted by political reform. A climate of continual legal change discourages certain forms of socially valuable investment. And there are various transitional costs associated with changing laws: propagating the changes to all citizens, retraining public officials, designing and implementing new systems to execute the laws, etc. For such reasons, it may be desirable for future citizens to be educated to support the status quo (albeit not to such a degree that they are blind to its defects when these are clear, severe, and readily remediable).<sup>10</sup>

The argument from stability, like the other content-independent arguments we shall survey, will not ordinarily be *sufficient* to justify status quo biased civic education: rather, it will complement content-dependent arguments. Admittedly, under various pessimistic assumptions about the risks and costs associated with attempts at significant political reform, the value of political stability could suffice to justify using education to bolster support for a society’s existing laws and institutions even if they are believed to be decidedly poor. But I doubt that these pessimistic assumptions are often warranted.

One might deny that the value of political stability justifies teaching children to believe in the *substantive* merits of the status quo when we could instead teach children to see the value of political stability itself, to be open to supporting existing laws and institutions simply for the sake of avoiding turbulence. The latter approach has the considerable advantage of being candid and transparent to children – we simply introduce

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<sup>9</sup> We shall shortly see that status quo educational bias may also promote compliance more directly.

<sup>10</sup> Status quo biased education is obviously not the only way to increase the chance that future generations will retain existing institutions: one might (also) use the constitutional strategy of entrenchment, establishing procedural obstacles (such as supermajority requirements) to certain kinds of political reform.

them to the same content-independent reasons that we ourselves have for favoring the status quo. But such teachings may not, as an empirical matter, be as effective as we think they should be: it is possible that the costs and risks associated with political reform will seem so abstract and remote to children (and the young adults they will become) that they give insufficient weight to arguments from stability. If children cannot be sufficiently moved by content-independent reasons to preserve the status quo, those very same reasons may justify adults in delivering status quo biased education.

### **Compliance**

A second content-independent reason to inculcate children's support for laws is to encourage their compliance with those laws. One can be under a moral obligation to comply with a bad law for reasons of social coordination: laws arouse expectations about behavior, and those expectations may suffice to render noncompliance *malum prohibitum*. But these *prohibitum* reasons for compliance, even when they are (normatively) sufficient to establish that noncompliance is unjustified, may nonetheless not be sufficient to *motivate* compliance. Citizens who have been taught to (falsely) believe that a particular law is good may be more strongly motivated to comply with it.

Admittedly, we have reasons to avoid instilling false beliefs in children, but we also have reasons to promote compliance when this is morally required for *prohibitum* reasons. As with the argument from stability, the goal of promoting compliance is unlikely to justify cultivating children's support for laws that we believe to be bad, but it adds weight to the argument for teaching children to support laws that we believe are good (despite the possibility that we are mistaken in this belief).

## **Patriotism**

Let me now turn to the third and last content-independent reason for status quo bias. Teaching children to believe in the substantive merits of at least some of their society's fundamental laws and institutions may be justified in part as a way of inculcating patriotism and a sense of civic identity. Citizens who have an affective attachment to and/or sense of constitutive membership in their political community are more likely to contribute to civic life in ways that are not legally required. Of course, not all such contributions are beneficial. But democratic societies depend upon voluntary civic participation for their survival and flourishing (Tocqueville, 1850/2006). Pure and disinterested moral motivation is unlikely to generate sufficiently high levels of participation. And narrow self-interest cannot be relied upon given the free-rider problem: each citizen benefits from the survival and flourishing of his political community, but narrowly self-interested citizens will often regard the civic participation necessary to realize these public goods as burdensome work that they would prefer to leave to others. When large numbers of citizens reason in this fashion, the likely result is undersupply of the public good. So, if the civic participation that educationally-induced patriotism generates is (on balance) morally desirable, this provides a (prima facie) moral reason to raise children to support the fundamental laws and institutions of their state.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, patriotism and civic identity can be promoted without reference to the political community's laws or institutions: one could try to induce this kind of affective attachment or sense of constitutive membership by focusing entirely on shared history,

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<sup>11</sup> In future work I hope to build on this argument from civic participation to defend the value of a form of patriotism and to justify adopting the cultivation of patriotic sentiments as a goal of civic education. I cannot here fully defend these controversial views.

ethnic or linguistic commonalities, etc. Love is an emotion that descriptively does not require, and normatively need not be warranted by the justifiability of, any underlying belief in the merits of the object that is loved (Hand, 2009). One need not think well of the political community in which one resides – its laws and institutions – in order to identify with it and be affectively motivated to contribute to its maintenance and improvement. But there is reason to think that future citizens are *more likely* to develop love of country and a corresponding sense of membership if they believe in the substantive merits of at least some of that country’s fundamental laws and institutions.

As with the values of stability and compliance, the benefits of enhanced patriotism are unlikely to be sufficient to outweigh the harms that would result from teaching children to support a fundamental law that is unjust or deeply unwise. But when we have content-dependent reasons for biasing civic education in favor of a particular fundamental political institution, and even when those reasons face a significant challenge from the fallibility objection, the content-independent argument from patriotism adds weight to the case for status quo bias. It is sometimes more important to encourage the kind of civic participation that sustains what we reasonably believe to be a good regime than to refrain from teaching children to support one of that regime’s fundamental laws on the grounds that we could be wrong to believe that it is a good law.

Much as I discussed in part III, one might think that a two-stage educational solution is available, enabling us to have our cake and eat it. *Young* children’s love of country could be aroused by teaching them to support its fundamental political arrangements. As the children grow older, they could be encouraged to reflect critically on the substantive merits of those arrangements. The affective ties to their country might

remain even after the bias towards its existing institutions has been overcome. But the likelihood is that this bias will *not* be fully overcome: *both* effects of early-years bias – arousal of patriotic sentiments *and* support for the status quo – will prove to be enduring. Of course, this is an empirical claim: if it is possible for the second stage of education to fully undo the effects of early-years bias on future citizens' beliefs about the substantive merits of existing institutions without any loss of patriotism, then the argument from patriotism will not favor programs of civic education that allow the status quo bias to persist. The argument from patriotism, like the argument from compliance but unlike the argument from stability, does not aim to increase the probability that existing institutions will persist across generations

The arguments from stability, compliance, and patriotism significantly bolster the content-dependent reasons for teaching children to believe in institutions that instantiate liberal democratic values in ways that may be (and we may believe to be) incommensurable with or even inferior to alternatives. The goal of reproducing and improving a recognizably (but inevitably always imperfect) liberal democratic regime is not best served by the most thoroughly philosophic education that adults can provide to the next generation of citizens. Critical autonomy is not the only civic virtue. We should recall Edmund Burke's (1790/1987, pp. 7-8, 28) warnings to those purveyors of abstract reason whose words threaten to weaken people's sentimental attachment to established institutions that serve them well, albeit not perfectly.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that there are conditions under which the overwhelming consensus of adult citizens constitutes a strong content-dependent reason to bias civic education in favor of a particular existing law or political institution. The fallibility objection to status quo bias is important but not conclusive, especially given the content-independent reasons that complement arguments grounded in our beliefs about the substantive merits of the status quo. The fact that we could be wrong in our assessments of existing institutions does not warrant always setting those assessments aside when we educate the next generation of citizens. Current adult citizens are indeed fallible, but members of the next generation are even more likely than their parents to err if they are raised in ways that scrupulously avoid even the most defensible forms of status quo bias.

But what about the legitimacy objection? Again, this is important but not conclusive. Although Brighouse is right (contra Clayton, 2006, pp. 133-134) to say that it is *a* liberal value that citizens should autonomously endorse their political institutions, it is not the supreme liberal value. It is appropriate to trade off this liberal legitimacy against the values that are served by status quo biased civic education. Brighouse himself acknowledges that the capacity to give free and authentic consent is always a matter of degree, never absolute. He emphasizes the ways in which the autonomy of this consent is undermined by exercises of state power that are necessary to achieve justice as liberals understand it – “even the most conscientiously self-limiting state is unlikely to refrain entirely from encouraging consent in ways that bypass or preempt [citizens’] rational scrutiny ... Even publicly guaranteeing rights encourages citizens to view themselves as rights bearers” (2000, p. 77) – thereby stacking the decks against, for example, utilitarian, feminist, or Marxist arguments that deny the centrality of rights to a just political order.

The autonomy of citizens' political beliefs and values is a matter of degree, and more is certainly better from the standpoint of liberal political legitimacy, but we have seen that there are other potentially conflicting goods with which the legitimizing properties of autonomy must compete.

In short, my argument is that some particular instances of status quo biased civic education will be justified by cost-benefit analysis. Admittedly, if all children could successfully be raised with a very high degree of philosophic sophistication in their approach to politics and an appropriate sensitivity to both the value of political stability and the prohibitive reasons for compliance with laws, and if the motivation to serve one's country could be instilled without promoting the substantive merits of any particular existing political arrangements, it is hard to see why we would endorse the biases that were this paper's subject. But, if the values that status quo biased education can serve are genuine values, as I think they are, and if other approaches to education cannot by themselves fully realize those values, which seems very likely to be the case in practice, then some significant degree of intentional status quo bias in civic education may be justified, and some unintended bias will be desirable, notwithstanding the attendant costs and risks.

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