
From Popular to Personal Democracy

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American democracy was once the creation of its citizens. They enabled a relatively small government to rule a big nation. As citizen soldiers, they secured their country's autonomy, cleared it for European settlement, and preserved its unity against secession. As citizen administrators—what are now disparaged as patronage appointees—they extended the government's authority across a continent and energized the political parties that transformed a complex, disjointed institutional design into a workable government. As taxpayers and bondholders, they financed wars, paid for the purchase of new territories, and underwrote economic development projects such as the Erie Canal. In return, they received a variety of benefits, among them legal rights, pensions, and perhaps most important the right to vote.

Popular sovereignty was directly related to the government's reliance upon the active support and cooperation of its citizens. Today that reliance has diminished, and the era of the citizen is coming to an end. The contemporary means for raising armies, collecting taxes, public finance, and government administration do not demand as much citizen cooperation and consent as they once did. Government has made other arrangements.

The supposed lesson of Vietnam, for example, was that the nation could not wage war without the overwhelming support of the people. In fact, however, Vietnam taught our government that it had to reinvent war so that it could be fought even when the public was cool to hostilities. Professional soldiers, smart weapons, and drone aircraft have all diminished the role of citizens in military security and foreign policy.

American democracy is not dead, but it has undergone a transfiguration, and so has American citizenship. These changes are not the results of some vast conspiracy to deprive the general public of its place in politics. In fact, twentieth-century political reforms have given citizens unprecedented access

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to the political process. The introduction of primary elections, the use of referendum and recall, sunshine laws, legislative mandates requiring agencies to give public notice and hold public hearings before making policy changes, freedom of information statutes—all would seem to have made the government more responsive to citizens than ever before. Through ACTION, VISTA, AmeriCorps, and the Peace Corps, the government has sponsored the activism of citizens committed to a vision of the public good, and it has extended the idea of citizenship itself to cover many circumstances of life once regarded as purely private. Gender, race, age, sexual preference, and physical handicap now figure in the claims that we make upon the public. According to Michael Schudson, “a dimension of citizenship has come to cover everything”; he adds that the new political dimensions of life in the United States may compensate for the “slackening of voter turnout.”¹

But the new opportunities for citizen involvement have changed the nature of citizenship itself. The proliferation of opportunities for individual access to government has substantially reduced the incentives for collective mobilization. For ordinary Americans, this means that it has become standard practice to deal with government as an individual “customer” rather than as a member of a mobilized public. At the same time, Americans of more than ordinary political status find that they can use the market, courts, administrative procedures, and other political channels to achieve their ends without organizing political constituencies to support them and their aims. In short, elites have fewer incentives to mobilize non-elites; non-elites have little incentive to join together with one another. The two circumstances have operated in combination with one another to produce a new politics of individualized access to government and a new era of *personal democracy* for those in a position to take advantage of its possibilities.

Recent trends in popular participation are all the more striking because they seem to run against expectations. The most powerful predictor of political activism, for example, is education, and levels of education have been rising in the United States, but political participation has not.² Personal democracy may help to explain why. Increased education, together with the increased accessibility of government, may have equipped Americans to get what they want on their own, without hitching their interests to coalitions of like-minded fellow citizens.

Just as curious as the combination of rising education and declining participation is the conjunction of the so-called advocacy explosion in Washington with quiescence beyond the Beltway. Estimates of the explosion’s magnitude vary, but everyone agrees that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of organizations represented in Washington, perhaps as much as a fourfold increase since the late 1960s. Yet the population explosion in organized interest groups has not been accompanied by any comparable increase in organizational activism among the public at large—with one ambiguous and perhaps significant exception. Americans are more likely to contribute money to political and advocacy organizations than they were in the 1960s. But it is not clear whether we should

regard these donations as a form of political involvement or as a substitute for actual participation.³ Today, we hire others to be active on our behalf.

Perhaps the most puzzling anomaly in contemporary democratic politics is the disparity between mass immobility and elite agitation.⁴ The coupling of elite conflict with popular quiescence is inconsistent with expectations based on what might be called the neoclassical theory of political democracy. As developed by Dahl, Duverger, Key and Schattschneider, it asserts that a high level of competition or conflict among political elites increases the rate of mass participation as contending leaders and parties engage in rival efforts to mobilize political support.

V. O. Key credited the Jeffersonians with setting the stage for mass mobilization when they built local party organizations to “line up the unwashed in their support.” The practice was distasteful to the opposing Federalists, but they were soon forced to do the same or risk exclusion from office and power.⁵ Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, party leaders and candidates waged political warfare like generals, recruiting and mobilizing regiments of voters whose numbers tended to grow whenever party conflict intensified. But some time in the twentieth century, the link between leadership competition and citizen mobilization weakened and then disappeared. Though partisan conflict in Washington has rarely been more rancorous than during the past several years, it does not seem to have translated into popular mobilization. Voter turnout, for example, once rose and receded with the intensity of partisan division in Congress, but by the late 1960s surges of congressional conflict and tides of electoral activism no longer ebbed and flowed in concert, and voting itself was riding a downward wave that has not yet broken.⁶

Down to the end of the nineteenth century, American elites encouraged popular participation because they needed the active support of non-elites. In its infancy, of course, the United States had to win the allegiance of citizens already attached to states and regions. It was largely for this reason that the framers of the Constitution extended basic rights of participation and representation to common people in exchange for their consent, support, and cooperation. Constitutional Convention delegate James Wilson explained that to “raise the federal pyramid to a considerable altitude,” it would be necessary to give it “as broad a base as possible.”⁷ For a century or more after ratification, the federal government remained a small state in a big country. It depended on the support of citizen soldiers, citizen taxpayers, and citizen administrators to survive and govern.

The government’s need for its people set the terms of political competition. Groups and parties contending for office and influence were virtually compelled to organize and mobilize citizens. Popular support was the currency of power, and in the struggle to acquire it political leaders produced the high rate of participation that persisted until the start of the twentieth century. Outside the South, turnout in presidential elections routinely exceeded 80 percent; in midterm congressional elections, it was often more than 60 percent. Left to

themselves, many citizens, especially those with lower levels of income and education, would never have taken to politics. Limited political information, little interest in public affairs, and primitive communications technology would have left many of them on the sidelines of the nation's public life. They became active because vigorously competitive leaders marched them into the public forum.⁸

As they sought popular support, politicians striving for power were compelled to offer concessions and inducements in exchange for the people's allegiance. At first elites offered representation and participation. Later, they pledged more concrete benefits. Even today, contending politicians offer voters health benefits, social services, old-age pensions, and job security for their votes. Yet today the promises seem more ritualistic than ever—designed less to mobilize new support than to retain the old and placate important interest groups. There are fewer promises of new benefits, more pledges to continue old programs while controlling their costs, fewer efforts to galvanize new constituencies, more fence-tending to retain a political base.

This is what happens when elites discover that they can do without the support and service of ordinary citizens. Rather than offer concessions, elites suggest that the private marketplace might be a better source than the government for health, welfare, and old-age benefits. Rather than expand the base of the federal pyramid through voter mobilization, elites suggest that representative institutions are so ineffective that their power should be curtailed by “good government” reforms such as term limits and circumvented by privatization, deregulation, and expansion in the role of the judiciary.

The upper classes never relied exclusively upon mass politics to advance their political and economic goals. Facing the rise of popular democracy in the nineteenth century, they tried to ride the majoritarian tide through astute deployment of campaign contributions and lobbyists.⁹ Reformers readily spied the hand of privilege that manipulated these political innovations and railed against the influence of “big money” in elections and interest group lobbying in Congress.¹⁰ But this was no reactionary conspiracy here to reverse the progress of democracy. The money and the lobbyists represented the elite's capitulation to democracy's electoral and representative institutions and an acknowledgment that they would have to play the democratic game. By contrast, contemporary reforms supposed to democratize government—enhanced access to the courts and to the process of administrative rule making—may actually enable political elites to circumvent the arena of popular politics and exercise power without mobilizing democratic support.

The Making of Modern Citizens

The manifestations of the new era in U.S. politics are subtle and wide-ranging. Consider, for example, the recent transformation of civic education in American public schools. Its purpose is to teach young people a common set of political ideals and beliefs and to habituate them to the rules of conduct that govern

public life in a democracy. Promoting good citizenship was one of the purposes for which public schools were originally created in this country.¹¹ The not-so-hidden curriculum used to concentrate on preparing students for collective political action, especially the electoral process.¹² Students held elections to choose team captains, class officers, student government representatives. They even held mock elections that paralleled real elections.

Schools have not abandoned all of these rituals. But there is a pronounced shift from these electoral exercises to “student service learning.” Maryland was the first state to make it a requirement for high school graduation, but other states are quickly following suit. Elementary and secondary school students are expected to “volunteer” for public service jobs with charitable, civic, and public interest groups. Student service learning is also a growing presence on college campuses, and there have been calls to make it a graduation requirement in the state colleges and universities of California.¹³

Traditional civic education tried to teach students that they could help to govern the country along with their fellow citizens just as they governed their classrooms, teams, and schools with their fellow students. Service learning imparts a fundamentally different set of lessons about citizenship. It is no longer about the collective activity of governing. Students are urged to produce the public services that a voting public once demanded from its government—frequently, services that government has abandoned or is not prepared to pay for. Lessons in service have supplanted training for sovereignty.

One study finds that more than half of all service-learning students report they have worked in environmental or beautification projects, where they may not even be offering assistance directly to other human beings. But the principal and intended beneficiaries of these programs may be the students themselves, rather than the service recipients. The service-learning experience is supposed to be personally rewarding and to bolster “self-esteem.”¹⁴

The civic activities of young adults (ages eighteen to twenty-four) reflect a similar shift toward service activities. During the past twenty-five years, voter participation among young people has declined by more than 12 percentage points, while their participation in quasi-public and private volunteer organizations such as AmeriCorps or the Jesuit Volunteer Corps has grown substantially.¹⁵ In a recent study of local activists, Nina Eliasoph has found parallel tendencies among adults in general. Activists tended to avoid “politics” in favor of community service projects. Talking about political issues, they believe, is wasteful because such talk seldom arrives at consensus on clearly defined conclusions. Perhaps more important, they were convinced that political issues were unlikely to yield to the efforts of community volunteers like themselves. They tended to concentrate instead on community service projects where they knew that they could “make a difference”—especially projects aimed at the welfare of children. Not only were such efforts likely to be noncontroversial, says Eliasoph, but the volunteers “took a ‘focus on children’ to mean ‘a focus on private life.’ That meant that the only real changes regular citizens could

make were changes in feelings.”¹⁶ Not least important were the feelings of the activists themselves, whose personal satisfaction depended on the conviction that they were making a difference.

What passes for citizenship today often inverts the feminist dictum that the personal is political. It has transformed the political into the personal. Political activity should feel “empowering.” It should enhance self-esteem. It should not engender confusion, ambiguity, or frustration.

An all-too-easy diagnosis of the new, service-oriented citizenship would locate its origins in a more comprehensive feel-good culture of self-gratification and self-esteem. But that would overlook the authentic sacrifices made by volunteers who actually perform tasks useful to their communities. It would also ignore the more authoritative efforts of political elites to recast the meaning of American citizenship (“Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country”). President Kennedy’s inaugural exhortation bore fruit in the Peace Corps and, later, in VISTA. The National Community Service Act of 1990 was to embrace an even wider population of volunteers, and it supplied more than \$200 million to fuel President George Bush’s thousand points of light. President Clinton followed this initiative in 1993 with his half-billion-dollar AmeriCorps program.

These programs unquestionably inspire worthy people to worthy deeds, but they also represent a government-sponsored shift in our conception of citizenship. Rather than make demands of government, we now fulfill them ourselves, and in doing so we gain the personal satisfaction and certainty that we have actually performed a service and made a difference.

The New Science of Public Administration

Although citizens have been encouraged to think of themselves as public servants, the more conventional public servants employed by the federal government have also been encouraged to adopt a new perspective on the citizens whom they serve. It emerges in the 1993 report of the National Performance Review, the manifesto of the Clinton administration’s campaign to “reinvent” government. The review is one in a long succession of studies designed to improve the functioning of the federal bureaucracy. Its predecessors emphasized the democratic accountability of public bureaucracy. That was one of the initial points made by the first Hoover Commission in 1949: “The President, and under him his chief lieutenants, the department heads, must be held responsible and accountable to the people and the Congress for the conduct of the executive branch.” The statement has all the banality of a self-evident truth. But, as James Q. Wilson observes, nothing like it appears in the report of the National Performance Review overseen by Vice President Al Gore. The subject of democratic accountability is hardly ever mentioned. Nor do citizens figure in the report. They have been transformed into “customers,” and the review’s explicit objective, declared by the vice president, is “to make the federal government customer friendly.”¹⁷

There is nothing necessarily undemocratic about this aim. The vice president's point is that federal employees should strive to meet the needs of their clients and treat them with respect—in other words, to make the government more responsive to its people. But there are crucial differences between citizens and customers. Citizens were thought to own the government. Customers merely receive services from it. Citizens are members of a political community with a collective existence created for public purposes. Customers are individual purchasers seeking to meet their private needs in a market. What is missing from the experience of customers is collective mobilization to achieve collective interests, and the omission is not just a matter of changing semantic fashions along the Potomac.

Customer service has also become the focus of training for public administrators in general, a departure from an earlier emphasis on public responsibility. In the 1950s, Fritz Morstein Marx summarized the bureaucratic orthodoxy of the time: "Public responsibility . . . asserts the necessity of providing demonstrable public benefits and of meeting public expectations. . . . Public responsibility under popular government further demands the willing subjection of the bureaucracy to the laws as the general instruction of the representatives of the people."¹⁸ But the authors of a more recent text regard the public as a collection of customers to be "managed" rather than a public to be served: "You should work hard to cultivate outside group support for your mission. . . . When you deal with the general public you should expect its members to have a limited understanding of the complexity of most issues. . . . While it is to your advantage to have the public on your side, this may not always be possible. Your organization may have a mission that is in conflict with . . . community groups. . . . Your job is to uphold your organization's mission. . . . Be prepared to suffer through public outcries, insults and demonstrations while supporting your program goals." But suffering can be minimized by effective management of the media, representative institutions, community groups and the public at large.¹⁹ Citizens have been demoted to customers; public administration, to customer relations.

Who Needs Citizens?

The narrowing political role of American citizens has done nothing to diminish the ethical elevation of citizenship itself. Citizenship, in fact, seems to have become an embodiment of the virtues and values in which American society is alleged to be deficient: civic consciousness, the sense of community, responsibility to others. Among academics, a recent "explosion of interest in the concept of citizenship" is partly a response to a perceived deterioration in the practice of citizenship.²⁰ The new requirements for community service in public school systems are introduced to reinvigorate a sense of public-mindedness weakened by a market-driven society that inspires the avarice of its consumers rather than the spirit of its citizens. One of the more recent eulogies for the lost

virtues of citizenship comes from a representative of the television industry, an institution often blamed for the erosion of America's civic community. Anchor-man Tom Brokaw's best-selling book honors an entire generation of citizens who endured the hardships of the Depression and the hazards of World War II.²¹ They are the measure of what we have lost and the model of what we should have become. In a sense, they are modern America's counterparts for the fallen soldiers glorified in Pericles' famous funeral oration, the citizen-heroes who sacrificed themselves for the sake of Athens.

We are witnessing a radical divergence between the moral conception of citizenship and the political conduct of citizens. The mismatch is widely acknowledged and conventionally attributed to deficiencies in the moral, cultural, or social resources of today's citizens that prevent them from acting on behalf of interests larger than their own.²² The general diagnosis is that America has amassed money and power at the expense of its "social capital"—the interpersonal connections and mutual trust that used to sustain collective enterprises. In a book and a series of articles, Robert D. Putnam documents a general decline in civic engagement since the 1960s that has transformed us into a nation of increasingly solitary and mutually mistrustful citizens.²³ Even in our services to others, we have become more likely to act alone. Putnam finds an increase in "volunteering" since the mid-1970s, but it is accompanied by a decline of participation in community service projects.²⁴ Altruism itself has been privatized.

Though Putnam attributes an array of social and cultural ills to the erosion of social capital, its political consequences must weigh most heavily in any assessment of American democracy and citizenship. They strike at the sources of political engagement. Formal associations and informal socializing once instilled habits of cooperation and elevated private interest into public spirit, but the social ties that sustained the practice of democratic citizenship have weakened or dissolved. This depletion of social capital has impoverished grassroots democracy, depopulated the public forum, and undermined the effectiveness of popular government, which the people have come to regard with growing mistrust.

By Putnam's account, three-quarters of the decline in civic engagement can be attributed to just two factors: television and generational change. Television has turned the private home into a place of private entertainment. The diversions of an older America—visiting with neighbors, lodge meetings, church socials—must compete with a calculated campaign of amusement designed to capture an audience for commercials. Americans, long known as a rootless people, have become a nation of stay-at-homes.

But self-interestedness, as Peter Riesenbergs points out, has been the constant companion of citizenship.²⁵ Even Pericles recognized the intimate connection between the public sacrifices of citizens and their private interests. Political communities had to offer inducements to inspire good citizenship: "For where the prize is highest, there, too, are the best citizens to contend for it."²⁶

States offer “prizes” for citizenship because they have need of citizens. In classical antiquity, the extension of citizenship rights often followed from an escalation in the need for military manpower—especially foot soldiers. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Otto Hintze noted that in modern states there had been a similar connection between dependence on citizen-soldiers and the extension of suffrage. The existence of militia forces was associated with the early onset of democracy, and even in more centralized and authoritarian systems, Hintze argued, universal military service eventually led to universal suffrage, if only after several generations.²⁷

Armies, of course, had to be equipped, provisioned, paid, and pensioned—all of which enlarged the state’s need for taxpayers—and the need for taxpayers gave states another incentive to extend the rights of citizenship. Long before American colonists demanded that representation accompany taxation, England had begun to recognize taxpayers as citizens. The step was taken not just to part taxpayers more peacefully from their money but to increase the wealth available to be taxed. Property rights, the right to practice a trade or engage in commerce, and the ability to secure those rights through the courts all helped to enhance the prosperity of taxpayers and expand the state’s revenue base.²⁸ In absolutist France, the transformation of taxpayers into citizens occurred later, but more suddenly, when a revenue crisis forced Louis XVI to summon the Estates-General for the first time in centuries.²⁹ Within a few years, almost everybody in Paris was addressing everybody else as “citizen.”

The modern states of Europe invented modern citizenship, not just because they needed standing armies and the money to pay for them but because the very existence of the state defined the conditions for citizenship. The modern state was a membership organization to which people belonged directly as individuals, not indirectly through their membership in families, clans, tribes, guilds, or status orders; the state itself replaced this jumble of premodern political jurisdictions as the single, paramount object of political allegiance.³⁰

Understood in this way, the connection between the modern state and modern citizenship is tautological. The definition of citizenship is implicit in our definition of state. But citizenship was more than a vertical relationship between subject and state; it also implied a relationship among fellow citizens, a common tie of blood, belief, or culture that united them into a political community. Beyond that, citizenship also has behavioral implications—a role in governing the state and the support of state authority. These were the activities denoted by Aristotle’s definition of the citizen as one who rules and is ruled. The benefits of rulership were the prizes that citizens won for being of service to the state, and as Pericles observed, the more valuable the prizes, the higher the standards of citizenship were likely to be. His ancient observation, as well as the modern state’s cultivation of citizen-soldiers and taxpayers, suggests an alternative to the view that the recent decline in the role of American citizenship is a product of the citizens’ personal characteristics, their cultural values, or their access to social capital.

Citizens become politically engaged because states and political elites need them and mobilize them. If they remain passive, politically indifferent, or preoccupied with private concerns, the reason may be that our political order no longer furnishes incentives for collective participation in politics. The state may no longer need citizens as much as it once did, or perhaps citizens have become a nuisance to political elites, or it may be that citizen prizes have gotten too expensive for the state to bear.

Citizens, of course, do not disappear simply because they have become institutionally inconvenient. A political system engaged in the collective demobilization of citizens fashions other arrangements for the political management of its population. In general, American institutions operate increasingly to disaggregate and depoliticize the demands of citizens. The reinvention of American government has reinvented citizens as customers. It has offered “stakeholders” easy access to the decision-making process as a low-energy alternative to collective mobilization. It emphasizes private rights at the expense of collective action. It is promoting arrangements for policy implementation that encourage individual choice rather than the articulation of public interests. It has reduced the occasions for citizens to congregate around “opinion leaders,” and it has weakened the incentives for political entrepreneurs to organize public constituencies. It has begun to privatize not only many of its own functions but the public itself. American politics has entered the era of personal democracy.

A Short History of Personal Democracy

The routine operations of American government once relied on the large-scale mobilization of the public to a far greater extent than they do today. Conceptions of political democracy that focus on parties, elections, and pressure groups tend to overlook this fading dimension of popular sovereignty. But the complete citizen, as Aristotle observed, plays two roles—ruling and being ruled—and they have been bound to one another. The more government rule depended upon citizen cooperation, the more government submitted to the rule of citizens. As government has learned to manage the public business without the public, it has also diminished the occasions for the kind of popular mobilization that demands the reshaping public policy or changing political institutions.

Some of the first steps toward the demobilization of American citizens date to the Progressive era, when reformers sought to eliminate waste and incompetence from government by abolishing patronage and crippling the political party organizations that mobilized working-class, immigrant voters who offended the Progressives’ “public-regarding” conception of citizenship.³¹ The Progressives’ conception of an autonomous citizen independently evaluating candidates and policies was an early anticipation of personal democracy. But some of the most significant discouragements to the collective mobilization of citizens followed the end of World War II, perhaps the last and greatest summons to citizen duty in the nation’s history.

They were expressions of the postwar conservative reaction against the New Deal. The Administrative Procedure Act of 1946 and the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 were both intended to curb the authority of New Deal regulatory agencies by holding them to formal standards of rule making and adjudication. The ostensible purpose of these enactments was to prevent the interest groups under regulation from “capturing” the agencies that were supposed to regulate them. The chief concern of congressional conservatives at the time was the privileged status of labor unions with respect to the National Labor Relations Board. To counter such interest group influence in the regulatory process, Congress tried to open the administrative rule making to the public at large by means of requirements for public notice and comment. To avoid bias in particular cases, the Administrative Procedure Act attempted to construct a firewall between the agency rule makers and its administrative law judges. Finally, Congress decreed that an agency’s decisions could be appealed to the courts.³²

In the effort to eliminate factional bias from the regulatory process, Congress also reduced the incentives for citizens to mobilize and form interest groups. After the Administrative Procedure Act, pressure successfully exerted on an agency’s rule makers did not necessarily extend to its adjudicators; since the rule-making process was now open to the public at large, there was not so much need to organize groups and mobilize constituencies in order to gain access to it, especially since unfavorable decisions could be appealed from regulatory agencies to the courts. The postwar regulatory reforms were eminently democratic, at least in a formal sense.³³ It could be argued, in fact, that they opened government more fully to the participation of its citizens because of their notice-and-comment provisions and the opportunity to appeal agency decisions to the courts. The Taft-Hartley Act was explicitly justified as a measure that would protect individual workers from undemocratic labor unions as well as from the unfair labor practices of their employers. But since the new regulatory regime facilitated individual access to policy making, it reduced the value of collective mobilization.

The legalistic mode of administration imposed by the postwar conservative reaction was extended, in the 1960s and 1970s, to types of policies that the conservatives could hardly have anticipated: civil rights, occupational health and safety, environmental protection, and consumer protection.³⁴ A further step in the progress of legalistic policy making was the use of public interest lawsuits as instruments of regulation. The civil rights movement had used litigation to advance its aims since the 1940s—but it did so, in part, because the denial of voting rights to African Americans and their minority status meant that blacks were seriously handicapped in the usual arenas of democratic decision making. Litigation was, like the resort to civil disobedience, a way to overcome their electoral disabilities. In the 1970s, however, public interest groups emerged whose chief democratic disability was not minority status but the very breadth and diffuseness of the disorganized constituencies that they claimed to represent. They devoted less energy to mobilizing their

potential supporters than to litigation. Aided by responsive federal judges, these new public interest groups employed lawsuits against federal agencies—notably the Environmental Protection Agency—to establish regulatory standards that the agencies were then required to enforce.³⁵

What ensued was an advocacy explosion. Groups claiming to represent diffuse populations such as consumers, children, the disabled, the elderly, or the public in general opened Washington offices, not just to conduct traditional lobbying activities aimed at Congress or the federal bureaucracy but to litigate on behalf of their constituents. The relationship between the constituencies and the organizations claiming to speak for them, however, was often quite tenuous. Litigation required money, research, and expertise, but not the political mobilization of a popular following. The “membership” of these groups sometimes amounted to nothing more than a mailing list of faceless contributors who had never met with one another to discuss the group’s political objectives or strategies. A few highly influential groups, in fact, were actually supported by foundation grants, or legal fees won in court cases, and some received funding from the federal government itself.³⁶

The legalization of national policy making accentuated an emphasis on individual rights that has always been inherent in American ideas about citizenship. Public interest lawsuits aimed not only to assert those rights but to invent new ones, and in the process they changed the character of national political discourse. Mary Ann Glendon argues that the language of rights is a conversation-stopper; it “puts a damper on the processes of public justification, communication, and deliberation upon which the continuing vitality of a democratic regime depends.”³⁷ The successful assertion of a right trumps all other arguments. In some instances, of course, political argument can actually be stimulated by the contest between competing rights, or the attempt to extend a recognized right to a new situation. Once established, however, a right can be invoked without engaging in the collective action that awakens and renews the common ties of citizenship.

The vast increase in interest group litigation since 1970 and the rights-based politics that followed from it may help to explain a contemporary curiosity of American politics.³⁸ By all accounts, the population of Washington lobbyists and interest groups has grown rapidly since 1970, to unprecedented levels, but there has been no corresponding increase in group membership among Americans at large. One possible reason for this disparity may be that some of the newest interest groups have begun to target ever-narrower interests.³⁹ But an explanation with even longer reach is that contemporary interest groups tend to concentrate more on litigation, research, polling, fund raising, and media relations and less on mobilizing popular support. The handful of Washington-based interest groups that actually have extensive grassroots memberships (for instance, the NRA and the AARP) are connected with the vast majority of their constituents only by mail.⁴⁰ The interest group struggle in Washington, like the clash of party elites in Congress, becomes increasingly

disconnected from the mobilization of citizens, and the scope of citizenship itself narrows.

While Washington interest groups floated free from the constituencies that they claimed to represent, the federal government seemed to fasten itself more firmly to the grassroots. “Maximum feasible participation” was the controversial watchword of federal policy.⁴¹ Requirements for citizen participation spread from one national program to another. Public bureaucracies and private interest groups seemed to be moving in opposite directions, but they were both dancing to the same music. Like the conservative reforms of the postwar era, they were opening the administrative processes of regulation and policy implementation to outside forces—to citizens—and, like their conservative precursors, they accomplished almost exactly the opposite. Maximum feasible participation usually achieved only minimal mobilization of the public. In the Community Action Program, the Model Cities Program, and other antipoverty ventures of the federal government, the chief effect of participatory administration was to absorb and dissipate the political pressures generated by urban protest movements, often by co-opting the actual or incipient leaders of those movements.⁴² The participatory programs also lacked substance. To allow policy making by the people, after all, official policy makers had to refrain from issuing precisely designed programs with clearly articulated objectives. The immediate result, as Theodore Lowi pointed out, was that “the absence of central direction and guidance simply deprives the disappointed of something to shoot against. This is a paternalism that demoralizes.”⁴³

It was also a formula for policies that would be difficult to justify and defend when under attack, precisely because the policies and their purposes were not clearly or compellingly defined. When the Reagan tax cuts made deficit reduction the organizing purpose of federal politics in the 1980s, the last vestiges of community action were swept away, along with the revenue sharing and block grant programs of the 1970s.⁴⁴ They suffered from the same political disabilities as their participatory predecessors: vaguely defined objectives and weak or politically diffuse clienteles.

What replaced them was a new conservative policy regime that preached the virtues of the market, not just as a substitute for big government but as an instrument of big government. Privatization and vouchers were supposed to free the public sector of bureaucratic inefficiency and unresponsiveness. But they also represented a new stage in the erosion of citizenship. Vouchers and programs of “choice” were designed so that public policies could be disaggregated into private decisions. Under a school voucher system, for example, parents dissatisfied with the kind of education their children receive need never complain or join with other parents to protest. They can simply choose to send their children to a different and more satisfactory school.

There is an undercurrent in twentieth-century American politics that flows through movements and measures strikingly at odds with one another. The postwar conservatives who backed the Administrative Procedure Act and

the Great Society liberals who launched the War on Poverty will never be mistaken for ideological soul mates. They are connected, however, by a shared political sensibility that ties them not only to one another but to the Progressives who preceded them and the Reagan-Bush conservatives who followed. It is a tendency to individualize democracy—an inclination to give citizens personal access to politics, policy making, and administration, and by so doing to reduce the frequency of and need for collective action.

Personal democracy lowers the political barriers that citizens used to breach only by collective assault. Freedom of information policies, sunshine laws, mandatory public hearings, public notice and comment requirements, quotas for “citizen” representation on boards and committees, public agency “hotlines,” and policies of choice—all these and other arrangements besides permit citizens to play politics alone. Yet the principal effect of these apparently benign arrangements for personal democracy is to shrink the role of citizens in American politics. Organizational entrepreneurs and elites who once mobilized followers so as to earn a place among the government’s power holders and policy makers now discover that they can achieve similar or better results through litigation, or that by claiming to speak on behalf of a diffuse and otherwise voiceless constituency they can qualify as stakeholders whose presence is essential to the legitimacy of federal policy.

When popular mobilization ceases to be a favored strategy among leaders, citizens are left to their own devices—of which there is no shortage these days. But they generally lend themselves only to an attenuated kind of citizenship. It seldom results in political mobilization for collective ends; more frequently the outcome is individual action for improved service or personalized treatment. One alternative for citizens is community activism, designed not to raise political issues or reshape public policy but to produce public goods and services directly—cleaning up the environment, for example, or serving meals in a homeless shelter. This dimension of personal democracy may be personally rewarding and certainly helpful to needy people or the local community at large, but it does not represent an exercise of political democracy. A nation of citizens, once illuminated by democratic purpose, has disintegrated into a thousand points of light.

Notes

1. Schudson, M. *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*. New York: Free Press, 1998.
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To illustrate the voting process provide an illustration such as: Chuck and John would both like to be the captain of the kickball team. How will we decide which boy will be the captain? Help the children to understand that the fairest way to choose a captain is by voting. Write both candidates' names on the chalk board. Pass out slips of paper. Explain to the children that they are to write the name of the boy they would like to have as their captain. Collect and tabulate the results on the chalk board. Parallel this election to that of the election for the Presidency.

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