

enhance the visibility of these “extreme voices” help to explain “why Americans hate politics”⁴¹ and distrust government.⁴²

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 Those willing to compromise policies in order to control offices, jobs, and other tangible benefits have been replaced by those who are motivated largely by policy and ideological commitments.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.

What Is to Be Done—Party Renewal?

If the reader is willing to entertain the notion that over at least some of its range civic engagement is socially harmful, what is to be done? Many political scientists trace a variety of problems in contemporary politics to the weakening of traditional political parties. At least since the 1930s many in our profession have believed that parties dominated by professionals

41. Dionne (1991) argues that the country is stuck in a political debate that is foreign to the concerns and beliefs of the larger population, but he describes the discrepancy without explaining why the political order is out of step with the larger population. I am suggesting a mechanism that could help explain the gap he decries.

42. In fact, a recent study by King (1997) shows that people who are far from the position of the strong partisans of either party are more mistrustful. Given the data in Figure 11-4 and variants of it that I have constructed, I suspect that the relationship King finds would be even stronger if positions of political activists were considered.