

The Great Passivity

Lawrence M. Mead

According to the APSA report, “American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality,” in the United States economic and political inequality are feeding on each another. Since the 1970s, earnings, income, and wealth have become more unequal, while politics is becoming more elitist. Rising inequality is corrupting our democracy, especially through the rising role that money plays in politics. At the same time a more exclusive government exacerbates, or at least tolerates, growing inequality.

Changes toward greater material inequality are easy to exaggerate. For the most part, they reflect the rich getting richer rather than other people doing worse. Trends slowed in the 1990s, when income gains were broad based. The causes are not well understood and have little tie to government.¹ Nor is it clear that rising economic inequality has heightened political inequality. The report does not assert this. While active participants in politics are skewed toward the elite, they differ from nonparticipants much more in their demographics than in their political views.² To my eye, recent changes in elite politics have not clearly made the government any less responsive to society than it was decades ago.

Silence from Below

The important change, rather, is outside the Beltway. Elites may not be misrepresenting the masses, but the people seem to demand less from government than they once did. In part, they participate less. Since 1960, voting turnout has fallen, especially among lower-income people, and unionism and other organizing by the less privileged have ebbed. And in part, people make fewer new demands than formerly. No popular movement has arisen to challenge inegalitarian trends. Ordinary Americans are less likely to insist that government do more to facilitate their lives. The elderly

*Lawrence M. Mead is professor of politics at New York University (LMM1@mail.nyu.edu). He testifies regularly to Congress on poverty, welfare, and social policy and has written many books and articles on the politics of poverty and welfare reform, most recently *Lifting up the Poor* (with Mary Jo Bane) and *Government Matters: Welfare Reform in Wisconsin*.*

recently obtained a Medicare drug benefit from Congress, but that was the exception.

Not every policy change stems from public passivity. Some recent cuts in antipoverty spending reflect evidence that programs were ineffective. Some cuts in Social Security and Medicare were forced by exploding costs not faced in earlier eras. Reduced public demand comes out, rather, in the Reagan and Bush tax cuts and the failure to enact new social benefits, such as universal health care, that exist in other rich countries.³

Why have public pressures abated? The report raises this question but fails to answer it, instead preferring to moralize about the change and blame it on the system. This aristocratic stance, where all responsibility rests with the elite, contradicts the democratic values that the authors claim to serve.

Is Inequality to Blame?

In part, the authors attribute falling engagement to inequality itself. They stress that people who do not participate typically have fewer resources, such as education and income, than those who do. To say, however, that this explains lower participation goes too far. Only in giving money to politicians is income or wealth decisive. Every other form of participation depends partly on education and income but even more on civic skills, the proclivity to be politically engaged, recruitment by other people, and interest in the issues.⁴ Unless we say that all these attributes are set by income and schooling, we have not explained much. If they cared to do so, lower-income Americans could still command far more political attention than they do.

Furthermore, to say that engagement is deterred by collective action problems is no answer. Perhaps no single individual can influence public outcomes enough to make political effort seem rational, yet those who do participate feel amply rewarded, if only because they satisfy civic values.⁵ So the failure of the masses to make more input *seems* self-defeating. Indeed, it threatens a key premise of popular government. As Derek Bok says, “Democracy assumes that individuals will take advantage of the opportunities the system provides to defend their interests. The experience of American workers shows that this assumption may be unwarranted.”⁶

Failures of Government?

The report also blames popular disengagement on government. Faced with growing inequality, supposedly, ordinary Americans can “become increasingly discouraged about the effectiveness of democratic governance, spreading cynicism and withdrawal from elections and other arenas of public life.”⁷ It is true that since the 1960s rising proportions of respondents have professed inefficacy or distrust of government in the National Election Studies. But this sentiment cannot be taken at face value. Although voting turnout has fallen, other forms of participation have not, and alienation from government is not clearly tied to lower participation.⁸

The report also endorses research arguing that public policies can shape participation through “policy feedback.” Allegedly, broad programs that confer generous benefits, such as the GI Bill or Social Security, promote more political engagement than recent, more meager social programs.⁹ I am not persuaded by the principal studies that find this, because they do not control for selection effects.¹⁰ The effects they find are, in any event, too small to explain the great passivity.

Successes of Government

A better explanation for political withdrawal is the very success of government in promoting expanded opportunity in recent decades. In the past, ability was distributed far more equally than income or opportunity. When individuals with brains and energy were denied fair opportunity, they were receptive to egalitarian public policies. But after the 1960s, chances to get ahead became more equal, detaching the fortunes of children somewhat from those of their parents.¹¹ Now able individuals of any background more often receive decent schooling and make rewarding careers for themselves. Affirmative action has eagerly sought out gifted minority individuals to promote into the elite. The new meritocrats then become the beneficiaries of inequality rather than its opponents. Equally, those who lose out in fairer competition are less likely to assert egalitarian claims. Thus, meritocracy can become the enemy of more thoroughgoing social reform.¹²

At the other end of society, the poor have become politically weaker. Formerly, people with low income might simply have low-paying jobs, but they retained the ability to join unions and parties seeking egalitarian change; such workers were the core supporters of the New Deal. But today the vast majority of steady workers, at any wage, are above poverty. The remaining poor tend to have problems besides low earnings—especially, single-parent families and an inability to work consistently. Those patterns—not clearly due to the economy or government—deter participation in either the workplace or politics.¹³

The nation’s prosperity also calms popular unrest. Ordinary Americans, as the report notes, care a lot less about economic inequality than they do about equal opportunity.

Most people ignore the rich, provided that they have a fair chance to get ahead themselves. It was not inequality as such but distress and especially high unemployment that sparked the aggressive movements of the populist era and the 1930s. But the nation has enjoyed more secure employment recently—only the recession of the early 1980s recalled the severities of the Great Depression.

The report assumes that economic inequality should inspire discontent, but the opposite is true. America’s low wages promote far greater job creation than in Europe, where labor markets are more highly taxed and regulated. In Europe, earnings may be more equal, but fewer people can get jobs at all. Americans complain about low pay, but as long as they are working they are unlikely to march on Washington. In the United States, easy employment is the opiate of the people.

Bountiful job creation also explains the rapid immigration the nation has seen in recent decades, and this too drives participation down. The Hispanic population has grown by close to four times since 1972, while Asians have more than doubled since 1987. In 2002 those groups comprised 14 and 4 percent of the population, respectively.¹⁴ Participation levels might decline because many immigrants are not citizens (often because they are illegal), and also because many come from political cultures that are less assertive than ours. In the 2000 election, Hispanics were 4 percent less likely to vote, and Asians 22 percent less likely, than were whites, controlling for other determinants. These racial effects have grown since 1984.¹⁵ Greater ethnic pluralism also weakens social trust, impeding political cooperation with others.¹⁶

Parallels with Poverty

Just as the report blames nonparticipation on a lack of resources, so in the 1960s and 1970s most experts blamed poverty on social conditions outside the poor themselves. Largely, working-aged parents and their children were poor because the adults did not work regularly. Nonwork in turn was correlated with low skills, minority status, disincentives to work created by welfare, and so on. Most experts thought that government had to push back those “barriers” before the poor could work and get ahead. The analysis was deterministic, defining the poor as the passive objects of outside forces, including government.

But education, training, minority rights, and work incentives were all improved, and work levels did not rise. So in the 1980s and 1990s government started to require welfare adults to work as a condition of aid. It also spent more on wage and child-care subsidies. Beginning in 1994, those steps, coupled with a superb economy, drove the majority of recipients off welfare, mostly into jobs. The report ignores welfare reform, but along with the economy, it was the chief force that moderated trends toward inequality in the 1990s, because it drove up work and earnings at the bottom of society.¹⁷

In the 1980s and 1990s, policy makers disbelieved the academic research linking poverty to various disadvantages. In statistical models, poverty might have many causes, but the explainers were often conditions that the poor could change, and much variation was left unexplained. So if government enforced work, behavior could change, and it did. The poor, it turned out, were paralyzed, not by a lack of freedom, but by too much of it. Alongside new benefits, they needed an obligation to work.

In the epitome of reform, seen in Wisconsin, welfare adults faced immediate and unyielding demands to work, but they were also lavishly subsidized to work. Far from diminishing the public sector, the reform was a governmental triumph that in some ways expanded the welfare state.¹⁸ The task force report treats citizenship as if it consisted only of claims to political and social rights. In welfare reform, however, the emphasis was on the obligations of citizenship, one of which is to work when employable. And it was this conception that produced positive social change.

Should Participation Be Enforced?

Just as in the 1960s and 1970s government extended new benefits and rights to the poor without expectations, so in promoting participation it has assumed the whole burden of change. Since the 1960s, blacks have been fully enfranchised, then provided with “majority minority” election districts. Restrictions on registration and voting were eased. Government also helped fund higher education levels, which should also have raised voting turnout. Just as in earlier social policy, government sought “barriers” to remove. And yet turnout fell. It is time to stop blaming nonparticipation on outside impediments. Very likely, political withdrawal is not due to inability to participate, but rather to a lack of obligation to do so.

Should nonvoters be required to vote, as welfare recipients have been made to work? Australia and Italy already mandate voting. On the one hand, doing so flouts the idea that participation is self-motivated. On the other hand, we enforce other civic duties, such as paying taxes and serving on juries. In addition, union leaders and community activists could put more pressure on people to join their organizations, the better to pressure employers and governments for concessions. Such bodies rarely grow just by opening doors; there must also be positive suasions to join.¹⁹

To raise participation requires challenge, not solicitude. The 9/11 attacks dramatized this. When the World Trade Center collapsed, egoistic New Yorkers changed in an instant into dutiful citizens. They took the injured in off the street, flocked to the disaster site offering to help, and donated rivers of blood. Nationwide, distrust of government fell sharply, as the report notes, while civic attitudes surged, at least briefly.²⁰ No government effort to raise participation has had anything like this effect. While no one would wish another 9/11, the moral is clear: What engages people in

public affairs is not merely the opportunity to participate, but collective obligations that they cannot evade.

Good behavior must be enforced, not just facilitated. That implies treating the disengaged as something more than victims. The responsibility for nonparticipation must be divided between them and society. The moralistic voice, which the report aims only at the elite, must be turned on the political free riders as well. “What people seem to want . . . is the power to participate, not the hard work of actually doing so,” remarks Derek Bok. “In the end . . . people do get the quality of government they deserve.”²¹ This report lacks that bracing but realistic tone.

The report asserts that, through research and advocacy, political scientists can promote wider participation. But as the community organizer Saul Alinsky always said, democracy cannot be given to people—they must achieve it for themselves.²² In the past, a more popular regime has always emerged when pressure from below was spontaneous, triggered by some practical crisis, such as joblessness or oppressive taxes. If there is now no such urge, democratization must wait until there is. Or voting must be mandated. The answer to elitism cannot be more elitism.

The Question of Competence

A hidden issue in the report, as in other discussions of social problems, is the competence one attributes to those with the problems. The apparent debate may be about the fairness of the opportunity structure, but often the real issue is about how able people are to exploit the opportunities they have. The more resourceful one finds them, the more willing one is to hold them responsible, at least in part, for the problems and their solution.

Traditionally, American politics assumed that formal political rights were enough to give the people leverage. That imputed to them the competence to advance their own interests. The report, however, adopts the protective stance typical of academic poverty experts: “[L]ess-advantaged Americans vote less because they lack the skills, motivation, and networks that the better-advantaged acquire through formal education and occupational advancement.”²³ Thus the capabilities people do or do not have are attributed to their environment. The affluent get no credit for participating, nor do the disadvantaged get discredit for failing to do so. It sounds sophisticated and humane, but it is also condescending. The unfortunate are exempted from any responsibility for their weakness, reducing the potential for change.

Academic solicitude may seem realistic in an age when the worst-off have more trouble functioning than they once did; after all, even the better-off today experience politics mainly on television. But to lower expectations clashes with the norms of citizenship in our heads, which are much more demanding. Those conceptions go back to the hardier Americans who first built this country, then fought in its wars, at home and abroad, for the next two hundred years.

To suggest, as the report does, that the less fortunate are barred from influence by inequality, when the vote and civil liberties are still available, is something our ancestors would not understand.

To recover democracy, government must assume greater competence in lower-income Americans than the elite finds comfortable. We would rather lay the burden of change on ourselves than on the less fortunate. We believe in our own abilities; we are less sure about theirs. But unless some minimal capacities are expected of the less privileged, change becomes unimaginable, and a caste society will emerge. To prevent that, we must say to those at the bottom (to paraphrase a famous political maxim): Don't get down, get even. Only if the masses act is the solution really democratic.

To use English terminology, democracy is the creation of the Roundheads—citizens below the elite who assert a belief in the individual, independent of class, and insist on an egalitarian politics. The Cavaliers are those who believe in a hierarchical polity in which by nature they are destined to rule and others to follow. America's founding was a great victory for the Roundheads; the Civil War was another.²⁴ But our society is becoming more stratified, by race as well as class, and the ideal of equal citizenship is under stress. A Cavalier politics threatens to reemerge. This report, with its democratic rhetoric but aristocratic assumptions, dramatizes that tension.

Notes

- 1 Gottschalk and Danziger 2004; Levy and Murnane 1992.
- 2 Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995.
- 3 Bok 2001.
- 4 Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Bok 2001, 177.
- 7 American democracy 2004, 655.
- 8 Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Luttbeg and Gant 1995.
- 9 Mettler and Soss 2004.
- 10 Soss 1999; Mettler 2002. In models of participation, the problem is that people with certain features are likely to enroll in certain social programs and also to participate or not participate in politics. The correlation between enrollment and participation levels may thus be spurious. The solution is 2SLS estimation using instrument variables to identify the true program effect. Neither of these studies attempts this.
- 11 Bok 1996.
- 12 Young 1961.
- 13 Mead 1992, chapters 3–6.
- 14 U.S. Bureau of the Census 2003.
- 15 Ginsberg and Mead 2004. To be black raised the chance of voting by 10 percent *ceteris paribus*. These analyses used the 2000 Current Population Sur-

vey (CPS) Voter Supplement File. In another analysis, using the 2000 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, the negative Hispanic and Asian effects were even larger.

- 16 Putnam 2004.
- 17 Blank and Haskins 2001. Welfare reform is mentioned briefly and critically in the research summaries about government and policy accompanying the report.
- 18 Mead 2004.
- 19 Olson 1971.
- 20 Sander and Putnam 2002.
- 21 Bok 2001, 391, 419.
- 22 Alinsky 1946.
- 23 American democracy 2004, 656.
- 24 Beer 1993; Phillips 1999.

References

- Alinsky, Saul D. 1946. *Reveille for radicals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- American democracy in an age of rising inequality. 2004. Report of the American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy. *Perspectives on Politics* 2 (4): 651–66.
- Beer, Samuel H. 1993. *To make a nation: The rediscovery of American federalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Blank, Rebecca M., and Ron Haskins, eds. 2001. *The new world of welfare: An agenda for reauthorization and beyond*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Bok, Derek. 1996. *The state of the nation: Government and the quest for a better society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- . 2001. *The trouble with government*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ginsberg, Beth, and Lawrence Mead. 2004. Ethnic influences on voting. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago.
- Gottschalk, Peter, and Sheldon Danziger. 2004. Wage inequality, earnings inequality and poverty in the U.S. over the last quarter of the twentieth century. Paper presented at the Inequality Summer Institute, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.
- Levy, Frank, and Richard J. Murnane. 1992. U.S. earnings levels and earnings inequality: A review of recent trends and proposed explanations. *Journal of Economic Literature* 30 (3): 1333–81.
- Luttbeg, Norman R., and Michael M. Gant. 1995. *American electoral behavior, 1952–1992*. 2nd ed. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock.
- Mead, Lawrence M. 1992. *The new politics of poverty: The nonworking poor in America*. New York: Basic Books.

-
- . 2004. *Government matters: Welfare reform in Wisconsin*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mettler, Suzanne. 2002. Bringing the state back in to civic engagement: Policy feedback effects of the G.I. Bill for World War II veterans. *American Political Science Review* 96 (2): 351–65.
- Mettler, Suzanne, and Joe Soss. 2004. The consequences of public policy for democratic citizenship: Bridging policy studies and mass politics. *Perspectives on Politics* 2 (1): 55–73.
- Olson, Mancur. 1971. *The logic of collective action: Public goods and the theory of groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Phillips, Kevin. 1999. *The cousins' wars: Religion, politics, and the triumph of Anglo-America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Putnam, Robert. 2004. Diversity, inequality, and community: Mid-term report on a continuing project. Presentation at the Inequality Summer Institute, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge.
- Sander, Thomas H., and Robert D. Putnam. 2002. Walking the civic talk after Sept. 11. *Christian Science Monitor*, February 19.
- Soss, Joe. 1999. Lessons of welfare: Policy design, political learning, and political action. *American Political Science Review* 93 (2): 363–80.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. 2003. *Current population reports, P60-222, Poverty in the United States: 2002*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Young, Michael. 1961. *The rise of the meritocracy, 1870–2033: An essay on education and equality*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books.