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The Margaret Chase Smith Essay

CLOSING THE CLASS GAP IN CIVIC PARTICIPATION

by Amy Fried

When the young Alexis de Tocqueville came to the United States in 1831, he found a nation teeming with energy and filled with citizens who were involved in their local governments and communities. By getting involved, citizens learned to care for those outside of their circles of families and friends. People could develop a trait Tocqueville called “self-interest properly understood,” the recognition that we all are served by contributing to the collective good. Today, in many ways, it seems like Americans have lost their interest in the collective good. Active involvement in political groups has declined and citizens are less likely to even follow the news. Even the most simple of political steps—voting—is down.

But what can we do about this decline in political involvement? Advertising campaigns that urge people to vote or participate in another fashion may encourage some to do so, but these campaigns will not be enough to halt the decline, since it is not the result of poor public relations strategies. Many commentators argue that low participation

is mostly due to the public’s dislike of contemporary politics; they believe political reforms provide the cure. In my view, making changes in the political system, such as reforming the campaign finance system and revitalizing political parties, are important steps. However, it is also essential to recognize how increasing class divisions contribute to declining civic involvement.

Decades ago, this nation was known for its relative social and economic equality. In the nineteenth century, Tocqueville saw a nation where immigrants and more settled Americans were on the move—geographically and economically. Unlike European society, citizens of the United States were fairly equal to each other, and this gave Americans great energy and confidence. But divisions between America’s rich and poor have recently expanded, and the United States now has a wider class gap than nearly all industrialized nations. Political scientists recognize that this split is part of why participation has declined. Along each step of the income ladder, people with more money are more likely to vote and

otherwise get involved in politics. As a result, those who speak and act politically have become, on the whole, wealthier and thus less representative of the nation. Among many citizens, this leads to cynicism and frustration, which further discourages participation. Furthermore, upper-income individuals are less tied to particular geographical locations than they once were, and often are linked more closely to national and global professional communities than they are to individuals in their towns and cities.

These class divisions do not just affect adults. If one looks at high school students, there are striking and dismaying tendencies occurring. High school students who participate in school clubs and athletics—compared to those who do not—are more likely to be involved in their communities and in politics after graduation. Yet a participation gap has grown among high school students as well. In 1972, there was only a 3% difference between the portions of low- and high-income high school students who were involved in academic clubs. However, in 1992 a U.S. Department

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of Education study found that this gap had grown four-fold—to 12%. A similar pattern can be seen when it comes to students who work on their school newspaper. Given the correlation between participation in high school and after graduation, this schism has effects that will persist long after a student's high school commencement exercises and graduation parties are over.

As high school students mature into their adult responsibilities, this trend will surely cement or intensify the class gap in participation, and greater public estrangement from the political system will likely result. After all, active involvement in shared endeavors teaches students civic skills, such as the ability to express their points of view, to listen to others, to compromise, and to work together. In attaining these skills, students often gain commitments to community and find that they can succeed when they work together. Hence, music, athletics, arts, and academic extracurricular activities are not luxuries, but means to nurture citizens.

Closing the divide between the classes is an important goal that requires multiple strategies, some of which will require national policy commitments. However, when it comes to closing the class gap in participation in schools, state and local policymakers can take effective action. Policymakers should recognize that some high school students don't get involved in activities after school because they must earn money. Yet in other cases,

opportunities are simply not available. Poorer school districts tend to have a relatively high proportion of low-income students, and extracurricular activities are often the first items to be cut by cash-strapped schools. Thus, it is absolutely necessary to attain more equitable funding for schools.

All of us know that public schools can be a great engine of economic opportunity. Yet let us not forget they are also our engine of equal opportunity. While the technical abilities educated citizens acquire surely provide them with goods and services, quality education also gives people the cognitive tools to make reasoned choices about their lives. Among those choices are decisions about our collective endeavor—which can only be made through democratic practices and structures.

After observing citizens' engagement in local government, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote: "Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science—they put it within the people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it." Indeed, our primary and secondary schools must continue to teach science (and math and literature and other subjects), but they can also be the "local institution" that educates all students about how to work with others. Rich, poor, and middle-class all deserve these skills, and, what is more, our entire society will benefit from them. However,

we will only benefit if we acknowledge the school's role in fostering participation. We must create solutions that use our educational system to spark a more vibrant civic life across all classes. As a start, policies to equalize school funding serve many goals, and civic participation is surely one of them. 🐟



Amy Fried is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Maine. She writes and teaches about American politics, with special emphasis on public opinion, political participation, media and politics, gender and politics, and American political thought. Her book, Muffled Echoes, which concerns citizens' difficulty in having their voices heard in contemporary American politics, was published by Columbia University Press in 1997.