

CURRENT BOOKS

How Are We Doing?

THE GOOD CITIZEN:

A History of American Civic Life.

By Michael Schudson. Free Press. 390 pp. \$27.50

by Michael Barone

You don't have to look hard to find complaints about the decline of American civic life. Voter turnout is down; many voluntary organizations have lost members; people bowl alone rather than in leagues. But in *The Good Citizen*, sociologist Michael Schudson argues that things may not be all that bad. Drawing on a deep and wide-ranging knowledge of American history, he shows that there was never a golden age of civic participation. In his view, our current civic life is much healthier than the critics suggest.

Certainly it is much different. Adopting a historical division similar to that of Robert Wiebe in *Self-Rule* (1995) and Bruce Ackerman in *We the People: Foundations* (1991), Schudson describes a politics of deference in the colonial and federal periods, a politics of parties from the Jacksonian years until the turn of the century, a politics of progressive reforms from 1900 to about 1960, and a politics of rights in the years since. Each style of politics was transformed, fairly abruptly as such things go, by changes in the character of the country, by changes in the law, and (though Schudson does not emphasize this) by responses to developments in Europe.

Colonial Americans, though "renegade, individualistic, and distrustful of authority," practiced a politics of deference to local notables that was much like the politics of 18th-century Britain. Voters queued up at local courthouses and, with the higher born speaking first, declared their choices before one and all. American deference, however, had its limits. Members of local elites were not guaranteed election, for voters, judging on the basis of character, presumably

rejected the incompetent and the eccentric or deterred them from standing. Some were seen as more able than others; thus George Washington was selected as colonial commander in chief in 1775, though not distinguished by primogeniture (he was the second son of a second marriage) or wealth (many elite Virginians were richer) or seniority (he was 43).

The American Revolution, writes Schudson, marked "the beginning of the end of deference." The party as a mass organization got its start in the 1790s, a product of divisions over the French Revolution and the war between France and Britain. But the first party system withered as the Federalists faded from the scene. Change came in the 1820s and 1830s: extension of the vote from male property owners (already a large group) to all adult males, direct election of presidential electors, the organization of mass parties, an efflorescence of the voluntary associations Alexis de Tocqueville described in the 1830s, and the proliferation of elective offices and patronage jobs to the point that one in five voters in the late 19th century had an economic interest in election results. Parties staged torchlight parades, marched voters to the polls (often with a cash incentive), provided ballots (the government didn't print ballots at the time), and held quadrennial national conventions.

The Civil War years excepted, this was still an era of minimalist government, yet voter turnout as a percentage of eligibles—accepted by Schudson, as by so many others, as the prime indicator of citizen involvement—reached historic highs. But citizen involvement, as the author points out, was anything but an exercise

of thoughtful ratiocination. Politics was emotional; attachment to parties exceeded rational bounds; pecuniary interest was often a motivation for political activity. In an entr'acte chapter, Schudson looks at the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, so often held up as an example of high citizen involvement. He concedes that the speakers were men of high intellect who at times presented serious moral and political arguments with great sophistication. But more often, he notes, they advanced or attempted to refute crude conspiracy theories, made coarse jokes (often racist, in Douglas's case), and attacked each other's character as bluntly as any 1990s negative ad. The seven debates (Lincoln had proposed 50!) attracted huge crowds, but most people probably came for entertainment or to cheer on their candidate and heckle the opposition.

By the 1890s, elites were increasingly troubled by this unruly and seemingly irrational politics. They were engaged in what Robert Wiebe called "the search for order," creating orderly bureaucratic government and corporations in place of patronage politics and buccaneer businesses. In the process, voters were disenfranchised—most notably blacks in the South, but also aliens in most states and illiterate people in many. States took over the task of printing ballots, and the secret ballot was instituted. The number of elective offices was reduced, and elections were made nonpartisan in many municipalities. Many patronage jobs were eliminated and civil service laws instituted. Voting was transformed "from a social duty to a private right."

All this was done in the name of making politics more rational and less emotional. Another motive, unmentioned by Schudson, may have been a fear that the American masses, augmented by recent immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, might do what the European masses seemed on the brink of doing: vote

for socialists or religious-ethnic parties. The gloomy elites, traumatized by the horrors of World War I and the seeming irrationality of the Versailles peace process, doubted that a mass electorate could ever make intelligent choices—this was the theme of Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922).

This new politics of "the informed citizen" had the effect of *reducing* citizen involvement as measured by voter turnout. After peaking in the 1890s, turnout as a percentage of eligibles fell through most of the 20th century. It increased in the 1940s and 1950s, as the New Deal gave more Americans a pecuniary interest in government decisions and as decisions on war



The County Election, mezzotint by John Sartain after the painting by George Caleb Bingham

and peace made government supremely important in many people's lives. The new peak was reached in 1960, though it was still below the turnout of 1908, much less 1896. Even in 1960, elites lamented that voters were behaving irrationally—basing their choices on the candidates' TV performances in the Kennedy-Nixon debates rather than their ability or stances. Schudson takes a sunnier view, pointing out that both candidates set out their positions in clear language. The author makes the refreshingly original argument that serious political ideas can be presented briefly and comprehensibly, citing the Gettysburg Address and *Federalist* 10. To that list I would add many (not all) political cartoons and 30-second TV spots.

Turnout has dropped since 1960, to

the consternation of many. Schudson is less troubled. He believes we live in an era of rights-oriented politics, in which judges and other unelected arbiters often wield more power than elected officials. He sees its beginning in Justice Harlan Stone's famous footnote 4 in *United States v. Carolene Products* (1937). The Supreme Court declined (and still declines) to say that all the guarantees of the Bill of Rights bind state governments as firmly as the federal government. But Stone set forth three situations in which courts should closely scrutinize laws passed by legislatures: when the laws seem to violate a constitutional provision, when they restrict the political process itself, and when they are directed at religious, national, or racial minorities.

The *Carolene Products* footnote was the seed whose fruit includes *Brown v. Board of Education* and other decisions outlawing racial segregation, as well as the one-person-one-vote redistricting decisions. These, Schudson argues, in turn helped inspire movements for women's rights, welfare rights, workplace rights (of much more importance today than unions, which represent only 10 percent of private-sector workers), abortion rights, and gay rights. To this list he adds the almost unanimously supported laws that marked the end of the baby boom and the "privileging" (as many would have it) of the two-parent family: the withdrawal of preferred treatment for married couples in the income tax law in 1969, and the early-1970s stampede to no-fault divorce (the first such law was signed by Governor Ronald Reagan). Much of this could have been written in the 1970s and 1980s, and indeed was written in Daniel Yankelevich's book *New Rules* (1981).

While conceding that rights consciousness "incurs real social costs" and "burdens institutional capacities," the author seems to pass lightly over some major shifts in American politics. Rights-based law is inherently elitist and undemocratic and centralized. It encourages political passivity and nonvoting, and it sets one rule for a diverse nation. But the great movement of American society over the last 30 years has been away from centralization and

toward decentralization. In many important ways, today's postindustrial America more closely resembles the preindustrial America that Tocqueville described—decentralized, individualistic, culturally varied—than the industrial America in which most of us grew up—dominated by big government, big business, and big labor; culturally (mostly) uniform.

Rights-based lawgivers have used the judiciary and the federal government to impose policies favored by university-trained elites. But that control has been fraying as ordinary people have begun to question the purported expertise of the elites. We can see the results today, as elite policies on welfare, education, crime, and gun control are being challenged, often clumsily but with increasing success, by local citizens.

"Has the rise of rights-based liberalism in America established a democratic home but failed to educate anyone fit to inhabit it?" Schudson asks. "My own sense is that the rise of the rights-regarding citizen has done more to enhance democracy than to endanger it." But much of that democratic action—more than he seems to realize—is devoted to destroying the rights-based policies of national liberal elites. One wonders whether an author who chides us for having only "a lagging welfare state" and criticizes our "absurd inequalities of wealth" entirely approves of the results.

Schudson is on firmer and less partisan ground when he tries to calm those alarmed by low voter turnout. He reminds us that turnout was low in the colonial and federal eras, highest in the emotion-ridden era of party politics, and then declined with the onset of progressive policies championed by most bemoaners of low turnout. The fact is that turnout has been relatively level since the sharp drops between the presidential elections of 1968 and 1972 and the off-year elections of 1970 and 1974. That period of abrupt decline coincided with enactment of a constitutional amendment entitling 18-year-olds to vote, which lowered turnout significantly (because relatively few people aged 18 to 20 vote) but which does not account for the total decline. It also coincided

with the end of the relatively egalitarian distribution of income that prevailed from 1947 to 1973, with the onset of inflation and the low economic growth of the years 1973–82, with the cultural revolution that produced no-fault divorce, and with the growing emphasis on abortion and other noneconomic issues. It coincided, in other words, with the change from an industrial America dominated by big government, big business, and big labor to a postindustrial America that is more decentralized, more culturally various, more Tocquevillian. And a Tocquevillian America without the strong parties of the Jackson era does not seem to produce the high turnouts of the 1830s.

Which may not be so bad. “Citizens can be monitorial rather than informed,” Schudson argues. In a time when war does not rage and economic survival is not threatened, sensible people can go about their business just keeping a weather eye out for political trouble. In-depth news about politics and government is available, and in increasingly diverse forms, but citizens are free to consult it only when they need it (television news ratings spiked upward with the onset of the Persian Gulf

War). It is easy to vote in America—far easier than it was 35 years ago, when states required up to two years’ residency for voters and almost half of all blacks were barred from the polling places. Registering to vote today is as simple as getting a driver’s license—indeed, one can register while getting a driver’s license. How many Americans sit at home unable to go anywhere because they haven’t had a chance to get to the motor vehicle bureau?

Yet as painless as voting is, half of all Americans don’t bother. Is there any reason to believe that the political process would be improved by the votes of people so little interested in civic life? Those decrying low turnout must assume there is. Not so Schudson. “Monitorial citizens,” he writes, “have no more virtue than citizens of the past—but not less, either.” Democracy will never be perfect and the citizenry can always stand improvement, but Schudson argues persuasively that we have less to bemoan than many think.

> MICHAEL BARONE is Washington Bureau Chief of Reader’s Digest, coauthor of *The Almanac of American Politics* (1998), and author of *Our Country: The Shaping of America from Roosevelt to Reagan* (1992).

Chronicler of a Dying World

ANTON CHEKHOV:
A Life.

By Donald Rayfield. Henry Holt. 674 pp. \$35

CHEKHOV:
The Hidden Ground.

By Philip Callow. Ivan R. Dee. 428 pp. \$30

by Clive Davis

At the end of the 1880s, after he had already enjoyed success with his short stories and his first full-length play, *Ivanov*, Anton Chekhov submitted a new work for the stage, *The Wood Demon*. Back came an abruptly frank rejection from the actor-manager Alexander Lensky: “I will say only one thing: write tales. You refer scornfully to the stage and to dramatic form. You esteem them too little to write a play.” Although the play was eventually

taken up by another company—Chekhov was too desperate for a 500-ruble advance to refuse the offer—the clumsy production was comprehensively ridiculed and closed after just three performances. Bruised by the entire experience, Chekhov refused to allow *The Wood Demon* to be published.

But this is not the usual tale of a strong-willed genius thwarted by hacks and philistines. As the English novelist and poet Philip Callow records in his thoughtful