The Public Sphere and Its Problems: Bringing the State (Back) In

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MICHAEL SCHUDSON*

The sorry state of American citizenship is widely and fervently noted by moralists and critics on the left, right, and center. We are regularly reminded how few Americans vote, how few can name their Congressional representatives, how few take an active interest in political affairs, and how self-centered or self-interested their engagement is even when they do become active (the "not in my backyard" syndrome). Survey research has documented people's declining trust in leading social institutions over the past thirty years. Voter turnout has dropped in the same period. All of this is regularly cited in both popular and professional literature as evidence of a political, even spiritual, decline in American life.

Critics manifest less agreement, and less specificity, in declaring just when and where a better era of political health existed or what happened to it. If there has been a decline of what has been called "the public sphere," when did it begin and to what can it be attributed? Answers vary enormously. Some critics blame a declining seriousness of the news media, abetted particularly by television. Political scientists typically pay less attention to the media as a culprit and more attention to changes in political institutions, especially the weakening of the political party, as the primary agency for mobilizing political interest among citizens. To read some contemporary political science, one would scarcely know that political reformers for a century have taken parties to be a barrier to democracy rather than its staunchest ally. Still other observers point to the declining test scores of American students, the erosion of academic standards in the 1960s and since, or to the seductions of affluence spurred by a consumer society.

I will not confront each of these explanations here because the diagnosis of decline they seek to explain is in the first place not correct. Does the historical record demonstrate, over the short term or the long term, a decline of citizenly virtues in the

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United States? I think not. Is contemporary political discourse uniquely impoverished in its focus on personalities rather than issues in elections? No. In fact, in the late eighteenth century elites urged voters to vote on the basis of the candidates’ characters, not on the basis of particular issues or interests. What is today decried was in the colonial and early national era taken to be ideal.

Or do Americans fail to exercise their right to vote more than ever before? No. Voter turnout was as low or lower in the period 1790-1820, in the 1920s, and even in the much idealized New England town meetings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Or has the quality of political debate deteriorated? Why don’t our columnists write like James Madison in The Federalist Papers and why don’t our politicians rise to rhetorical heights like Lincoln and Douglas? Without denying the extraordinary character of The Federalist Papers, it is worth recalling that their anticipated readers were elites and that political influence was expected to trickle down. Without denying the importance of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, recall that Lincoln and Douglas misrepresented each other’s positions outrageously, that the debates were far from deathless prose or even fair-minded argument, and that in any event they were an exceptional rather than ordinary exercise of political argument for their day.¹

My primary concern here, however, is not with the historical errors in the diagnosis of decline but with conceptual errors in contemporary diagnoses of political democracy. Too much contemporary criticism speaks as if popular democracy were something that springs up naturally and authentically from “grass roots” without intervention or shaping by political structures or institutions. The state, in this familiar rhetoric, can only infringe on free expression or, at best, through the judicial system, protect people’s expression from the state itself. I want to suggest, to the contrary, that political institutions are necessary constituents of public opinion and popular voice.

I will couch this argument in terms of the concept of the “public sphere,” a notion widely debated in some intellectual circles (and practically unknown in others). The “public sphere” refers not to a space as such but to a set of activities that constitutes a democratic society’s self-reflection and self-governance. In a public sphere, private persons come together to discuss,

deliberate, and decide public questions. In a modern nation-state, this is rarely done in the form of direct democracy or meetings of the whole but as a set of exercises in which persons are elected to make decisions for the people they represent, instructed or guided by their constituents' interests and opinions and constrained by terms of office that make their tenure subject to voters' approval in the future. The public sphere also includes private associations and institutions not necessarily oriented toward electoral politics, but that create public opinion which may well influence elections, elected representatives, or other elected and unelected public leaders. This notion of a public sphere, related to Aristotle's view of the "polis" as distinct from economy and family, and elaborated in different ways by Tocqueville, Dewey, and Arendt, bears no relation to the distinction in liberal society between government and private enterprise or between the "public sector" and the "private sector." This is the most familiar distinction in public policy analysis, but it is not my subject here. My concern is not the reach of the state, but the content of citizenship.  

In discussing the public sphere in these terms, I differ in one vital respect from the use of the term as Jurgen Habermas has developed it and as many others, influenced or inspired by him, have come to use it. Frequently, the "public sphere" has come to be almost synonymous with "civil society;" that is, those institutions, spaces, and forums not a part of "private life" (the family), a part of the state as such, or a part of the economy. Civil society consists of all those intermediate institutions between the state and private persons — the church, the media, the political parties, and voluntary associations of all sorts, in which and through which people from different private worlds come together to deliberate about public issues. Civil society is not the whole of "the social" or the "sociocultural lifeworld" but only those "structures of socialization, association, and organized forms of communication of the lifeworld to the extent that these are institutionalized or are in the process of being institutionalized."  


3. Andrew Arato & Jean L. Cohen, Civil Society and Political Theory at x (1992). Arato and Cohen also speak of civil society as "a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication." Id. at ix. I omit the family from my understanding of the "public sphere" or "civil society" not because it is unconnected to political life but because it is not the
The emergence of a public sphere is then understood as the growth of those institutions and spaces outside the state apparatus where people come together to talk of common concerns in ways that ultimately shape opinion and may influence public policy. While in European thought the notion of civil society has one set of intellectual roots going back to Hegel, in the American case the concept (not the term) is generally associated with the insights of Alexis de Tocqueville. Civil society is what Tocqueville marveled at in the United States of the 1830s, the proliferation of voluntary associations of tremendous number and variety, all contributing to a frenetic and voluble public life.

I will argue, in six overlapping points, that government must be understood as a part of a public sphere and not as a separate dimension of social life. I do not aim to replace a sociologically-centered causal theory with a state-centered one. I recognize, as Victor Perez-Diaz has argued, that there is an "ebb and flow of the state tide." There may be good reasons, as Perez-Diaz suggests, to single out for analytic purposes what he calls "civil society two," the social institutions of the public sphere separate from and unsupervised by state power. But I want to suggest that, at least for liberal societies, it is important to see the place of the state in the construction of civil society and the public sphere. I think it is important to examine not only how people make their voices effective in bringing issues before the public but how governmental institutions help to form the "voice" of citizens in the first place.

I. GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURE HELPS DETERMINE CIVIL SOCIETY STRUCTURE AND THE CHARACTER OF A PEOPLE

Governing structures do not exist only as institutional devices of decision-making but rather as cultural forms that characterize and shape social habits just as vitally as any other part of the symbolic and social world of a given people. You may have a governmental structure without mass-based political parties, as did the United States in its first decades, but that structure gives shape to the parties that arise. You may have legislative deliberations without public access or political reporting, as colonial forum in which private persons from different worlds come together to discuss public issues — even though it is often the primary arena in which private persons, trying to construct a common world, discuss public issues. It is an incubator of political attitudes, not only for children but for adults, but it is not generally the association through which attitudes are actualized in public.

assemblies and the Constitutional Convention did, but you cannot easily have public access and political reporting without a governmental structure and political culture to authorize them. The presence of representative governmental institutions engenders public spaces, and the presence of particular forms of representation will give rise to particular types of public space. John Adams, for instance, argued that the peculiar character of the American polity, rather than abstract notions of liberty in general, required special provisions for a free press. Writing to Massachusetts Chief Justice William Cushing in 1789, Adams takes up the question of whether truth is adequate as a defense against libel. In England, he suggests, it is not an acceptable defense—but in America a different resolution to the question may be required:

[I]t is a serious Question whether our Constitution is not at present so different as to render the innovation necessary? Our chief magistrates and Senators &c are annually eligible by the people. How are their characters and conduct to be known to their constituents but by the press? If the press is stopped and the people kept in Ignorance we had much better have the first magistrate and Senators hereditary.\(^5\)

Not republicanism in the abstract but annual elections specifically require an informed citizenry and, hence, a free press, and therefore one that should be able to repair to truth as a defense against libel.

To take another example, since 1790, Congressmen in Washington began to print circular letters to their constituents to inform them about the work of the Congress and, not incidentally, to present themselves in the best possible light, especially just before elections. But whatever the motives may have been, this was a useful form of communication for a far-flung citizenry. Not all Congressmen engaged in this practice. One factor, among several, that seems to distinguish which Congressmen sent such letters is whether they were elected by district or at-large. While today all states elect Congressmen by district, in the early 1800s a number of states voted at-large; not surprisingly, no Congressmen in those states employed the circular letter.\(^6\) The capacity of the public, then, organized in voluntary associations of various kinds and engaged through the press and other public forums with questions of common concern, to influence govern-

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mental decisions cannot be dissociated from the structure of government itself as a public forum.

Habermas writes that citizens act as a public "when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion." This is a normative ideal. But there is no such situation. There is no free-form discussion, no functioning debate that does not operate within a normative structure accepted as binding. Indeed, for serious consideration of matters of general interest in a conversation or a parliament, explicit or implicit ground rules, written or taken for granted, must be operating. No playing field is ultimately even; if it is evened out in one dimension it necessarily becomes uneven in another.

The democratic-ness, representative-ness, and deliberativeness of governmental bodies themselves are not only a constituent of public-ness and an element in the shape and constitution of a public sphere. It is also true that the character of government is a defining feature and central causal agent in the establishment of society more broadly conceived.

The distinguishing characteristic of the society known as the United States of America is the fact that it is a democratic culture dedicated to a self-government in which all are technically involved and in which this interest is demonstrably central to the self-identification of the people. It can be used as the hallmark of the culture. Eighteenth century thinkers took this to be a general rule of human affairs, as John Adams did in writing, "It is the form of Government which gives the decisive Colour to the Manners of the People, more than any other Thing." Eighteenth century thought generally did not distinguish "society" from government. In the United States, where the government in a sense preceded and made possible an "American" society, the primacy of the political was especially plain. But what was obvious then has been hidden to modern social thinkers — both Marxists, who have taken political institutions to be "superstructure," and struc-

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tural-functionalists, who see government as one differentiated institutional sphere among many, none of them with any evident ontological priority over the others.

2. Parliamentary Government Is Itself a Preeminent Public Forum Both in Its Legislative Capacity and as an Investigative and Publicity-Generating Body

Parliamentary government is a public forum. John Stuart Mill suggested that
the proper office of a representative assembly is to watch and control the government: to throw the light of publicity on its acts, to compel a full exposition and justification of all of them which any one considers questionable; to censure them if found condemnable. . . . In addition to this, the Parliament has an office . . . to be at once the nation's Committee of Grievances, and its Congress of Opinions . . . .

Max Weber judged the British Parliament's greatest achievements to be founded on its use of the right of inquiry. He emphasized that the political maturity of British citizens followed from the coverage of parliamentary inquiries in the press - but that "only the committees of a powerful parliament can be the vehicle for exercising this wholesome pedagogic influence." As Nancy Fraser has observed, once parliamentary sovereignty becomes a feature of the state, the legislature is established as a "public sphere within the state." And it is a privileged public sphere, at that. It is what Fraser terms a "strong public" because it not only expresses public opinion in its discussions but makes authoritative decisions. The "weak public" of civil society, in the absence of parliamentary sovereignty, articulates opinion but has no direct path to effecting that opinion in decisions of state.

The legislature has among its chief functions the public airing of grievances and the surveillance of other parts of the state apparatus.

The idea of "civil society" as it came to be discussed in Eastern Europe in the 1980s was the idea of an oppositional set of structures; it referred to the associational life that kept alive democratic aspirations and that enabled the practice of democratic

12. See Nancy Fraser, Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy, in Habermas and the Public Sphere 109, 134 (Craig Calhoun ed., 1992).
dialogue even in the absence of genuine representation and in the face of strong discouragement or repression by the state. Within liberal democracies, however, civil society is not by definition opposed to state or economic institutions. On the contrary, the institutions of political and economic society provide in a liberal democracy "mediating spheres" through which civil society can touch decision-making. "An antagonistic relation of civil society, or its actors, to the economy or the state arises," Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato argue, "only when these mediations fail or when the institutions of economic and political society serve to insulate decision making and decision makers from the influence of social organizations, initiatives, and forms of public discussion."

If it is difficult to separate the operation of the public sphere outside the state from the institutions of the state as such, it is also difficult to extricate it from the ideas of government held by those in power. Federalists in the 1790s strenuously sought to discourage voluntary associations from engaging in political activities, not only because the groups springing up were primarily oppositional but because they had principled objections to "self-created" institutions in politics regardless of their point of view. (At a later date, government not only did not discourage voluntary associations but actively supported them. The federal Women's Bureau and state and local commissions on the status of women actively nurtured the American women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s.)

If one were to evaluate a public sphere by some measure of the vigor of popular expression, Eastern European political life in the late 1980s might look superior to anything in the West; but if we are interested in some organization of social life that enables an enduring connection between public expression and authoritative decision-making, then the representative democracies of Western Europe, North America, and elsewhere clearly have an advantage.

3. Civil Society Institutions Are Both Inside and Outside of the State

This relationship of the state to the public sphere is more than a matter of mutual influence; it is a case of inextricability. This is perhaps most obvious, if most vexing, to the scholar of American history during the colonial era where the state is simply not very well differentiated from private life. Here it is diffi-

13. See Arato & Cohen, supra note 3, at xi.
cult to define a "sphere" arising between the state and private life because the state and private life are not separate realms in the first place. But today certain preeminent institutions of a "public sphere" stand as much inside as outside the state. In most European nations, this includes broadcasting, originally a government-operated monopoly and still today a government-dominated sphere. In the United States, broadcasting is much less a part of the state, but the degree of separation of the news media from government has been historically variable. Not only has government operation of the postal system enabled the state to directly aid or thwart the viability of an independent press but from the beginnings of the nation until the Civil War the incumbent president used one or another Washington newspaper as a semi-official outlet for public statements. On the local level, many newspapers in the early nineteenth century and even later were fundamentally dependent on government subsidy through the paid publication of legal notices for their survival. There is no bright line between the state and the private media.15

Political parties, even more than the media, have had an institutional standing that straddles state and civil society. Parties are both part of the state and part of civil society. They are part of the state not only in operating as decision-making and majority-forming coalitions for legislative action (for instance, organizing the committee system within the Congress). They also have a semi-official and legally recognized role in organizing elections. In one sense, primary elections might be considered the private affairs of voluntary associations, thereby protected from state regulation. The state would then have no more role in regulating party primaries than in intervening in the elections and by-laws of the Elks Club, the Girl Scouts, or the Harvard Alumni Association. But the courts have judged the parties, by virtue of their special place in the political system, to have a status that opens their affairs to state scrutiny. For instance, "white primaries" in the South that barred African-Americans from participation were found unconstitutional in 1944 as abridging individual rights.16

4. Government Helps Construct the Personality or Physiognomy of Public Life

The character of government does not vary only on one or a few dimensions. A government is not simply more or less demo-


16. For a review of recent Supreme Court opinions in this area, see Nancy Maveety, Representation Rights and the Burger Years 147-87 (1991).
cratic, more or less deliberative, more or less inclusive of people as eligible citizens. It is democratic, deliberative, and inclusive not only to different degrees but in different ways. Governments differ not only by broad types (monarchy or republic) and not only by inclusiveness (broader or narrower franchise) but by political physiognomy or political personality. Representational schemes may be majoritarian or use proportional representation — and neither scheme (nor any of the variations of them) is by nature more or less "democratic" than the other. Executive power in a representational system may be organized on a presidential or a prime ministerial model (or any of the variations of these). Again, neither model is necessarily more democratic than the other. Parties may be hierarchical or populist. Legislatures may or may not exercise judicial functions (they often did so in the American colonies). Voting may be direct or indirect. Courts may have more or less authority to initiate public policy. Apportionment may be individualistic, based on a "one person, one vote" model, or it may be based on group representation of some sort. Representatives may be instructed or uninstructed. They may understand their role as representing constituents' interests or as transcending them to represent a national interest or public interest. The dimensions on which political systems may vary significantly are legion.

Take, for instance, the question of representation. Should a legislature represent the public regardless of the geographic or other communities that make up the legislature's territory? Should elections be at-large or by district? At-large elections would seem to offer benefits of universality, but district elections might improve access to public deliberations, enhance communication between constituents and representatives, and give some opportunities for the representation of minorities. If there are to be districts, how are they to be carved up? Minority groups have argued that the lines should be drawn to assure minorities a majority in some districts so that minority members can be elected to the legislature. That may be a good argument, but it privileges ethnicity over other possible grounds of organization.

This is not the only situation where reasons have been adduced to give preference to a group identity rather than an individual identity. The existence of the United States Senate is predicated on the assumption that states, as political units, merit separate standing so that a state with two or three million people is as well represented as a state with forty million. Why not? Why should the individual be the privileged unit? Why should the communities of fate we are a part of not be represented?
Beyond these matters, there is a larger context, what we might call the ecology of the public sphere, that will make the character of a public sphere necessarily different in one nation from the next. How large is the polity? Public discussion and the formation of public opinion will operate differently in large and small societies. How homogeneous or heterogeneous is the population in ways that are politically salient? How evenly or unevenly is wealth distributed? How large or small is the public sector — how are decisions about allocations of political and economic goods distributed among governmental and private organizations? How much is political authority and intellectual leadership centralized in a capital city or distributed among different cities and regions? In all of these questions, the United States is a unique case and what will be possible or impossible here will not necessarily apply to any other country.

All of this constructs the character of the public sphere. To the extent that it does, we cannot easily line up the public spheres of different nations on a chart of "more" or "less" public sphere-ness. We have public spheres of different personality. It is not easy to say, for instance, how presidential systems compared to prime ministerial systems of government line up on dimensions of the quality or quantity of political participation; they simply shape political participation along different paths. It is not easy to say how "one person, one vote" systems of representation and apportionment versus representation or apportionment by group interests or territorial (and presumably community) integrity map onto the quality or quantity of political participation; they direct it into divergent, and not strictly comparable, channels.

5. Opinion Does Not Exist Outside of the State

A public sphere does not provide pre-existing public opinion a forum; there is no pristine "public opinion" existing apart from the way those public opinions find expression through the institutions of the public sphere. Maurice Duverger put this well with regard to political parties. For him, parties "create public opinion as much as they express it; they form it rather than distort it; there is dialogue rather than echo. Without parties there would be only vague, instinctive, varying tendencies dependent on character, education, habit, social position and so on." Parties do not distort raw opinion but make possible real opinion. Critics "fail to realize that raw opinion is elusive, that formed opinion alone can be expressed, and that the method of expres-
sion necessarily imposes on it a frame which modifies it."¹⁷ Not only parties but the state as such sets the question on which and the paths by which opinion is created. The public voice exists only insofar as institutions are available for its self-construction. And, of course, the "selves" that come together in salons or taverns, public squares or private living rooms, meeting across a common discursive territory established by a sermon or a pamphlet or an opinion poll are themselves institutional products. Families, churches, schools, and other institutions that touch the young, including, again, government itself, provide frameworks that will encourage or inhibit free expression. Recruits to the early women's suffrage movement in the United States not only had to take unpopular positions in public, but literally had to find the voice in which to do so; early suffragists organized debating clubs to gain experience in public speaking. No woman could be found to chair the famous Seneca Falls convention in 1848, so a feminist leader's husband agreed to do so. Some of the earliest feminist organizing was no more (and no less) than the organization of small debating and discussion clubs on college campuses to provide the sort of basic training in public argumentation from which women had been barred for so long.


The state's capacity to include citizens in the process of policy formation is not limited to legislative representation. Citizens may register complaints, raise issues, or challenge policy in a variety of governmental arenas. In the United States, citizens or private associations may directly engage in public policy making by their representation in federal regulatory agencies. Increasingly, private associations like environmental groups have been recognized as having interests that justify their standing to speak on disputes brought before the agencies. Recent (1990) legislation has even formalized procedures whereby interested parties in a dispute, say, environmental groups and industry in combat over Environmental Protection Agency regulations, are empowered among themselves to write regulations they are willing to live with.¹⁸

Perhaps the most notable extra-legislative route of access for citizens to have a policy-making role is the judicial system. While

the judicial system in the United States has always had some capacity for making policy, this tendency greatly accelerated after 1954 in the wake of the desegregation cases. The courts since then have accepted a more expansive definition of their role in making social policy, and at the same time have broadened their view of which parties may have standing before a court. The increasing use of the “class action” suit by citizens’ groups as a weapon for social change has also played a role in making the courts an alternate arena in which citizens can directly influence public discourse and public policy.

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An ideal public sphere would enable the full and equal participation of any person within the society affected by political decisions and would also enable the full deliberation of participating persons so that the decisions arrived at represent their considered judgments. How this can be achieved or the paths along which such goals might be sought are not strictly comparable across nations, or even across the history of a single nation. In the American case, when we say “full and equal” participation, this is understood within what are taken to be practical constraints on both of these criteria. We do not enfranchise pre-verbal children, nor verbal children below some age deemed reasonable for expecting their independent and rational decision-making. Nor do we go to great lengths to insist that, say, people are literate before they are enfranchised, although literacy can certainly enlarge a person’s capacity to deliberate and come to considered judgments.

We are more rigorous about the “equal” participation of persons than about their “full” participation. Where the state does not enforce full participation or punish lack of it (although colonial New England towns sometimes fined non-voters), the state is constrained by law to seek equal participation by reapportioning and districting to enable it.

Full participation means that citizens not only vote but give some thought to their vote and deliberate with others about whom to vote for. Following Habermas, I believe that deliberation or what Habermas calls “rational-critical discourse” is essential to “the public sphere.” Picture institutions that enable people to speak and argue about political issues with great freedom but give them no power to affect actual decision-making. This may be an unstable arrangement but it is certainly not unheard of — the Soviet Union under “glasnost” is a reasonable approximation, a society where deliberation is extremely high and participation in decision-making extremely low. Alterna-
tively, picture a society where there is little room for genuine deliberation but a high degree of participation in a decision-making activity like voting. Here again there are historical examples — a Bonapartist plebiscite or elections in communist eastern Europe where there was rarely any real contest to be decided. Elections in colonial America often, but not always, approached this extreme, although in the context of a society managed by leading local families rather than by a disciplined political party.

Neither of these extremes contain both essential ingredients of the public sphere — participation and deliberation. A public sphere requires not only that eligibility to participate and actual participation in political decision-making (or voting) be as broadly based as possible but that the decision-making be of a certain quality. Quality, as well as quantity, of participation counts. To adapt the language of political theorist Bernard Manin, a public sphere is not a public realm in which everyone makes decisions but in which everyone deliberates. The legitimacy of decisions made in such an arena is based not on the fact that everyone has a say but that the process enables everyone to arrive at their conclusions deliberatively: "We must affirm, at the risk of contradicting a long tradition, that legitimate law is the result of general deliberation, and not the expression of the general will."19 This emphasizes again that opinion exists in the making of it rather than as a natural phenomenon that exists prior to the political process.

The practical incarnation of a "public sphere," then, is complex. What is full participation? What is equal participation? What is deliberation? What unit should be represented and who should deliberate: Individuals? Individuals as members of certain social or ethnic groups? Individuals as members of certain political units (as is the case in the United States Senate but not the House of Representatives)? How do we define the character of representation? Should representatives serve the interests of their constituents? Or carry out the will of their constituents, which may be a different thing? Or serve the interests of the polity as a whole, even if it may appear to contradict the good of the local unit?

The various dimensions of the public sphere do not work in lock-step. Again, a discussion of the public sphere in American life is not a matter of "more" or "less" participation or delibera-

tion or rationality in political debate. What participation means in American life is not a constant. Consider the vote as a form of participation. For all the importance of “talk” and deliberation and opinion formation as politics, the central act in a democracy remains the decisive gesture to which the talk is tending, the vote. What that vote signifies has changed dramatically from one era in our past to the next. The eighteenth century citizen voted to affirm his place in an established social order of which politics was one aspect and political expression one ritual evocation; the nineteenth century citizen voted to affirm his partisan connection to an organized body with which he shared symbolic identification and which won his sympathy by its closeness to his ethnic, religious, class, and ideological interests. The nineteenth century citizen cast a colorful ballot given to him by a party worker, and he cast it, publicly, at the end of several months of spectacular, parade and torch and banner-strewn campaign efforts, to express affiliation with a partisan alliance, often defined in ethnocultural terms, and frequently representing a solidary faith handed down from father to son. The twentieth century citizen, handed a state-prepared ballot to mark in the privacy of the voting booth, experiences a much more solitary and individualistic practice of political choosing, and votes as a civic obligation more or less cheerfully shouldered. Even if eligibility for the franchise had been constant over American history and even if the percentage of citizens who cast ballots had been unvarying, the meaning of voter participation would have changed dramatically from one period to the next.

A public sphere, like a public, is a societal construction. To make it, to create a democratic public space, there must be constructed persons open to it and capable of taking advantage of it; governing institutions responsible to the public in ways the public can monitor by mechanisms that provide citizens standing; political institutions capable of communicating citizen views to government and organizing government issues for the comprehension of citizens; private associations, like political parties, that share these responsibilities with formal political structures; and public forums in which political discussion can take place and public language in which it can take place rationally. To put this more schematically, for a public sphere to exist, there must be a representative forum in the government which public discussion and public opinion can appeal to and influence, and there must be an infrastructure of supporting resources that makes possible the formation of critical public judgment. These resources will include institutional resources — notably, parties, other voluntary associations, and news media; educational resources in fami-
lies, schools, religious institutions, libraries, and popular culture that help form or "socialize" individuals able and desiring to participate in rational and critical public debate; and cultural resources, in the language and norms of public contention and the political, social, and legal traditions that people can draw on to sustain public discourse.

Most of the literature on "the public sphere" assumes with little or no question that the public sphere is a good to be desired, that politics is a good people should seek to be a part of, and that various privatizations that keep people from a concern with the public weal are to be discouraged and disparaged. "Politics" may be something of a dirty word in ordinary conversation, but among political theorists it is a god-term, at least when it stands in for "activity in and oriented to the public sphere." But recent critiques have dared to question this supremacy. In the small but lively industry of Habermas criticism, a number of thinkers have raised serious challenges to Habermas's own elevation of the bourgeois public sphere as a normative standard for evaluating political systems. Historians and theorists have argued that the notion of the public sphere as Habermas developed it gives short shrift to an alternative model of public-ness in a proletarian public sphere and ignores altogether the ways in which the bourgeois public sphere is "gendered," constituted in essential ways by its male-ness and its delegation of women exclusively to private life. Since so much of Habermasian criticism is European rather than American, there has been less attention to the implications of the racial exclusiveness of the early bourgeois public sphere. And there has been next to no mention of other exclusions that can also be said to have shaped the specific formation of the public realm in European and American societies — the exclusion of Jews (and other non-Christians), the exclusion of Catholics in Protestant-dominated countries, and the exclusion everywhere of children (a matter that may not be as trivial as it may at first appear).

It is not my task to analyze all of these matters here except to take issue with one conclusion sometimes drawn from these critiques: that there are and should be multiple and overlapping public spheres rather than a single, unitary public sphere. Nancy Fraser, for instance, argues that since all publics are necessarily made up of culturally specific institutions — even those publics like the liberal bourgeois one that claims to distance public life from the impact of participants' statuses and backgrounds — then no multicultural society can or should organize public life "exclusively in a single, comprehensive public sphere." She argues explicitly that "a multiplicity of publics is preferable to a
This, I think, is the wrong conclusion, and it flies in the face of Fraser's own recognition in the same essay that the state and the public sphere are not neatly separable. While I can agree that a thousand flowers of association should bloom in civil society, it does not follow that the same should or could be said for the conduct of public business in and around the state. The existence of a common, overarching polity is the center around which public discourse flows. It may be subdivided so that, in the United States, the public sphere is differently constituted in different states and localities — but within a jurisdiction there is and must be, finally, a single region where public discourse comes together, however varied the social bases from which discussions arise. Historically, the emergence of strongly organized, mass-recruiting political associations — the parties — did not spring forth as a federation of pre-existing local associations; on the contrary, local associations grew out of the outreach efforts of parties begun initially at the national level and compelled to organize, above all, by the requirements of sponsoring a candidate for the presidency.

CONCLUSION

Having begun by calling into question the idea of a golden age of American political participation and citizenship, let me not presume that ours is the best of times. I do not make that assumption at all. What I argue is that any solution to the ills of citizenship today will have to be contemporary solutions, cognizant of the specific problems and situation of the present-day, not some other world. In this world, the formation of a public sphere is a political process highly dependent on our understanding of what an ideal or desirable polity should look like — but this requires a degree of specificity that the broad outlines of the notion of a public sphere cannot provide.

The concept of a public sphere remains useful. It stresses that popular representative democracy is an arena of discussion rather than a set of electoral laws, as formal definitions in political science sometimes suggest, or rather than a social psychological style, as older studies of political culture have held. Its abstractness is also in some ways a virtue, reminding us that the political democracy we seek is not at any given moment necessarily characterized by fervent discussion and high levels of partici-

20. See Fraser, supra note 12, at 126, 136-37.
participation but by the structures, institutions, frameworks, and norms that make such discussion and participation possible. In American history, it is plain that participation is a sometime thing, that a public involving large numbers in the population is only periodically constituted when electoral machinery allows it, when a public issue of great power ignites it, and when competitive parties exploit it — all at once.

The notion of a public sphere remains useful also because, as Peter Hohendahl suggests, "[i]t provides a paradigm for analyzing historical change, while also serving as a normative category for political critique."\(^{21}\) But when it implies that the political system is superstructure rather than framework, then it carries with it some Marxist baggage or sociological reductionism that blinks our vision. There must be, for some of us, a painful process of unlearning sociology, I think, a task Theda Skocpol and colleagues referred to some years ago as "bringing the state back in."\(^{22}\) I'm not sure the state was ever in sociology, at least not since the eighteenth century. But it belongs there now.

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22. See *Bringing the State Back In* (Theda Skocpol et al. eds., 1985). See especially the introduction by Skocpol, *id.* at 3-37.