

standing institutions and use them to their advantage. Both contributions will surely inspire new work on these topics. These books have obviously important lessons for political scientists, but I expect that they will find a place on reading lists and syllabi in other disciplines as well, including law, public policy, and public administration.

Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy

Alive. By Roderick P. Hart. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 370p. \$99.99 cloth, \$29.99 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592719004869

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During this age of purported voter apathy and citizen disengagement, Roderick P. Hart offers *Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive*. In this book, Hart uses abundant evidence in the form of newspaper letters to the editor to demonstrate how a robust “culture of argument” (p. 10) sustains and nurtures democracy in the United States. Letters, Hart writes, evidence an ongoing willingness of people to call out imperfections in the nation’s leaders and the nation’s policies, while also debating ideas, in writing, with their neighbors. Hart draws his conclusions from a dataset that spans seven decades (1948–2018) and so runs the gamut from when newspapers were part of the daily artifice of many American doorsteps to the recent era of print decline and the rise of internet culture.

Hart crafts his thesis around what he terms “civic hope,” or the preternatural American ability to maintain faith in democratic ideals despite bleak odds. Such hope is more than optimism. It is a willingness of people to struggle with themselves and each other about the meaning of the nation in which they live and to push forward in the face of problems. By conducting a content analysis of 10,000 letters from newspapers in 12 midsize cities—in addition to 10 surveys that happened over 20 years, as well as in-depth interviews with some letter writers and editors—Hart provides insight into how people negotiate and clarify political values; expect their leaders and fellow citizens in the nation to act; and lament failures of behavior and action, publicly and permanently, in writing. By studying letters to the editor, Hart explains, scholars can apprehend the “texture of people’s beliefs—the reasons underlying their opinions and the varied ways in which a given belief can be expressed” (p. 8; emphasis in original).

Much of Hart’s enthusiasm for studying letters derives from their source as grassroots evidence. The 12 cities from which he draws data are “nothing special,” he writes: they are not New York, San Francisco, or New Orleans (p. 22). Rather, they are places whose letters and writers are worthy of study precisely because they could be anywhere. Although those who write are almost never famous, they are important because they have composed at least one

letter to the editor. This singular act elevates them beyond political cynicism. There is a kind of Tocquevillian nostalgia inherent in Hart’s argument—he admits as much himself (on p. 25)—because he insists that citizenship is realized not only through voting but also through writing and speaking. This nostalgia extends to Hart’s idealization of the printed word as the quintessential form of democratic debate. The book underexplores whether this idealization still holds in a twenty-first century, post-Trump world.

Hart also argues convincingly that letter writers act as citizen vanguards against disengagement and even disinformation. They keep the conversation going. However, recent studies make plain that the public is more likely than ever to believe in and act on falsehoods and lies. In later chapters, especially chapter 7, Hart suggests that even when letter writers get things wrong their contribution is still additive because they keep people thinking and conversing. However, as Yochai Benkler and Robert Faris recently wrote in *Network Propaganda* (2018), “as a public we have lost our capacity to agree on shared modes of validation as to what is going on and what is just plain whacky” (p. 6). Hart suggests that we can survive such wackiness so long as people keep writing. However, he never fully explains why this should be the case, except to celebrate how letters are the purview of ordinary people and reveal ordinary Americans’ political ideas and anxieties.

An indisputable strength of the book is Hart’s use of breakout quotes from writers. The words give life to the manuscript, just as Hart argues that the letters he studies give vibrancy to US democracy. Readers move through time from commentary about Truman and Eisenhower to dyspeptic remarks about the character of Donald Trump. Such examples are grounded in extensive data analysis that includes digestible charts and bulleted lists that undergraduate readers may find helpful as they make their way through nearly 300 pages of text, not including appendices. Getting through so many pages is helped mightily by Hart’s writing. His prose is engaging, authoritative, and scholarly all at the same time.

Each chapter is well grounded in literature in political science and political communication. Hart nicely surveys what others have discovered about his questions and then uses his own letter data to color or trouble those conclusions. This tack works especially well in chapters 4–9, in which he wonders who writes letters, who reads them, what makes them compelling, and what makes them interesting, and more. Turning the stereotype of the crackpot curmudgeon on its head, Hart continually emphasizes the ordinary nature of those who compose letters, insisting that although they tend toward the earnest in personality, they make up for this with healthy doses of skepticism. Readers read letters for many reasons, including to learn and feel connected to the community.

Along with a systematic review of the letters, *Civic Hope* includes interview data from editorial page editors. Most (88.1%) letters get published. Those that are rejected lose out for predictable reasons: they are too long, libelous, filled with obscenity, or hard to follow (pp. 129–30). Editors admitted that letters come from “regulars,” meaning those who wrote all the time; “angry” commentators, those who had a bone to pick; and “people who are not happy with their government” (pp. 130–31). These are predictable, time-tested roles of such letters. Michael Schudson, among others, used missives to the *Boston Gazette* to help tell the story of how the notion of a “good” citizen in the United States came to be defined (*The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*, 1998, p. 28). However, the interviews with the editors about letter writers suggest there is something special—not ordinary—about those who write. Although they may live in places that make less news, they are not average Janes and Joes. They take their citizenship more seriously than other people, and they feel upset that others are not so inclined.

Although there is plenty of granular and interview data in the book for readers to like, Hart also uses a big data approach to bring the voices of letter writers to readers. Using a software he developed, Hart analyzes and maps the sound and word choices of letter writers, as opposed to politicians and journalists. Hart hypothesizes that letter writers might act as a harmonizer of sorts and find the middle ground between presidents (who are too optimistic) and journalists (who tend to be dour). “Writers weigh the good and the bad,” he explains, like “referees in a tug-of-war” (p. 147). This refereeing sometimes sounds like sermonizing, and sometimes it is more like fortune telling. The sermonizing, of course, can be irksome. Indeed, part of the pleasure of reading letters to the editor comes from the irritation they generate. Reading another’s “bad” opinion produces a sense of superiority in readers, Hart writes. But even this egoism comes with a benefit: letters to the editor work as a kind of “gentle spring rain” (p. 178) against the frenetic online process of networked news and social media commentary. Here, Hart may overestimate the power of letters to overcome internet chatter. He deplores the nature of online commentary and argues that the steps required in writing, addressing, mailing, editing, and then printing letters adds a deliberative solemnity to the process that cannot be ignored. What is less certain is how much longer readers will look for these letters or see them as different from the online comments Hart finds so distasteful.

As a whole, the book is a vital contribution to literatures in voter apathy and voter behavior in political communication and political science. If there is a true weakness in the book it is its strictly American focus. Except for a few mentions of international journalists, there is little of interest for scholars outside the United States. Even so, *Civic Hope* is an outstanding work of

empirical scholarship that deserves a place on every bookshelf.

Religious Freedom, LGBT Rights, and the Prospects for Common Ground. Edited by William N. Eskridge, Jr. and Robin Fretwell Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 542p. \$145.00 cloth, \$44.99 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592719004249

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In 2016 the US Commission on Civil Rights issued the report *Peaceful Coexistence: Reconciling Non-Discrimination Principles with Civil Liberties*. Despite the title, the commission seemed to argue that reconciliation was unlikely because, in the words of Obama-appointed chairman Martin Castro, “religious liberty” and “religious freedom” stood largely as “code words” for every form of bigotry and intolerance in the United States. Castro’s rather injudicious assertion is the jumping-off point for this collection of “thirty-five crisp, consciously accessible thought pieces” (p. 1) organized into nine parts on the prospects for common ground between religious freedom and LGBT rights in the United States since *Obergefell*. The clear majority of essays both seek for and claim to have found such ground. Although constitutional scholars and lawyers dominate the list of authors, among the book’s strong points is its inclusion of legislators, policy makers, and religious authorities as well. The volume strives for and largely accomplishes balance between the number and quality of pieces from each side in the debate. Its overall tone is measured, tolerant, and optimistic, clearly fulfilling the editors’ hope that “reconciliation” (p. 6) can be achieved in a period of considerable national division.

The volume covers many different arenas of conflict and potential cooperation. The issue of public accommodations dominates the discussion, but churches and religiously affiliated organizations in higher education, health care, and adoption services are all discussed. Several pieces recognize the similarity of abortion and euthanasia as issues to the legal, cultural, and political position of LGBT rights in today’s United States. Constitutional law frames the analysis. Although some writers give attention to politics, political philosophy, and ethics, the task of “balancing rights” to (or “balancing interests” in) liberty and equality takes center stage.

With a volume of this size, a built-in shortcoming is its inclusion of so many authors from so many diverse perspectives, tending toward a cacophony of voices that undermines the editors’ optimism in finding common ground. Several authors, such as Alan Brownstein, Douglas Laycock, Dennis P. Hollinger, Holly Hollman, and Robin Fretwell Wilson, explicitly invoke the concept of “human dignity” shared by advocates of both religious liberty and LGBT equality. Yet, even though both socially