

Citizenship and Democracy: Exercising Individual Freedom Toward the Common Good

Scholars from a variety of disciplines—e.g., political science, sociology, philosophy, theology, law, psychology—and other civic and religious leaders have raised concerns that democracy and democratic principles are less understood and appreciated by young people today. Throughout the globe, on each continent including our own, the rise of populist leaders, the increasing polarization in our politics, and the attack on a shared sense of reality, or post-truth, have led many to fear we are headed in a dangerous direction. In his address to members of the International Association of Jesuit Universities (who gathered for an Assembly at Boston College in Summer 2022), Rev. Arturo Sosa, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, reminded those assembled that “A characteristic identity of Jesuit universities is to find... meaning in our public life...to better understand how to contribute to the deepening of the expansion of democracy which is threatened today even in those countries in which democracy has a long tradition, and one would suppose a deeply rooted consciousness of democratic values as the basis of political stability.” (See [Sosa Address](#) to IAJU, 2022, p.3)

Sosa and others have pointed to the need for education for citizenship—national and global—and the “fundamental role that the Humanities play in a Jesuit education that leads to integral human development and a commitment to the common good.” In a time of increasing threat from “three strains of virus” including “fragmentation, superficiality, and instrumentality,” we must ask ourselves: what does it mean to be a global citizen participating in a powerful democracy, especially during a time of great polarization and tension?

This commission is asked to reflect on the forces that threaten our commitment to the discovery of truth; the increasing polarization that threatens civil discourse and communal discernment for the common good; and how these might be addressed in educational programs for our students. For example, does the core curriculum at our Jesuit colleges and universities adequately address the challenges to truth, to concern for the common good, and respect for democratic institutions that call for inclusion and equity for all in our society? Are students prepared to understand the forces that threaten democracy? Are they being prepared to participate in our civic community as leaders with an ethical compass, and a firm belief in the dignity of all people, including and especially those on the margins of society? Are they aware of their call to global citizenship with its responsibilities for the welfare of all humanity, and the natural world which is our common home? *How, then, can a Jesuit, liberal education better prepare young people to become a force for expanding participation in our democracy, for discerning truth in our political discourse, and for working for the inclusion of all in the benefits of a liberal democracy?*