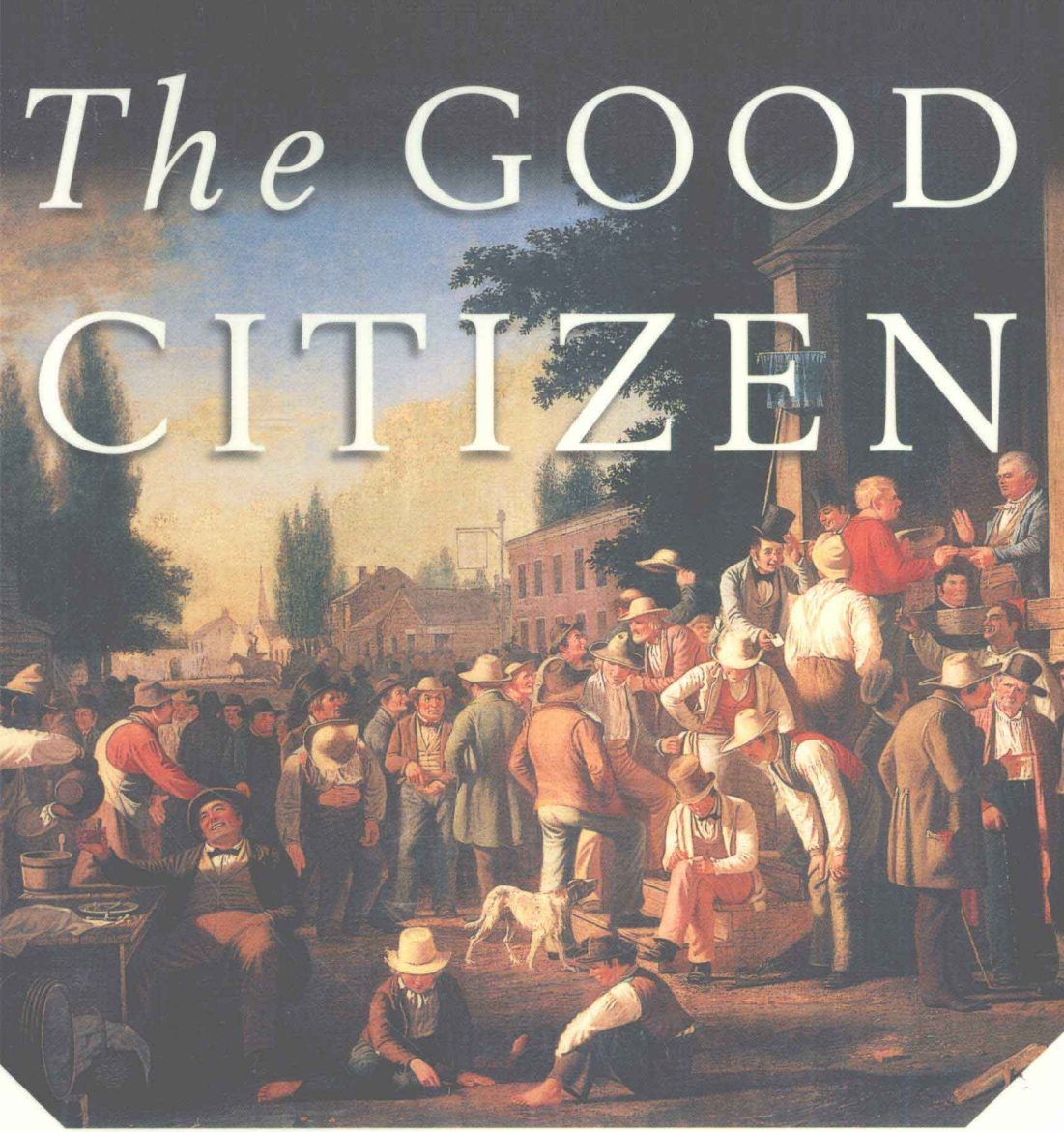
The GOOD CITIZEN



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A HISTORY of AMERICAN CIVIC LIFE

MICHAEL SCHUDSON

The
G·O·O·D
CITIZEN

A History of American Civic Life

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Introduction

Election Day

In 1996, I served as an election inspector in the San Diego precinct where I vote. Of the five volunteers, I was the only one not yet a grandparent. Though I turned fifty a few days before the election, I was the youngster of the group. The oldest was seventy-three, the same age as Republican candidate Bob Dole.

We worked for fifteen hours in a garage donated year after year by a law enforcement official and his family. He sees this as a part of his children's political education. He received $25 for his efforts, the clerks $35, and I, as supervisor of the clerks, $50.

Dozens of the 563 voters who cast ballots thanked us for our efforts on behalf of this democracy. When voters knew one of the clerks, there was friendly banter and, invariably, some indication that they were proud of their neighbor for volunteering. The labor required to run an election is substantial: with more than 25,000 precincts in California alone, each employing three to five poll workers, the outpouring of volunteer labor is enormous and their organization and training no mean feat.

People brought their children to the polls. Often they took them into the voting booths. A few times babies were handed to one of the clerks while a parent voted. All but the most stubborn of the small chil-

dren would light up when a clerk offered them an "I Voted" sticker. Some of the kids took advantage of the "demonstrator" voting device. A clerk placed the sample computer punch card in the device and the child could then vote for George Washington, Albert Schweitzer, or Helen Keller for president, and select "yes" or "no" on the proposition that hot dogs should be served at all sporting events.

Not everyone came. Not everyone was registered. But more than seven of ten of those registered voted. It was not always easy. Several visually impaired people brought companions to provide assistance. A neighbor of mine voted and, his jaw drawn tight, observed that his wife, an Alzheimer's patient, was missing a presidential election for the first time.

The clerks divided their labors in an orderly fashion. The first clerk took the voter's name and had the voter sign in on the alphabetical roster. The second clerk marked the voter's name on a list of street addresses. The third clerk handed out the voting device and demonstrated it if the voter was unfamiliar with the punch-card contraption. The fourth clerk received the device back after the voter had voted, folded the ballot, and placed it in the ballot box in the presence of the voter.

Late in the afternoon the clerk who kept up the street address list began to wonder what she was doing. Every hour or two we used the street address list to cross off names on a duplicate list posted publicly at the entrance to the polling place. This was for the convenience of poll watchers from the parties or other organizations. If political workers wanted to know who among their loyalists had not yet voted, this provided them the information they needed.

But not a single poll watcher came. And as the day wore on and the clerk came to the realization that there was no other reason for her function to be performed, she was somewhat disheartened. Indeed, not long after four o'clock, I decided that we would not bother to update the public list any more unless a poll watcher turned up—and still no one did. The county hired hundreds of clerks to subsidize political parties and other voluntary political organizations. But at our precinct, as at increasing numbers of precincts, when parties choose to subsidize television stations rather than citizenship, this is wasted money and labor.

As a Democrat myself, I should probably have hoped for a low turnout in my heavily Republican district. But it was not possible to barter my preference about the election's outcome against my hope that the democratic process would work. There was a sense among the clerks and among the voters that right there, in that unassuming garage, democracy was happening. The question we were most frequently asked was, "How's the turnout?" When we declared that it was good (without much evidence except the sense that we were constantly busy), people were cheered. I was cheered, too.

A number of people, I assume Dole supporters, expressed doubt that their votes would do much good. A number of voters indicated that they had studied hard—or not hard enough to handle the remarkably complex California ballot. "I'll be right back, I left my crib sheet in the car," one voter declared, referring to the "sample ballot" that the county's Registrar of Voters mailed out several weeks before the election. Many voters brought the sample ballot into the voting booth after having marked it at home. One voter shook his head, having left parts of the ballot blank, presumably some of the more obscure local offices or some of the more bewildering state or local propositions, and said, "I shoulda done more homework." In California, at least, voting is not only an act of civic engagement but of cognitive challenge.

When the clerks and I counted the ballots at the end of the day before delivering them to the sheriff's department at the designated checkpoint, we were beat. We had spent more than thirteen hours at the polls (with two 45-minute breaks for each clerk, but none of them took their full breaks). We were cold from sitting in the garage, which got quite chilly after sunset. The seventy-three-year-old clerk's daughter brought by several blankets. The government worker's wife set up a Mr. Coffee for us. But mostly the clerks just persevered. In the end, there was a strong shared sense of a day well spent, especially when the number of ballots in the ballot box tallied perfectly with the number of signatures on the roster of voters.

So goes today's central act of democratic citizenship, a small ritual of neighborly cheer and personal disappointment. People want it to feel like a Frank Capra film, but the experience rarely obliges, if only because

it is so forceful a reminder that in this last act of the campaign drama, there is no heroism left for the individual, only a small duty to perform. It takes some imagination to recognize that there is drama, if not spectacle, when tens of millions of people across a vast nation simultaneously engage in the same activity on the same day and with very similar sets of feelings. Apart from holiday observance, nothing else mobilizes so many people in this country to do the same thing at the same time, not even the massive rush to the shopping malls on the day after Christmas. There remains something compelling, even if perennially disappointing, in voting on election day.

Election day today is unlike election days in the American past; Americans have found different ways to establish a public life together over the past three centuries. There have been fundamental historical changes in the American experience of politics and in what Americans of different periods have taken a "good citizen" to be. Picture, for example, a very different scene of voting:

Imagine yourself a voter in colonial Virginia, where Washington, Jefferson, and Madison learned their politics. You are, first of all, a white male owning at least a modest amount of property. Your journey to vote may take several hours since there is probably only one polling place in the county. As you approach the courthouse, you see the sheriff supervising the outdoors election. Although elections are uncontested more often than not, in this case two candidates for the House of Burgesses stand before you, both of them members of prominent local families. You watch the most prominent members of the community, the leading landowner and clergyman, cast their votes, and you know whom they have supported because they announce their selections in loud, clear voices. You do the same, and then step over to the candidate you have voted for, and he treats you to a glass of rum punch. Your act of voting, though you did indeed have a choice of candidates, has been an act of restating and reaffirming the social hierarchy of the community in which no one but a local notable would think of standing for office.

Turning to New England rather than to colonial Virginia, a different model of voting prevails. Here you elect town selectmen and representatives at a town meeting. You are still necessarily a white male property

owner or at least a white male taxpayer, but the format of the meeting stresses equality among the members rather than deference to authority. Still, like Virginia, the New England model reflects an organic view that the polity has a single common good and that the leaders of locally prominent, wealthy, and well-established families can be trusted to represent it. Dissent and conflict are no more acceptable in New England than in Virginia.

This is the context in which the founding fathers thought about citizenship. They were generally hostile to political parties and to any politically oriented associations. They expressed significant reservations about a free press, the open deliberation of legislative bodies, candidates' solicitation of the votes of citizens, and public education.

In the long parade from colonial Virginia or colonial New England to a secret ballot in a California garage, American citizenship has changed dramatically. There have been three distinct eras since the colonists first arrived, each with its own virtues and defects, and in the past forty years we have entered into a fourth era. The opening period of the founders, which can be labeled a politics of assent, gave way early in the nineteenth century to a new mass democracy, the world's first. Imagine yourself voting in the mid-nineteenth century. Here there is much more bustle around the polling place. The area is crowded with the banners and torches of rival parties. Election day is not set off from other days but is the culmination of a campaign of several months. You must still be a white male to vote, but not necessarily of property. During the campaign you have marched in torchlight processions, perhaps in military uniform, with a club of like-minded individuals from your party. If you were not active in the campaign, you may be roused on election day by a party worker to escort you to the polls on foot or by carriage. On the road you may encounter clubs or groups from rival parties, and it would not be unusual if fisticuffs or even guns were to dissuade you from casting a ballot after all.

If you do proceed to the ballot box, you may step more lively with the encouragement of a dollar or two from the party—not a bribe but an acknowledgment that voting is a service to your party. A party worker hands you a "ticket" with the printed names of the party's candidates.

The ticket is likely to be distinctive enough in shape and size that poll watchers can readily see what party you vote for as you place the ticket in the ballot box. You are not offended in the least by this openness; indeed, you want your party loyalty to be recognized. Your connection to the party derives not from a strong sense that it offers better public policies but that your party is your party, just as, in our own day, your high school is your high school. In any event, parties tend to be more devoted to distributing offices than to advocating policies. Very likely you have been drawn to your party by the complexion of the ethnocultural groups it favors; your act of voting is an act of solidarity with a partisan alliance. This is a politics of affiliation, not a politics of assent.

To reformers at the end of the nineteenth century, this mode of voting seemed not colorfully carnivalesque but corrupt, and they sought to clean it up. They made campaigning more educational and less emotional. They passed personal registration laws for voters. They enacted a secret ballot. They created an atmosphere in which traditionally loyal party newspapers "bolted" from party-endorsed candidates. They supported civil service reform to limit the rewards parties could offer their partisans. They prohibited electioneering close to the polling place. In short, they celebrated the private, rational "informed citizen" that remains the most cherished ideal in the American voting experience today.

Did they create a better system? They at least created a different one, which instructs us in what citizenship is and should be in novel ways. Political education comes to most people not only from history textbooks or recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance in school but from the presence and practice of political institutions themselves. Elections educate us. The ballot educates us. Parties educate us. The division among federal, state, and local jurisdictions educates us. The First Amendment educates us. The product of this education is our citizenship, the political expectations and aspirations people inherit and internalize.

When children go out to play Little League, their coach offers all sorts of verbal instructions and encouragements. Anyone who listens to the coach will hear that the point of Little League is that everyone should learn to play baseball and have a good time. Everyone will get to

play. Every member of the team is just as valuable as any other member. Teamwork is essential and teammates should encourage one another. As soon as the game begins, however, the kids receive an even more powerful, but unspoken, set of instructions: the pitcher and the catcher are the key positions and only the best players will have a chance for those spots. The first baseman and the shortstop are the next most important positions and only the most skillful players will play there regularly. Relatively few balls are hit to the outfield, so that is where the weaker athletes are platooned. Baseball demands of all but the most ruthlessly egalitarian coaches that they submit their democratic aspirations to the logic of the game. No one will have any fun if the pitcher can't get the ball over the plate or if the first baseman can't catch a ball thrown right to her.

What values, then, are the children learning and who is their teacher? In part, the coach teaches. In part, the children teach one another, usually without mincing words. The most unrelenting teacher is the game of baseball itself, to which the coach's "Let's all just go out there and have fun" seems a feeble countercurrent.

To understand American political experience, I am directing attention to the instructions of the game itself. It is in this respect that I emphasize basic rules of political practice, including formal constitutional provisions, statutory laws, and conventional patterns of public electoral activity. This is not all there is to politics, but nothing more fundamentally shapes people's grasp of public life and their concept of citizenship.

The rules of the political game have obviously changed over our history. Eighteenth-century American political authority was rule by gentlemen; the nineteenth century brought rule by numbers, majorities of associated men organized in parties; and twentieth-century American politics is rule by everyone, and no one, all at once. This is expressed in government by the central importance of impersonal rules themselves—in civil service examinations, formal procedures of review and record-keeping in bureaucracies, requirements of public notice, and practices of parliamentary procedure. It is expressed in the life of the private citizen by the importance of rights, legally legitimated claims upon the government.

In fact, rights have grown so important since the civil rights movement that they define a fourth model of citizenship in our time. The "rights-bearing citizen" has not displaced the "informed citizen" at the ballot box, but the expansion of rights-consciousness has made the polling place less clearly the central act of political participation than it once was. The "political," carried on the wing of rights, has now diffused into everyday life.

Another way to characterize the past three hundred years of political change is to say that the type of authority by which society is governed shifted from personal authority (gentlemen) to interpersonal authority (parties, coalitions, and majorities), to impersonal authority (science, expertise, legal rights, and information). The locus of authority has moved from shared, generally religious, values located in the community to the formal polity and elections, to individual rights guaranteed by administrative fairness and the courts. The geographical center of politics has shifted from the countryside to the cities to the suburbs and perhaps, today, to "technoburbs," "postsuburbs," or "edge cities," or whatever we name our newer habitations.[1] Correspondingly, the kind of knowledge a good citizen requires has changed: in an age of gentlemen, the citizen's relatively rare entrances into public discussion or controversy could be guided by his knowledge of social position; in the era of rule by majorities, the citizens' voting could be led by the enthusiasm and rhetoric of parties and their most active partisans; in the era of experts and bureaucracies, the citizens had increasingly to learn to trust their own canvass of newspapers, interest groups, parties, and other sources of knowledge, only occasionally supported by the immediacy of human contact; and in the emerging age of rights, citizens learn to catalog what entitlements they may have and what forms of victimization they may knowingly or unknowingly have experienced.

We can also say that the "ownership" of the political sphere has shifted. In the eighteenth century, political activity was set in motion and controlled by gentlemen; in the nineteenth century, it was organized by parties; in the twentieth century, after democratization had reduced the authority of social class and reform had seriously weakened the parties, multiple claimants compete to set the standards of political life. The

media, the political candidates set adrift from party, the increasingly important, well-funded, and professionally staffed interest groups, the government bureaucracies shielded in many respects from close public scrutiny, and individual citizens empowered by the expansion of "rights" all bid to define what counts as politics and what the experience of politics might mean.

Each reorganization of political experience has had its own virtues and defects. I do not join the common practice of beating up on our own era because it fails to live up to the standards of another day. It goes without saying that a democrat today, plunked down in colonial Virginia, would find slavery a savage practice and the exclusion of women and the propertyless from the franchise inexcusable. Likewise, a gentleman from colonial Virginia visiting our world during an election campaign would be appalled at how candidates readily reshape principles to appease public opinion or how they quickly shed a sense of the public good to win the financial backing of special interest groups. He might well wonder: whatever became of civic virtue?

Comparisons of this sort lack both a sense of history and a sense of sociology, an understanding of the complex coherence of a society at a given time. We do not have to accept a society, least of all our own, on its own terms, but we do have to know what those terms are. We can gain inspiration from the past, but we cannot import it. None of the older models of authority and of citizenship will suffice. We require a citizenship fit for our own day.[2]

The use of history should not be to condemn the present from some purportedly higher standard of the past, but to know where we stand in time. If my argument persuades, it will at least convince the reader that today's most honored notion of citizenship, the ideal of the "informed citizen," arose in the Progressive Era as part of a broad-gauge attack on the power of political parties. The nation's framers would not have recognized it. The institutional practices that were legislated to make it realizable were made deeply inadequate by the emergence of a complex, national industrial society. Moreover, the informed citizen model has had less influence on progress toward a society of free and equal citizens than the model of the "rights-bearing citizen" that began to displace it in

recent decades. Even so, the rights-bearing model has curiously failed to win the cherished place in civic education or public discourse that the informed citizen has now held for nearly a century.

What can political experience be today? What should it be? What are the structures of power in society that bear most on defining it? The ideals of republican virtue, party loyalty, informed citizenship, and rights-conscious citizenship, by themselves, cannot adequately serve as moral guideposts for us today. I hold out the hope, nonetheless, that the sum of them, reconceived and reinvigorated, may still serve us well. What kind of citizenship, of the kinds that may be possible, should we strive for? What kinds of standards, of the kinds that can resonate with people's life experiences now, should be held up as ideals? I seek to anchor these questions so that they can be addressed critically and productively.

It is easy to wonder, thinking of California garages and comparable locations across the country, if the Grand Experiment that Jefferson inspired, Madison nursed into being, Washington protected, Lincoln rededicated, and King revitalized has come to no more than this. Has the great "choosing day" that Walt Whitman declared the Western world's "powerfulest scene and show," more splendid than Yosemite or Yellowstone or Niagara, been reduced to these drab scenes?[3]

It *has* come to this. But what *this* is, what this prosaic exercise in American polling places at the end of the twentieth century means and how we came to it, is deeper than at first appears, and nearer the rushing force of Niagara than one might imagine.

Chapter 1

Colonial Origins of American Political Practice

1690–1787

Prospectus

A deferential society in the classical—that is, eighteenth-century English and American—sense is usually conceived of as consisting of an elite and a nonelite, in which the nonelite regard the elite, without too much resentment, as being of a superior status and culture to their own and consider elite leadership in political matters to be something normal and natural.[1]

On September 25, 1690, Benjamin Harris published a newspaper. This Boston coffeehouse proprietor, formerly a politically controversial publisher and bookseller in London, intended his *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick* to appear monthly or more often "if any Glut of Occurrences happen." Harris planned to give an account "of such considerable things as have arrived unto our Notice." This would include

"Memorable Occurents of Divine Providence" and other items to help people everywhere "better understand the Circumstances of Publique Affairs, both abroad and at home."

These lofty ambitions notwithstanding, Harris made a serious miscalculation: he neglected to get governmental approval for his publication. Military news in the first issue included criticism of the Iroquois Indians, England's allies against the French in King William's War. Harris attacked these "miserable Salvages [sic]" and hoped that the military effort to take Canada might triumph without Indian assistance so that with an all-Christian force "God alone will have all the Glory."[2] Most likely it was this article that led authorities to kill the paper, and it never saw a second issue. This was an inauspicious inauguration for American journalism. No other newspaper appeared in the American colonies until John Campbell, Boston's postmaster, began the first sustained newspaper in 1704, the *Boston News-Letter.*

The year 1690 is a somewhat arbitrary starting point for the history of American journalism and more arbitrary still if the beginnings of the newspaper are to symbolize the opening of an American public sphere. A "public sphere," as current academic discourse uses the term, refers both to a public forum independent of government and to private associations beyond the household where people come together to discuss public affairs. A public sphere may come to life in verbal give-and-take at a tavern, in a public square, on the courthouse steps—or in the pages of a newspaper or pamphlet.[3] It is the playing field for citizenship; democratic citizenship may bear fruit in the formal acts of voting or legislating, but it germinates in the soil of a free public life.

In Britain's North American colonies in the 1600s, written public communication about politics was scant. Elections were the exception, not the rule, and where there were elections it was taken for granted that results should be unanimous.[4] Early elections in Virginia and in Plymouth Colony were uncontested. New York did not even have a colony-wide elective assembly until 1683. The first seventy years of elections in America, one historian concludes, "produced few real encounters and generated little sustained interest among the populace."[5] Government