

PARTICIPATING CITIZENS IN THE INDIVIDUALIST SOCIETY

By Everett Carl Ladd

That individualist America has been historically a nation of great collective energy confuses some observers. Aren't practitioners of individualism naturally social and political loners?

Alexis de Tocqueville, for one, didn't think that was their essential tendency in the US. He argued in *Democracy in America* that the strength of American individualism is—somewhat paradoxically—a prime source of the country's vigorous group life. A nation of self-confident and assertive individuals had produced a welter of associational activity, as people banded together to accomplish their many objectives.

"The political associations that exist in the United States," Tocqueville wrote [vol. 2, ch. 5], "are only a single feature in the midst of the immense assemblage of associations in that country. Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations....The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools....Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association."

Five years before he wrote the above, in the first volume of the *Democracy* (ch. 12), the young, brilliant French theorist had given the classic statement of the fact that—far from holding back collective energy and participation—American individualism was its very source: "In the United States associations are established to promote the public safety, commerce, industry, morality, and religion. *There is no end which the human will despairs of attaining through the combined power of individuals united into a society.*" (My

emphasis.)

For more than two centuries now, American democratic experience has been shaped by the powerful individualist currents swirling within it. Key among the effects is the exceptionally high level—by comparison to other real-world countries, though not, perhaps, to some theoretic ideal—of participation by millions of ordinary citizens.

In recent years there has been some drop-off in voting—admittedly, an important form of participation. But as we learn from data presented in this issue's

These findings attest to the persisting force of Tocqueville's brilliant insight, that the US is different—its citizenry more participatory because it is more individualist. In the largest sense, then, American democracy is alive and well, because the demos are vitally engaged.

Public Opinion and Demographic Report, the voting rate decline is a great exception in a larger story of high, and either stable or increased citizen engagement in civic affairs. The big study done in 1990 under the direction of Sidney Verba, Kay L. Schlozman, Henry R. Brady, and Norman H. Nie, showed once again a populace which is highly participatory in most forms of political activity (giving money to political organizations, contacting government officials, etc.) and even more so in non-political public affairs (from a vast variety of organizational memberships to charitable giving and volunteer action).¹

In the two articles which follow this one, Virginia Hodgkinson, and Helmut Anheier, Lester Salamon, and Edith Archambault, present important new find-

ings on volunteerism and charitable giving in the United States and in western Europe. These findings attest to the persisting force of Tocqueville's brilliant insight, that the US is different—its citizenry more participatory because it is more individualist. In the largest sense, then, American democracy is alive and well, because the *demos* are vitally engaged.

Nonetheless, there is great dissatisfaction among much of the US public with the performance of the principal institutions of the country's representative democracy. In the articles preceding this one, Burns Roper and James M. Burns offer differing interpretations of today's institutional "malaise." Both find it real and consequential; they simply differ as to its sources. In the center section data review, we bring together survey findings on the extent of the present unease.

My assessment of the historical record leads me to the conclusion that current dissatisfactions with the performance of our representative institutions parallel in intensity those in the Progressive era early in the century. The Progressives' frustration with unresponsive institutions—unresponsive to public wishes, that is—led them to push (successfully) for a host of "direct-democracy" reforms—most notably, referenda and direct primaries. The push for curbs such as balanced budget amendments and term limits are today's response to the same basic condition—democratic institutions which somehow don't seem to be doing our bidding.

Endnote:

¹Sidney Verba, Kay L. Schlozman, Henry R. Brady, and Norman H. Nie, "The Citizen Participation Project: Summary of Findings," a project supported by the National Science Foundation and the Spencer, Ford, and Hewlett Foundations, with survey work done in 1990 by the National Opinion Research Center.