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.

RODERICK P. HART holds the Shivers Chair in Communication and is Professor of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Former dean of the Moody College of Communication and founding director of the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, Hart is the author or editor of fifteen books, the most recent of which is *Political Tone: What Leaders Say and Why* (2013). Hart has been named a fellow of the International Communication Association and Distinguished Scholar by the National Communication Association, and received the Edelman Career Award from the American Political Science Association. He is also a member of the Academy of Distinguished Teachers at the University of Texas at Austin.

Communication, Society and Politics

Editors

W. Lance Bennett, University of Washington
Robert M. Entman, The George Washington University

Politics and relations among individuals in societies across the world are being transformed by new technologies for targeting individuals and sophisticated methods for shaping personalized messages. The new technologies challenge boundaries of many kinds – between news, information, entertainment, and advertising; between media, with the arrival of the World Wide Web; and even between nations. Communication, Society and Politics probes the political and social impacts of these new communication systems in national, comparative, and global perspective.

Other Books in the Series

Erik Albæk, Arjen van Dalen, Nael Jebril, and Claes de Vreese, *Political Journalism in Comparative Perspective*
Eva Anduiza, Michael James Jensen, and Laia Jorba, eds., *Digital Media and Political Engagement Worldwide: A Comparative Study*
C. Edwin Baker, *Media Concentration and Democracy: Why Ownership Matters*
C. Edwin Baker, *Media, Markets, and Democracy*
W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman, eds., *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*
Rodney Benson, *Shaping Immigration News: A French-American Comparison*
Bruce Bimber, *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power*
Bruce Bimber, Andrew Flanagin, and Cynthia Stohl, *Collective Action in Organizations: Interaction and Engagement in an Era of Technological Change*
Lynn S. Clark and Regina Marchi, *Young People and the Future of News*
Murray Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation*
Frank Esser and Barbara Pfetsch, eds., *Comparing Political Communication: Theories, Cases, and Challenges*
Myra Marx Ferree, William Anthony Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards, and Dieter Rucht, *Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States*
Hernan Galperin, *New Television, Old Politics: The Transition to Digital TV in the United States and Britain*
Tim Groeling, *When Politicians Attack: Party Cohesion in the Media*
Richard Gunther and Anthony Mughan, eds., *Democracy and the Media: A Comparative Perspective*
Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*
Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, eds., *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*
Robert B. Horwitz, *Communication and Democratic Reform in South Africa*
Philip N. Howard, *New Media Campaigns and the Managed Citizen*

Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, eds., *The Making of a European Public Sphere: Media Discourse and Political Contention*
L. Sandy Maisel, Darrell M. West, and Brett M. Clifton, *Evaluating Campaign Quality: Can the Electoral Process Be Improved?*
Douglas M. McLeod and Dhavan V. Shah, *News Frames and National Security*
Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*
Pippa Norris, *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Society*
Victor Pickard, *How America Lost the Battle for Media Democracy: Corporate Libertarianism and the Future of Media Reform*
Sue Robinson, *Networked News, Racial Divides: How Power & Privilege Shape Public Discourse in Progressive Communities*
Margaret Scammell, *Consumer Democracy: The Marketing of Politics*
Adam F. Simon, *The Winning Message: Candidate Behavior, Campaign Discourse*
Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*
Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *After Broadcast News: Media Regimes, Democracy, and the New Information Environment*
Gadi Wolfsfeld, *Media and the Path to Peace*

Civic Hope

How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive

RODERICK P. HART
University of Texas at Austin

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit
of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108422642
DOI: 10.1017/9781108525138

First published 2018
Reprinted 2018

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-42264-2 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-108-43562-8 Paperback

For my granddaughters,
Colleen, Elly, Jill, Meg, and Olive,
for whom my civic hope abides

Contents

Figures

Tables

Acknowledgments

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

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.

I have enjoyed the superb backing of university leaders, including Jay Bernhardt, Barry Brummett, Sheldon Ekland-Olson, Larry Faulkner, Greg Fenves, Steve Leslie, Bill Powers, Randa Safady, and Ellen Wartella. I am also indebted to my dear friends in the Texas journalism mafia who have taught me so much over the years, including Rosental Alves, R. B. Brenner, Jane Chesnutt, Jeff Cohen, Tracy Dahlby, Craig Dubow, Karen Elliott-House, Glenn Frankel, Elizabeth McCue, Kathryn McGarr, Kathleen Mc Elroy, Jim Moroney, Dan Rather, Evan Smith, Karen Tumulty, Mary Walsh, and my late friend Walter Cronkite.

Fifty years ago, I was lucky to have married a sociology major, Peggy Hart, who helped me understand the twelve cities when we traveled through them together. I am also indebted to Hank Hardesty and Mark Knapp for the greatest gift of all: They make me laugh.

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.

I am especially grateful to the editorial staffers working for the newspapers in the twelve cities studied here. On three different occasions they took the time to explain what they did and why they did it. Some of these folks were grizzled veterans of the news business and some were newcomers, but all were exceedingly helpful to me. Also generous were those who reviewed *Civic Hope* prior to publication. I thank Sara Doskow, my editor, for her prompt, insightful, and professional comments, as well as the anonymous reviewers who provided detailed feedback. I have never received more helpful advice in all my years of writing books.

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.