

BOOK REVIEW

Dalton, Russell J. *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics*. Washington, DC: CQ, 2008.

In this election year, questions and pronouncements about candidates and voters are ubiquitous. Considering the huge voter registration drives and impressive turn-out during the 2008 primaries, it may seem odd to focus our attention on concerns about voter behaviors, and citizenship more broadly. But when we examine data from recent elections, a troublesome disparity by age becomes clear, despite modest increases in voter participation in 2004. In that election, Americans aged 55 and older voted at a rate of 72 percent, while those ages 18–24 did so at a rate of only 47 percent.¹ This chasm has been a topic of debate for some time now and has led to a great deal of academic literature decrying the apathy of young Americans.

Thinkers of all types and political leanings—scholars, television pundits, writers—tell us that today’s youth are politically lazy and indifferent: they do not vote, and they appear to be more interested in the release of the newest iPod than in being the kind of citizens that made up previous generations in

this country’s history. “Young people today are putting America’s democracy at risk” is the message we hear. One Gen-X journalist, Jonathan Cohn, went so far as to call his own birth cohort the “doofus generation” in regards to political activism (37). And many accounts warn that this is not simply a situation that will be resolved with age—that is, these youngsters will grow up and join in—but that this apathy marks a seismic shift in participatory democracy and constitutes a major threat to foundational American political institutions and ideals.

A few years ago, political scientist Russell Dalton sat down with a group of government officials and administrators in Washington, DC, and presented the current academic wisdom regarding the withdrawal from public life, and especially the political process, underway amongst Americans. He went on to ask if they were concerned by this trend of citizen passivity: the reaction was laughter (75–6).

In *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics*, Dalton explains this response. He offers an important corrective to the partially accurate, but excessively harsh, critique of younger Americans by insisting that we reorient our thinking about their behavior. While it is both true and problematic that members of Gen-X and Gen-Y do not vote in the same numbers as earlier birth cohorts, this does not, in and of itself, constitute the dissolution of our democracy. He insists that we must stop focusing only on negative changes and see that, in fact, our public and our politics are changing, and many of these changes are producing positive outcomes. Additionally, in a welcome turn, Dalton breaks with much of the America-at-risk

¹ See Kelly Holder, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004: Population Characteristics,” U.S. Census Bureau (March 2006): <<http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf>>.

literature by including a significant, if small, comparative section, looking at what is happening in regards to the political process in other advanced, industrial democracies.

Dalton is at his strongest when making the case for his analysis. He rightly contends that the scholarly literature about the American political system has been overly narrow, and as a result, overly critical and perhaps even histrionic about the demise of good citizenship. To rectify this state of affairs he opens up the inquiry in two important ways. One is to illuminate as broadly as possible what changes are actually taking place. That is, aside from a decrease in voter participation, what else is happening and why? The other is to put the U.S. in a broader context, comparing the shifts in our democracy to circumstances in other similarly structured societies. Are our circumstances unique, or do they reflect transformations also taking place in Western Europe, Japan, and/or Australia?

To investigate these issues, Dalton moves the conversation in a useful way. Rather than asking if good citizenship—that is, “good” citizenship as it has been defined in the past—is on the decline, he begins by asking: “*What does it mean to be a good citizen in America today?*” (3). This is a smart adjustment, as it remedies the logic of concluding that if citizens are behaving differently than they did fifty years ago, our society must be in peril. Dalton lets us in on his conclusions up front: he claims that what has changed are the norms of citizenship, and once we recognize that, the shifts we are seeing are quite comprehensible. “The good news is,” he tells us, “...the bad news is wrong” (76). He argues that where obli-

gation, loyalty, deference to authority, and a “subject” mentality were the defining characteristics of a “good citizen” throughout the first half of the twentieth century—a norm Dalton calls “duty-based citizenship”—from the 1960s onward a new set of traits increasingly constituted citizenship norms. The new norms, those of “engaged citizenship,” promote a more direct approach to government affairs, increased tolerance, and concern for the well-being of others, not only in the U.S., but globally.

Where trouble emerges is in the model Dalton puts forward. Using sophisticated statistical methods, Dalton insists upon a direct causal explanation. While many elements ring true—for instance, that modernization has had a significant impact on citizenship norms and as a result, on the political process—there is a disconnect between his broader statements and his method of using survey data to illustrate more specific contentions, for example, that increased levels of education *cause* changed norms of citizenship. Dalton illuminates important factors in shaping norms of citizenship, such as generational variation; changes in education, standard of living, and type of work; shifting gender roles; and increased diversity. He also points to the consequences of an altered notion of citizenship, incorporating full chapters on a broadened conception of political participation, rising tolerance, and a changed notion of the role of the state, among others. The problem is not in the identification of significant variables, but in the claims that follow.

What is totally missing is any recognition of the dialectical relationship between all of these factors and some larger, deeper social construct that might



tie them all together: culture. Perhaps leaving culture out is the consequence of using only survey data; culture might be difficult to measure using the particular datasets Dalton employed. But there is no doubt that both the duty-based citizenship of the past and the new, engaged citizenship of today have deep roots in the culture and narratives of America that have been present from the get-go. America's culture—as well as the norms of citizenship that emerge from that culture and that have simultaneously continued to shape it—is not monolithic, and has within it the contours of both types of citizenship Dalton discusses. Dalton's basic argument is good and important, but without pondering a deeper kind of culture, it occasionally seems like he remains above important concerns about the hows and whys of cultural (normative) change.

Interestingly, in a book of the same title (*The Good Citizen*) published ten

years ago (1998), sociologist Michael Schudson takes on the same critique as Dalton, but from a broader historical and cultural approach. What Schudson sees is an evolution of citizenship in the U.S., which seems to capture more fully the importance of context and social change. He sees the first half of the century quite differently than does Dalton, perhaps as a result of studying a longer period. What does seem curious is that there is no mention of Schudson's book at all in Dalton's more recent one.

One important innovation Dalton offers is the inclusion of comparative data intended to put American citizenship norms and changes into a broader context. He dislikes the ethnocentrism of assuming that our situation is unique and uniquely bad, and seems pleased to report that the basic trends towards engaged citizenship are occurring in most highly modernized, industrial democracies. In fact, he finds that overall the American political system is in quite good shape.

Despite his findings that suggest we can reject the prevailing declension narrative, Dalton is right to return to the legitimate concerns about the long-term ramifications of changing norms of citizenship. He closes the book by beginning to address what may be the key question coming from his analysis: "How does the democratic process adjust to changing norms, mitigating the problems and maximizing the benefits?" (173, italics removed). That closing offers him the best way to live up to an earlier statement:

I respect my colleagues' views and have benefited from their writings—but, this book tells the rest of the story. Politics in the United States and other

advanced industrial societies is changing in ways that hold the potential for strengthening and broadening the democratic process.... If we do not become preoccupied with the patterns of democracy in the past, but look toward the potential for our democracy in the future, we can better understand the American public and take advantage of the potential for further progress. (19)

The rest of the story is worth looking into as we attempt to understand changes in American culture.

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