book review

Three Rs and a V
Schools should teach the importance of voting

Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape Our Civic Life
By David E. Campbell

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

Why We Vote is a provocative interpretation of the factors that determine participation in our democratic processes, and specifically voting, the form of participation available to almost all. Campbell begins with the story of Traci Hodgson, the only person of 275 registered in her precinct who voted in Boston’s 1989 City Council elections. She was 21, had lived in Boston for only two months, and was not very familiar with the candidates. So why did she vote? “I just think it’s important to vote. If you have the right, you ought to exercise it—whether you are going to make a difference or not.”

Campbell has structured his book to explain the case of Traci Hodgson. It is a theoretically sophisticated and statistically demanding examination of who votes and why. The United States stands at the bottom among democratic countries in the percentage of the population voting. Theories and analyses abound as to why this is so.

Campbell notes that the dominant interpretation in the political science literature of why people vote doesn’t explain this voter: Hodgson was not protecting or advancing her interests, since she was new to the area and didn’t know where various candidates stood on the issues that might affect her. He offers an alternate interpretation: “If, in Federalist 10, Madison has written the quintessential statement on political participation as ‘protecting one’s interests,’ then perhaps Tocqueville has written an equally quintessential statement on political participation as driven by ‘fulfilling one’s duty’… ‘What had been calculation becomes instinct. By dint of working for the good of his fellow citizens, he in the end acquires a habit and taste for serving them.’”

Traci Hodgson moved to Boston from Little River, Kansas, population 693. In 1992, voter turnout in Little River was 67 percent, 12 percentage points higher than the national turnout, 27 points higher than Boston’s. Little River is clearly different, much smaller, undoubtedly much more homogeneous on any measure than Boston. Which raises the question even more sharply: Why should there be more voting when people are more alike, and presumably in agreement with each other on many issues, than when (as undoubtedly in Boston) they aren’t?

Campbell argues there are two very different kinds of motivations for voting, those consistent with a homogeneous community, in which people are likely to agree with each other, and those operative in a heterogeneous community, in which interests diverge widely and conflict is greater. We might expect more voting in the second kind of community. But the percentage is uniformly high in the homogeneous communities. When voting reaches equally high levels in areas with more heterogeneity and more conflict, it is because much effort and money are expended in such areas to bring out the vote. These two motivations work to produce our voting pattern, a U-shaped curve, in which the most heterogeneous and the most homogeneous counties have the highest percentage voting, and this is elegantly demonstrated here.

It is easy to understand why people vote to defend their interests. The greater part of the book is devoted to trying to understand the opposite and harder case: why people see voting as a duty and how we can instill that notion more effectively. It is Campbell’s contention, on the basis of ingenuous mining of many data sources—longitudinal and other large-scale studies from which we can extract voting behavior, political attitudes, and various background factors that might explain them—that it is community, place, that plays a central role in cultivating the idea of voting as a duty. The key concept connecting the homogeneous community to a high participation in voting is “social capital,” as developed by James Coleman and his colleagues 20 years ago in their studies of schools and more recently by the important research of Robert Putnam. “Fundamentally, social capital refers to the mechanisms by which social norms are enforced.” It points to the kind of community in which what your neighbors think and say will affect your behavior, rather than the kind in which neighbors are too disparate for their opinions to be known or matter to you.

Campbell is particularly interested in the experience of adolescents. Traci Hodgson has been shaped by the community in which she was raised and went to school, and it is to those norms and expectations that she is responding. Campbell demonstrates that the more homogeneous the community or the school, by various measures, the greater the degree of participation in voluntary civic activities. And the greater the expectation that students when adults will vote. They will do so not because of political partisanship, but because the sense of duty has been instilled.
“If I left the story here,” Campbell writes, “it might appear that homogeneous communities have it all—utopias where homes and schools combine to inculcate in their young people the ‘habits of the heart’ [the phrase is Robert Bellah’s, from Tocqueville]… that lead to a lifetime of civic involvement. But, as you might expect, there is more to the story. Politically homogeneous communities have other social consequences that many people might find troubling.” Whereas many good things seem related to an increasing degree of homogeneity, others are not. For example, tolerance declines with homogeneity. (I should note that “tolerance” and other variables of large scope and meaning are measured in this study, perforce, by the response to a single question in complex data sets, and one often feels one is being led through a chain of reasoning from data to the interaction of large concepts that may not bear up, but that is the inevitable consequence of extracting large concepts from large data sets.) Apparently, the sense of efficacy in the public sphere—“voice,” as Campbell labels it—also seems to increase in politically heterogeneous environments.

Campbell worries about this, but his heart is with Traci Hodgson, not her (possibly) more tolerant but nonvoting neighbors. He regrets, with Alan Ehrenhalt in his book The Lost City, “the fraying of civic bonds in America” and cites other “declensionist” writers, as he labels them—Michael Schudson, Theda Skocpol, David Gelernter, Francis Fukuyama, Gertrude Himmelfarb—to similar effect. “You knew who was from the neighborhood and who wasn’t; you knew who could be trusted…. [H]owever, … these same neighborhoods are also characterized by an unreflexive suspicion of the ‘other’.”

Campbell is torn between his appreciation of what has been lost and his acceptance of the reality of an ever more heterogeneous society in which tolerance is essential, but firmly insists that schools have an obligation to raise civic consciousness and voting participation. He does not dispute the research that says that more formal civics education wouldn’t help much, but he does argue that schools can do more for the civic development of students: “The challenge is to build the sense of ‘we’ within our schools in order to nurture civic norms, including the encouragement of voting as a civic obligation.” Campbell contends it is a task that we should study as seriously as we do programs to raise test scores in reading and mathematics. A less technical version of his case for teachers and administrators would be a help in promoting this eminently worthy objective.

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