

The conservatism objection to educating for the virtues of citizenship

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tre**Benjamin Sachs-Cobbe** 

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, education for the virtues of citizenship has become widespread in the United States and United Kingdom. It is intended to inculcate virtues such as courtesy, respect and truthfulness in school children. This essay defends education for the virtues of citizenship against two criticisms. According to the first, which might be called the ‘*status quo* bias’ criticism, inculcating such virtues is a recipe for *stasis*. According to the second, which might be called the ‘individualism’ criticism, EVC sends the message that the citizen herself is primarily responsible for her fate. The authors who raise these two criticisms tend to link EVC with ‘conservatism’ or one of its cognate terms. If education for the virtues of citizenship really is conservative, this raises the worry that education for the virtues of citizenship is partisan, which would surely render it morally objectionable. In this paper, I distinguish big-C Conservatism from small-c conservatism, and interpret the education for the virtues of citizenship critics as contending that education for the virtues of citizenship is Conservative (i.e. aligned with the political philosophies of right-leaning parties) in virtue of being individualistic, and conservative in virtue of being status quo biased. Against the individualism criticism, I point out that the strand of conservatism of which economists like Hayek and Friedman are the standard-bearers is anti-individualistic in virtue of holding that we need good economic policy to make up for the fact that we cannot count on individual economic actors to exercise sound moral judgement, and that the strand of conservatism inspired by commentators like Burke, Nisbet and Scruton is anti-individualistic in virtue of its emphasis on community. Hence, the inference from individualism to Conservatism doesn’t go through. Against the status quo bias criticism, I contend that it is unpredictable who will benefit from citizens being resistant to change. Hence, while it may be right to label such resistance ‘conservative’, such conservatism is not partisan.

Keywords

Civic education, conservatism, individualism, moral education, political liberalism, virtue education

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Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to defend the real-world practice of educating children for the virtues of citizenship against the objection that doing so serves a ‘conservative’ agenda. Citizenship is also a long-standing part of the curriculum in the United Kingdom; it is a taught subject in England’s National Curriculum,¹ while ‘global citizenship’ is embedded across a variety of taught subjects under the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland.² The idea that inculcating virtues in children will lead them to become better citizens, and thereby lead to a healthier democracy, has been very influential in the U.K. government at various points in recent history, beginning in the days of New Labour,³ while the intellectual font of this movement in its contemporary form is the Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues at the University of Birmingham. In the United States, the story is not as straightforward, with the educational system being so decentralised. However, character education is a point of emphasis at many charter schools, and recent decades have seen a proliferation of the Core Virtues programme in primary schools, the mission of which is to promote the virtues that are essential to a properly functioning republic.⁴

My target in this essay is any real-world schooling programme that aims to inculcate certain virtues in children for the purpose of turning them into good citizens. I will refer to such programmes, collectively, as Education for the Virtues of Citizenship, abbreviated EVC hereafter. The word ‘education’ when used here means state schooling. As I explain below, I treat the ‘conservatism’ objection as a distinctly political objection to EVC, which entails that it has most force when targeted at educational programmes that are backed by the state.

The ‘conservatism’ objection is best understood sometimes as an objection to all versions of EVC, while in other cases as an objection that depends on the set of virtues the EVC programme in question is attempting to inculcate. When I address the ‘conservatism’ objection in that second form I will take England as my EVC case study. In England, per official guidance from the Department for Education (DfE), schools are to inculcate the virtues of courtesy, respect, truthfulness, courage and generosity, as well as integrity, humility and a sense of justice.⁵ Many of the critics who raise the ‘conservatism’ objection in its second form make England an explicit target of their criticism, and, besides, their criticism is most forceful when we assume a list of virtues of the DfE’s sort.

I begin, in the next section, by laying out two criticisms that, in my judgement, comprise the ‘conservatism’ objection against EVC: (1) that EVC is individualistic, and (2) that EVC is biased in favour of the status quo. I argue that one reasonable way to construe these criticisms is as attempts to establish that EVC serves a partisan agenda and I explain why EVC would be morally objectionable if this were true. In the third section, I review what EVC defenders have said up to this point by way of rebutting the two criticisms, and identify the ways in which those rebuttals fall short. I then move on to offering my own responses to the individualism criticism (the fourth section) and the status quo bias criticism (the fifth section). The upshot will be that EVC doesn’t succumb to the ‘conservatism’ objection; it will remain open, however, whether EVC is vulnerable to other objections.

Throughout the essay I will focus on the link between EVC and theories of citizenship, where a ‘theory of citizenship’ tells us what is required to be a good citizen. To foreshadow, in my view the challenge for the ‘conservatism’ objection is to identify a theory of citizenship, purportedly inculcated by EVC, that is neither too specific nor too general. If the objector identifies a quite specific theory of citizenship, then it will be difficult for her to show that that theory is inculcated by EVC. There are, after all, several diverging ways of completing a picture of ideal citizenship that starts with the thought that a citizen should be, for example, courteous, respectful, truthful, humble, and courageous. If, on the other hand, the objector identifies a quite general theory of citizenship then it will be difficult for her to show that that theory is partisan, since there will (again) be different ways of completing the picture that that theory sets out, some of them serving one political agenda, others of them serving the opposite political agenda.

Formulating the ‘conservatism’ objection

In this section I begin by discussing theories of citizenship. I go on to construe the individualism criticism as an argument to the effect that EVC inculcates an individualistic theory of citizenship, and the status quo bias criticism an argument to the effect that EVC inculcates a status quo biased theory of citizenship. Finally, I explain why it is important to lay out and respond to the claim that in virtue of teaching an individualistic and/or status quo biased theory of citizenship EVC engages in a partisan project designed to serve the ends of conservatism.

The two parts of a theory of citizenship

The immediate goal of an EVC programme is to turn children into good citizens. Therefore, any such programme relies, whether implicitly or explicitly, on a theory of citizenship.

Any complete theory of citizenship will be divisible, at the broadest level, into two parts. The ideal theory part will lay out what role the citizen has in the project of achieving the ends of the state, where the ends of the state can be anything from respecting human rights to maximising the utility of the populace. The non-ideal theory part will explain what role the citizen has in circumstances in which the state is failing to achieve, or even failing to aim itself at, its proper ends.

In what follows I give a more detailed reading of the individualism and status quo bias criticisms and explain what they imply about the theory of citizenship that EVC is targeted at spreading.

The individualism criticism

As mentioned, one aspect of the ‘conservatism’ objection charges EVC with inculcating an individualistic theory of citizenship. Of course, in some sense the entire practice of education is individualistic, in that it is structured around a concern that each individual student acquires certain knowledge, skills, and so on, and thus implicitly embraces the idea that the ultimate locus of moral concern is the individual. So there is a risk here of

saddling the EVC critic with an objection that proves too much. To reject EVC on the grounds that it is individualistic in the broad sense just expressed would be to reject it for endorsing a moral outlook common to conservatives *and* their mainstream opponents. Hence, we need to adopt on her behalf a narrower understanding of individualism. Here I offer my own understanding of what the critics mean when applying this and cognate terms to EVC, but the reader who wants to see for herself what the critics have to say is encouraged to read this endnote.⁶

As mentioned already, the immediate target of EVC is producing good citizens, so if EVC is individualistic then that means that it's built on an individualistic theory of citizenship. Specifically, we can understand the individualism criticism as targeting the ideal theory part of EVC's implied theory of citizenship. As a reminder, the ideal theory part explains what role the individual should play in achieving the goals of the state. On this point, the critics are saying that EVC embodies a view on which the citizen herself, and not the political decisions taken, is primarily responsible for one of the state's goals, namely her own fortune.

If this is true, then while it matters in one way which virtues EVC seeks to inculcate, since EVC needs to tell the individual which ways of acting will lead to good and which to bad outcomes for her, the critic is taking issue with the very fact that EVC portrays the virtues of the individual as the key to her good citizenship.

The status quo bias criticism

The other criticism contained within the 'conservatism' objection is the status quo bias criticism. Again, I will offer my own characterisation of the criticism, but the reader who is interested in hearing the critics speak for themselves is encouraged to read the next two endnotes.

I understand the status quo bias criticism as attacking the non-ideal part of EVC's implied theory of citizenship. Recall that the non-ideal part lays out how citizens are to act when the goals of the state are not being met or perhaps not even pursued. The status quo bias criticism comprises two worries about the message EVC conveys on that theoretical matter. First, the focus on civic virtues downplays the importance of political and social structures as generators of injustice.⁷ The very teaching of individual virtues suggests that social problems can be solved by individual citizens behaving differently. This, one might think, is to subtly suggest to students that they should not be on the lookout for structural injustice, as no such thing exists. Consequently, EVC discourages the citizen from pursuing any political agenda ambitious enough to require more than individual behaviour change.

Second, critics will draw our attention to which virtues are typically taught by EVC programmes – virtues such as, for example, courtesy, respect and humility – and argue that inculcating such virtues is a recipe for stasis.⁸ Such virtues, they worry, leave aside a large part of what it is to be a good citizen: for example, to have a sharp critical eye, to be ready and willing to dissent vocally, or even to disobey when the injustice is deep enough. So, whereas the first worry (under the umbrella of the status quo bias criticism) was that EVC discourages the next generation of citizens from perceiving the need for certain kinds of change, the second worry is that EVC leaves the next generation of

citizens disinclined to agitate for change at all. Note that the status quo bias criticism, in virtue of the fact that its second part refers to specific virtues included in England's EVC programme, should be understood as intended to land against that version of EVC and not necessarily against any others.

The 'conservatism' objection

In this section up to this point, I've explained what I see as the fundamental structure of a theory of citizenship and offered an interpretation of the individualism and status quo bias criticisms on which they each are concerned with the theory of citizenship that is implicit in EVC. But, of course, a criticism is not an argument. At best we have the *start* of two arguments against EVC: even if EVC were individualistic and status quo biased – so what?

This is where conservatism comes in. I begin with the simple, but I think telling, fact that references to 'conservatism' are omnipresent in the articles and books that advance the individualism and status quo bias criticisms of EVC. This is certainly true of the publications I cited in the endnotes in support of my interpretation of the two criticisms: every one of them links EVC with 'conservatism', or one of its cognate terms, or 'neo-conservatism'. One could, of course, dismiss this as mere name-calling or as an attempt at guilt-by-association by writers who can safely assume that their audience includes few if any conservatives. It's true, after all, that right-leaning governments in the United States and United Kingdom have supported character education and seen it as a pathway to developing better citizens. Perhaps then, more charitably, the allusions to 'conservatism' are supposed to set the political context for the rise of EVC but not to raise doubts about its merits.

But I think there's something more going on, namely that 'conservatism' is the answer to the lurking 'so what' question. If EVC can be substantively linked with a theory of citizenship that is conservative (or otherwise up for political dispute) then it may well be that EVC is partisan. On the other hand, if we *cannot* build off the individualism and status quo bias criticisms to a conclusion that EVC is partisan, what do those criticisms establish (assuming they're valid)? They help to make the case that EVC is misconceived pedagogically: that it teaches a falsehood, or at best only part of the truth, as to what good citizenship consists of. Granted, this is no trivial criticism. If schools mislead children about what counts as good citizenship, then they arguably contribute to making society a worse place and to the children themselves winding up leading worse lives than they otherwise would have.

But if EVC can be unmasked as a *partisan* project, in addition to (let's assume) a piece of bad education, then there is a strong case to be made that EVC is not just flawed and better done away with (or substantially overhauled), but illegitimate and an abuse of power. The case would be based on the simple premise that the state education system should not be commandeered by the government of the day to produce citizens who subscribe to its political outlook.⁹

On my reading, then, those who link the individualism and/or status quo bias criticisms of EVC with 'conservatism' are making the following inferences regarding the theory of citizenship inculcated by EVC:

Individualistic/status quo biased → conservative (qua theory of citizenship) → partisan → morally objectionable

Before assessing the soundness of this inferential chain, a bit more nuance would be helpful. It is customary to distinguish ‘small-c-conservatism’ from ‘big-C-Conservatism’, with the former referring to a political philosophy that says that we ought to be averse to rapid change and untested policies, and the latter referring to the philosophical outlook associated with right-leaning political parties in the United Kingdom and United States.

So there are two versions of the ‘conservatism’ accusation, one that charges EVC with embracing a theory of citizenship that is small-c-conservative and another that charges EVC with embracing a theory of citizenship that is big-C-Conservative. It seems to me that each version of the ‘conservatism’ objection pairs naturally only with one of the two criticisms discussed above. Charging EVC with being status quo biased is, obviously, charging it with embracing a small-c-conservative theory of citizenship. And if the individualism criticism is supposed to show EVC to be partisan (as I will assume here that it is), surely it is intended to do so by way of showing EVC to be built on a big-C-Conservative theory of citizenship. It is often said, after all, that the philosophical outlook of the Conservative (United Kingdom) and Republican (United States) parties is individualistic.

So we have two criticisms of EVC and, for each of them, a separate inferential chain leading to a conclusion that EVC is morally objectionable.

Individualistic → Conservative (qua theory of citizenship) → partisan → morally objectionable

Status quo biased → conservative (qua theory of citizenship) → partisan → morally objectionable

I will argue that EVC, though individualistic, is not Conservative. And I will argue that EVC’s brand of conservatism does not render it partisan. So I see the above-given inferential chains being blocked in the following way:

Individualistic →| Conservative (qua theory of citizenship) → partisan → morally objectionable

Status quo biased → conservative (qua theory of citizenship) →| partisan → morally objectionable

I will not address whether other parts of this inferential chain are vulnerable to challenge, though in the next section I will discuss what attacks on this chain appear in the existing literature.

Since the individualism criticism does not depend on the virtues inculcated by a given EVC programme, all versions of EVC stand or fall together with respect to the first moral argument. Therefore, my upcoming rebuttal of the first argument is an argument to the effect that EVC *per se* is immune to the individualism criticism (when that criticism is

parlayed into a political objection). By contrast, the status quo bias criticism is partly grounded in a judgement about the virtues that real-world versions of EVC inculcate. Consequently, my later rebuttal of the second argument against EVC serves (if effective) only to show that *those versions* of EVC – here I focus on England’s – are immune to the status quo bias criticism (when that criticism is parlayed into a political objection).

Hereafter I refer to my target as ‘The C(c)onservatism Objection’, to emphasise that it has two variants. And I will follow the uppercase/lowercase convention to make clear what I mean by ‘C(c)onservative’ and its cognate terms when I use them.

What responses to the objection have already been given?

In the literature there are various responses to The C(c)onservatism Objection. Kristján Krisjánsson (2013: 279) argues that EVC advocates (himself being a prominent one), far from being opposed to social change, actually see EVC as a pathway to it, the idea being that fundamental reform becomes more feasible once you have a more virtuous citizenry. This response is targeted, obviously, at demonstrating that EVC is not status quo biased. I set it aside here, as its success or failure is orthogonal to the success or failure of my preferred response to the charge of status quo bias, which is to concede that EVC is status quo biased while denying that its being status quo biased renders it susceptible to a political objection.

Andrew Peterson, meanwhile, picks out and responds to two versions of The C(c)onservatism Objection: The first version he identifies is founded in the worry that EVC sends the message that one’s character is the key to social mobility and that therefore those who end up at the bottom of the social hierarchy have only their own traits to blame. The second version charges EVC with underemphasising the role of unjust political and economic structures and thus implicitly encouraging conformity.¹⁰ Given my taxonomy of The C(c)onservatism Objection, the first version is the individualism criticism while the second is the status quo bias criticism. To both criticisms his response is the same; he maintains that EVC programmes should repudiate both messages and convey only the message that ‘those who are disadvantaged by political and social inequities are likely to need . . . character traits which enable them to work with others to challenge current conditions’ (Peterson, 2020: 146; for other, similar, comments, see Peterson, 2020: 148–150).

As I understand him, Peterson is saying that there is a possible version of EVC that is immune to the objection, but he is not standing in defence of actual EVC practice. As such, his response to The C(c)onservatism Objection is much less ambitious than mine. I want to establish that EVC *per se* is immune to the individualism criticism (when construed politically) and that the status quo bias criticism (when construed politically) doesn’t succeed against the real-world instances of EVC at which it is targeted.

Individualism and big-C conservatism

Having discussed what responses to The C(c)onservatism Objection are extant in the literature, I move on in this section to offering my own response to one variant of that objection, the individualism criticism. Recall that those who raise the individualism

criticism worry that EVC implicitly overplays the role of the individual and downplays the role of policy in leading to bad outcomes for people. As I said, my response is to deny the inference from individualism to Conservatism (qua theory of citizenship).

Earlier I defined ‘Conservative’ as referring to the political philosophy of right-leaning political parties in the United States and United Kingdom. Undoubtedly, prominent members of these parties have employed the rhetoric of individualism, from Ronald Reagan¹¹ to David Cameron.¹² But one might wonder whether there is a single, consistent political philosophy behind that rhetoric. The Republican Party is a big tent – as it has to be, being half of the United States’s two-party system – bringing together social conservatism, free-market liberalism, anti-globalism and more, each of which could reasonably be called a political philosophy on its own. The Conservative party, likewise, brings together an array of loosely related, or simply unrelated, political projects.

Given the breadth of these parties’ political philosophies one might doubt whether there is any truth as to whether the inference from individualism to Conservatism (qua theory of citizenship) goes through. I share this worry and will return to it soon at the end of this section. For now, however, I want to focus on whether there is anything that may be properly called ‘individualism’ anywhere in the multifaceted outlooks of the Republican and Conservative parties.

My sense is that those who raise the individualism criticism and link it to ‘conservatism’ or ‘neoconservatism’ have in mind the tendency of the Republican and Conservative parties to advocate for the thinning out of the social safety net. This outlook is individualistic in a straightforward sense: the weaker the social safety net, the greater difference it makes to the individual’s fate in life what decisions she makes.

Note, however, that EVC, insofar as it is individualistic, is individualistic in a narrower sense. It doesn’t simply teach children that their decisions matter, and that they should take care in arriving at them. To educate someone in the virtues is to teach them the importance of, and the skill of, exercising good *moral* judgement. This is important, because if we rely on paradigm cases of Conservatism we find that it’s not clear at all that a focus on the role of individual *moral* judgement is a signature feature of a Conservative outlook on citizenship. By way of introducing the first case, consider the most famous passage from Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.

Setting aside where Smith himself was going with this thought, it certainly has served to inspire one of the above-mentioned strands of Conservatism, namely free-market liberalism. On this view, the end of economic activity is the production of wealth – as much as is possible. And the way this is to get done is by asking nothing of individual moral judgement and instead asking quite a lot of institutions – specifically, by structuring markets correctly: by, e.g. providing a clear legal basis for, and consistently enforcing, contracts, property rights, patents, etc. Conservative standard-bearers of the 20th often adverted to this picture of economic life by way of explaining why it was acceptable for us to expect so little of the individual.

- Friedrich Hayek (1945), for instance, focused on the individual's lack of information. Since the exercise of good moral judgement depends on good information, but we can't expect any single individual, or even any group of people, to collect all the relevant information about what goods and people want and at what price and what goods are available to be supplied and at what cost, we have to find a way to distribute goods that places no demands on individual moral judgement. For him, the basic free market setup described above was the solution.¹³
- Milton Friedman (1970), as another example, focused on the individual's inability to navigate divided moral loyalties. He said that if we want corporations to act in a socially responsible way then we should enact laws demanding the relevant actions instead of relying on corporate managers to use their own moral judgement by way of deciding, with respect to any given decision they face, to whether to act more in the interests of shareholders (i.e. whatever will maximise the value of the corporation's shares) or more in the interest of society at large.

More generally, it is free-market liberals, not their opponents, who are known to want to spread market values into ever more domains of human life (for instance, supporting the creation of new markets (for, e.g. human organs from deceased donors), opposing limits on money in politics, and opposing funding for public-service broadcasting), thus reducing the social space in which the exercise of individual moral discretion would otherwise be necessary.

So while it is true that free-market liberals downplay the role of the state in one way, namely by wanting to thin out the social safety net, they do not seek to fill the void with individual moral judgement but rather with economic stewardship. Likewise, Conservatives like Edmund Burke, Robert Nisbet (2010) and Roger Scruton (2014) downplay the state's role, not to make room for individual moral judgement, but to make room for the moral judgement of the community.¹⁴

Coming at the same question – the question of the link between individualism and Conservatism – from the other end, it's not at all clear that anti-Conservative political philosophies downplay the role of individual moral judgement. Again, we can appeal to a paradigm case, in this case the socialist philosopher G.A. Cohen. Cohen, far from downplaying the role of individual moral judgement, criticised Rawls for downplaying it. Rawls argued that inequalities could be justified if they worked out to the benefit of the worst-off, and he seemed to believe that the actual world provided opportunities to bring about just such inequalities. Specifically, he proposed that we need to use the lure of higher incomes to induce talented people to train and apply their talents in a way that benefits everyone, including the worst-off, and so we are justified in doing so. Cohen, in response, argued that if our goal, as a society, is to produce an outcome that is at least as good for the worst-off as any other outcome we could produce, then we need to focus not just on what policies we might put in place (such as the policy of offering higher incomes to certain people) but what societal ethos we might inculcate. Not only does justice require the right sort of policymaking, Cohen maintained, but it also requires the right sorts of citizen behaviours. If setting things up to the benefit of the worst-off is the morally justified goal, then people should behave accordingly; this includes, Cohen (2008) insisted, the talented deciding not to demand higher incomes in return for training and applying their talents in a way that benefits the worst-off (Part I).

The takeaway here is that according to one paradigmatic anti-Conservative, achieving justice places high demands on individual moral judgement. There is a case to be made, then, that it is not characteristic of anti-Conservative political philosophies to reject the specific sort of individualism embraced by EVC.

In this section I've argued, by way of appeal to paradigm cases, that it is not characteristic of Conservatives to affirm, and anti-Conservatives to deny, the importance of individual moral judgement. So when EVC critics argue that EVC is individualistic and therefore promotes a Conservative theory of citizenship, they make a mistaken inference. There is nothing particularly Conservative about making the exercise of good moral judgement a centrepiece of one's theory of citizenship.

One might, of course, take issue with the strategy of averting to paradigm cases. For one thing, some of the paragons of Conservatism mentioned above are dated and perhaps Conservatism has substantially evolved since their time. Stepping back a bit, my opponent could rightly point out that the issue at hand is an analytic one – specifically, the overlap (or lack thereof) between Conservatism and individualism – and therefore must be approached analytically. This would involve defining Conservatism, or defining individually its various strands, and then assessing their consonance with various strands of individualism (which would also have to be defined). If we did this, we might find that there is some sense of individualism that aligns neatly with some sense of Conservatism.

This would be an interesting project, granted, but my main concern here is to give my opponents a run for their money, and I would do them no favours by imposing greater precision on this debate. The problem is that the more precisely we define what we mean by an 'individualistic theory of citizenship', the more difficult it will be to link that theory to EVC. The relationship between educating children for the virtues of citizenship and teaching them a theory of citizenship is very weak; doing the former entails doing the latter only if we allow that a set of principles can be quite high-level while still counting as a theory. To return to the case just mentioned, suppose that some educator, engaged in the project of EVC, manages to successfully inculcate the virtue of integrity in her students, by helping them to come to accept that in order for society to function well it is important that people act on their moral beliefs. A student emerging from this educational process is surely neither an adherent of G.A. Cohen's theory of citizenship nor an adherent of the theory implicit in the philosophies of the Republican and Conservative parties. If she's an adherent of any theory of citizenship at all, it is a vague one that is consistent with both of the more specific ones just mentioned.

The larger point, then, is that substantiating the inference from individualism to Conservatism in the first argument against EVC requires achieving two objectives that are in tension with each other: identifying an individualistic theory of citizenship at a broad enough level that it links clearly with EVC but also with enough specificity to make it anathema to paradigmatically anti-Conservative political philosophies.

Small-c conservatism and partisanship

Earlier I disambiguated two versions of The C(c)onservatism Objection. The first one is defined by this chain of inferences:

Individualistic → Conservative (qua theory of citizenship) → partisan → morally objectionable

I argued in the previous section that its first inference is invalid. The second version, the status quo bias criticism, is defined by this chain of inferences:

Status quo biased → conservative (qua theory of citizenship) → partisan → morally objectionable

In this section I discuss the second inference in that chain.

Two kinds of conservatism

Before getting to that, we need to come to a more precise understanding of the sense in which EVC is conservative. Broadly speaking, a theory of citizenship can be conservative either substantively or procedurally. It is *substantively* conservative if it instructs citizens to eschew policy changes that are too quick or are in the direction of something too unlike the *status quo*. It is *procedurally* conservative if it tells citizens that, whatever policy changes they seek to promote (or thwart) and however quickly, their advocacy should be courteous, respectful, humble etc.

To begin with, procedural conservatism is clearly not partisan, since one can argue for *any* policy in a courteous, respectful and humble way. Likewise, if recent years have taught us anything, it's that there is a non-humble constituency for just about any policy anywhere on the political spectrum: Occupy Wall Street for the economically downtrodden, Unite the Right (the Charlottesville march) for white supremacists, Extinction Rebellion for future generations, the Proud Boys (the January 6 riots) for overturning elections, etc. Now, of course, virtue theorists deny that for any virtue, X, possessing that virtue means acting X-ly in any situation in which it is possible. Rather, it means acting X-ly *when appropriate*. A virtue theorist would therefore deny that the above examples show a lack of humility right across the political spectrum. But to rely on this aspect of virtue theory – specifically, that virtues require the exercise of judgement – is to play right into my hands. It shows that we learn nothing interesting, from a partisan point of view, when we are told that our children have been taught to be procedurally conservative; all we come to know is that they are disposed to act, e.g. humbly when it is appropriate for them to do so, leaving it to us to fill in the blank regarding when humility is appropriate.

We have no choice, then, but to understand the conservatism objection as charging EVC with *substantive* conservatism. I am quite suspicious of this charge, and though I shall grant it for the sake of argument, I do want to take this opportunity to cast doubt on it. The problem is that a virtue is, after all, a practical disposition – a disposition to notice, expect, value, feel, desire, choose, act, and react in certain characteristic ways (Hursthouse and Pettigrove, 2018). It is obscure what connection there could be between having a certain practical orientation and believing that a certain policy is right or wrong – which, of course, is a theoretical orientation. Granted, one might propose that the theoretical is shot through with the practical; the idea would be that one simply has to ask oneself of a

policy, ‘does it promote the sort of valuing that is right, the sort of desiring that is right, the sort of acting that is right?’, and one thereby brings one’s practical orientation to bear on the theoretical question of whether it is right. By way of rejoinder, I insist that arriving at a sound theoretical judgement of any policy depends on so much more than one’s practical orientation. Consider, as a case study, workfare: the policy, enacted in both the United States and United Kingdom in the 1990s, of requiring recipients of poverty-linked benefits to engage in (what is known as) ‘work activity’ to maintain their eligibility for benefits. It might seem obvious that such a policy forces those working in the benefits office to do something inconsistent with the virtue of kindness – namely, to threaten already downtrodden people with the withdrawal of their monthly benefits cheque. But this is obvious only once it has been accepted that the alternative, namely bestowing the benefits cheque regardless of work activity, will have results that are better for the recipient. If one believes that handing over benefits unconditionally is likely to cause even worse outcomes for the recipient, as did Charles Murray, whose book *Losing Ground* helped to inspire the move to workfare, then the story is different. From that set of facts one would naturally conclude that the kind thing to do is to make the threat, and thus workfare is a good policy. The general point I am advancing here is that one can get from a practical orientation to a judgements about the goodness of a policy only by way of accepting a certain set of facts.

As I said, though, I shall grant for the sake of argument that EVC is substantively conservative. This section is about the inference the inference from conservatism to partisanship. Having clarified what sort of conservatism is under discussion, we can move now to the main topic.

When is partisanship morally objectionable?

Before getting into the inference itself, it will be helpful to offer an understanding of the circumstances under which partisanship is morally objectionable. If the EVC opponent can substantiate the conservative → partisan inference only at the cost of undermining the next inference, the partisan → morally objectionable inference, then her victory will be hollow. So we have to look ahead to the latter inference in order to get clear on the agenda for the former inference.

Obviously, the various political philosophies will each have their own theory as to how far a government may go in promoting its own vision of the good society before its actions become morally objectionable. The most demanding such theory is political liberalism, with its well-known restrictions on the state’s pursuit of potentially controversial comprehensive doctrines.¹⁵ I will not argue for political liberalism here nor consider objections to it; I will simply grant it to my opponent for the sake of argument and lay out only those aspects of the doctrine that are relevant to a discussion of partisanship.¹⁶

Moving forward, it will be important to note that the prototypical politically liberal view about education takes as crucial the distinction between values the general acceptance of which is essential for the stability of a just basic structure society – call them ‘essential values’ – and all other values.¹⁷ Therefore, my discussion of the inference from (substantive) conservatism to partisanship below is divided into two parts: one for essential values and one for non-essential values.

Substantive conservatism about the essential values

Suppose that widespread acceptance of the essential values were to favour some political constituency over another. Would it be objectionably partisan for the government of the day to use the state education system to foster support for such values? Even a political liberal will have to answer ‘no’.

Political liberalism, in whatever formulation, always comes with caveats. The most important caveat, for our purposes, is that the state does no wrong in promoting widespread acceptance of the essential values.¹⁸ Consequently, EVC’s being substantively conservative in the sense of promoting such values would not make it objectionably partisan even by the lights of political liberalism.¹⁹

Not even political liberals, then, will be willing to endorse the inference from partisanship to moral wrongness if the partisanship in question is with respect to essential values.

Conservatism about the constitutional non-essentials

In this section, we are trying to understand whether the inference from conservatism to partisanship in the status quo bias criticism of EVC is valid. Thus far I argued (1) that we ought to interpret the objector as treating conservatism substantively as opposed to procedurally; (2) that it needs to be made clear whether EVC, by embodying (substantive) conservatism, is being charged with partisanship with respect to essential or non-essential values; and (3) that the charge of partisanship with respect to essential values has no force. I move on now to the charge of partisanship with respect to non-essential values.

Suppose that the state’s constitutionally *non-essential* policies were to favour some political constituency. Would it be objectionably partisan for the government of the day to use the state education system to foster support for such policies? Perhaps. Again, however, inculcating a virtue means encouraging the adoption of a practical disposition, not an ethical or political philosophy. The state cannot, then, use EVC to foster support for any of its policies. But I shall grant that what it *can* do through EVC – specifically, by teaching students to be, for example, respectful and humble – is create a generation of citizens who are resistant to rapid and radical change away from whatever happens to be the *status quo* set of policies.

But this is *still* not enough to render EVC, substantively conservative though it may be, a partisan project, for there is now an unstated premise in the inference from conservatism to partisanship, which is that if the *status quo* favours a certain constituency then rapid and radical changes will work against that constituency. But sometimes rapid and radical change serves only to further concentrate wealth and power within the class of people who already possess most of it. Two examples:

- Financial instability was the prime cause of increasing wealth inequality worldwide in the decades leading up to the 2008 financial crisis. This, anyway, according to a book-length analysis by the economist James K. Galbraith (2012). He specifically points the finger at aggressive high-interest-rate policies and how they transformed world finance starting in the 1980s and at the cycle of financial booms and busts and the speculative bubbles that contribute to them.

- In the late 20th century, many western nations experienced deindustrialization in the context of wider globalisation. This rapid change from an economic system placing a heavy emphasis on manufacturing and exporting goods to one in which (a) there was a lot more importing, and (b) manufacturing jobs were replaced by jobs in the service sector, worked mostly to the benefit of those already well off. One of its effects was to make cheap imported goods widely available, something with broad benefits across social classes. But the replacement of manufacturing jobs with service jobs benefitted those with education and skills – people who were already sitting above manual labourers in the socioeconomic hierarchy. Hence the cry from left-leaning political figures to fight back against globalisation.

From the mere fact that some course of action would constitute a sharp turn away from the *status quo* we can infer nothing about who would benefit from it. This, I think, is sufficient to render EVC non-partisan even if substantively conservative. Although there is no canonical definition of partisanship, my sense is that when we worry about the state education system being hijacked for partisan purposes our moral objection is to it being used by certain people to favour themselves and others about whom they have special concern. We can think of partisan practical deliberation as the antithesis of practical deliberation from behind Rawls's veil of ignorance. Such a veil prevents one knowing anything about oneself that differentiates one from anyone else. When deliberating from behind such a veil one is unable to be confident, of any proposed arrangement, that choosing it will work to one's relative favour (or detriment). My suggestion, then, is that an educational policy that includes EVC, substantively conservative though it is, could be chosen from behind a veil of ignorance.

An objection

At this point my opponent might charge me with deflecting our attention away from the key issue.²⁰ I have been highlighting how an anti-conservative approach to citizenship is consistent with entrenching ever-greater wealth and power in the hands of those who already possess an outsized portion of it just as it's consistent with breaking up and redistributing such concentrations. The opponent might say, though, that we should focus our attention on the probable instead of on the possible. And what's probable, the opponent will say, is for resistance to radical change – that is, a substantively conservative approach to citizenship – to work to the benefit of those who already possess an outsized portion of wealth and power.

But we do not know this to be true; it just sounds like it has *got to be true*. As to why the claim is so intuitively appealing, I think there are two reasons, neither of which holds water on reflection. First, those on the left of the political spectrum typically make the language of change, resistance, and revolution more central to their political agitating than do those on the right. But we know very well that all political groups are constantly trying to change the world to make it better resemble their ideal. Second, it seems as though if we were to map the logical space of possible distributions of wealth and power we would find that a greater portion of it is taken up by distributions that are more equal

than the current one than is taken up by distributions that are less equal. So, just as a matter of brute probability, change is more likely to disfavour those who are in a dominant position than it is to work to their benefit. But, of course, we do not land on wealth/power distributions at random. Social and political dynamics work to make some much more likely equilibria than others.

A final note

I have been arguing that even political liberals, who endorse an expansive conception of partisanship (or at least of morally objectionable partisanship), lack the resources for substantiating the conservative partisan inference in the second argument against EVC. And I would be remiss if I did not mention that I cannot think of single theorist who has made political liberalism the basis of an objection to EVC. To the contrary, some of the most prominent political liberals of the last 30 years, such as Martha Nussbaum (2006) and Amy Gutmann (1995), have written in great detail about their vision for EVC.

Conclusion

The movement towards including citizenship as a component of state education, and towards structuring that component around the acquisition of civic virtues, has attracted a great deal of criticism over the past 20 years, much of it linking the movement with ‘conservatism’ or one of its cognate terms. This essay has been an attempt to put a fine point on that criticism and then address it in its strongest form. I began by arguing that the criticism has most bite when understood as political, not pedagogical; specifically, we should understand the critic to be charging EVC with serving a partisan agenda. I went on to distinguish big-c Conservatism from small-c conservatism, by way of setting up a substantive rebuttal of the criticism. Against the charge that EVC is partisan because it serves a Conservative agenda, I denied the premise. The link between the individualism of EVC and the individualism that singles out Conservatism (as against other varieties of individualism, some of which would appeal to anti-Conservatives) is too tenuous to substantiate the premise. Against the charge the EVC is partisan because it serves a conservative agenda, I denied the inference. There is no constituency that can count on being served well by people taking a conservative approach to their role as citizens; the outcomes of conservatism and radicalism are too unpredictable for that.

As the above summary likely makes clear, this essay is overall quite sceptical as to the existence of any sort of reliable connection between inculcating civic virtues in children and achieving any foreseeable political outcomes. Is this defence, then, at best a Pyrrhic victory for EVC? Have I undermined the C(c)onservatism objection to EVC at the cost of undercutting any sensible motivation for it? To this charge I offer two responses. First, some of EVC’s virtues are not outcome-focussed in the first place. Virtues like courtesy and respect are, when embodied in citizens, useful for enabling civic discourse that is more productive and less likely to lead to rancour, resentment, and polarisation. This alone makes them worth inculcating. Second, recall *why* we cannot be said to know which political outcomes having a virtuous citizenry will lead to. As mentioned at various points above, what policies the virtuous citizen decides are right depends on, for

example, what purported set of facts she accepts and whether she manages to exercise good judgement in the case at hand. Maybe we do not *know* that these factors will turn in favour of morally good policy outcomes, but perhaps we can have reasonable hope that they will.

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Notes

1. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908347/SECONDARY_national_curriculum_-_Citizenship.pdf (accessed 9 September 2022).
2. <https://scotdec.org.uk/global-citizenship/> (accessed 9 September 2022).
3. See Kisby (2017: 14)
4. <https://www.corevirtues.net/mission.html> (accessed 14 October 2022).
5. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904333/Character_Education_Framework_Guidance.pdf (accessed 9 September 2022). The Core Virtues programme targets a similar list of virtues; see <https://www.corevirtues.net/programme-overview.html> (accessed 14 October 2022).
6. Some representative passages: The rise of character education in Britain has coincided with the election of a Conservative government, austerity economics and the reduction of state expenditure as a proportion of GDP.[. . .] [C]haracter education actually provides the perfect vehicle for promoting the core ideas associated with neo-liberalism, which is concerned with dismantling the tradition of collectivist democratic citizenship.[. . .] The distinctive aspect of [character education as promoted by the Jubilee Centre] is to link the development of character virtues at the individual level to the health of democratic politics at the societal level. As we have seen, the individualising tendency within character education establishes a particular logic of development here. First, work on the individual, then, second, democracy will be strengthened. Improve society by improving each individual, one at a time. (Jerome and Kisby, 2019: 110–111) The first problem with the idea of citizenship education is that it is largely aimed at individual young people. The assumption is that they, as individuals, lack the proper knowledge and skills, the right values, and the correct dispositions to be the citizens

that they should be. This not only individualises the problem of young people's citizenship – and in doing so follows the neo-liberal line of thinking in which individuals are blamed for their social malfunctioning. It also individualises citizenship itself, most notably through the suggestion that good citizenship will follow from individuals' acquisition of a proper set of knowledge, skills, values and dispositions (Biesta, 2011: 12–13).. . . the starting point for . . . advocates [of character education], such as the Jubilee Centre, is virtue ethics, not liberal pluralism or republican active citizenship. As such, the clear focus of character education is on personal ethics rather than public ethics, and with addressing important moral or political issues at the level of the individual rather than at any other level. The focus on the individual is problematic for two reasons. First, it is very weak as a means of making sense of the world. Second, it places sole responsibility on individuals for their position in society (Kisby, 2017: 16).. . .if one genuinely believes that radical social change is necessary to overcome urgent social problems of injustice, inequality and oppression, then surely an essential part of such an approach is convincing people that such change is both possible and necessary, and creating a climate of public political discourse where ideas about what and how to change, and why, are openly debated and argued for. An educational approach that puts all pedagogical emphasis on individuals and their character traits mitigates against this, both reflecting and reinforcing the dominant policy discourse that views the system as here to stay and individuals as to blame for social problems (Suissa, 2015: 114).The same sort of criticism can be found in Cooley (2008: 197).

7. See, for example, Winton (2008) and Taylor(2018):Winton (2008: 312) says, 'The traditional approach's focus on teaching values to students reproduces inequities in society more generally by focusing on individuals rather than investigating how economic, political, or cultural factors affect character and behaviour. This focus allows political, economic, and cultural institutions to remain unchallenged . . . and perpetuates the status quo'.Taylor (2018: 403) says, 'As it has gained more traction in policy circles, there is a need to question the concept [of character education as a solution to social ills] politically. The suggestion is that in its emphasis on individual virtues, psychological traits, or skills as markers of success, it risks perpetuating existing discourses that individualise responsibility for a highly unequal society and economy'.See also the quotes from Kisby and Suissa in the previous note.
8. See, for example, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) and Costa (2006):Westheimer and Kahne (2004: 243–244) say, 'Certainly honesty, integrity, and responsibility for one's actions are valuable character traits for good neighbours and citizens.[. . .] At the same time, the visions of obedience and patriotism that are often and increasingly associated with this agenda can be at odds with democratic goals.[. . .] Indeed, government leaders in a totalitarian regime would be as delighted as leaders in a democracy if their young citizens learned the lessons put forward by many of the proponents of personally responsible citizenship[. . .] To the extent that emphasis on these character traits detracts from other important democratic priorities, it may actually hinder rather than make possible democratic participation and change. For example, a focus on loyalty or obedience (common components of character education as well) works against the kind of critical reflection and action that many assume are essential in a democratic society'.Costa (2006: 284–285) says, '. . . even democratically elected governments may suspend or violate some of the civil rights of their citizens. Or they may completely ignore the human rights of non-citizens, for example by torturing foreign prisoners. Inculcating civic loyalty divorced from the development of critical capacities makes it more difficult for citizens to make an impartial assessment of their governments and to decide to oppose such immoral policies'.
9. One might argue, I suppose, that there is no possibility of EVC being pedagogically bad. But this could hold only if there were no objective criteria by which we could judge the theory of

citizenship that is inculcated by EVC. If some version of ethical relativism or subjectivism, or even nihilism, were true with respect to the values of citizenship, then, admittedly, no such criteria would exist; the only thing we could say about each candidate theory of citizenship is that it is more aligned with X political ideology than with Y political ideology. All theories of citizenship would be partisan (thus suggesting that the pursuit of citizenship education is *per se* a moral mistake). I assume, however, that there are objective criteria by which to assess candidate theories of citizenship.

10. Althof and Berkowitz (2006), like Peterson, are aware of this version of The C(c)onservatism Objection and offer a defence of EVC against it (pp. 508–509). But I set them aside here, as Peterson’s engagement with the worry is more in-depth and begins from a more faithful representation of the critics’ concerns.
11. Reagan listed personal responsibility among his six ‘bedrock values’, alongside faith in God and honesty <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-address-the-nation-federal-income-taxes> (accessed 6 September 2022).
12. David Cameron called personal responsibility the foundation of an ethical society <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/feb/27/david-cameron-personal-responsibility> (accessed 6 September 2022).
13. Some readers may balk at the labelling of Hayek as a Conservative, since Hayek did after all title the postscript to his *The Constitution of Liberty* ‘Why I am Not a Conservative’. Note, though, that Hayek (2006) clearly means to be rejecting conservatism, not Conservatism, as evidenced by his definition of the word: . . . a legitimate, probably necessary, and certainly widespread attitude of opposition to drastic change (p. 343).
14. Thanks to Lee Wakeman for drawing my attention to these thinkers and their relevance to the point I’m making in this section.
15. This formulation is intentionally vague, as it has to be in order to capture the wide variety of theories that are generally grouped together as instances of ‘political liberalism’.
16. For classic defences of political liberalism see Rawls (1996) and Quong (2011); for influential criticisms see Raz (1986) and Wall (1998).
17. For relevant citations, see the next footnote.
18. Rawls, 1996: 199; Nussbaum, 2006: 303, 305; Gutmann, 1995: 560–565, 559; Paddock, 2021: 399–400; Thomas, 2017: Ch. 1 and p. 274.
19. The other caveat worth mentioning is that the state’s policies inevitably favour some philosophical outlooks over others (Rawls, 1996: 191–194), and consequently an ‘insofar as that is possible’ caveat is commonly attached to formulations of political liberalism. This is important, because it is not possible to educate children without inculcating in them some character traits. Even if an educational system makes no attempt to do so, children will develop certain traits, but not others, based on what traits the educators themselves model, what developmental opportunities they are given, which historical figures they learn about, what sort of learning environment (e.g. collaborative or competitive) the system creates, etc. And even if those traits aren’t specifically traits-of-citizenship, no doubt some if not all of them will be applicable to decisions the students will face in their role as citizen. Inculcating this set of traits amounts to inculcating a set of purported virtues of citizenship (Biesta, 2011: 14; Jerome and Kisby, 2019: 20). Against this backdrop, EVP stands out only in virtue of doing this virtue-inculcation in a planned way. It is not clear whether there are resources within political liberalism for saying that this difference is morally relevant.
20. I thank Joe Millum for prompting me to address this objection.

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