

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.”

Recent research indicates that thoughtfully designed civic education efforts in schools can be effective. The big obstacle to their succeeding may be that adults disagree about “the kind of citizenship they want our schools to foster.” Should education emphasize loyalty to existing institutions or criticism of them, national unity or demographic and ideological diversity? Galston is hopeful that there’s enough flexibility in America’s radically decentralized education system to accommodate a variety of views.



Civics lessons were once a staple of American classrooms.

What Ails the States

“State Government Finances: World War II to the Current Crises” by Thomas A. Garrett and Gary A. Wagner, in *Review* (March–April 2004), Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Research Division, P.O. Box 442, St. Louis, Mo. 63166–0442.

Feverish California, running an estimated \$17.5 billion deficit last year, may have been the sickest state in the Union, but it was hardly the only patient in the fiscal ward—during what was probably the worst year for state budgets since World War II. And this year isn’t expected to be much better. How did so many states fall into this lamentable condition? Short answer: by cutting taxes when the going was good. But according to economists Garrett, of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, and Wagner, of Duquesne University, simply hiking taxes again as a one-time quick fix is no real cure.

Over the past half-century, states have become much more dependent on the personal income tax and the general sales tax, both of which are very responsive to the boom-and-bust business cycle. By 2001, income taxes supplied about 37 percent of states’ revenue, up from only 9 percent in the early 1950s. Over the same period, revenue from general sales taxes increased from 22 percent to about 32 percent. So, during the boom years of the 1990s, states’ coffers

filled with revenue, and many governors had the pleasant task of announcing budget surpluses—and huge tax cuts, mostly in the rates on personal and corporate income. Then came the stock market collapse, and the recession that began in March 2001.

“Over the past decade,” say the authors, “state budgets have been under considerable pressure from rapidly rising Medicaid expenditures, unfunded federal mandates in the area of health and human services, and a growing prison population.” Roughly half the states have made or are making drastic cuts in spending on education, Medicaid, and corrections. But fear of voters’ opposition has kept all but a few states from raising taxes significantly.

Inevitably, an economic rebound will restore fiscal health to the states, at least until the next bust. But the authors doubt that the basic problem—the states’ increasing dependence on taxes tied to the business cycle and their refusal to save enough for the inevitable rainy day—will change, so long-term fiscal solvency remains only a dream.