
*Democracy
at Risk*

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Democracy at Risk

*How Political Choices
Undermine Citizen
Participation and What
We Can Do About It*

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PREFACE

THE GENESIS OF THIS REPORT WAS THE FORMATION, IN THE SUMMER of 2002, of the American Political Science Association's first Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement. Our idea from the start was to operate for two years as a task force and to produce a report that would bring the insights of political science to bear on the problem of civic engagement. This book is the fruit of our labor. It tests the proposition that modern social science has useful insights into the state of democratic life and what might be done to improve it. This is no small task, and we have tried to be scrupulous about what we know and the limits of what we know. We speak to the public—to everyone who is interested in democracy in America—but we also address our fellow researchers by pointing out the many important questions on which more work remains to be done.

We, as authors, speak only for ourselves and not for the American Political Science Association (APSA) and its members. This collective effort is, however, part of a renewed commitment on the part of the American Political Science Association to take civic education and civic engagement seriously and to encourage political scientists to work together to address important public issues.

We seek to cast light on the ways in which choices about public policies and the design of institutions shape patterns of civic life: how and when citizens act, with whom, and for what ends and how citizens' identities, dispositions, and interests are formed. Our central concern is the educative or formative impact of political design. We focus on institutions other than schools and policies other than educational policies because political choice offers so many other formative possibilities. This is one of the oldest themes in political science: Plato and Aristotle sought to analyze how the laws as a whole form the charac-

ter of citizens, and many modern political thinkers have also pursued this project.

We do not disparage the role of schools in forming citizens; indeed, a number of us have worked, and will continue to work, on schools and education, and we are all educators. It seems to us a mistake, however, to ignore the formative dimension of the laws as a whole, including collective choices about institutions and policies of many sorts. Even in a liberal democracy that avoids objectionable forms of paternalism, public policy is pervasively educative. A clearer recognition of this should help to support rather than demean the important work of schools.

We split our large theme into three more manageable topics and then divided into working groups. Several of our original committee members—all of whom made important contributions and offered valuable support—were not able to participate in our discussions and writing. Several coauthors were added for their expertise and commitment to the project.

The principal coauthors of chapter two, on the electoral process, were David E. Campbell, William A. Galston, Richard G. Niemi, and Wendy M. Rahn. The principal coauthors of chapter three, on American metropolitan areas, were Yvette Alex-Assensoh, Luis Ricardo Fraga, Stephen Macedo, and Katherine Cramer Walsh. Robert D. Putnam also worked with this group throughout. The principal coauthors of chapter four were Jeffrey M. Berry and Rob Reich, with substantial contributions from the beginning by Michael Brintnall, Margaret Levi, and Meira Levinson, all of whom also contributed to other parts of the document. These were all original members of the first American Political Science Association Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement (Putnam and Brintnall, *ex officio*), and they participated fully over two years.

The original group was joined in mid-course by Archon Fung and Todd Swanstrom, who worked closely with the metropolitan areas group and by Keena Lipsitz, who worked closely with the electoral processes group. Christopher F. Karpowitz and Rob Rodgers worked closely with Stephen Macedo for many months as roving editors and contributors; they worked especially intensely on chapters one and three and, with Macedo, brought the whole text together.

The foregoing paragraphs do not do justice to the degree of collaboration that went into every aspect of this report, from its initial conception to its final stages. Suffice it to say that every coauthor made important contributions, and every one contributed in many ways and at many different stages.

In addition, we had substantial help and contributions from many others. E. J. Dionne, Pamela Johnston Conover, and Keith Reeves made important early contributions as members of the original committee. We received extensive

written comments from Chris Achen, Jane Junn, Leslie Lenkowsky, and Jessica Trountine. Henry Brady, Jean Elshtain, and Margaret Weir provided very helpful and constructive comments at and after a panel held at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

We received significant comments and suggestions from many colleagues; these improved our text substantially. At the Princeton workshop, we heard from Richard Alba, Larry Bartels, Kayla Dragosz, Walter Feinberg, Miriam Galston, Donald Green, Fredrick C. Harris, Michael Jones-Correa, Michael Lipsky, Nolan McCarty, Tali Mendelberg, and Iris Marion Young. At a daylong workshop at the Kennedy School of Government, we were joined by David Barron, Xavier de Souza Briggs, Gerald Frug, and Edward Glaeser. Barron and Frug supplied detailed comments over several months. At other meetings or via e-mail, we received comments and suggestions from Alan Abramson, Elizabeth Boris, Jeffrey Brudney, Juliet Gainsborough, Martin Gilens, James Jennings, Michael Jones-Correa, Greg Markus, Eric Oliver, Markus Prior, Douglas Rae, Lester Salamon, Bruce Sievers, Theda Skocpol, Steven Rathgeb Smith, Clarence Stone, and Sidney Verba.

We also gratefully acknowledge the generous support of Princeton's University Center for Human Values and its Center for the Study of Democratic Politics (and its director, Larry Bartels) for cosponsoring a two-day meeting at Princeton University in February 2004. The Midwest Political Science Association also allotted us panels at its annual meeting for three years running. We thank the program officers and annual meeting staff, especially Director William D. Morgan, for giving us these opportunities.

Finally, we are grateful to the officers and members of the American Political Science Association for giving us the opportunity and the support to undertake this effort. Thanks to Executive Director Michael Brintnall and staff assistants Kelly Baden and Corinne Ferrara for their logistical support. Thanks especially to APSA past president Robert D. Putnam and successive teams of officers for their leadership role in establishing this committee and for naming us to it.

Toward a Political Science of Citizenship

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IS AT RISK. THE RISK COMES NOT FROM some external threat but from disturbing internal trends: an erosion of the activities and capacities of citizenship. Americans have turned away from politics and the public sphere in large numbers, leaving our civic life impoverished. Citizens participate in public affairs less frequently, with less knowledge and enthusiasm, in fewer venues, and less equally than is healthy for a vibrant democratic polity. Americans can and should take pride in the historical accomplishments of their constitutional democracy—in many ways, America remains a shining example to much of the world. But our democracy is not all that it could be. Although some aspects of civic life remain robust and some citizens still participate frequently, Americans should be concerned about the current state of affairs. The risk is not to our national survival but to the health and legitimacy of our shared political order.

Consider some straightforward indicators of political participation. American voter turnout ranks near the bottom among democratic nations.¹ Other political activities, such as writing letters to the editor, participating in rallies and demonstrations, and volunteering in campaigns, fell by about half between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s.² Citizens need public information, but the number of civics courses taken in public schools has declined by two-thirds since 1960, and, at least by some measures, college graduates nowadays know as much about politics as the average high school senior did fifty years ago.³

The political activity we do observe is distributed unevenly across the population. Disadvantaged Americans, who may have the most reason to get involved, participate far less than the well-off.⁴ Participation has plummeted precipitously among the young. For instance, from the mid-1970s to the present, the number of adolescents who say they can see themselves working on a political campaign has dropped by about half.⁵ As our national politics has become more polarized, participation has declined especially steeply among independent and moderate voters, who should play an important centripetal role in keeping the two parties from drifting toward the extremes.⁶ Meanwhile, in national politics and across metropolitan areas, long-standing inequalities in patterns of participation across racial and ethnic groups persist.

The 2004 presidential election witnessed a rebound in voter turnout, including among young voters. The campaign was widely regarded as the most intense and closely contested race in a generation, and yet, by the standards of a not-too-distant era, the turnout was not especially high: at approximately 60 percent, it was about the same as in 1956, when an incumbent president handily and predictably defeated the same challenger he had faced four years earlier. It remains to be seen whether 2004 marks a new trend or is a mere blip in a long-standing decline.

In addition to the decline in political participation, Americans have also withdrawn from a wide range of civic engagements. Published in 2000, Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* initiated a vigorous debate about the scope and dimensions of civic participation, but almost all agree that the fabric of our civic life has frayed significantly and that the youngest generations of Americans participate the least in civic life, a worrisome indicator for future trends.

These declining levels of civic engagement and participation are in many ways surprising. Income and education have long been viewed as the best predictors of civic engagement, and Americans are now far wealthier and enjoy more years of formal schooling than their parents and grandparents did. So why are Americans turning away from politics and civic life? More important, what, if anything, can we do about it? Do we know enough to diagnose the cause and cast light on possible remedies?

Our aim here is not simply to join the chorus of those who chronicle civic decline. Nor is it to cast blame on Americans for being poor citizens. Rather our aim is constructive. We believe America can do better by improving the design of institutions and policies that govern our civic and political life. Our central argument is that the levels and distribution of civic activity are themselves political artifacts. Whether consciously intended or not, the design of our current political institutions and practices turns citizens off.

If Americans find the presidential primary process long and boring, it is because that process is indeed longer than it should be, and its lengthy and episodic nature discourages sustained attention and continued political learning.

If Americans find congressional elections dull, it may be because they are rarely competitive. Our systems of redrawing district boundaries and financing campaigns, as well as our increasingly candidate-centered politics, all work to the advantage of incumbents—an advantage that has grown in recent years. For example, in 2004, 98 percent of the incumbents running in House races won. When elections are not competitive, citizens have little incentive to pay attention, become informed, take part in the campaign, and vote in the election.

If Americans find partisan politics excessively ideological, nasty, and insufficiently focused on practical problem solving, there is reason to think they are right: American citizens tend toward the political middle, but safe congressional seats may empower the ideological bases of the two parties at the expense of moderates, intensifying party conflict in Washington and hindering efforts to work across party lines.

If poorer Americans believe that local political institutions are incapable of addressing their problems, if racial minorities find American politics to be exclusive rather than inclusive, and if better-off Americans seem disconnected from the problems and experiences of their poorer fellow citizens, this is partly because our metropolitan political institutions encourage privileged Americans to move to suburban enclaves, defying the promise of common public institutions and a sense of shared fate.

In short, if the American public square is far less vibrant than it should be, if the quality of participation is disappointing, if the tone of national politics is nasty, and if the distribution of political activity and influence favors the socially and economically advantaged, the responsibility in substantial measure is our own. But we cannot solve the problems as individuals. Instead, we must act collectively to improve our institutions and thereby to foster a richer civic life for all citizens.

The authors of this book are political scientists, and in what follows, we do our best to present in clear prose what is known about the ebb and flow of civic and political activity in America: who participates, how much, with whom, and why. We know that the capacity and willingness of citizens to get involved in politics depend on a variety of personal factors. We draw on a rich set of research traditions that highlights the relationship between political participation and such individual characteristics as psychological dispositions, learned habits or skills, and socioeconomic standing.

Our motivating idea, however, is that the political arrangements under which we live—the policies and institutions we make together as a political society—

shape the incentives, interests, identities, and capacities of citizens to participate effectively in civic life. In writing this report, we seek to bring the expertise of political science to bear on the task of improving our political arrangements and, thereby, the quantity, quality, and equality of civic engagement.

Why do we believe that improving our institutions to promote robust citizen engagement is essential to American democracy? First, civic engagement enhances the quality of democratic governance. Democratic decisionmaking requires knowledge of the interests of the people. Citizens make their preferences known through various forms of civic engagement: casting a ballot, attending a rally, writing a public official, volunteering time, or showing up at a meeting. While there surely is a role for expertise in politics and public administration, citizen input has the potential to improve the quality of public decisions by marshaling the knowledge and registering the preferences of the entire community. As Gregory B. Markus puts it, “When citizens do more than merely provide ‘input’ to professional decisions, when they instead possess sufficient information, resources, time, and space for deliberation, and power to transform input into action, then the planning, the implementation, and the results can be more insightful, more legitimate, and more effective than anything that officials and planners could have devised on their own.”⁷

Second, the promise of democratic life is not simply that government by the people yields the most excellent governance. It is also—and perhaps mainly—that government is legitimate only when the people as a whole participate in their own self-rule. Insofar as important classes of citizens are considerably less active and influential than others—especially when participatory inequalities are a consequence of the design of the political system—then the reality of collective self-rule is doubtful, and the legitimacy of the political order is compromised. Democracy is supposed to represent the interests of the people as a whole, but ample evidence supports the notion that political institutions are most responsive to those who mobilize.⁸ Government “by the people, for the people” founders when only narrow and particularistic interests are mobilized or when important sectors of the political community are left out. “The rights and interests of every or any person are only secure from being disregarded,” John Stuart Mill declared, “when the person interested is himself able, and habitually disposed, to stand up for them.”⁹

Third, participation can enhance the quality of citizens’ lives. We believe that civic engagement is valuable in itself, that popular self-rule involves the exercise of distinctive human capacities and is an intrinsically noble enterprise. We follow Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, and many others in holding that participation has the potential to educate and invigorate citizens to expand their understanding and capacities. Mill praised “the ennobling influence of

free government—the nerve and spring which it gives to all the faculties, the larger and higher objects it presents to the intellect and feelings, the more unselfish public spirit, and calmer and broader views of duty, that it engenders.”¹⁰ We recognize, however, that the benefits of political and civic activity often compete with other good things in life. There can be trade-offs between time spent at a political meeting and the joys of private life, including time spent with family and friends. While acknowledging the existence of important trade-offs and allowing that people frequently lead good and fulfilling lives without engaging in political activity, we maintain that civic engagement is part of the good life and that, under favorable conditions, civic activity complements rather than detracts from other valuable activities.

Indeed, civic engagement can enrich citizens’ lives in more diffuse ways. Beyond formal institutions of government, voluntary and nonprofit organizations, supported in part by the contributions and participation of individuals, provide a wide variety of goods and services that neither the state nor the market can replace. Some evidence even suggests that higher levels of civic engagement, especially active membership in groups and involvement in social networks, are associated with greater individual satisfaction with the quality of community life and, indeed, one’s own life.¹¹ Quite simply, when citizens are involved and engaged with others, their lives and our communities are better.

In sum, we share the widespread—if not unanimous—concern with the state of American citizenship, and we agree with President George W. Bush when, in his first inaugural address, he told the American people,

What you do is as important as anything government does. I ask you to seek a common good beyond your comfort, to defend needed reforms against easy attacks, to serve your nation, beginning with your neighbor. I ask you to become citizens. Citizens, not spectators. Citizens, not subjects. Responsible citizens, building communities of service and a nation of character. . . . When this spirit of citizenship is missing, no government program can replace it. When this spirit is present, no wrong can stand against it.¹²

To help Americans better understand the plight and the promise of civic engagement, we undertake three tasks. First, we describe and document recent trends in civic engagement. Second, we explore the influence that the design of public policies and political institutions has had on these civic trends. Finally, and perhaps most important, we recommend policies and institutional reforms to increase the quantity, quality, and equality of civic engagement in the United States.

We have set out to test the proposition that political science casts light on the problem of civic engagement and on reforms that could improve the practice

of citizenship. We focus largely—though not exclusively—on the educative impact of institutions other than schools and practices besides the directly and specifically educative. We fully realize that schools have played and will continue to play an essential role in promoting civic education and engagement in the United States. Nevertheless, we choose not to focus on schools for several reasons. Many others have explored the topic of civic education in schools, and excellent summaries of this literature are already available. Indeed, ever-increasing numbers of organizations and groups focus attention on school-based civic education.¹³ Much less attention has been given to the many ways in which institutions and policies other than those concerned directly with schools and education shape civic life and educate citizens in critical ways. The first political scientists, Plato and Aristotle foremost among them, recognized the importance of viewing all political institutions as broadly educative. We believe that modern political scientists and those engaged in crafting public policy too often neglect the formative dimension of politics as a whole.

In this sense, schools are part of the larger political order: they respond to imperatives set forth by the polity and work hand-in-hand with other community institutions, from parents and families to the federal government. Hence school-based efforts to foster civic engagement should be placed within a broader political framework. Schools did not create our current civic engagement crisis single-handedly, and they cannot solve it on their own.

What Is Civic Engagement?

Citizens enter into public affairs in many ways and for many reasons. They may seek information about candidates or policies or express support for, or opposition to, particular candidates or programs. They may act to extend their own or others' rights, to protect their own interests, or to promote what they view as the public good. They may be moved by a sense of civic duty: the belief that citizens have an obligation to volunteer, to vote, to serve. Or they may desire to build a community or network in support of some cause or to address some common problem. Of course, people also get involved partly because they enjoy the social interaction that accompanies many forms of civic activity.

Just as we take a broad view of the reasons and motives for political action, so too do we favor a capacious understanding of the means of civic engagement. For us, *civic engagement includes any activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity.* This includes the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills as well as a wide range of acts. We do not draw a sharp distinction between “civic” and “political” engagement because we recognize that politics and civil society are interdependent: a vibrant politics

depends on a vibrant civil society.¹⁴ Political voice can, for example, mean participation in formal government institutions, but it may also involve becoming part of a group or organization, protesting or boycotting, or even simply talking to a neighbor across the backyard fence.

Civic engagement most obviously includes voting. As John Dewey reminded us, however, the moment when a vote is cast is the culmination of a much richer process that includes a host of prior conversations, judgments, and actions. Scott Keeter and his colleagues identify various “electoral indicators” of civic engagement that lead up to voting; these include working for an organization on behalf of a candidate or campaign; attending a political rally, speech, or dinner; contributing money to a campaign or cause; displaying a campaign button or bumper sticker; and persuading friends, neighbors, or strangers why they should vote for or against a party or candidate.¹⁵ We should never forget that the electoral process includes far more than the act of voting and the quality of voters’ choices depends on this wider set of activities.¹⁶

Important as they are, elections and the activities that precede them are but one aspect of political activity. Protesting and marching, attending a public meeting, lobbying a government official, writing to a newspaper about a public issue, signing an e-mail or written petition, boycotting, canvassing a neighborhood, or engaging in political mobilization and debate are all forms of civic engagement. Beyond these well-established methods of advocacy, nonelectoral political involvement can also include new avenues of engagement, such as the growing number of deliberative forums where private individuals can meet face-to-face to talk about public problems.¹⁷

If politics includes far more than elections, it is also true that “civic” activity includes more than electoral and pressure politics. Citizens frequently gather either formally or informally to address collective problems themselves, sometimes, but not always, with the support of public institutions. Civic activity includes public service and collective actions to improve our society: serving one’s country in civilian or military capacity when needed, volunteering for programs such as Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), AmeriCorps, or the Peace Corps, or participating in a neighborhood watch. Numerous Americans volunteer their time or give money and support to groups and organizations that are concerned with serving the disadvantaged, protesting injustices or promoting other moral values, protecting the environment, or improving our cultural institutions, schools, and communities. Voluntary and community groups of all sorts, including nonprofits, labor unions, and churches, help citizens to mobilize on behalf of matters of common concern.¹⁸

Civic activity also includes learning about our political system and the issues of the day. Civic education takes place in schools, unions, voluntary associa-

tions, and places of worship, among other venues. Campaigns and elections are educative exercises in important respects. Citizens acquire knowledge about political affairs by reading the newspaper, watching the news and other television programs, listening to the radio, surfing Internet sites, studying voter pamphlets, talking to friends, volunteering their time, and participating in a host of other ways.

What Dimensions of Civic Engagement Should We Care About?

Given that such a wide range of activities qualify as civic engagement, we need to pick out those aspects of civic engagement that matter most for the health of American democracy. Throughout this book, we concentrate on three critical dimensions of civic engagement: quantity, quality, and equality.

QUANTITY

We care about the overall amount of civic engagement. Democracy is better, we assert, if participation is widespread. Generally, though not always, the problem is to get citizens interested, to encourage them to turn out in an election, or to get them involved with an organization or group. This, in any event, is the challenge in the contemporary United States. Many ordinary citizens express a lack of interest in politics at all levels and an extreme hesitancy to play a role in democratic decisionmaking.¹⁹ We are especially worried about declining involvement among the young—a tendency that may portend an even greater impoverishment of democratic life in the years ahead. Whether or not one believes that there is a crisis of civic engagement, a concern with encouraging an interest in, and capacity for, active citizenship runs through many reflections on modern mass society, including those of Adam Smith, Benjamin Constant, and Alexis de Tocqueville.²⁰ We agree that the number of participants (or non-participants) is important, and we believe that institutional and policy choices can increase these numbers by influencing the environment within which individuals develop and act on their civic interests and identities.

QUALITY

Of course, numbers alone are not enough to ensure the legitimacy, stability, and health of a democratic government. The quality of participation matters too. In a large, diverse, extended republic, citizens need to learn to cooperate across lines of racial, religious, political, social, and economic differences. Political engagement is not confined to the first Tuesday after the first Monday in

November; it extends beyond the ballot box to myriad other opportunities for expressing one's voice. At its best, it involves learning about public issues and understanding the political system. It means being heard as well as being able to explain and justify one's opinions to others in civil dialogue. It encompasses the capacity to affect the agenda and do more than just respond to given choices. The most valuable forms of civic engagement address important issues on which people of goodwill disagree, finding points of common agreement, while seeking ways to deal productively with enduring conflicts. Quality civic engagement maintains bonds of political community even after the votes have been counted and the majority has spoken.

Individual acts of participation have qualitative dimensions, but so too do institutions such as elections. At their best, elections hold incumbents accountable for their past performance and offer citizens clear choices between candidates with well-articulated programs and positions. Poor elections generally feature entrenched incumbents who, for numerous reasons (including their fundraising advantage, name recognition, or the way their district lines have been drawn), easily trounce their opponents. Quality civic environments prompt deliberation and debate about a range of political issues, including those important to disadvantaged segments of the population. We recognize, of course, that although healthy competition is good, excessive polarization is bad. We discuss this distinction in chapter two. While acknowledging that qualitative judgments about civic and political activity are often controversial, we argue that political activity is increasingly uninformed, fragmented, and polarized.

EQUALITY

Implicit in the idea of governance by and on behalf of the people as a whole is a concern with who participates and who does not. We realize that distributive concerns are often controversial and partisan, and we recognize that inevitably some people will choose not to be involved. Nevertheless, we worry about the uneven distribution of civic participation. We are especially concerned about institutional obstacles that undermine civic engagement among the disadvantaged. Certainly, the young, the poor, the less educated, and many racial and ethnic minorities participate far less than the population as a whole; these persistent or even increasing inequalities impoverish our civic life and call into question the democratic credentials of our politics. In some respects, racial and socioeconomic inequalities are rooted in discriminatory policies of the past, and the effects persist most visibly in educational inequalities and residential housing patterns. Significant progress has been made in eradicating discrimi-

natory laws, and the variation in participation across racial and ethnic groups seems attributable largely to differences in income, education, and citizenship status. Nonetheless, many political scientists have worried that the political chorus “sings with a strong upper-class accent.”²¹ We share this worry and add to it the concern that the chorus is older and whiter—not to mention more male—than American society as a whole.

Ultimately, we believe that improving the quantity, quality, and equality of civic engagement will improve the quality and legitimacy of self-governance, and it should increase our collective capacity to pursue common ends and address common problems. There is, of course, a great deal of disagreement about what our most pressing problems are and how we should address them; improved civic engagement will not end disputes about what our common ends should be. But we will be better off as a nation and as individuals if more Americans participate in an informed and capable manner. If, however, we choose to do nothing and unfavorable trends continue, the decisions of an increasingly unaccountable political elite will reflect the interests of a smaller and increasingly unrepresentative pool of highly mobilized citizens. Our democratic ideals will ring increasingly hollow.

Can Civic Engagement Be Bad?

Not all observers—not even all political scientists—agree with our basic premise that citizen engagement is fundamental to healthy democratic politics. Some are untroubled, even comforted, by low levels of citizen participation.²² There are, indeed, numerous arguments against our effort to bolster citizen activity, and we want to take their measure briefly before moving on.

Citizens may have good reasons not to get involved or stay informed. Public engagement can be demanding, and many citizens may decide not to participate in the political life of their communities because they prefer to delegate political activity to others, such as other voters, their elected representatives, or other political elites.²³ As John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse put it, “The last thing people want is to be more involved in political decisionmaking; they do not want to provide much input to those who are assigned to make these decisions; and they would rather not know all the details of the decisionmaking process. Most people have strong feelings on few if any of the issues the government needs to address and would much prefer to spend their time in non-political pursuits.”²⁴ Lack of political involvement may signal widespread satisfaction with the status quo rather than a crisis of democracy. When circumstances change or problems arise, citizens will become more involved. Mancur Olson expresses a related idea by casting citizens as rational maximiz-

ers of self-interest. In this view, the costs associated with participation will, for many if not most, outweigh any benefits that might accrue to them.²⁵ In addition, people may act privately rather than publicly to attain the sorts of public goods they want. For example, people may move their place of residence within a metropolitan area to live in the community that matches their personal preferences with respect to public services and to live with others who share those same preferences; they may “vote with their feet” rather than cast ballots.²⁶

Participation in political affairs can cause people to feel injured. Citizens may emerge from attempts to participate in even normal and relatively tame political settings feeling frustrated at the inefficacy of their efforts or dismayed by the disharmony commonly found in a diverse democracy. We take seriously the cautionary observations of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, who argue that many citizens recoil from the disagreements and differences that naturally emerge in any open democratic forum concerned with important issues. Political participation can spark feelings of powerlessness and frustration.²⁷

Other arguments against our concern with participation focus on the consequences for public governance rather than for individuals. Low participation may not be troubling if the preferences of voters are, for the most part, representative of the entire society, so that nonvoters would not alter election results by going to the polls.²⁸ Elitists, however, worry that more widespread popular engagement would undermine good governance. Critics of democracy, beginning with Socrates, have bristled at the people’s capacity for capricious decisions.²⁹ Although few now advocate nondemocratic forms of government, many scholars still worry that extensive citizen participation encourages unwise decisions. According to these critics, elites are more competent than ordinary citizens, who tend to have less knowledge and less information and to be less consistent in their opinions.³⁰ As Joseph Schumpeter rather derisively puts it, “The typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field.”³¹ Intense citizen engagement may hamper the ability of politicians and other elites to broker policy compromises. Samuel Huntington claims that “some of the problems of governance in the United States today stem from an excess of democracy.”³² He argues that heightened participation leads to political polarization, which makes it more difficult for political elites to satisfy the demands of citizens. As a result, citizens lurch between overly passionate involvement and cynical withdrawal in a kind of “democratic distemper.”³³

Still worse, highly engaged majorities may repress minorities and produce other injustices. Democracy allows citizens to organize on behalf of particular interests averse to “justice and the public good”; as James Madison warned,

“Freedom is to faction as air is to fire.”³⁴ Participation may be aimed at righting constitutional wrongs, but citizens sometimes mobilize to defend an unfair privilege or to deny other citizens their basic rights. If the civil rights movement was an exercise in political engagement, so were many aspects of the massive resistance to it. Voluntary associations, praised for their contribution to civic life by political scientists such as Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol, sometimes foster racism rather than tolerance, insularity rather than bridges across particular identities, or sectarianism rather than a commitment to a larger public good.³⁵

Our commitment to increased popular engagement faces, it is now clear, a powerful litany of criticisms. How can we answer these arguments? And what can we do about the potential pathologies of popular involvement in political and civic life?

Let us begin with the view that popular civic engagement can undermine the capacity of wise and virtuous elites to govern. The obvious problem with this view is that there is not now, and never will be, a class of empathetic, non-self-interested elites who can be trusted to advance the common good.³⁶ Unless they are held to account by a vigilant public of engaged citizens, elites tend to advance their own interests and the interests of that small portion of the electorate that actively supports them. Expertise, leadership, and excellence play important roles in politics, but elites must be held accountable by the people as a whole. As Thomas Jefferson put it, “I know no safe depositary of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”³⁷ For these reasons, we worry about the decline of civic engagement and popular attention to politics—and so the weakening of the popular capacity to hold leaders accountable.

But what of Schumpeter’s dictum regarding the political foolishness of citizens? We would turn his charge on its head: there are many issues on which political and bureaucratic elites are likely to be ignorant and on which citizens are especially expert. Citizens as subjects feel first and most deeply the effects of many kinds of policy decisions in areas such as education, the environment, and social policy. Contestatory democratic institutions help to bring out the relevant information needed to make intelligent decisions. For this reason, civic engagement often enhances the quality of governance.

In addition, the activity of ordinary citizens is often vital because many public goods are the joint product of the activities of public officials and ordinary individuals: education, public safety, a clean environment, and public health are among the goods that can be achieved only when citizens and public officials collaborate. We would also note that “voting with your feet” by moving to

another jurisdiction to find improved public services, such as schools, is often a very poor substitute for political action on behalf of better services for all. We explore both of these themes further in chapter three.

Finally, leaving aside the quality of governance, it remains the case that the basic legitimacy of our system of government rests on the democratic ideal: government by and for the people as a whole. Whatever the wisdom of many laws and policies, many people accept them because they can be plausibly connected to popular assent. This connection becomes less plausible as levels of civic and political engagement diminish and as the active electorate ceases to represent the people as a whole. Ample political science research confirms that the poor, for example, participate considerably less than the better-off. It is not plausible that greater satisfaction is the reason; nor is there any evidence that the disadvantaged have consciously delegated custodianship over their political interests to the better-off. There are a variety of respects in which the unengaged differ from the engaged, and evidence suggests that those who are active do a poor job of representing the interests of the inactive.³⁸ The theory of “virtual representation” was abandoned long ago, for good reason. When the half of the electorate that votes in national elections and the far smaller percentage that votes in state and local races are unrepresentative of the people as a whole, government legitimacy ebbs. Without a strong sense of legitimacy, citizens can become reluctant or even unwilling to obey the laws, let alone cooperate in the joint production with government of a host of public goods.³⁹

In the end, then, we stick to our guns: accountable, effective, and legitimate government requires substantial civic and political engagement by “the people themselves.”

This does not mean, however, that political action and civic engagement are costless. We acknowledge the costs, which include deflection from valuable private pursuits, potentially tedious meetings, the discomfort of open conflict, and the frustration that comes from being on the losing side of decisions. We contend, however, that many of these costs and pathologies of engagement stem from weaknesses in particular forms of civic engagement rather than participation per se. Through institutional design, it may be possible to reconcile, or at least lessen the tensions between, just and good government, on the one hand, and enhanced participation, on the other.

And, of course, there is an important role for “elites”: we advocate popular engagement within the frame of constitutional self-government. Representative government, federalism, and a complex system of shared powers among separate institutions providing “checks and balances” should help to refine and elevate the popular opinion.⁴⁰ Constitutional limitations on political majorities are a significant part of this system, and courts should help to sustain

stable support for democratic fairness and basic constitutional principles such as freedom of speech and minority rights.

We may not altogether agree with Al Smith that “all the ills of democracy can be cured by more democracy,” but we believe the evidence shows that some of them can be. Institutions and policy choices shape the quality (as well as the quantity and equality) of engagement, and this may have an impact on citizens’ satisfaction with political activity. For example, problems in citizen participation may arise because citizens are shut out of the process or because elites do not trust ordinary citizens: this may encourage citizens to take a distinctly adversarial approach to participation. Public hearings may become contentious and uncivil. Participation may improve, however, if citizens are invited to take part earlier in the process of policy formation. Democracy depends on citizens being willing to make an effort, no doubt, but the nature and consequences of much popular political activity are deeply influenced by the context in which citizens must act. That context may inhibit, frustrate, and deter valuable political activity. In well-designed contexts, civic participation may lead from a vicious circle of alienation and exclusion to a virtuous circle of trust and inclusion.

The lesson we draw is that if politics can, from the perspective of the citizen, seem “a remote, alien, and unrewarding activity,”⁴¹ that is partly the consequence of poor design. We can construct institutions that encourage the better forms of civic activity and that promote a healthy exchange of ideas without deteriorating into cantankerous and destructive polarization.

Finally, we believe that citizens can learn to participate in civic life in healthy and productive ways. Civic education occurs in a variety of places—at school, at home, at work, in religious organizations, in the great variety of voluntary associations that Tocqueville saw Americans creating and joining with astonishing frequency, and through ongoing activity within well-designed democratic institutions. As we seek ways to increase public participation and decrease unnecessary polarization, we believe citizens will come to better appreciate the inevitability and legitimacy of disagreement in a diverse democracy: “People need to understand that disagreements can occur among people of good heart and that some debating and compromising will be necessary to resolve these disagreements and come to a collective solution.”⁴² Citizens who are averse to political conflict often misunderstand the nature of democratic politics. Many wrongly assume a greater level of consensus about the common good than may, in fact, exist.⁴³ Indeed, civic educators and public actors need to make it clear that disagreement and public debate are often the best way of discerning the truth.⁴⁴ When democratic institutions are designed properly, citizens who participate can learn that disagreement, contention, and the giving and demand-

ing of reasons are not necessarily signs of political dysfunction, but salutary parts of democratic life. Then, too, they should come to better understand the opinions of others, and they may come to accept decisions that they disagree with (or might have disagreed with initially). Their interests and their self-conceptions may be modified; they may truly become citizens. Hannah Pitkin expresses eloquently the hope that civic engagement can promote genuine deliberation:

Drawn into public life by personal need, fear, ambition, or interest, we are there forced to acknowledge the power of others and appeal to their standards, even as we try to get them to acknowledge our power and standards. We are forced to find or create a common language of purposes and aspirations, not merely to clothe our private outlook in public disguise, but to become aware ourselves of its public meaning. We are forced, as Joseph Tussman has put it, to transform “I want” into “I am entitled to,” a claim that becomes negotiable by public standards. In the process, we learn to think about the standards themselves, about our stake in the existence of standards, of justice, of our community, even of our opponents and enemies in the community; so that afterward we are changed.⁴⁵

We hold that, as things stand, increased civic engagement would improve our democracy and the lives of our citizens. Conflicts are rarely resolved by being swept under the rug, and problems are unlikely to be addressed in ways that are widely acceptable if only a few participate. While we know that some disagree, we believe that the predominant danger is not excessive widespread political zeal but widespread apathy that allows the zeal of a relative few too much sway over Americans’ lives.

One last point. Our argument is *not* that we should *maximize* participatory demands on citizens. In that respect, we share a concern that too many demands (too many elections, for example, held at too many different times) can cause exhaustion and a decline in participation as well as skewed participation. When few take part in public decisions, those few who do turn out are likely either to have a special interest in the outcome or to be motivated by principled purity and zeal that are not shared by mainstream, moderate voters. It is worrisome when few participate, and it is also worrisome when those who do are not representative of the people as a whole. One way to get more citizens to vote is to ask them to vote less frequently. The point can be generalized: one way to increase participation is to be reasonable in our expectations about the number and extent of the occasions on which we expect citizens to participate. Increasing participation is important not only for its own sake but because higher turnouts are liable to produce electorates that are less dominated by the ideological extremes and more reflective of the broad interests of the public as a whole.⁴⁶

To conclude, we argue that civic and political participation in the United States today is too low. We do not argue that extremely high rates of participation are necessary, that high participation has no negative consequences, or that democracies “always” need more participation. When and where participation falls to a point where perceived legitimacy is low, individual cynicism about government decisionmaking is high, and indifference to government and collective life is excessive, then *increased* engagement is called for. The current situation in the United States features these characteristics—questionable legitimacy, high cynicism, and great indifference—and, in response, we call for increased participation, more equal participation, and a higher quality of participation.

Our Report and the American Political Science Association

The collective endeavor that has produced this book is part of a recent effort by the American Political Science Association (APSA) to enhance the contributions of political scientists to our nation’s conversation about democracy. This may seem anything but novel—political scientists talking about politics—but in truth, while individual political scientists routinely comment in the press or in popular writings about the wisdom of this policy or that reform, as a profession we have been silent.

We have not spoken collectively in large part because the members of our profession—like the rest of the public—disagree on many issues of the day. In spite of our expertise, or because of it, political scientists disagree not only about the way the world ought to be but also about how it is and why it is that way. Given our disagreements, it seemed inappropriate (and perhaps unwise) for a committee of the American Political Science Association to speak on matters of policy or institutional practice. Until the initiation of our project, the APSA had not encouraged the formulation of a set of public policy or reform recommendations since 1950. In that year, the APSA Committee on Political Parties issued a report advocating a more “responsible” party system.⁴⁷ That study proved highly controversial.

Recently, however, the officers and council of the APSA reexamined this matter and decided that the inhibition against collective contributions by political scientists to national discussion of issues on which we have some expertise has been overly broad. When we work together, collaborating across disciplinary boundaries, we should be well positioned to present the state of knowledge in an informed and nonpartisan manner. Whether we succeed is for readers to judge. Nonetheless, we emphasize that we do not speak for the APSA as an organization or for its membership as a whole. As authors of this book, we speak only for ourselves: we have, under the auspices of the APSA, tried to discern what political

science has to say about citizenship—the sources of its current malaise and the means of its possible renewal—but the judgments that follow are ours alone.

Wherever possible, we rely on evidence backed by a strong consensus among our peers. However, here as elsewhere in life, evidence is often conflicting, uncertain, and subject to competing interpretations. Significant forms of civic and political engagement are influenced by a host of factors, and understanding causal connections can be extremely difficult. Further complicating the task is the fact that reliable measures are often hard to come by and some important aspects of public life have received little attention from scholars. Frequently our judgments are, by necessity, based on the preponderance of the available evidence, and it is rare that we can claim to have proof “beyond a reasonable doubt” (a strict standard appropriate for criminal law but inappropriately demanding for many other spheres of life). An additional complexity is that there are many positive political values, and these sometimes conflict (for example, the goals of securing more, versus more equal, participation). Our assertions often rest on contestable value judgments, but we try to avoid narrowly sectarian claims. When evidence pulls up short, we marshal our best hypotheses, believing that offering an educated guess is better than remaining silent, so long as we are clear about the speculative nature of our recommendations. We sometimes address ourselves to our fellow researchers, pointing out important questions on which not enough is known. Even then, however, we believe that ordinary citizens and policymakers will benefit from understanding more about the limits of our shared knowledge.

In short, we do the best we can with what we have. Scholars agree, for example, that many forms of civic engagement have declined, and there is a substantial body of excellent research that we can draw on to describe the problem. There is less agreement on the causes of the decline and on what can or should be done about it. We ourselves do not always agree. We try, in what follows, to be scrupulous in emphasizing the limits of what we know and the limits of what we agree on. We hope to clear a path along which a great deal more work remains to be done.

Most important, we agree that Americans are less involved in civic life than they should be and that inequalities of involvement reflect persistent hierarchies of wealth and privilege to a disturbing degree. Not all of our news is bad. Many Americans remain active in civic affairs. Some forms of participation—notably volunteering—remain robust. But the overall health of our democracy has been compromised by a decline in participation across a broad range of activities. From neighborhood life, to city politics, to state affairs, and to matters involving the whole nation, we believe that expanded and improved participation will strengthen our democratic way of life.

Roadmap to What Follows

The concerns at the center of this report are large, but in the chapters that follow we try to deal with manageable aspects of the problem of American citizenship.

Chapter two discusses engagement with electoral politics at the national level. We consider some debates about the degree to which voting has declined but emphasize that, given increasing education and wealth, voting and other forms of political activity are far lower than they should be. Political participation among the young, moreover, has not held steady but has decreased; this bodes ill for the future of American democracy. We also canvass persistent inequalities of participation across various groups within the population and emphasize that civic inequalities among Hispanic and non-Hispanic white Americans, for example, are important in their own right, even if they are explained largely by differences in income, education, citizenship status, and language proficiency. We find that important features of the political process itself depress turnout: these features include noncompetitive elections and the interminable nature of presidential campaigns. We agree with those who observe that our national politics is excessively polarized, and we identify a variety of likely causes. Most important, we argue that practical reforms could improve the prospects for more widespread, representative, civil, and well-informed campaigns and elections. The most important of the practical reforms we advocate in chapter two is nonpartisan redistricting of congressional districts.

Chapter three takes up a very different set of institutions and policies that shape political and civic engagement: those that structure American metropolitan areas. Here we confront the fact that political scientists lately have given far less attention to local and regional politics than they have to national politics. In this domain we have less evidence than we would like, and both our critical analysis and our recommendations are tentative. We argue, nevertheless, that local and regional political structures often have profound effects on the composition and form of political communities, and this, in turn, has significant implications for political interests and identities, the ways in which citizens act in their communities, and the winners and losers in metropolitan political life. Because of the relative dearth of research, and because especially difficult and complex trade-offs seem to confront metropolitan civic reformers, many of our practical recommendations in chapter three call for more research. Nevertheless, the most important practical recommendation that emerges out of chapter three is that we must find ways to overcome the tremendous and growing inequalities associated with places of residence, inequalities that defy democratic ideals of equality and inclusion.

Chapter four examines policies and institutions that influence the health of a domain that has recently been at the center of discussions of citizenship: associational life and the nonprofit sector. Here we report both encouraging and discouraging trends. As is well known, participation in many civic groups and social organizations has declined considerably over the past forty years. Yet volunteering has increased, especially among the young, and important voluntary associations remain vibrant—notably religious institutions. In addition, the sheer numbers and resources of nonprofit organizations in the United States are nothing short of astonishing. No nation rivals the United States with respect to the extent of the resources and responsibilities we assign to nonprofit organizations. A great deal of responsibility for the delivery of social services has devolved to the nonprofit sector. These organizations interact extensively with disadvantaged segments of the population, and they should be capable of playing a role in enhancing the political voices of the disadvantaged. However, as we discuss, various rules unnecessarily inhibit the political activity of nonprofit organizations. Our most important recommendation in chapter four may be our call for more adequate public funding of a variety of programs of national service.

Conclusion

Our central argument is that the amount, quality, and distribution of political and civic engagement are themselves largely the product of our political choices. For this reason, the future of American democracy is, in important measure, up to us. Although there are significant limitations to political scientists' understanding of why some people are actively engaged in civic life while others are not, sometimes we know enough not only to describe and diagnose but also to prescribe.

In the chapters that follow, we clarify the nature and limits of what we know about our collective civic and political lives: we offer a portrait of important aspects of American citizenship, a diagnosis of our ills, and some prescriptions for improvement. We hope to clarify the vision of democratic reformers and to refocus the energies of political scientists. We fully recognize that politics is not an exact science. We offer no blueprint for a democratic utopia, but we have labored to produce a rough sketch of where we succeed and where we fall short as a democratic community. We offer this not as the best that can be done but as the best we could do, in the hope of helping our colleagues and our polity to do better.

- *Between 1974 and 1994, engagement in twelve key political activities, such as writing letters to the editor, participating in rallies and demonstrations, and volunteering in campaigns, fell significantly.¹*
- *In 2002, only fifteen of 435 congressional races were decided by four percentage points or less. Of the fifty congressional incumbents who ran in California, not one lost, and all got at least 58 percent of the vote.*
- *In the 2004 presidential election, despite a massive voter-drive ground war in which interest groups alone spent more than \$350 million to get out the vote, voter turnout, at 59 percent, was only five percentage points higher than in 2000.*
- *Also in 2004, just 2 percent of House incumbents and a single Senate incumbent—the aggressively targeted Senate minority leader—lost.*
- *From the mid-1970s to the present, the number of adolescents who say they can see themselves working on a political campaign has dropped by about half.²*