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Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation and What We Can Do About It (Book Review)

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ent veneer of clinical stories to support his argument. I wanted more evidence (from research or Scripture) to boost the reader's confidence in the general applicability of Winter's points. Because of Winter's desire to make the book useful for study groups, topics are addressed rather superficially. For example, I wished that a biblically-based analysis of perfectionism were considered in far more depth. I wanted to know more about Winter's view of how sin is related to perfectionism, but sin is not mentioned until two-thirds of the way through the book and is not even listed in the subject index (and neither is the Fall, though "depravity" gets a single listing). Further, how is pride related to perfectionism? Is perfectionism the result of basic human fears about relationships and rejection and about one's identity and purpose in the world? Beyond the lack of theological depth, I wanted to know more about the relationships between perfectionism and depression, anger, and anxiety: does one of these cause the others? How effective are anti-anxiety drugs or anti-depressants in reducing unhealthy perfectionist thinking?

Review: *Democracy at Risk: how political choices undermine citizen participation and what we can do about it*, by Stephen Macedo, et al, Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2005. 228pp. Cloth \$44.95. Paper \$17.95. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor of Political Studies *emeritus*, University of Illinois at Springfield.

Macedo and his co-authors open with urgency, saying, "America is at risk. The risk comes not from some external threat but from disturbing internal trends: an erosion of the activities and capacities of citizenship" (1). Regrettably, this work fails to remedy the risk while offering some wrong directions.

The authorship of this work deserves particular attention. The study originated in the American Political Science Association's Committee on Civic Education and Engagement. The title page names Stephen Macedo as first author and then lists 18 co-authors alphabetically. This collective effort aims to test the proposition "that modern social science has useful insights into the state of democratic life and what might be done to improve it" (vii). The intention is unusual because the science-oriented ideology of the discipline typically eschews "improving" anything.

The authors have usefully catalogued hazard points in American life regarding the civic engagement they mean to promote. What is included in civic engagement? "[A]ny activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the policy" (6). The litany of activities is long: voting, campaigning, attending rallies, demonstrating, face-to-face talking, volunteering, and learning about public policies and processes just to name a few. To give this study scope and limits, the authors address three expansive areas: national elections, government at the local level, and association life.

About national elections the authors note a decline in

Because of the relative shallowness with which each topic is addressed, Winter's book may raise more questions than what it answers.

Despite its significant shortcomings, the book is not without some value. In identifying and labeling a cluster of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive patterns, Winter provides a new way of understanding the people around us. The book's most useful chapters provide insights into our own thinking and that of family, friends, and co-workers, and a study group discussion may foster additional self-insights. For example, maybe my meticulous separation of used office paper into several bins and categories of re-use is done less out of respect for God's creation than a biochemically-driven scrupulosity that was reinforced in childhood. Perfectionism is not always maladaptive, but cultural pressures for perfection can surely create psychological and social problems that we should be prepared to combat. Unfortunately, Winter's book may not give us enough to do so.

participation by citizens, not only in voting but also in the conventional foot soldier work of campaigning. Citizens have little contact with campaign organizations, and face-to-face engagement has declined. Young people are grievously uninformed, and much less than a majority of them are voters. The authors lament a decline in the media environment, especially the print media. The polarity of political competition also bothers the authors, as does the predictability of gerrymandered congressional elections.

Regarding the American metropolis, the authors decry the absence of ordinary citizen faces, often replaced by specialized spokesman with parochial interests. Instead of diverse integrating structures at the local level, there is spatial separation of rich and poor, whites and nonwhites, more educated and less educated. The authors condemn the Progressive reforms of the early 20th century, such as nonpartisan elections, council-manager governments, and off-year elections for engaging fewer voters than partisan elections do.

A rich mosaic of groups and organizations constitutes America's associational life. Charitable, religious, and labor unions receive particular attention. Workplace organizations, voluntary associations, and churches "are frequently schoolhouses for civic and political information and skill development" (120), or what has become known as "social capital." The good news is that volunteering and service in nonprofit organizations has grown during the last generation. The authors assert that the U.S. "possesses one

of the most robust nonprofit sectors in the world” (128). However, as nonprofits, they are legally inhibited from advocacy regarding public policies. The authors believe that such inhibitions should be abated to encourage nonprofits into legislative advocacy (149).

A surprising paucity of action plans accompanies the recommendations. The authors’ recapitulation of recommendations boils down to 45 specifics. A predictable bias favors liberalization -- simplify voter registration, lower barriers regarding immigrants and felons, lessen regulation of union organization, relax limits on issue advocacy by nonprofit social service organizations, broaden tax incentives for charitable contributions by people of modest means. They would enlarge the central government’s role -- fixing voting rights, facilitating voter registration, regulating nonprofits and multiplying opportunities and support for national service, elsewhere called “paid volunteerism.”

Reforms with meaningful political bite address redistricting congressional and legislative seats and attaching most of the electoral votes for president to election outcomes in congressional districts. Doubtless, partisan redistricting rules and practices in the states have created mostly safe seats and easy incumbency for members of Congress and state legislatures. If electoral competitiveness, political responsiveness, and institutional legitimacy are related, as I believe along with most political scientists, this matter begs to be addressed with change. The authors urge that “non-partisan commissions” take over such intensely partisan actions, but they offer no strategy to obtain such a change. If there is merit in redistributing presidential electoral votes to partisanly competitive congressional districts, that merit cannot accrue until gerrymandered congressional districts are reformed.

To revitalize local politics, the authors desire greater centralization of power in the metropolis. Their argument is this: trust metro-politanized governments to act more wisely than more numerous local governments. With scant evidence they argue that small governments harbor small and “parochial” minds. However, a convincing case for metropolitanization as the way to improve civic life remains unexplained.

They argue to reverse reforms from a century ago that augmented executive authority, clarified executive accountability, and dampened party politics in local elections. For greater voter turnout in local elections, the authors target council-manager governments, at-large council elections, and nonpartisan electoral rules of the game. It is curious that today’s political scientists want local politics back in the hands of party professionals. Ironically, political scientists led reforms to free local governments from irresponsible party machines during the Progressive era.

The authors cavalierly treat churches and religious nonprofits. Churches are commended for doing “more to push their members into civic life than to pull them out of it” (144), African-American and Latino churches receive

kudos for enabling active citizenship, and organizations that serve the disadvantaged receive praise. But when noting public policy about “charitable choice,” the beneficial things churches and religious organizations do are suddenly anathematized:

We believe that policy makers can fashion appropriate policies that allow for broader participation of faith-based nonprofits in social service delivery, while not engaging in affirmative action for faith-based organizations. The efforts of government grantmakers to aggressively pursue and assist religious groups, but not others, are ill-conceived, as they tilt what should be a level playing field.

Compare this condemnation to language by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services describing charitable choice (www.hhs.gov/fbci/choice.html, accessed by the author on 3-6-06):

Charitable Choice is a legislative provision designed to remove unnecessary barriers to the receipt of certain federal funds by faith-based organizations. The provision prohibits states from discriminating against religious organizations when choosing providers under certain federal grant programs.

How can civic engagement advocates so denigrate positive cooperation between governments and faith-based groups that extend mercy to achieve public sector ends? They can do so by a total disregard of political-science literature that documents accomplishments in social service by faith-committed workers and organizations. (See, for example, Stephen V. Monsma. *Putting Faith in Partnerships: Welfare-to-Work in Four Cities*. University of Michigan Press, 2004. See also *When Sacred and Secular Mix: Religious Nonprofit Organizations and Public Money*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1996.)

Despite a chapter titled “Toward a Political Science of Citizenship,” the authors spotlight civic engagement, ignoring the concept of citizenship. However, a basic American government text is appropriately explicit: “in a constitutional democracy, citizenship is an *office*, and like other offices, it carries certain powers and responsibilities” (Burns and Peltason et al. *Government by the People*, 20th ed. Parson, Prentice-Hall, 2004, 428). Those “powers” have much to do with civic engagement, including voting and advocating. The “responsibilities” take expression in accommodation to the rule of law as constitutionally implemented.

By ignoring the responsibilities of citizenship, the authors urge restoration of voting rights to felons. Their rationale is that high incarceration rates among subgroups, notably African-Americans, exacerbate “race related inequalities that stem from income and education.” Apparently society is to blame for these high incarceration rates. Therefore society should make amends by entitling felons to voting rights. The authors suggest nothing about felons earning back the rights and privileges of citizenship with law-abiding behavior. Nor do they consider restorative justice and accountability to victims.

The authors mostly overlook the vitalizing functions of American economic enterprises. Making a living teaches political values. Pocketbook interests shape political behavior. Our vibrant economy, with nearly full employment, prompts most political participation. Moreover, economic productiveness sustains the purpose-driven groups in society, mostly nonprofits and certainly the churches, with financial contributions. Ministries that express the spiritual fruit of love effectually serve, in face-to-face fashion, the needs of society's poorest and most deprived. Purpose-driven organizations produce hope and new direction for changed lives, including motive power for civic participation. Ironically, when pressed to consider civic virtue as a matter of moral concern, contemporary political scientists must cast back to Plato and Aristotle to acknowledge "the importance of moral education as a prelude to political activity" (171). But their nihilism supplies little consensus about what positive moral education is.

Perhaps it is no surprise that political scientists turn too easily toward the central government for solutions to civic problems. Regrettably, their most disquieting proposal follows their reflection on benefits from associations and nonprofits. They dare to suggest that society pays too high a price for such benefits. How? By tax deductions for

contributors to such groups. Consider this vexed comparison:

While tax breaks for charitable giving reduce the federal government's ability to support large-scale and inclusive programs like the G.I. Bill and Social Security, they may also undermine its capacity to promote important Aspects of national citizenship (154).

In short, reduce (eliminate?) deductions from individual income taxes, thus choking off contributions to philanthropic groups. The result? The central government taxes more income. Then trust the central government to engage in "large scale and inclusive programs," thereby promoting national citizenship.

Unable to formulate a prophetic vision for contemporary democratic life in America, leading political scientists fail to speak truth to power coherently. If our democracy is at risk, the insights of the authors will at best stimulate modest amelioration; at worst, they will undermine the salt and light poured into American life by its faith-based organizations and their supporters. Lacking a metaphysical ontology, the authors compel little attention. Perhaps a new vision for civic life ought to come from a Christian perspective.