

# Extreme Voices: A Dark Side of Civic Engagement <sup>1</sup>

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## Why Participatory Democracy Makes Americans Unhappy

"Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right"

-from Stealer's Wheel, "Stuck in the Middle with You"

There are several reasons why Americans who have more opportunities than ever before to influence the actions of their government trust their government less than before. One explanation--popular two decades ago--is "overload." Noting the increase in interest group activity and popular participation described above, some democratic theorists expressed their concern that with encompassing organizations such as parties and unions declining, interest-aggregating structures were being overwhelmed by the rise in interest articulation. Moreover, if the scope of government has expanded, so that expectations are higher than in the past, the problem would be compounded. Although the relevant evidence is mostly circumstantial, this explanation has a good deal of plausibility.

More recently, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse have resurrected Bismarck's caution against watching the production of sausages or laws. Considering the low standing of Congress in relation to the presidency and the Supreme Court, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue that Congress is despised precisely because of its openness. Congress allows citizens to see democracy in all its messiness--interest groups lobbying, parties posturing, members dealing and compromising. Generalizing this argument, the more open American politics becomes, the less citizens can maintain the fiction of public-spirited officials working cooperatively to solve social problems and defuse social conflicts. Again, this explanation certainly is plausible.

While seeing merit in both of the preceding hypotheses, I propose a third that is not inconsistent with either: the transition to a more participatory democracy increasingly has put politics into the hands of unrepresentative participants--extreme voices in the larger political debate. Consider another brief listing of research findings.

Back in the 1960s political science students studied Anthony Downs's exposition of the centrist logic of two-party competition. A generation later intellectual inheritors of the Downsian tradition were working to develop models in which the candidates did *not* converge to the center. A changed reality caused this shift in the modeling agenda. During the 1980s pundits and scholars alike remarked on the (electorally) unhealthy influence of "cause groups" in the Democratic primaries who exerted a "left shift" on popular perceptions of Democratic candidates. With a "new Democrat" in titular control of his party for most of the 1990s, the problem has become more serious in the Republican Party, where observers judge that the religious right controls two-thirds of the state party organizations.

Party activism today is ideologically motivated to a much greater extent than in the past. The demise of the spoils system, public sector unionization, conflict-of-interest laws, changes in our political culture, and other factors have cumulated to diminish the material rewards for party

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activism and the associated incentive to compromise abstract principles in order to maintain material benefits. Today's activists are more ideologically motivated, and whatever the sample studied--state convention delegates, national convention delegates, financial contributors, campaign activists, or candidates themselves--those so motivated come disproportionately from the extremes of the opinion distribution.

The situation is similar with interest groups. At one time groups were viewed as moderating influences in politics. Because people had multiple memberships they were subject to cross-pressures that led them to moderate their stands. On some important issues groups were so heterogeneous internally that they could not take clear positions or exert political influence. Contrast those stylized facts with the contemporary ones. The economic groups formed in the previous generation are more focused and specialized than the older groups people joined before that. They represent single industries, not large sectors. Moreover, there has been a proliferation of "single-issue groups." In the 1960s the NRA was everyone's example of the latter; today, people have their choice of hundreds, many involving matters far more esoteric than guns. Scholars today are more likely to view interest groups as a divisive force in politics, not a moderating one.

If the polarization of political activists were purely a partisan phenomenon or one limited to the national political level, devotees of civic engagement might dismiss it as an exception to the axiom that the more civic engagement the better. Voting in a primary or attending a pro-choice rally may not be the best examples of what they mean by civic engagement. But anyone who has followed a variety of nonpartisan community conflicts in recent years--sex education, land use, leash laws, the organization of children's activities, and so forth--can testify to the generality of the phenomenon. One group of activists may propose something outside the mainstream of community sentiment only to be countered by another group's proposal equally far off in another direction. Or opponents may simply exercise their "exit" option and withdraw from the discussion. In most such conflicts my strong suspicion is that a handful of people picked randomly off the street could have offered proposals that would have beaten the formal contenders in majority votes of the community.

What is going on here? The answer is clear enough. Ordinary people are by and large moderate in their views--relatively unconcerned and uninformed about politics most of the time and comfortable with the language of compromise, trade-offs, and exceptions to the rule. Meanwhile, political and governmental processes are polarized, the participants self-righteous and intolerant, their rhetoric emotional and excessive. The moderate center is not well represented in contemporary national politics--and often not in state and local politics either.

The abortion issue provides a noteworthy illustration. Survey after survey finds that the majority of Americans are "pro-choice butts." They endorse the principle of choice and oppose the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, but blithely approve of numerous restrictions such as parental consent, mandatory counseling, viability testing, and denial of public funding. As Colin Powell, among others, has discovered, however, the debate is dominated by people who condemn as pro-choice someone who would abort a fetus without a brain, and people who denounce as pro-life someone who would outlaw the abortion of a healthy eight-month fetus. Irony of ironies, it took an unelected Supreme Court to impose the kind of broadly acceptable compromise that elective

politics had been unable to achieve for two decades, although it had long been evident in the public opinion polls.

In sum, another reason people are frustrated with government is that all too often they see the participants in government locked in battle over unattractive and unrealistic alternatives. The result is unnecessary conflict and animosity, delay and gridlock, and a public life that seems to be dominated by "quarrelsome blowhards," to borrow Ehrenhalt's apt terminology.

Other aspects of political activism exacerbate the problem. Verba and Nie, and Verba, Schlozman, and Brady report that participants care about somewhat different issues than nonparticipants. Thus, not only do the activists debate extreme alternatives, but they also talk about issues nonactivists care less about. Moreover, purist "true believers" have a style different from that of ordinary people. They place more weight on symbols (dubbed "principles"), reject what appear to be reasonable compromises, draw bright lines where many people see only fuzzy distinctions, and label those who disagree with them as enemies. Changes that empower or even enhance the visibility of these "extreme voices" help to explain "why Americans hate politics" and distrust government.

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### **Civic Engagement and Social Welfare**

Much of the debate on civic engagement implicitly presumes that it is a good: the more of it there is, the better off we are. I have argued that such an assumption is invalid, at least in the political realm. In the old order, when ordinary Americans had less opportunity to engage in politics, they apparently were happier with government and what it did than they are today, when they have more opportunities. The reason, I suggest, is that the composition of those who participate has changed. Those willing to compromise policies in order to control offices, jobs, and other tangible benefits have been replaced by those who are motivated largely by policy and ideological commitments. To compromise these is to remove the very motive for participating in the first place. Moreover, these committed activists have less need to broaden their appeals in order to mobilize a mass following than previously. In today's America the courts, the media, and money can substitute for sheer numbers. Thus, only small minorities of highly motivated citizens take advantage of the new participatory opportunities, minorities who are by and large extreme voices in the context of American politics and who have less reason to moderate their commitments than in the past.

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### **What Is to Be Done--New Modes of Participation?**

. . . Perhaps surprisingly, I think the answer may lie in going further down the path of popular participation. To paraphrase John Dewey, the answer to the problems created by increased civic engagement is even more civic engagement. In part, I am led to this position because there is no turning back; any argument to restrict popular participation would be met with incredulity, if not ridicule. One of the more interesting observations of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse is that although voters rarely participate, they value the opportunity to participate in the abstract and would oppose any restrictions on that opportunity.

Thus, the only possibility is to go forward and raise various forms of civic engagement to levels where extreme voices are diluted. Studies of voter turnout have concluded that despite its older, whiter, and wealthier character the actual presidential electorate does not differ significantly in partisanship or presidential preference from the potential universal voting electorate. Given that the actual electorate is about half its potential size, these findings suggest that a reasonably representative politics can be achieved with levels of participation somewhere between the 10 and 20 percent levels now measured by most indicators and the 50 percent turnout in presidential elections.

That will not be easy. Consider Concord again, one of the minority of New England towns with a traditional town meeting--as close to direct democracy as occurs in the United States. Although the meeting is no more than a fifteen-minute drive for anyone, average turnout is less than 10 percent of registered voters, with a modern high of 14 percent. It is doubtful that another 30 or 40 percent of the residents could be induced to give up several evenings each year. The problem is that classic forms of participation like this are far too costly for today's citizens. New England town meetings are traditionally scheduled for early spring, after the snows have melted but before the fields are dry enough to plow. For the eighteenth and nineteenth-century participators, town meeting must have been a welcome diversion after a long lonely winter, especially in an era with no television and little reading material. In contrast, consider the situation of today's two-worker commuter families. Spend several evenings a week listening to your fellow citizens debate issues? That's bonkers. Spend your precious Saturday afternoon at a caucus? Oh, right. Give up dinner out in order to make a contribution? Let them get their money from the PACs.

It is time to abandon the notion of political participation as part of human nature. It is not; it is an unnatural act. The experience of the city-states of antiquity where the civic engagement of the political class was supported by slave labor cannot serve as the model for today's complex mass democracies. Nor can the experience of a nineteenth-century agricultural society where alternative forms of entertainment were unavailable. Contrary to the suggestions of pundits and philosophers, there is nothing wrong with those who do not participate; rather, there is something unusual about those who do. All too often they are the people nobody sent."

Of course, I am overstating the case in order to underline the point, which is that the kinds of demands on time and energy required to participate politically are sufficiently severe that those willing to pay the costs come disproportionately from the ranks of those with intensely held extreme views. Given that people cannot be forced to participate, the alternative is to get the costs down.

Thus, we should give a fair hearing to proposals for newer, lower-cost forms of political participation. In particular, we need to reconsider the notion that people must be physically present, or must invest large blocks of their time. Ross Perot's talk of electronic town halls was met with derision among academics, but the possibilities offered by modern communications deserve investigation, if only because they may be the only practical remedies.

The standard objection to movement in this direction is that making participation easier raises its quantity but lowers its quality. People who do not invest their time and engage in deliberation will be less informed, or indeed will be badly informed, expressing their stereotypes and prejudices in low-cost participatory acts. This objection is less compelling than it might seem.

In the first place, the statistical law of large numbers works against it. Empirically, recent research on public opinion shows that however uninformed and inconsistent individual attitudes may appear to be, in the aggregate public opinion seems to be reasonable and rational. [51](#). Similarly, despite periodic gay-rights initiatives and other popular attempts to deny rights to minorities, studies of direct democracy find little indication that it produces outcomes any worse than those produced by legislatures.

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In the second place, it is not at all clear that ordinary people *are* more badly informed than activists, for ideology often masquerades as information. The activists on various issues may be more informed about those issues, but their information is typically selective, exaggerated, and biased in various ways. Some recent studies have compared the views of various political "elites" with those of equally expert but not politically active control groups. For example, leaders of environmental groups were asked to rate various environmental cancer risks. Their ratings were then compared with those of a sample of cancer researchers. Unsurprisingly, relative to expert but disinterested opinion, the environmental activists significantly overstated the risks of environmentally caused cancer. Such findings are not at all surprising, but they seriously undercut arguments that informed minorities make better--as contrasted with "different"--decisions than uninformed majorities. It is not clear that empowering "informed" extremists and letting them fight it out produces better public policies than a politics in which ordinary uninformed citizens have more influence.

### **Conclusion**

While the far-ranging debate about civic engagement and social capital is full of disagreements, few have questioned the basic premise that civic engagement is a good thing, or at least that it does no harm. I do--at least when attention focuses on civic engagement in the political realm. There are plenty of political scientists, politicians, and journalists who believe that American democracy worked better when the only participation expected of citizens was that they vote early and often. Today, when citizens have far more opportunities to determine the choice of candidates and policies, small and unrepresentative slices of the population disproportionately avail themselves of those opportunities. Too often the consequence is "clowns to the left and jokers to the right"--a politics that seems distant from the views of ordinary people. When future research attempts to relate civic engagement to welfare measures, it should bear in mind that the relationship between political engagement and social welfare may well be U-shaped, with societies better off with either "a little" or "a lot" than with "some."