

Good Citizenship in America

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The Concept of Citizenship

Some features of American politics stand out clearly. There are fifty states, which exercise substantial powers according to the Constitution. Congress has two houses, one with 435 members, the other with 100, and both must agree before bills can become national laws. The president serves a four-year term, and perhaps another, is charged with administering various government agencies, and has a commanding role in foreign affairs. The federal courts work through districts and circuits, and the Supreme Court sits in a marble palace in Washington. The details are endless, but one knows more or less what to look for and where.

Good citizenship is less tangible, more difficult to study, and sometimes overlooked in the national roster of political institutions. Americans admire good citizenship. But they are not always sure what citizens should do on behalf of the communities in which they live. This is so even though many people believe that, when civic practice does not measure up to its ideal, a vital element is missing from the national landscape.

In truth, the concern for good citizenship, no matter how imprecisely defined, takes aim at something very important. That is, Americans understand not only that government officials should work properly but also that citizens must help assure the quality of public life. The point is self-evident: In a democracy citizens rule, yet if they rule badly, all will suffer. Thus it is no exaggeration to say that not just constitutional checks and balances but also the practice of good citizenship has helped the nation to establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure liberty.

A General Concern

Many Americans worry about how they and their neighbors do, or do not, practice good citizenship. This anxiety appears in newspaper editorials, in political speeches, in sermons, and so forth, with formal expressions such as the report of the National Commission on Civic Renewal entitled *A Nation of Spectators: How Civic Disengagement Weakens America and What We Can Do About It*.¹

The commission, for example, strove to examine citizenship impartially, in the belief that concern for that subject cuts across party affiliations and is therefore an all-American impulse. Co-chaired by former Democratic Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia and former Republican Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities William Bennett, the commission worried, in a nonpartisan way, over symptoms of political disengagement such as a rate of national voter turnout that declined in presidential elections from 62.8 percent in 1960 to 48.9 percent in 1996, even while turnout in state and local elections hovered around 10 to 20 percent.²

Commission members were aware, no doubt, that the right to vote is shared today by most citizens, although this was not always the case in American history. But the will to vote together with friends, neighbors, countrymen, and countrywomen, and thereby to take part in producing election results capable of desirably shaping public life, seemed to the commission, and to many other observers, quite weak.³

¹ The report was funded by the Pew Trusts and published at the University of Maryland in 1998.

² Many political scientists believe that low voter turnout indicates a serious shortfall in civic behavior. This is because election results conclusively put candidates into office or keep them out, whereas lobbying is an uncertain business that may or may not persuade elected officials to respond to constituent preferences. Furthermore, most adult Americans, of whatever means, have the right to vote, whereas various forms of lobbying are practiced by people who possess resources of time, energy, money, ethnicity, gender, location, talent, and more, that are not distributed equally among America's citizens. Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Knopf, 2002); and Marvin P. Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), are both troubled by low voter turnout. Less concern on that score appears in Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), esp. pp. 294–314.

³ One reason for civic disengagement is that many citizens believe government ignores what they want. See National Issues Forums Research, *Governing America: Our Choices, Our Challenge: How People Are Thinking About Democratic Government in the U.S.* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: John Doble Research Associates, 1998). This report was sponsored by the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio. See also Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Philip D. Zelickow, and David C. King (eds.), *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997).

From this reality we may deduce that nonvoters are, in a sense, bad citizens. They do not intend their abstention to harm public life and institutions. But neither do they regard themselves as obliged to fill what may be called *the office of citizenship*, which is nowhere formally defined but constitutes a vital calling in any democratic society. Of that office, more in a moment.

The Public and Hidden Transcripts

From frequent usage, citizenship is a tangled concept with many connotations. Americans have talked about citizenship for more than two hundred years, and many millions of them have practiced it, for better or worse, during the same time as voters, candidates, officeholders, civic activists, and, when necessary, soldiers.⁴ The subject is so large, then, that no one can analyze it by consulting more than a representative sample of documents and studies indicating what Americans have thought about citizenship in the past and what they think about it today. Unfortunately, to survey only some sources and not others means that, inevitably, some opinions and the people who express them will be slighted. I cannot avoid this result, but I can explain the reasoning that guided my choice of source materials for this book.

To make a long story short, I decided that the best place to locate a representative sample of documents and studies bearing on American citizenship is in what James C. Scott calls *the public transcript*. This is Scott's term for the visible part of any nation's conversation with itself, with its founders and their descendants.⁵ In America, the public transcript includes official documents such as the Mayflower Compact (1620), the Declaration of Independence (1776), and the Constitution (1789); political speeches such as George Washington's Farewell Address (1796), Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (1863), and John F. Kennedy's inaugural address (1961); and Supreme Court decisions such as *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), *Lochner v. New York* (1905), and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). The American public transcript also includes widely publicized expressions of opinion such as *The Federalist* (1787–1788),

⁴ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944–May 7, 1945* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), expresses enormous respect for ordinary Americans who took up arms and risked all to preserve the commonweal.

⁵ On public and hidden transcripts, see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), esp. pp. 1–16.

“The Seneca Falls Declaration” (1848), and Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963).⁶

When Scott analyzed nondemocratic societies, he regarded their public transcripts as expressing the values of dominant elites. Less powerful members of the same societies, he observed, who might be slaves, serfs, women, or religious and ethnic minorities, are often afraid to speak openly about what they believe. They therefore express their opinions and ideas, if at all, mostly in a *hidden transcript*, whose sometimes bitter messages, perhaps via diaries, letters, protest songs, and folktales, run through underground channels of communication.

To consult a substantial part of America’s public transcript, even without citing the country’s hidden transcript, requires considerable effort. It is a feasible effort, however, as compared with trying to study both. Moreover, in the case of considering America’s devotion to citizenship, one may regard this feasible effort as adequate, if not perfect. In a democracy where frequent elections determine who will hold public office, we can reasonably assume that political people, even elites, will mostly refrain from expressing opinions that contradict what large numbers of citizens believe.

In fact, democratic candidates usually affirm principles and preferences that match what voters hold to be true. To do otherwise would cause the mavericks to lose electorally. It follows, in a free society, that we can look at what political winners say and assume that it approximately represents what many, or most, citizens believe. This is so even though, as we shall see, many Americans, and especially women and many African Americans, were prevented from voting and being elected until fairly recently.

Three Kinds of Citizenship

Considering mainly the public transcript, it would appear that for Americans there are three parts to the concept of citizenship. Popular talk does not refer to these aspects of the subject separately and distinctly,

⁶ Anthologies are helpful for providing representative selections of American thinking on public affairs. For example, Richard Hofstadter (ed.), *Great Issues in American History*, 3 vols. (New York: Vintage, 1958); Alpheus T. Mason (ed.), *Free Government in the Making: Readings in American Political Thought*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985); and Diane Ravitch (ed.), *The American Reader: Words That Moved a Nation* (New York: Harper, 1991).

but to keep them clear in our minds it will be convenient here to call them Citizenship I, Citizenship II, and Citizenship III.⁷

Citizenship I refers to a person's legal status, to whether or not, for example, one is entitled to reside in a specific country and, in modern times, carry its passport. Many regimes furnish their members with this status, which can exist today in places as diverse as Canada, Iran, and Japan. Citizenship I may entail little social interaction, as when Daniel Boone is reputed to have moved his homestead further into the primeval forest when he saw smoke from his neighbor's log cabin. For such people, as *de jure* citizens, good citizenship is mainly a matter of obeying their country's laws, which defend and preserve the local populace. The range of obedience will vary, of course, from country to country, from stopping at red lights, to serving on juries, to enlisting in the armed forces, to paying taxes.

Citizenship II appears when, in some cases, there exists an active sort of belonging, with political participation as its hallmark. Here, some *de jure* members of the community (Citizenship I) are entitled to participate in making decisions concerning matters of public interest. In most modern states, and especially in republics and democracies, Citizenship II has become a common condition of political life. In America, Abraham Lincoln praised this sort of politics when he described it in the Gettysburg Address as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."⁸ For such people, good citizenship means obeying their country's laws *and* helping to make them, say, by voting or being elected to a public office.

⁷ A qualifying note is in order here. Some colleagues have advised me, in a spirit of constructive criticism, to call these elements of the subject "legal citizenship," "political citizenship," and "moral citizenship." I understand their concern, but I prefer not to do that. The danger is that talking in this book about citizenship via familiar words might suggest to readers connotations and consequences beyond those conveyed by the novel, and somewhat inelegant, terms of Citizenship I, Citizenship II, and Citizenship III. That is, telling my story in terms used elsewhere might evoke reminders of other stories, other considerations, other problems, other aspirations, and other expectations. These may be legitimate for other purposes but they may also divert attention from the messages I hope my story will convey. It is for the same reason that I make few references in this book to some very profound academic thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Jurgen Habermas, and Hannah Arendt, who have written often and compellingly about citizenship. Citing the ideas of such thinkers would suggest, at least to scholarly readers, implications far beyond those I wish to convey in the more popular story I tell. Thus citing, for example, Taylor, Habermas, and Arendt would bring us into an academic conversation, both interesting and important, which is, nevertheless, not the one I set out to analyze.

⁸ This speech, from 1863, is analyzed at length in Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

Citizenship III is more difficult to define than its companions. Unconditional civil obedience and routine political participation can produce bad social results, as in cases where citizens like Germany's Adolf Eichmann collaborated calmly, or even enthusiastically, in legalized genocide.⁹ Consequently, it seems advisable to promote an active practice of citizenship that is sometimes better than ordinary. In this third sense of the subject, good citizenship requires more than just obeying a country's laws and perhaps helping to make them. Citizenship III requires, in addition, virtuous behavior. It obliges citizens to use their political resources and skills to participate well, that is, to maintain not just effective laws but also a decent state.¹⁰

Good Citizens and Good People

Although each sort of citizenship may be admirable in its own way, they can be separately and jointly problematical. For example, between Citizenship I and Citizenship III, there is an implication that individuals can practice a commendable form of citizenship only by combining the demands of two different social roles. On this score, the right sort of citizenship, for Americans at least, sometimes requires a good citizen to also be a good person.

Yet between these two roles, and therefore between Citizenship I and Citizenship III, there arises a moral dilemma that may be traced back at least to the life of Socrates. One of the great teachers in Western history, Socrates left no written works to tell his story. But commentators like Plato, who admired Socrates as a good man, say he insisted on challenging the traditions of Athens to the point where his neighbors, assembled in an Athenian jury, convicted him in 399 B.C. of corrupting young people by leading them away from routine obedience to Athenian laws (Citizenship I).

Acting publicly in his role as a good person (Citizenship III), Socrates apparently argued that, under certain circumstances, citizens should not contribute to injustice by obeying an immoral state. With examples such as the Socratic life in mind, men and women in Western society for more than two thousand years have envisioned the social role of a good person

⁹ See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1963).

¹⁰ Edmund Burke is credited with expressing this point succinctly: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." However, no one has found this exact quotation in his writings. See Antony Jay (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Political Quotations* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), p. 68.

as being sometimes, and occasionally severely, at odds with the social role of being a good citizen. After all, obedience provides predictability and stability in public affairs, whereas civil disobedience, no matter how virtuous, may undermine the routine conditions of law and order that enable members of a community to prosper together.

This point is highly significant. Because the role of good citizen (who sustains law, order, and security) and the role of good person (who pursues curiosity, knowledge, and virtue) may point toward different ends and call for different kinds of behavior, people may not know for sure how to act out Citizenship III. In truth, to combine law and virtue can be difficult and even dangerous.¹¹ Thus Allied judges at the Nuremberg Trials after World War II assumed that, on behalf of natural justice, good Germans in the law-abiding sense (Citizenship I) should have disobeyed Nazi laws (Citizenship III). But how could Germans have known this before they lost the war? Where, for example, as the storm raged, could most Germans have found the courage to risk losing their loved ones by hiding Jews or Gypsies if death for entire families was the punishment for helping enemies of the state according to laws enforced by implacable Nazi police?

In an example closer to home, many Americans admired Martin Luther King, Jr. Here was a man who led thousands of demonstrators to disobey segregation laws but seemed praiseworthy for serving the highest interests of a country that had, shamefully, enacted such laws in many states and enforced them even in Washington, D.C. King reminded his followers of legalized racism in Nazi Germany and insisted that decent men and women must strongly oppose America's homegrown brand of the same evil.¹² The principle seems clear, but where should one draw the line? Are antiabortionists who defy the Supreme Court as laudable as Martin Luther King, Jr.?

¹¹ Literature offers classic cases of this dilemma. For example, in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, introd. by Cyrus R. K. Patell (orig., 1924; New York: Washington Square Press, 1999), the British government charged Captain Edward Vere with upholding naval orders aboard his warship in order to maintain crew discipline in defense of the realm. Consequently, Vere felt obliged to pronounce a death sentence against Billy Budd, the simpleminded but decent sailor who, intensely provoked, impulsively struck and accidentally killed his cruel petty officer, John Claggert. Must all government officials, as obedient servants of the state (Citizenship I), enforce their country's laws so mercilessly to uphold public order?

¹² See Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in King, *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet, 1964), pp. 76–95, on why laws should be tested by higher standards of virtue.

Inclusion and Empowerment

In American history, Citizenship II is doubly problematic. First, we know the country did not extend participation rights to all its early residents, for example, not to Native Americans, not to slaves, not to most free African Americans later, not for a long time to women, and very slowly to Asian immigrants.¹³ Only gradually, then, did such people overcome what is called today *exclusion*.

Modern scholars have extensively explored the history of political exclusion.¹⁴ I will not refer much to their research, though. I will comment a little on who gained *inclusion*, who got Citizenship II, when they received it, and why they seemed worthy of possessing it. But mainly I will ask what they were supposed to do with Citizenship II once it entitled them to participate. I assume that although many Americans were long left out of political life, most of them were eventually brought in. Accordingly, I am concerned less with what happened on the way to that end and more with what people believe they should do upon arriving.

Second, even when, as today, political inclusion is widely authorized by law, there remains a question of whether or not to assure to each citizen enough resources so that he or she will be able to exercise the rights of Citizenship II effectively.¹⁵ In this regard, we sometimes speak of empowerment, which may flow from entitlements.

Thus most Americans now possess the rights of Citizenship II. These include the rights to vote, to speak freely, to organize interest groups, to petition government officials, to run for office, to be elected, and so forth. However, social conditions enable some Americans to exercise these rights more powerfully than others, on the basis of health, wealth, ethnicity, gender, race, or other potent resources. Where this is so, it may seem reasonable to redress, perhaps by affirmative action, various imbalances

¹³ On the long struggle for Asian inclusion, see Hyung-Chan Kim (ed.), *Asian Americans and the Supreme Court: A Documentary History* (New York: Greenwood, 1992); and Hyung-Chan Kim (ed.), *Asian Americans and Congress: A Documentary History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1996).

¹⁴ For example, see Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Resource questions are explored in Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991); Jeff Spinner, *The Boundaries of Citizenship: Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in the Liberal State* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1994); and Timothy J. Gaffaney, *Freedom for the Poor: Welfare and the Foundations of Democratic Citizenship* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2000).

of political outcome that will exist even after almost everyone enjoys the status of Citizenship II.¹⁶

Some scholars focus mainly on how inequality of resources may affect Citizenship II. I have chosen, instead, to write about citizens who are not particularly weak. I hope those who suffer on this score will eventually overcome resource deprivation, for example, when immigrant children join the mainstream of American life, or as women gradually surmount various forms of gender discrimination.¹⁷ I agree then, and very strongly, with those who say that the struggle for entitlement and empowerment must continue. But this struggle is more a project for marginal groups than for the great majority of people in America today.

In short, the problem I wish to address, without suggesting that other problems are less urgent, is not a matter of who has what but what should be done by those who, in large numbers, are already positioned to practice citizenship properly. Here are citizens who command democratic rights and economic resources beyond the reach of most men and women in previous eras and other societies. Here, I think, are the people who, in an important sense, collectively constitute America.¹⁸

The Office of Citizenship

The people I have in mind are especially obligated, as we shall see in later chapters as the tale of citizenship unfolds. Thus where Citizenship II is widely available to Americans, and when Citizenship III calls upon them to use their civic rights virtuously, then, in effect, to *do* citizenship properly is to fulfill *the office of citizenship*. On this score, where a combination of

¹⁶ For example, see the feminist arguments advanced by Iris Marion Young in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), and see the racial arguments advanced by Lani Guinier in *The Tyranny of the Majority: Fundamental Fairness in Representative Democracy* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

¹⁷ As a group, African Americans seem most likely *not* to overcome the difficulties of unequal resource distribution. I will have more to say on that probability later.

¹⁸ In short, my point of departure is the plight of those Americans who possess the resources needed for practicing citizenship but do not know how to use them properly. Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), describes various hardworking and moderately successful Americans who want to be good persons and good citizens. Although not wealthy, these people have the means to do whatever they should to that end. The trouble is that they do not know what to do in order to fulfill their citizenship ideals, and there is the problem I intend to address.

implications flowing from Citizenship II and Citizenship III speaks to well-meaning men and women, it is not enough to ignore political campaigns, to stay home on election day, or to vote solely on behalf of one's own interest.

Instead, there is something in the American political tradition that calls upon men and women not just to take their places as members of the community but to serve it faithfully, to respect its needs, to reflect on the public interest, and to act on behalf of that end, all this so that friends and neighbors may live effectively and prosper together. In the language of citizenship, I will call this sort of behavior "republicanism" and eventually analyze many of its implications. Most importantly, for the moment, let us note that if rights and right are to be blended properly, then elected officials are not the only people who must give shape to public life. Citizens too have this responsibility, even if they exercise it less frequently than politicians whose careers lead them, or so they say, to practice good citizenship at work every day. Thus Americans tend to believe that education is not just for acquiring vocational skills but should prepare "the people" both morally and intellectually to exercise their sovereignty.¹⁹

Does endorsement of this ideal translate into practice? Not necessarily, because those who admire republicanism do not always abide by its requirements. Similarly, churchgoers, and even ministers, do not always abstain from sin. No matter. Many Americans feel that citizenship entails some degree of social responsibility and therefore requires them to make at least some effort to fulfill the obligations of a small but significant public office. Here is the reason today for popular concern over voter fatigue, over indifference to public affairs, and over distrust of public institutions, all being indications that, deplorably, many citizens are

¹⁹ See Chief Justice Earl Warren, writing for a unanimous Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) 347 U.S. 483, forbidding segregated and hence unequal access to grade school education because "education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. . . . It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities. . . . It is the very foundation of good citizenship." The same is true for young adults in higher education. Thus a regent of the University of California, speaking in 1872: "The University is founded primarily on that essential principle of free republican government which affirms that the state is bound to furnish the citizen the means of discharging the duties it imposes on him: if the state imposes duties that require intelligence, it is the office of the state to furnish the means of intelligence." Quoted in Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Vintage, 1962), p. 278. For earlier indications of this view, see Richard D. Brown, *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650–1870* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996).

unwilling to do what they must in order to serve a democratic society as they should.²⁰

Exceptionalism

To focus on citizenship is to shed light on what sets America apart from other countries, a matter of variation which scholars refer to as American *exceptionalism*. On this score, America may be regarded as politically special, or even exceptional, in several ways. For example, when George Washington and his comrades rebelled against Great Britain, the country had neither strong feudal institutions nor much enthusiasm for aristocratic political ideas. Thus Americans could devise and maintain democratic practices without interference from powerful local forces still committed to an older regime.²¹ Moreover, until the late 1800s, moving west encouraged many Americans to continue the process of democratic invention. Thus frontier life instilled among pioneers a sense of individual worth and the need for voluntary participation in community affairs.²² And, finally, Americans inhabited a country blessed with great quantities of untapped natural resources such as fertile land. Thus they could create economic abundance without, for the most part, fighting among themselves to divide up a fairly static economic pie.²³

Historians and other scholars who first underscored such qualities in American life recognized their significance by comparing what happened

²⁰ Some scholars have usefully described the imperatives that inform Citizenship III although, of course, they do not use that term. Thus Joseph Tussman has argued that citizens who enjoy participation rights should use them to fulfill the requirements of a public office where citizens so acting constitute *the sovereign tribunal*. Moreover, he has pointed out that in that office citizens must go beyond *bargaining* to *deliberating*, which is less a matter of determining the momentary price of a policy than of recognizing its intrinsic value. See Joseph Tussman, *Obligation and the Body Politic* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 104–121. See also David Shelbourne, *The Principle of Duty: An Essay on the Foundations of the Civic Order* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), passim. Shelbourne claims that when citizens enjoy the safety and comfort of living within a civic order, they are morally obliged to foster policies which help to maintain that order rather than just extract benefits from it. In other words, as citizens are entitled to rights, so also they must fulfill the duty of using those rights to do what is right.

²¹ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955). Some historians today feel that Hartz praised American politics too highly. For example, see James T. Kloppenberg, “In Retrospect: Louis Hartz and *The Liberal Tradition in America*,” *Reviews in American History* (September 2001), pp. 460–478.

²² Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1920).

²³ David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1954).

in the United States with what happened elsewhere. The comparative technique has therefore long been valuable for suggesting useful generalizations about America as a wide-ranging and populous society even though it is composed mainly of small-scale acts and aspirations. More recently, making comparisons suggests that, after the Soviet Union collapsed, after more than a decade of political turmoil and reconstruction in Eastern and Central Europe, after fierce bloodletting in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Chechnya, and after frightful ethnic violence in Central Africa and Southeast Asia, we should look for additional comparative insights into American exceptionalism. For example, what caused, or permitted, public life to collapse in those places but not in America?

Citizenship and Nationalism

The answer to this question is, I think, that Americans over many generations fashioned a distinctive ideal of citizenship which, for the most part, eased or prevented at least some civic tensions that earlier political thinkers had recognized but not resolved. Apologies, and regrets, are certainly in order for the fact that America's voting majority did not always honor this ideal but long discriminated politically against women and various minorities. However, the ideal did inspire, from the outset, some admirable practices in American public life, and it was, as enshrined in documents like the Declaration of Independence, available for extension when, as time passed, citizens increasingly discarded timeworn prejudices in favor of more equality and democracy.²⁴

Now comparatively speaking, two great organizing principles – of *citizenship* and *nationalism* – animated most political leaders in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was the time when Western countries struggled to replace the assemblage of emperors, kings, princes, aristocrats, established churches, estates, and other feudal relics that Alexis de Tocqueville called “the old regime” in European civilization.²⁵ Real world solutions to the challenge mixed and combined the two major principles in varying proportions from one place to another, and some Marxian experiments that eventually failed, such as in the Soviet Union, seemed to avoid both entirely. Nevertheless, it is clear that, in this time of challenge, America established a government rooted mainly in the concept

²⁴ Two great exceptions are the relations between mainstream Americans and African Americans and between mainstream Americans and Native Americans. I will say something about these exceptions in later chapters.

²⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. Alan S. Kahan (orig., 1856; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998).

of *citizenship*,²⁶ while many other Western countries, such as France, Germany, and Italy, developed governments which drew their legitimacy more from *nationalism* or some other form of ethnic solidarity.²⁷

Here lies a civic dividing line that may be described in legal terms. In many countries, and in America today, most people acquire citizenship rights either by being born in their state's territory (*jus soli*) or by being born into a family that already enjoys those rights (*jus sanguinis*).²⁸ In America, however, an additional factor has long been at work, because millions of people acquired such rights in the past, and millions continue to acquire them today, by coming to the United States from abroad and committing themselves to uphold America's political ideals.²⁹

In fact, it is a vision of America as a land of conscious and committed citizenship that characterizes the American experience³⁰ to the point of forestalling a considerable measure, but not all, of ethnic exclusion and some, but not all, large-scale social violence. To that end American citizenship, which from the Revolution has been republican in *mode*, became during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries democratic in *scale*. As we shall see, this amalgamation was a remarkable accomplishment in the history of Western political thought that had, until Americans

²⁶ See Michael Walzer, *What It Means to Be an American: Essays on the American Experience* (New York: Marsilio, 1992), p. 27:

The United States is not a literal "nation of nationalities" or a "social union of social unions." At least, the singular nation or union is not constituted by, it is not a combination or fastening together of, the plural nationalities or unions. In some sense, it includes them; it provides a framework for their coexistence; but they are not its parts. . . . The parts are individual men and women. The United States is an association of citizens.

²⁷ On nationalism as a principle for organizing governments, or for justifying existing governmental arrangements, see Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, and Reality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992); and William Pfaff, *The Wrath of Nations: Civilization and the Furies of Nationalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

²⁸ For a discussion of these legal principles and how they have influenced acquiring citizenship in two European countries, see Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 81–82, 86–125, and *passim*.

²⁹ The point is not that, after the original establishment of colonial settlements, immigrants were ever a majority but that they were always a visible and significant presence.

³⁰ An indication of America's indifference to nationalism as a theory of community appears by omission in Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg, *A Companion to American Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). This book is an encyclopedia of articles dealing mainly with social concepts that have concerned American thinkers over several centuries. It contains articles on "democracy," "liberalism," "republicanism," and "citizenship," but it has none on "nationalism."

fashioned their distinctive vision of political belonging and behavior, regarded republicanism and democracy as quite different and somewhat incompatible.

Prologue

In the chapters that follow, we will see where the American concept of citizenship came from and how the roles of good citizen and good person began their tense, but constructive, journey into the modern world. On the way, I will describe how citizenship as an ideal evolved and what devotion to it in America has achieved. I will then explain, starting in Chapter 6, how a passion for acquiring economic goods, especially in the twentieth century, via consumerism, has impaired the ability of Americans to practice citizenship as originally envisioned. And finally, in Chapters 7–9, I will suggest that if citizens would more widely recognize the debilitating effects of consumerism, they might work together toward striking a better balance than exists today between material comforts and civic decency.

A Caveat

Political theorists like Ronald Beiner note that people learn how to behave civically from stories they hear about public life and how they should contribute to it.³¹ On that score, I believe the evolution of citizenship as a concept is an inspiring chronicle based largely on what Americans have told each other about who they are and what they should be.³² It may seem like a fairy tale, however, to historians and political scientists who pride themselves on being realists, on hewing to the unvarnished truth, on being suspicious of superlatives and wary of the worst in human affairs.

Let me stipulate, then, that in what follows I do not intend to highlight the warts in American history. Surely there are many. I am, however, more

³¹ See Ronald Beiner, *What's the Matter with Liberalism?* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1992), pp. 10–14: “Prologue: The Theorist as Storyteller.” See also Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003). Part of Smith’s approach appeared earlier in his “Citizenship and the Politics of People Building,” *Citizenship Studies* (February 2001), pp. 73–96, which describes civic stories as “political,” “economic,” “constitutive,” or a mixture of all three.

³² Every historical narrative relies on a selection of facts that supports the author’s view of what happened. My selection highlights an ideal of republican citizenship not because that ideal has inspired all civic practices in America but because I believe that it has been expressed frequently and that it is worth remembering as a potential inspiration. This strategy of highlighting positive aspects of the past is similar, I think, to what David Harlan, in his *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997), recommends that historians do at least occasionally.

interested in the United States' laudable qualities. It is, after all, a feeling for great ideals and achievements that inspires men and women from one generation to the next, that infuses their lives with meaning beyond what an unfocused recital of "the facts," sometimes brutal, might impart. For example, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were written, debated, and ratified in part by men who owned slaves. On that score, the Founding was savagely inauspicious.³³ Nevertheless, the same men endorsed various principles that were strikingly advanced for their day and age, in which case, thankfully, those principles could be stretched and amended so as to provide, eventually, more social justice than some of their authors intended.³⁴

I will not, therefore, discount great deeds by pointing out how, inevitably, some Americans were backsliders and others never even tried to realize their country's highest aspirations.³⁵ It goes without saying that no nation is perfect. As President Woodrow Wilson observed, when talking in 1915 to a group of four thousand new citizens in Philadelphia, "No doubt you have been disappointed in some of us. Some of us are very disappointing."³⁶

In short, and leaving aside disappointments, let us consider where America's civic ideal came from and how it may continue to serve as a benchmark for admirable civic actions. Ultimately, a culture's ideals can encourage its citizens to fix what needs repair. Thus Martin Luther King, Jr., called upon Americans to honor what the Declaration of Independence promised almost two hundred years after it proclaimed America's moral law.³⁷ Not everyone in previous generations had accepted King's interpretation of the Declaration's principles. And some still oppose the public

³³ The Founders' refusal to dismantle and forbid slavery is described in Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2002), pp. 81–119.

³⁴ In other countries as well as in America, the road to increasing freedom and decency has not always been paved only with good intentions. Thus the Magna Carta, whereby King John affirmed the right of trial by jury in 1215 for at least some Englishmen, contained two patently anti-Semitic clauses which impeded the collection of debts owed to Jewish lenders at that time. A similar disinclination of English debtors to pay what they owed encouraged King Edward I to expel all Jews from England in 1290, much as America's government, but for different reasons, later forced many Native Americans to leave their homes and trek to the faraway territory which eventually became Oklahoma.

³⁵ A great amount of backsliding has already been analyzed in the vivid survey of inclusion and exclusion, taken up to 1912, offered by Rogers Smith in his *Civic Ideals*.

³⁶ "An Address in Philadelphia to Newly Naturalized Citizens" (May 10, 1915), in Arthur S. Link (ed.), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 69 vols. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1955–1994), Vol. 33, p. 148.

³⁷ See his "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

policies he recommended. But the Declaration existed, many Americans revered it, and both facts helped King enormously in his pursuit of social justice. And there, regardless of his private life which so offended J. Edgar Hoover,³⁸ is the reality that should inspire King's civic heirs today.

³⁸ Hoover was director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. See David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Penguin, 1981).