

**Zukin, Cliff – Keeter, Scott – Andolina, Molly – Jenkins,
Krista – Delli Carpini, Michael X.:**
**A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life,
and the Changing American Citizen. Oxford – New York:
Oxford University Press, 2006, 253 pages,
ISBN 0195183169 (cloth) / ISBN 0195183177 (paper).**

Kateřina Vráblíková¹

The topic of the public engagement of citizens has come to the center of attention in recent years. This statement holds especially true for the USA. Robert Putnam's work (1995; 2000) has opened up a sharp discussion about the participation of American citizens in public life and the consequences for the development of US democracy. Putnam warned against a decline in voter turnout and described American society as composed of individuals "bowling alone," which means not participating in civil society organizations. The book *A New Engagement?* represents a significant contribution to this field of study. The authors, Cliff Zukin, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins and Michael X. Delli Carpini, examine overall citizen engagement by comparing generational cohorts in the USA and come up with relatively fresh findings: it is not true that Americans are disengaged from public life as a whole, nor that the younger generation rejects civic and political involvement. Readers interested especially in American public involvement will appreciate this opportunity to learn a great deal in terms of the data presented in the volume. However, the book remains rather underdeveloped in terms of theoretical and conceptual innovation.

The story of American engagement is told in seven chapters. The introduction makes clear the main arguments of the book. The authors claim that "the volume of citizen engagement has not declined so much as it has spread to a wider variety of channels" (p. 3). In order to

¹ Author is a doctoral student of Political science and a researcher of the Institute for Comparative Political Research, Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University, Joštova 10, 602 00 Brno; e-mail: vrabliko@fss.muni.cz.

capture these changes, they identify the distinction between political and civic participation as an important fault line in citizen engagement. On this basis, they explore political and civic engagement by comparing four cohorts: Dutifuls (born before 1946), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Gen Xers (born between 1965 and 1976), and DotNets (born after 1976), and find significant differences across these generations. The authors consider macro-level structural changes and political events rather than one's position in the life cycle as the cause for the differences observed.

The second chapter explores US social and political history over the last 40 years. The authors believe that individuals are “influenced by larger economic, cultural, political and technological trends and by the resulting events...” (p. 18). They further claim that the combination of these personal and collective experiences may lead to generational differences in political attitudes, opinion and behavior. Exploring the cultural and political conditions in which the younger generations of GenXers and DotNets have grown up (such as the revolution in technology and communication, globalization and the deterioration of social institutions), Zukin, et al., show how different their worlds are compared with those of their predecessors.

Citizen engagement of Americans in public life is analyzed in Chapter Three. Zukin and his colleagues present a categorization of various activities here. Their main interest is in the above-mentioned division of political and civic engagement. Drawing on Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995), they define political engagement as “activity aimed at influencing government policy or affecting the selection of public officials” (p. 51). Civic engagement, on the other hand, refers to “participation aimed at achieving a public good, but usually through direct hands-on work in cooperation with others. Civic engagement normally occurs within nongovernmental organizations and rarely touches upon electoral politics.” (p. 51)

In addition to these two main categories, they distinguish two other dimensions: public voice and cognitive engagement. Public voice involves activities which are taken by citizens to make their voice heard, such as writing e-mails to officials or protesting. Cognitive engagement refers to psychological interest like paying attention to politics or discussing politics with friends.

The chapter then describes these four types of engagement among their four cohorts. The authors find sharp differences in political and cognitive engagement, but greater similarity in civic work and the expression of public voice. To sum up, there is a growing gap in voter turnout between the youngest Americans and those of older cohorts, something which is at the same time accompanied by increasing levels of volunteer and community service among youth.

The fourth chapter presents attitudes and values that are relevant to citizen engagement,

again through the prism of cohorts. Zukin, et al., show that young people do not have a specific single reason for not participating in the electoral arena compared to older generations. They conclude that “young people have not so much dropped out as they have never tuned in” (p. 91) so that their nonparticipation does not mean the rejection of the political system but simply indifference. Subsequently, the text explores how citizens view themselves, their role in society and their fellow citizens. The authors find that DotNets identify themselves as one generation much more than other cohorts. The younger also think much less that citizenship brings obligations and have the lowest rate of viewing other people as fair compared to older generations. In contrast to other cohorts, the younger generation more often thinks the government should do more to solve problems.

In the fifth chapter, various pathways to civic and political participation are explored; in other words, the authors ask: what makes people participate? In answer, they develop a model of citizen engagement consisting of eight steps: initial characteristics, early socialization, education, television avoidance, generational identification, social capital, political capital, positive attitudes toward politics and government, and mobilization. They again examine generational differences in this process and show that the younger generation has enough resources to participate but lacks a sense of civic duty and is much less likely to be mobilized. In short, they conclude that young Americans are disengaged in traditional politics not because they do not possess the necessary resources, such as education or skills, but because, in Verba’s words, “nobody asked,” i.e., due to a lack of opportunities and mobilization incentives.

Chapter Six turns to the question of where the cohorts stand on indicators of partisanship and ideology, and on substantive issues of the day. Examining the four generations, the authors discover that young Americans are in many respects more liberal than older ones, but at the same time they hold some views which do not jibe with this finding. As Zukin, et al., summarize, “they are social libertarians who like big business and big government” (p. 157). On the one hand, the young express secular values, growing social liberalism such as positive attitudes towards immigrants and gay marriages and are supportive to national health insurance; on the other hand, they say that business has value and the government should end support for public schools.

In the conclusion, the authors ask what will happen if current trends continue. They see a political transition forthcoming as the current youth become an electoral majority and hold important positions in society. Will US democracy then be threatened by an inactive citizenry, which will eventually lead a loss of legitimacy for the entire system? Their view is rather optimistic, “given the motivation, skills, resources, and opportunities, young people are ready and

willing to add more politics into their still evolving repertoire of public sphere activities, not in place of their civic and economic involvement but in harmonious combination with it” (p. 210). According to Zukin, et al., young Americans must be provided with motivation and opportunities for public engagement. This is the main challenge of the current era.

The book forms an important contribution to current debates about public engagement. First of all, one should appreciate the vast empirical basis on which the authors build. They use the three-wave National Civic Engagement Survey for their analysis. As a result, the reader finds in one book not only various indicators of political and civic participation and political interest, but also data related to citizens’ attitudes, values and intentions. The latter, such as reasons for nonparticipation or opinions about everyday topics, are not very common in this type of literature. Usually, these books focus on narrower problems and, as a result, fail to connect the undoubtedly interrelated topics of participation and attitudes. Further, the authors truly succeed in presenting this vast amount of information clearly. The authors do not rely only on numbers, but offer their rich and enlightening interpretations, which make the text very reader friendly.

The individual parts of the book are well-structured according to the particular concepts discussed in them. This system helps the reader follow the main argument and at the same time choose the parts he or she is particularly interested in. What might be confusing with regard to the structure of the book is the order of the main chapters. While commonly book sections dealing with the dependent variable stand at the beginning and the independent variables are presented in subsequent chapters, Zukin, et al., do just the opposite. Their second chapter does not analyze the dependent variable – the variation in public engagement. As a result, the reader does not know “why it is worth explaining.” Instead, we are first introduced to the independent variable – the structural analysis of American history, as if there is some obvious reason for such a choice. There is not. It would be much more credible if the story was told not the way the authors think things happened in reality but rather in the sequence the authors found in the course of their research.

This comment brings me to criticism of the book. The book is based almost completely on a one-sided structural explanation. There is no doubt that lower voter turnout among the young is nothing new for the USA. This is the same situation as occurred in the case of DotNets’ fathers as well as their fathers when they were young. Now, the competing life-cycle explanation has its turn: just growing older brings citizens to the ballot-box. The authors themselves confess this weakness in their argument when they say, “we readily admit that definitive determining the relative impact of these two age-based processes on the patterns of engagement is beyond our

ability...” (p. 201). Thus, the authors should not rely purely on the structural explanation. They should pay attention to the life cycle effect, too, when they themselves admit it has influence.

Conceptually, although the authors consider their distinction between political and civic engagement to be an important contribution, this does not hold true. Using the three decade-old definition of political participation introduced by Verba, et al. (1978), Zukin and his colleagues make their job much easier. The theoretical challenge of political participation research lies in developing a new definition that would fit observed reality much better. Many other students have attempted to do so (e.g. Norris 2002; 2003; Rosenstone, Hansen 2003) but *The New Engagement?* does not even reflect them. The most striking point is that the authors themselves name the problems of the old approach: *We also recognize that the boundaries between political and civic engagement are not clear ones ... In such an environment, where the locus of power shifts from governmental and elected officials to the private sector and nongovernmental organizations, citizens may see the need to achieve public goals through cooperative work that engages or targets institutions other than the government* (p. 43). Unfortunately, this does not prompt them to incorporate these weak points to their new concept.

My criticism is pointed at their categorization of public engagement as a whole. It is not suitable to have one category which overlaps with others. In the concrete, Zukin and his colleagues (p. 44) themselves write that voice “forms of participation are characteristic of both political and civic activists...” There is not truly much logic in putting “contact with public officials” and “taking part in demonstrations” together in one category of public voice and “working for a political party” in the category of political engagement. Regarding their own logic, demonstrating can be aimed at influencing government just as “taking part in a political party campaign” may be seen as a public voice strategy. The typology of public engagement the book offers is not coherent and clear.

To sum up, *The New Engagement?*, probably as every book, has its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it offers a lot of new information regarding various aspects of public engagement in the USA. The authors present new findings that to a certain degree challenge commonly held assumptions. From this point of view, the book is worth reading for those searching for new data about American public engagement, which are indeed clearly presented in the book. On the other hand, the book does not make even an attempt to develop a suitable conceptual framework which would analytically present its data in a novel way. Therefore, readers seeking theoretical innovations will be rather disappointed.

References

- Norris, P. (2002): *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*, New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, P. (2003): *Young People and Political Activism: From the Politics Loyalties to the Politics of Choice?* Report for the Council of Europe Symposium: Young people and democratic institutions: from disillusionment to participation. November 27-28, November.
- Putnam, R. (1995): Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. VI, No. 1, pp. 65-78.
- Putnam, R. (2000): *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York, Simon and Schuster.
- Rosenstone, S. J. – Hansen, J. M. (2003, eds.): *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, New York, Longman.
- Verba, S. – Shlozman, K. L. – Brady, H. E. (1995): *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press.
- Verba, S. – Nie, N. – Kim, J. (1978): *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven-Nation Comparison*, New York, Cambridge University Press.