Civic Hope

*Civic Hope* is a history of what everyday Americans say – in their own words – about the government overseeing their lives. Based on a highly original analysis of 10,000 letters to the editor from 1948 to the present published in twelve US cities, the book overcomes the limitations of survey data by revealing the reasons for people’s attitudes. While Hart identifies worrisome trends – including a decline in writers’ abilities to explain what their opponents believe and their attachment to national touchstones – he also shows why the nation still thrives. *Civic Hope* makes a powerful case that the vitality of a democracy lies not in its strengths but in its weaknesses, and in the willingness of its people to address those weaknesses without surcease. The key, Hart argues, is to sustain a culture of argument at the grassroots level.

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Civic Hope

How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive

RODERICK P. HART
University of Texas at Austin
For my granddaughters,
Colleen, Elly, Jill, Meg, and Olive,
for whom my civic hope abides
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This project began during the run-up to the Clinton/Dole presidential campaign of 1996, when it occurred to me that the voice of the American people was a colossal muffle. Was it possible, I asked myself, to write a modern history of what citizens were thinking about their government, and to do so in their own voices? I did not immediately think of using letters to the editor, but I quickly discovered that they were the only game in town. But where could I find such letters? If found, would they reasonably represent opinions in their communities? How might the letters be analyzed once gathered? When might I start such a project and when might I finish?

Much has happened in my life since those early thoughts. For one thing, I gathered 10,000 letters to the editor written (between 1948 and the present) by people living in twelve small American cities stretched from coast to coast. I visited each of these cities on multiple occasions and, in 2004, was ready to write the book. Then, unexpectedly, I was dragooned into becoming dean of the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin. It would be another twelve years before the writing could commence.

In retrospect, this long interruption was more a blessing than a curse, allowing me to think harder about what the letter writers were saying. I took more than 250 flights for fundraising purposes during my time as dean, but I never left town without grabbing a new batch of letters to read on the plane. It was not easy being a scholar and an administrator, but the burden was lifted considerably by having colleagues with whom I could share my thoughts-in-the-making. Chief among them were Sharon Jarvis Hardesty, my colleague at the University of Texas, and Kathleen Hall

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Jamieson of the University of Pennsylvania. They showered me with thoughtful kindness (the former) and stern remonstrance (the latter). I have profited from their gifts equally.

This project has taken me far afield, drawing as it does on diverse disciplines. I could not have responsibly embarked on it without reading the work of three magisterial scholars: Robert Lane, Robert Putnam, and Michael Walzer. Their rich conceptual insights and deft empirical observations are models of community scholarship. I am also indebted to the work of political scientists Lance Bennett, Kathy Cramer, Morris Fiorina, John Hibbing, Chris Karpowitz, Skip Lupia, Eric Oliver, and Wendy Rahn, as well as sociologists Nina Eliasoph, Andrew Perrin, Michael Schudson, Richard Sennett, and Theda Skocpol and psychologists Jamie Pennebaker and Rick Snyder. Equally, I have profited from the work of communication scholars Rob Asen, Pablo Boczkowski, Greg Dickinson, Daniel Kreiss, Nick Lemann, Sam McCormick, Rasmus Nielsen, Bill Reader, Brian Thornton, Karen Tracy, Graeme Turner, Barbie Zelizer, and, especially, Stephen Coleman and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen. Closer to home, I continue to be blessed by faculty colleagues who – for better or worse – also study media and politics. They include Bethany Albertson, Lucy Atkinson, Gina Chen, Tom Johnson, Bryan Jones, Bob Luskin, Susan Nold, Steve Reese, Daron Shaw, Bat Sparrow, Paul Stekler, Talia Stroud, Sean Theriault, and Chris Wleizen.

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The research for this book was complicated, and I could not have done it alone. I have depended heavily on three fine computer scientists (Laurence Brevard, Rob Crossman, and Shawn Spiars) and a cadre of administrative personnel who did work for me that was tedious, when it was not remarkably tedious. That they performed these labors cheerfully is a
testament to the human condition. Thank you, Genevieve Bittson, Melissa Huebsch, Candice Prose, Anne Reed, Dian Sierra, Christie Smith, Margaret Surratt, and Kat Yerger.

The research on which this book is based – the interviews, the survey work, and the content coding of the letters – happened only because I was able to assemble (and reassemble, as the years went by) stalwart teams of research assistants. Since leaving my employ, some of these individuals have aged gracefully and others have aged fitfully because of their labors for me. Whether graceful or fitful, though, each is a personal treasure. The list includes Ana Aguilar, Heló Aruth, Vidula Bal, Emily Balanof, Laura Barberena, Sarah Blumberg, Jay Childers, Stacey Connaughton, Alex Curry, Lisa Densmore, Mary Dixson, Cindy Duquette-Smith, Lisa Foster, David Gilbert, Elizabeth Glowacki, Kristyn Goldberg, Hannah Gourgey, Stephanie Hamel, Soo-Hye Han, Bryant Hill, David Humphreys, Bill Jennings, Natasha Kovalyova, Becky Lavally, Colene Lind, John Lithgow, Marla Morton-Brown, Rachel Mourao, John Pauley, Radharani Ray, Jon Rutter, Kanan Sawyer, Josh Scacco, Juandalynn Taylor, Ori Tenenboim, Keri Thompson, Mary Triece, Claire Van Ens, Holly Waldren, Naomi Warren, Rick Webb, and Joel Wiggins.

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Ultimately, though, my greatest debt is to the American citizens who, year after year and issue after issue, contribute to letters columns in the nation’s newspapers. I have grown to love and respect these people. They are opinionated, yes, and some of them are nasty even on their nicest days, but, to me, they sing the song of democracy in exactly the right key. All of us who care about our communities should join their chorus.