

## *The Democracy Deficit*

“Voice and Inequality: The Transformation of American Civic Democracy” by Theda Skocpol,  
in *Perspectives on Politics* (March 2004), American Political Science Assn.,  
1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

When it comes to the making of government policy, the decades-long shift in America’s civic life from large, broad-based membership organizations to professionally run advocacy groups has had definite benefits: It has brought to the fore fresh voices (female, minority) and expertise and raised important issues. But, argues Skocpol, director of Harvard University’s Center for American Political Studies, it has also marginalized masses of Americans and caused their interests to be represented less well.

This unfortunate result can be seen in the contrasting fates of the GI Bill of 1944,

which provided educational benefits and other entitlements to veterans, and the proposal for universal health insurance put forward by the Clinton administration during 1993–94. Both measures were popular with the public, but only the first became law. The American Legion, a fellowship federation with a nationwide network of chapters, drafted, lobbied for, and helped to implement the GI Bill, “one of the most generous and inclusive federal social programs ever enacted.” But in the case of the Clinton proposal, “highly specialized professional and advocacy associations influenced the drafting of the legislation.” They

EXCERPT

### *Mugging Jefferson*

*The discrediting of the Enlightenment, the debunking of great white men, intellectual fortune hunting—all play a part, but these causes cannot explain why Thomas Jefferson has become the greatest target in the politicized history of recent times. I understand that the more greatly admired a figure is, the more likely he or she is to come under attack; but the American pastime of scandalmongering and idol crushing has not extended itself as viciously to Washington or Franklin or the Roosevelts, let alone to Lincoln. Why Jefferson?*

*By his best examples and his worst, he still eats at American consciences. Among the founders of this democracy, Washington was its father and Madison was its mind, but Jefferson was its conscience. That he could not live up to his own high principles, at Monticello as well as in the President’s House, is not the same as saying that he betrayed those principles, or that the principles themselves embodied some hidden evil. Failure, or hypocrisy, always attends high ideals. The imperfection of the morally ambitious is not surprising; it is only the most rudimentary information about how the moral life is actually lived.*

*Jefferson articulated an egalitarian standard that neither he nor the early Republic matched, and that the nation is still struggling to match. He is, in other words, an abiding torment. The progenitor of American egalitarianism, he is the last messenger of the bad news about ourselves, the stubborn monitor of our truanancies, the hard if human teacher against whom we sin, collectively and individually. His is a stringent and reproaching legacy. Who would not wish to have it complicated or qualified or (mis)interpreted out of its stringency and its reproach? I tremble for my country when I reflect that Jefferson is right.*

—Sean Wilentz, a historian at Princeton University, in *The New Republic* (March 29, 2004).

made it “far too complex” for ordinary understanding—and thereby sealed its doom.

According to Skocpol, the great transformation in American civic life between the 1960s and the 1990s, often attributed chiefly to Americans’ individual choices, was crucially brought about by “elite, well-educated Americans.” The Vietnam War, opposed by the “highly educated” young, drove a wedge between the generations; most traditional fellowship organizations (“racially exclusive and gender-segregated”) were hit by the civil rights and feminist “revolutions”; and, as women came to do more paid work, they had less time for volunteer activities.

Distrustful of bureaucratic, majority-rule institutions, “rights” activists created liberal advocacy groups—among them, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, founded in 1960; the National Organization for Women, founded in 1966; the Women’s Equity Action League, founded in 1968; and the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (now called NARAL), launched in 1973. The formation of such groups in the 1960s and 1970s led to the rise in the

1980s of opposing conservative groups and business associations.

Instead of raising money from a broad array of members who pay modest dues, advocacy groups seek support from foundations and through computerized direct-mail appeals to affluent adherents, who are “heavily skewed toward the highly educated upper-middle class.” The groups’ leaders have “little incentive to engage in mass mobilization” or to develop state and local chapters. Their lives are “more socially enclosed” than were those of their counterparts of previous generations, who tended to regard themselves as “trustees of community.”

As fellowship federations, unions, and farm groups fade in importance, says Skocpol, the opportunity is being lost for people in blue-collar and lower-level white-collar occupations to learn civic skills and political knowledge and, in some cases, to move into leadership positions at the district, state, or national level. Today’s advocacy groups “are not very likely to entice masses of Americans indirectly into democratic politics.” Or, as the botched Clinton health plan demonstrated, to represent well their values and interests.

## *Civic Slackers?*

“Civic Education and Political Participation” by William A. Galston, in *PS* (April 2004), American Political Science Assn., 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036–1206.

We all know that the younger generation is falling down on the job of citizenship: not voting, not reading newspapers, not caring what the government does. What slackers—so unlike us! Yet there’s another side to the story, writes Galston, a professor of civic engagement at the University of Maryland, College Park.

“Today’s young people are patriotic, tolerant, and compassionate. They believe in America’s principles and in the American dream. They adeptly navigate our nation’s increasing diversity.” Volunteering for community service is on the rise (though it drops off when youths get paying jobs in their mid-twenties). But the volunteering doesn’t seem to lead to a broader civic engagement. The young tend to see volunteering as an alter-

native to political participation, which they distrust. One reason for this is simple ignorance. “They understand why it matters to feed a hungry person at a soup kitchen; they do not understand why it matters where government sets eligibility levels for food stamps,” says Galston.

He faults the schools. A 1998 national test showed that 35 percent of high school seniors had virtually no civic knowledge, and 39 percent met only a “basic” standard. “Most high school civic education today comprises only a single government course, compared [with] the three courses in civics, democracy, and government that were common until the 1960s.” Only half the states have “even partially specified a required core of civic knowledge.”