

The Good Citizen in the Digital Era

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When we first learn the word “good” — as in the phrase “Johnny’s a good boy” — we are likely to believe that someone who is good in one way will be good “across the board.” Alas, life is more complicated. We come to understand that Johnny may be exemplary at the workplace but a rotten husband; that Jill may be active in civic affairs but lazy at home; or that Marty may be a wonderful spouse and parent but also someone who cuts every corner at work and has only voted twice in the last two decades (once for a distant cousin).

So, what do we mean when we speak of someone as being a good citizen? If you’d asked me a decade ago, I would have said the good citizen is well-informed, votes regularly, occasionally signs petitions and writes to his elected representative. I might have added that the exemplary citizen does not only pursue her self-interest but also takes into account what is appropriate for the wider community, even if she does not thereby directly benefit.

As a result of my membership in a MacArthur Foundation research network called “Youth and Participatory Politics,” I’ve changed my mind. The studies that we have surveyed as well as those that we’ve carried out indicate that American young people today are rarely well-informed about political and economic issues; they fail to vote, especially in off-year elections; and, perhaps most strikingly, they express a dislike, even revulsion, for prompts like “politics,” “government,” and even “activism.”

But, it is premature to dismiss America’s youth as bad or indifferent citizens. Rather, as a result of the ubiquity of the web, and the proliferation of social media, today’s young people readily circulate news items; they frequently donate to charitable causes; and when there are issues about which they feel strongly — for example, proposed legislation that might interfere with the free circulation of images, ideas, and information — they express themselves in force and have even caused legislators to abandon legislation that they previously favored. Moreover, our studies document an intriguing chain of events. Young people who pursue a hobby or interest on the web — for example, members of the Harry Potter Alliance — are more likely than others to participate eventually in political activities online and perhaps offline. And, so, one way in

which I have changed my views is to adopt an expanded view of what it means to be a “good citizen.”

Another factor on the current scene must be recognized. Not for many decades, if ever, has the American federal government been as nonresponsive and dysfunctional as it has been during the lives of today's young people. Unlike their grandparents, young Americans do not see leaders who are widely admired; elected representatives who join forces across party lines on issues of domestic or foreign importance; or civil discourse among leaders or pundits who disagree on important issues but believe in the importance of dialogue and on the legitimacy of changing one's mind on the basis of argument and evidence. The traditional notion of good citizenship presupposed individuals and conditions that no longer exist in the United States. So, it is scarcely surprising that young persons, who have no first-hand experience with a functioning and functional government, should retreat to personal relationships and communicate via media over which they have some control.

In the long run, our national system can only survive if we — old as well as young — see it functioning well and if individual citizens accept their responsibility to support it. But, it's wrong to conclude that today's young persons are bad citizens. Rather, it is the civic commons that has been undermined. Only if it is somehow restored — providing appropriate avenues of both online and offline participation — can we expect our young people who are often good workers and good persons to embody good citizenship as well.

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