

The New Citizenship

*Unconventional Politics,
Activism, and Service*



Craig A. Rimmerman

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Activism, and Service*

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Hobart and William Smith Colleges

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Dilemmas in American Politics

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The New Citizenship

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To my students

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Craig A. Rimmerman

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1

Introduction to the Core Dilemma

Anybody had'a just told me 'fore it happened that conditions would make this much change between the white and the black in Holmes County here where I live, why I'da just said, "you're lyin'. It won't happen." I just wouldn't have believed it. I didn't dream of it. I didn't see no way. But it got to workin' just like the citizenship class teacher told us—that if we could redish' to vote and just stick with it. He says it's gon' be some difficults, gon' have troubles, folks gon' lose their lives, peoples gon' lose all their money, and just like he said, all of that happened. He didn't miss it. He hit it ka-dap on the head, and it's workin' now. It won't never go back where it was.

Hartman Turnbow

.....

IN HIS COLLECTION OF INTERVIEWS with Civil Rights movement participants carried out between 1974 and 1976, journalist Howell Raines (1977) includes Hartman Turnbow's reflection on the meaning of the vote for African American Mississippians in the 1960s. Turnbow describes the enormous difficulties in their obtaining the right to vote. Many who participated in the Civil Rights movement had to embrace unconventional politics in order to open the system in a more democratic manner to those who had been excluded from the most fundamental elements of the democratic process. It is hard to believe that a mere thirty years after many risked their lives to register to vote in the South, we lament the rise in civic indifference, as measured by voting-turnout rates in presidential and off-year elections, that is, those between presidential elections.

Recent studies also indicate that over the past thirty years there has been a decline in Americans' psychological engagement in politics and government. Citizens increasingly perceive that they cannot trust Washington government officials and that their participation in any form of conventional politics is of little consequence; in short, they are exhibiting **political alienation**. Surveys have also indicated that more and more Americans have withdrawn from the affairs of their own community.

At the same time, however, there has been an explosion in the number of talk radio and television shows that thrive in response to the citizenry's increasing alienation from the political system. Tune in to virtually any of these programs and you will hear angry citizens decry politics as usual and the politicians who supposedly represent them. Various commentators have accurately reported that such programs represent a decline in civility.

In addition, there appears to be an alarming increase in factious political activity, largely on the far right, which threatens the overall stability of American society. In recent years we have witnessed the rise of right-wing hate groups, from the Posse Comitatus to Operation Rescue to the Michigan Militia, all of which have embraced violence at times as a response to particular policies with which their adherents disagree. With the rise of such groups, we move from a decline in civility to a threat to overall system stability. As we will see in Chapter 2, the constitutional framers were concerned that all of this "factious" activity could threaten the

stability of their newly created political and economic system. The central dilemma of this book, How does a polity strike a balance among the varieties of political activities engaged in by its citizens and residents? is related to that concern.

In this book also I will assess the various ways citizens do and do not participate in their communities and in American politics. Considerable attention is devoted to the attitudes and values of college students as they approach their roles as citizens within the larger political system in which they live. As we grapple with these concerns, we will also address two questions: What role does the citizenry play in the American political system? What role should the citizenry play? These questions lie at the heart of the book. In addressing them, I will evaluate the dilemma of the relationship between participation, civility, and stability from a number of vantage points. First and foremost, I will examine the consequences of civic indifference for contemporary American politics. I will describe the nature of civic indifference, provide explanations for why many Americans fail to vote and participate in their community's affairs, and discuss ways citizens might be empowered to reduce their distance from government. In addition, I will identify alternative forms of participation (besides voting) utilized by the citizenry in order to register their discontent with their representatives and government. Thus the relationship between citizen participation and broader issues of civic responsibility, community, democracy, citizenship, and the public will be clarified.

We must also examine the broader consequences of the citizen anger with politics and politicians expressed on radio and television talk shows to see where the anger fits into the landscape of American democracy. It is indeed ironic that at the very moment that some people lament the civic indifference associated with low voter-turnout rates, there seems to be an upsurge in American political activity that is not associated with voting *per se*. This irony reflects the central concern of this book with political participation. The political activity phenomenon is evaluated from a number of different perspectives.

The new facets of participation embraced by the citizenry, all of which go beyond merely voting, form the basis of the New Citizenship. The New Citizenship is rooted in the notion that people are not born as citizens; they need to be educated and trained. This training emphasizes the importance of understanding civic rights and encourages regular participation. Civic efforts need to be placed within a context broader than that of individual volunteering. The New Citizenship attempts to enhance the quality of democracy by bringing together people from different backgrounds, in a spirit of toleration, respect, trust, and social and political engagement.

We will examine various manifestations of the New Citizenship, including grass-roots mobilization and community participation, service learning, and the Internet, as potential vehicles for enabling the citizenry to act in a more participatory manner. These are the central elements of the New Citizenship, a concept that extends the participatory democratic vision articulated in the 1960s. It is argued here that the New Citizenship will enable the polity to confront the breakdown of civility in American politics in meaningful ways. The New Citizenship is also an important means for bridging the ever-increasing gap between the **public sphere**, the arena of intersection between an individual's interests and those of the larger community, and the **private sphere**, the locus of the individual's own interests.

As we will soon see, the New Citizenship goes well beyond the traditional model of political participation. In his classic text, *Political Participation*, political scientist Lester Milbrath sketches the "hierarchy of political involvement." This hierarchy forms the basis of the traditional model of political participation. As Figure 1.1 suggests, Milbrath's division of political participation is based on an active-inactive dimension. Those engaging in spectator activities participate

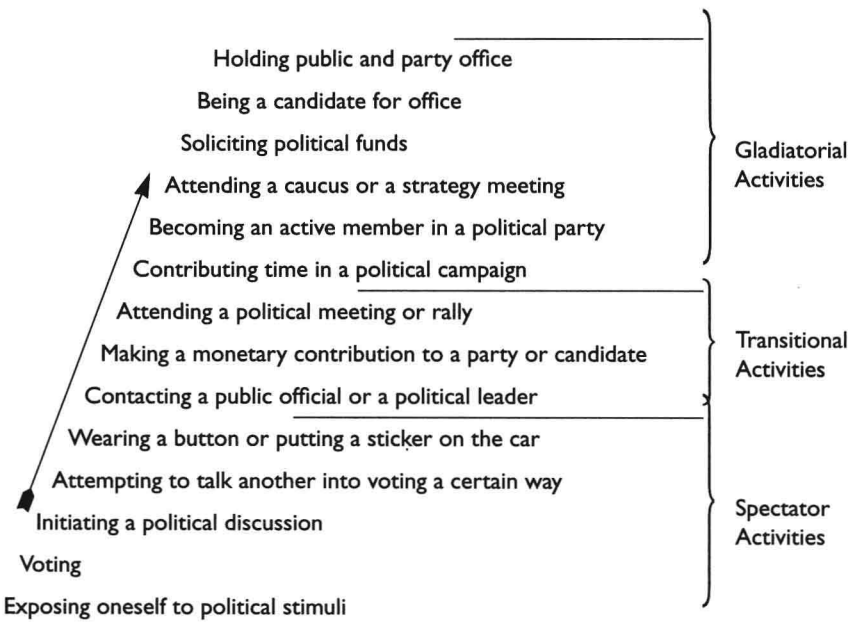


FIGURE 1.1

Hierarchy of Political Involvement