

Contemporary Affairs

VOICE AND EQUALITY:

Civic Voluntarism in American Politics.

By Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady.

Harvard Univ. Press. 662 pp. \$39.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper

Is American citizenship in crisis? Yes, say most pundits, not to mention most scholars of contemporary political life. A more nuanced reply appears in this comprehensive study, based on a massive survey of more than 15,000 Americans.

Having conducted their investigation at the end of the 1980s, a decade fraught with fractious single-issue politics and virulent partisan combat, political scientists Verba, Schlozman, and Brady report evidence that somewhat contradicts the stereotype of mounting public cynicism toward political institutions. Indeed, they find that voluntary participation is prevalent; that political activity aims (as much as possible) at the "common good"; and that the decline of voting is not matched by an erosion of more active forms of engagement, such as contacting officials on policy matters and giving money to campaigns.

Admittedly, these findings support the commonplace observation that political parties are getting weaker, interest groups stronger. Yet the authors make the more interesting point that political parties and interest groups are also changing. As they note, "Nationalization and professionalization have redefined the role of the citizen activist as, increasingly, a writer of checks and letters."

Verba and his colleagues find this change troubling. The reduction of civic voluntarism to insubstantial "check book" politics neither cultivates social responsibility nor leaves "activists feeling satisfied." It also gives disproportionate influence to those bankrolling the new pressure groups. Back in the 1960s, California Assembly Speaker Jesse Unruh remarked that "money is the mother's milk of politics." With the decline of other forms of political participation (such as community-based organizations) comes the prospect of even less solid nourishment for racial minorities and other economically disadvantaged groups. Such "representation distortion" means greater activism among the haves,

greater apathy among the have-nots.

Thus, *Voice and Equality* presents a challenging paradox. On the one hand, the discourse of class is becoming less salient—in a political regime that has never been heavily imbued with the rhetoric of economic inequality. On the other, the state of political participation in America is now such that "class matters profoundly."

About the causes and consequences of this paradox, the reader is left to speculate. One key to understanding the puzzle might be the decline of progressivism. Born of a moral crusade against economic and political injustice at the turn of the century, progressivism had by the 1970s degenerated into a politics of entitlement that corroded political associations and collective responsibility. In the wake of this "rights revolution," religious institutions have become more pivotal in representing the rank and file's moral concerns.

Yet as *Voice and Equality* reveals, religiosity no longer animates progressive principles. Rather, the authors note, "the center of gravity of the religious agenda in politics currently is a conservative concern with social issues, with a particular focus on the advocacy of pro-life views on abortion." However important, this exclusive focus on abortion draws religiously oriented activists away from other, equally grave issues. As concerned as Americans are about abortion, they are just as worried about the moral decay they perceive in their children's schools, their places of work, and their governing institutions. When it comes to representing and addressing these abiding concerns, neither rights-based groups nor religious associations provide an adequate substitute for genuine civic attachment—what Tocqueville called "the art of *political* association."

—Sidney M. Milkis

UNCOMMON GROUND:

Toward Reinventing Nature.

Edited by William Cronon.

Norton. 561 pp. \$29.95

Pristine, balanced, wild. These are some of the terms we apply to the natural world. Yet there is nothing *natural* about our use of such terms, according to the 14 essays col-