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Attention Deficit Democracy: The Paradox Of Civic Engagement

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Pay attention to matters of importance.

—Diogenes Laërtius, *The Life of Solon*

Habitual inattention must be reckoned the great vice of the democratic spirit.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

THIS BOOK ABOUT what Americans do and think begins by analyzing how we talk and write. The premise is that language matters; our choice of words may reflect or even affect our frames of mind. To borrow from Max Weber, humans are “suspended in webs of significance that [we ourselves have] spun,” ensnared in the logic that our choice of words dictates.¹ Such is the case with civic engagement. Born of a movement to analyze, promote, and possibly save democracy, nurtured with the best of intentions, the term *civic engagement* has grown out of control and has outlived its purpose, sowing more confusion than clarity. However, this book not only exposes the confusion but also turns it to our advantage. Acknowledging the problems with civic engagement terminology prompts us to examine it more closely, and a closer look can yield fresh insight into the unarticulated values and anxieties that have contributed to the term’s popularity. Through that exercise we can recognize more clearly the resources—especially attention and energy—that frequently flee from the public sphere and civil society but that must be protected and promoted for democracy’s sake. Thus we can learn from civic engagement even as we bid it goodbye.

Indeed, civic engagement as we know it is ready for retirement. That judgment might surprise the scholars, journalists, educators, and community leaders for whom civic engagement has become a household word. Since Robert Putnam first popularized the term in his 1993 political science classic, *Making Democracy Work*, it has spread through the pages of newspapers, Internet sites, academic books and journals, and mainstream

¹ Clifford Geertz attributed this widely cited line of thinking to Weber. Geertz interprets the self-spun web to denote culture, but language and rhetoric fit the metaphor just as aptly. Geertz (1973: 5).

political discourse.² Politicians praise it; foundations fund its study and implementation; educational institutions encourage their students to undertake it.³ Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) promote it in developing democracies. But like other buzzwords civic engagement means so many things to so many people that it clarifies almost nothing. Thus I come to bury civic engagement, not to praise it.

Scholars use civic engagement to describe activities ranging from bowling in leagues to watching political television shows, writing checks to political advocacy groups, and participating in political rallies and marches.⁴ For many journalists, public officials, and political activists civic engagement can mean everything from charitable giving to associational membership, political participation, artistic expression, or community service.⁵ Some maintain that civic engagement has declined in the United States and other liberal democracies over the past forty years. Others disagree, contending that civic engagement has simply changed its shapes and forms.⁶ We cannot easily judge these disputes because their advocates employ such disparate standards, using civic engagement to describe entirely different things. The conflicting parties do agree on one point: whatever civic engagement is, we need as much as we can get.⁷ But they are confused about its meaning and wrong about its value.

To be clear, no particular individual or group bears the blame for our terminological confusion. Despite the best of intentions we have inadvertently fallen into a linguistic trap by choosing flexible, broad terminology. Different thinkers have stretched the popular terms in their own desired directions, none of them violating rules of logic or grammar in the process. But the result has been many concerned friends of democracy talking past one another. Rather than blame those who have been trapped by civic engagement—which means all of us involved with its study and scholarship—we should disarm the trap and start afresh.

In that spirit this book advocates the end of civic engagement. Not the end of political participation, social connectedness, associational

²Among political theorists see, for example, Barber (1984 and 1998); Cohen and Arato (1992); Sandel (1996); Fishkin (1997); and Gastil and Levine (2005). Among political scientists see Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1993); Putnam (2000); and Skocpol and Fiorina (1999). Among sociologists and historians see Oldenburg (2001) and Ehrenhalt (1995).

³In January of 2002 an Internet search for the term *civic engagement* using the Google search engine returned approximately 15,000 results. By January of 2011 the number exceeded 3.9 million.

⁴Putnam (1995: 65–78); Schudson (1996: 17–27); Ladd (1999a); Barber (1998: 47–53).

⁵Connolly (2006); Tillotson (2006); McGann and Johnstone (2006).

⁶See, for example, Schudson (1998) and Ladd (1999a) for arguments that civic engagement has not declined but has been overlooked and misidentified.

⁷As one among many examples of tremendously broad endorsements: “Civic engagement is one of the most important instruments in democracy.” Maiello, Oser, and Biedermann (2003: 384).

membership, voluntarism, community spirit, or cooperative and tolerant moral norms but rather the umbrella term, *civic engagement*, used to encompass all of those topics while clarifying none. Civic engagement as it is currently used includes political, social, and moral components, or the entire “kitchen sink” of public and private goods. It exemplifies Giovanni Sartori’s concern about “conceptual stretching,” or “the distortion that occurs when a concept, applied to new cases, does not fit the new cases.”⁸ The stakes go beyond mere semantics. Words frame our debates, shape our research agendas, and affect the ways in which we view the world. When our words yield “vague, amorphous conceptualizations” rather than widely accessible concepts—concepts that mean something similar for most people most of the time—we cannot easily study, operationalize, or discuss the social and political phenomena that surround us.⁹ In conversations about “making democracy work”—the subject of Putnam’s landmark work and also this book’s overarching theme—civic engagement confuses more than it illuminates, and hence it must go.

Yet only half of the term merits early retirement. We should put *civic* to rest while coming to grips with *engagement*. Civic simply means that a subject pertains to citizenship or a city, so it can easily be subsumed under the rubric of *political* without any loss of conceptual clarity.¹⁰ In fact, clarity prevails when we stop stretching civic to mean sociable, helpful, or trusting, as so often happens in civic engagement scholarship. But *engagement* possesses untapped potential, and part of my purpose is to tap it. Engagement is a uniquely appropriate term for discussing ways of making democracy work, but only if we understand its full significance. At present we do not. Literally, engagement entails a combination of attention and energy (or activity), the two primary components of political governance or any intensely interactive relationship.¹¹ And while civic engagement is this book’s nominal subject, attention and energy are its informal stars. When we worry about declining engagement, which we have done at increasing rates over the past fifteen years, we are worrying about the elusiveness of our attention and energy—and well we might.¹² Since the era

⁸Sartori (1970: 1034); Collier and Mahon Jr. (1993: 848). Democracy, for example, connotes widely divergent attributes in different scenarios, but scholars continue to use that single, stretched concept to describe divergent phenomena, and hence they talk past one another.

⁹Sartori (1970: 1034).

¹⁰Civic. Definitions 1a and 2a. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1989.

¹¹Engagement can also denote an act or a condition, the act of engaging or the condition of being engaged. This presents difficulties for political science and political theory analyses, as I will discuss later in this book.

¹²Throughout this book I use the terms *energy* and *activity* interchangeably because activity is an actualization of our potential energy. They are not perfect synonyms, of course, but many other writers—ranging from contemporary scholars to canonical political theorists—use energy in precisely this sense: as an individual power (*dunamis*, in Aristotle’s

of ancient Greece, democracies have struggled to maintain these same resources. Attention involves selectively focusing one's wits on subjects that generate special interest or demand redress; activity involves following through on the subjects attended to, investing energy in their maintenance or resolution.¹³ Democracy's citizens must indeed be engaged, which is to say attentive and active. But attentive to what? Active in which ways? That vague designation, "civic," gives us little indication.

When sociologists laud civic engagement they commonly mean what I call *social* or *moral* engagement, people's attention and energies invested in social groups and networks or focused on moral reasoning and follow-through. When political theorists and political scientists laud civic engagement they often focus on what I call *political* engagement, people's attention to and activity in political issues and processes. These issues and processes require interaction with organs of the polity at any level of government. But democracy may flourish with only middling levels of political engagement if it is rich in social and moral engagement. That possibility goes against the belief, common among participatory democrats, that we need as much political attention and activity as we can get. Rather than disparage political engagement, we should recognize the costs as well as the benefits of promoting it and should remember that democracy requires a variety of dispositions, values, and behaviors.¹⁴ We should be asking which kinds of engagement—political, social, or moral—make democracy work, and how they might be promoted. Civic engagement (should be) dead; long live political, social, and moral engagement.¹⁵

The concern with making democracy work spans the history of political theory and political science, from ancient Greece to the present day. Aristotle, Rousseau, Madison, and Tocqueville all stress the importance of an attentive and energetically active citizenry. But (as I also advocate) they distinguish among different kinds of attention and activity; they understand that not all engagement is political, that social and moral engagement are equally vital to democracy's health, and that the three may

terminology) to be actualized in dynamic activity (*energeia*, in Aristotle). Aristotle, *De Anima* (1988: 412a22-8) and *Nicomachean Ethics* (1985: 1153a10).

¹³James (1890: 404). For a more contemporary account see Cohen and Magen (2005).

¹⁴The costs to which I refer include the sheer monetary cost of increasing political participation among a reluctant citizenry, whether through revitalized citizenship education, paid holidays for public deliberation (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004), or other forms of outreach, which I discuss in chapter 6. They also include the costs to individual freedom incurred by attempts to coerce political engagement through such initiatives as mandatory public service or compulsory voting (Lijphart 1997).

¹⁵Others have recognized that civic engagement is too broad, and one set of scholars takes the promising but incomplete step of distinguishing between *civic* and *political* engagement. Zukin et al. (2006). However, for reasons discussed below their distinction does not resolve the difficulties it sets out to remedy.

stand in tension with one another. Too many present-day scholars, politicians, educators, and community activists ignore this critical approach and wrongly assume that participation in political processes and institutions, participation in social dynamics and networks, and participation in tolerant, responsible, moral agency always go together—lumped conveniently under the umbrella term *civic engagement*—and that to promote any of them is to promote all three.

But in fact they are distinct. Political engagement means activity and attention relating to the political processes and political institutions of local, regional, or national government. It can include voting, seeking or holding public office, attending town hall meetings, circulating a petition—any engagement whose purpose is to influence state actors and political outcomes.¹⁶ Social engagement means activity and attention relating to social groups, dynamics, and norms. It can include myriad involvements ranging from Putnam's bowling leagues to parenting groups to friendship circles, all of which are often categorized as civic engagement although they have no obvious connection to citizenship or the polis. Moral engagement means attention and activity relating to moral reasoning and moral agency.¹⁷ And while these different kinds of engagement can accompany one another—political engagement can involve social and moral components, for example—they need not do so.¹⁸

Political and social engagement can coexist with an absence of moral engagement—what the political theorist Hannah Arendt calls “thoughtlessness,” or a failure to “think what we are doing”—as in the cases of nationalist extremism, religiously inspired terrorism, and racial supremacists' hate groups.¹⁹ Conversely, tolerant, charitable, and socially engaged

¹⁶ Here I draw upon Weber's definition of the state as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory,” and politics as “striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power either among states or among groups within a state.” Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in Weber (2007: 78). Power itself comprises a controversial subject, but an all-encompassing definition is not necessary for present purposes.

¹⁷ These definitions raise more questions than they answer; I will address some of the relevant questions in chapter 2.

¹⁸ Social engagement always involves at least some kind of moral engagement, an underlying consciousness of the appropriate norms of behavior. Most political engagement involves at least some kind of moral engagement, as well, an underlying consciousness of the appropriate goals to pursue through political action. But my category of moral engagement involves a more demanding kind of moral attention and energetic follow-through, in which moral reasoning is brought to the forefront. Further, some moral codes and moral reasoning are more appropriate for liberal democracies than others. Hitler's inner circle may have been morally engaged but with a kind of moral reasoning incompatible with liberal democracy.

¹⁹ Arendt (1963). Technically, Arendt's “thoughtlessness” describes total disengagement from moral reasoning. But as noted above, virtually everyone engaged in political or social dynamics participates in some moral code and exercises moral agency, although the moral

individuals may eschew political participation but still contribute to democracy's success. And very high levels of political engagement, in the absence of essential democratic ingredients such as responsive political institutions, can engender violent instability and jeopardize public safety.²⁰ Civic engagement enthusiasts often overlook these vital nuances.

My goal is to make democracy work better rather than make it work ideally. This book inquires into democracy's core requirements—those conditions that it must have (or avoid) in order to work at all—before positing its ideal features.²¹ Citizens might disagree about the latter because reasonable people hold divergent ideals, but we can probably agree upon the phenomena that make democracy fail: for example, rampant lawlessness, weak or unresponsive political institutions, capture of government by unrepresentative factions, or citizens widely unable to communicate, cooperate, or compromise.²² Grounding ourselves in “guarding against the worst” lets us ground ourselves with a measure of consensus.²³ But beginning with the worst does not mean dwelling on it exclusively. It leaves ample room for a chastened idealism that strives to achieve not the best but a variety of goods—not a single, greatest good that fits everyone equally but a framework in which individuals and communities can pursue pluralistic goals and values, including the values of individualism and communal cohesion.²⁴

codes with which they engage may not be compatible with liberal democracy. Further, Arendt's activity of “thinking,” a kind of moral reasoning, involves temporary withdrawal from the world of action. Chapter 2 of this book discusses these matters further.

²⁰See, for example, Bermeo (2003) and Armony (2004) for detailed chronicles of democracies or democratizing nations in which high and widespread political engagement accompanied instability, violence, and, at times, the end of democracy.

²¹For an excellent explanation of this core/ideal distinction, applied to liberal virtues, see Sabl (2005b: 207–35). See also Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear” in Shklar and Hoffmann (1998: 3–21).

²²Like Shklar I “begin with what must be avoided,” but I broaden the scope of ills to include not only “the worst” but also the very bad. We must avoid totalitarianism, slavery, organized cruelty, and constant fear of the preceding—which are awful but not terribly likely in most Western democracies—and also radical atomization, enforced marginalization, and systematic unfairness (denying certain people or groups a reasonable chance of achieving goals their fellow citizens take for granted). The latter type of deprivation pales in comparison with the former but would be shunned by any who take liberal democratic values seriously. See Allen (2004) for a vivid account of twentieth-century forced marginalization in the southern United States and its incompatibility with democratic ideals.

²³Rosenblum (1998b: 48). Robert Dahl posits a similar aim and rationale: “Because it is easier to discover ways of reducing inequality than ways of achieving perfect equality (whatever that might mean), an advanced democratic country would focus on the reduction of the remediable causes of gross political inequalities.” Dahl (1989: 323).

²⁴Martin Krygier proposes “Hobbesian idealism” that begins with the worst but then “thinks simultaneously about avoiding evil and about pursuing good; about threat, about promise, and about their interplay.” Krygier (2005: 148).

This book advocates clear terms and discourse, and to follow those standards I must clarify what I mean by democracy. Just as civic engagement has been stretched to the point where it means almost anything to anyone, so too democracy carries numerous connotations. This book analyzes engagement in modern, representative democracies as opposed to face-to-face direct democracy, possible only in small communities. Modern, representative democracies are also liberal democracies, polities committed to individual rights and dignity as well as to any perceived public good. We must specify liberalism because democracy by itself—majority rule—can involve illiberal coercion, excessive paternalism, or stultifying social conformity unless citizens and officials uphold legal and constitutional protections vigilantly. Liberal democrats value autonomy and choice, but that very autonomy means that citizens may disengage politically if they choose.²⁵ What are the stakes? How should democracy respond?

Democracy would not be democracy, rule of the people, without at least a modicum of political attention and activity from its citizens. But beyond the core requirement of avoiding radical disengagement, what value does political engagement promise to individuals and communities and how much of it does liberal democracy require? Scholars commonly assume that we need as much political engagement as we can get, that more politically engaged democracies are healthier than others, and that modest declines in political engagement should give us cause for grave concern. Some of the most common arguments in this vein either disregard empirical evidence or otherwise fail to convince. Political engagement may still hold great value, but we must do a better job of defining and defending it.²⁶

Viewing political engagement as a combination of attention and energetic activity helps us to understand its value as well as the reasons why democracies often struggle with deficits. Attention and energy are essential to intensive, cooperative undertakings yet are difficult to attract and sustain. That dilemma gives rise to the other half of this book's title. Some scholars assume that citizens would pay close attention to politics were it not for assorted, confounding influences—the baffling complexity

²⁵ By granting citizens the freedom to reject the very practices that led to liberalism's success, "liberalism itself . . . bears no small responsibility for the stiff challenge it now faces." Berkowitz (1999: 174).

²⁶ Others have argued convincingly that normative theory cannot dispense with empirical evidence. See, for example, Dennis Thompson (1970). Thompson criticizes the trend toward "prescriptivism," which attempts to construct normative democratic theory without input from empirical social science. He also criticizes the opposite extreme, "descriptivism," which assumes that empirical evidence can simply "disprove" any normative claim or ideal. My stance resembles Thompson's.

of modern politics or the pressures of time and money, for example.²⁷ According to this line of thinking, as the sociologist Robert Bellah has written, “democracy means paying attention.”²⁸ That view is mistaken. Democracy means, and in practice has always meant, citizens struggling to pay attention and invest energy politically.²⁹ In other words, to say democracy is to say attention deficit—at least, a deficit between theorists’ ideals of political attentiveness and activity, and citizens’ actual priorities and practices. Unlike its modern-day association, “attention deficit disorder,” attention deficit democracy is simply a diagnosis rather than a malady. The diagnosis need not be a counsel of despair, but if it goes unacknowledged our political theories will be at odds with our choices and capacities.

Democracy’s attention deficit is certainly nothing new. Even ancient Athens, widely regarded as a paragon of participatory democracy, saw its political pretensions skewered by the comic poet Aristophanes: “Here, on one of the Assembly days—broad day, too!—not a soul is in place! They’re gossiping in the market, shifting here and there to dodge the long rope’s red paint smear.”³⁰

Athenians so often preferred gossip to deliberative politics that the city’s soldiers employed “red-dyed ropes . . . to chase citizens from the Agora [marketplace] towards the half-filled assembly.”³¹ Being roped meant entanglement and also embarrassment; the telltale red stains invited ridicule and a fine. In subsequent years Athenians began paying a daily stipend for political participation, and in Aristophanes’ later play, *Ekklesiazousai*, soldiers used the same red-dyed ropes to keep citizens out of the overflowing assembly.³² That stipend apparently compensated for any boredom.³³ But neither scenario—neither the gossiping derelicts

²⁷ See, for example, Dewey (1935).

²⁸ Bellah et al. (1992: 255).

²⁹ Not only modern, liberal democracies but also ancient, direct democracies have struggled with this problem.

³⁰ *Acharnians*, in Aristophanes (1927: 19–23). The play dates to 425 BC.

³¹ Hansen (1987: 18). Scholars estimate the average attendance level of an Athenian assembly (*ekklesia*) at between 20 percent and 40 percent of the total citizenry, but some interpret this range as indicating fairly high interest in politics given the relative frequency of the assemblies (nearly one per week). See Ober (1991: 132).

³² *Ekklesiazousai*, in Aristophanes (1927). The play dates to 392 or 393 BC. “Without this stipend, poorer men would have found it hard to leave their regular work to serve in these time-consuming positions.” Martin (2000: 113).

³³ “The poorest of the citizens—the old, handicapped, unlucky and unskilled—might well attend the Assembly regularly as a way to collect money not otherwise available to them.” Ober (1991: 136). Note that not all citizens who participated were motivated by the money, and the stipend may well attest to Athens’s egalitarian commitments rather than a concession to low attendance. Martin (2000).

nor the mercenary attendees—suggests the presence of an independently attentive demos.

More than two thousand years later democracy had changed locations but not its ability to focus. Alexis de Tocqueville, now widely (but wrongly) regarded as an unqualified enthusiast for American civic engagement, observed a potential problem with New World democracy. He remarked that the average American citizen “does everything in a hurry . . . he hardly has the time, and he soon loses the taste, for going deeply into anything.”³⁴ Absent the distractions of a high-tech environment or the pressures of a heavily industrialized economy, Tocqueville still witnessed a “habitual preoccupation” with private affairs that left each individual “concerned with several aims at the same time.” He considered ancient as well as modern democracies and concluded that “habitual inattention must be reckoned the great vice of the democratic spirit.”³⁵

In the early twentieth century attention and energy once again took center stage in the still-influential Dewey-Lippmann debate. American philosopher John Dewey argued that universal education, a civically educational media, and thoroughgoing economic reform could promote awareness of mutual interests, direct attention toward public affairs, and “release human energy for pursuit of higher values.”³⁶ As a result “the average individual would rise to undreamed of heights of social and political intelligence,” and citizens could collectively direct their governments and destinies.³⁷ Public intellectual Walter Lippmann countered that modern society presents a bafflingly complex political environment and criticized Dewey for promoting a “myth” of the “omnicompetent citizen.”³⁸ In spite of any educational reforms, most citizens “even if they had genius, would give only a little time and attention to public affairs.”³⁹ Lippmann proposed much more modest goals for democratic politics, offering “a theory which economizes the attention of men as members of the public, and . . . confines the effort of men, when they are a public, to

³⁴ Tocqueville (1969: 611).

³⁵ Ibid. Dana Villa (2008) has pointed out that Tocqueville did not witness and could not fully grasp the possibility of corporate and global capitalism, which may have done more toward crowding out the role of citizens than even big government has done. Even with that point granted, however, Tocqueville did notice Americans’ frequent inattention to politics, especially outside of the tiny New England area that he praised so highly. He also bemoaned the increasing influence of economic power and commercialism on American culture and politics. See Craiutu and Jennings (2004: 398). More on these points in chapter 4.

³⁶ Dewey (1935: 90).

³⁷ Ibid., 70.

³⁸ Lippmann (1925: 21). Although Dewey wrote *Liberalism and Social Action* after Lippmann’s *Phantom Public*, the quotes presented here are illustrative of the two theorists’ long-standing debate. See also Lippmann (1929) and Dewey (1927).

³⁹ Lippmann (1925: 127).

a part they might fulfill.” The appropriate part for citizens would involve action “only when there is a crisis of maladjustment,” and even then it would simply entail choosing among competing elites.⁴⁰

Present-day scholars tend to endorse one of these two arguments while ignoring the rich terrain in between. To generalize broadly, Dewey has won the day in educational studies and political theory and among those who advocate a “participatory” model of democracy. Lippmann holds more currency among economists, political scientists who study voting behavior, and those who advocate an elite model of democracy.⁴¹ In analyzing what causes political disengagement and whether greater participation is desirable or possible, I steer a middle course between Dewey’s excessive optimism and Lippmann’s undue pessimism, between the participatory and elite models of democracy, while confronting similar problems of limited political attention and energy.

To be fair, empirical political scientists have done a better job than normative political theorists of acknowledging citizens’ limited political attention. But political scientists focus almost exclusively on limited attention’s implications for voting behavior and public opinion, which constitute only a small bit of what political theorists consider the meat of democratic political engagement.⁴² This book attempts to combine some of each camp’s strengths: a clear-eyed acknowledgment of citizens’ limited political attention and the implications for democratic politics, extended to include the many varieties of political engagement beyond episodic voting and political awareness.

Thus far I have focused primarily on attention, but citizens’ energies are equally important. Much has been written about democracies’ need for so-called social capital, which denotes “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions.”⁴³ When we participate in voluntary associations and other cooperative endeavors—when we are socially engaged—we can develop interpersonal relationships that fa-

⁴⁰Ibid., 199.

⁴¹The participatory (or deliberative) model insists that for democracy to merit its name, well-informed citizens must actively participate in political deliberation and decision-making. The elite (or pragmatic) model envisions modern politics as the province of well-trained elites who are periodically checked by competitive elections. For more on the debate between the participatory and elite models, see Posner (2003). For prominent arguments of the former type, see Pateman (1970); Gutmann (1987); Fishkin (1991); and Leib (2005). For prominent arguments in the latter group, see Converse (1964); Zaller (1992); Somin (1998); and Caplan (2007).

⁴²Political scientists considering limited attention generally ask whether a politically inattentive citizenry can comprise a rational and self-governing public. Converse (1964), Somin (1998), and Kuklinski and Quirk (2000) consider evidence to the contrary, whereas Popkin (1994) and Lupia and McCubbins (1998) present more optimistic arguments.

⁴³Putnam (1993: 167).

cilitate further cooperation.⁴⁴ We can draw upon social capital as well, just as we draw upon financial capital, to help us achieve individual or collective goals; we can channel social capital into political outlets and institutions, thus facilitating specifically political goals.⁴⁵ But we cannot generate social capital in the first place without moving beyond passive attention to invest our energies in cooperative endeavors and thus forge useful relationships, bonds, and reciprocal norms.

I will advance an original argument about the relationship among attention, energy, and citizens' tastes. Attention generally precedes energetic activity; if a topic does not capture our attention it will not enduringly attract our energy. So to attract our energy and form social or political capital, a subject must first attract and hold our attention. Attention, in turn, is shaped by many factors, including ideology, habituation, culture, and perceived threats or dangers. But it is also strongly influenced by individual taste, and as the old saying goes there is no accounting for that. So to a greater extent than many scholars acknowledge, attention follows tastes and energy follows attention.

Tastes → Attention → Energy → Social and Political Capital

Perceived self-efficacy—one's ability to succeed at a given endeavor and make a meaningful impact—can also affect tastes and attention, as Tocqueville recognized. More on that in chapter 4.⁴⁶ We pay attention to things that we like, sometimes at the expense of our own long-term interests. All of us know hobbyists, sports fans, or even video game enthusiasts who focus raptly on trivialities (and invest substantial energy) while ignoring policy debates that could vitally affect their futures.

In other words, having an interest does not always mean taking an interest. Having a stake in an outcome does not mean that we attend to it.

⁴⁴ Social capital represents a potentially useful but confusing construct, because it refers not only to the norms—such as trust and reciprocity—already present in social organizations or movements but also to the relationships that people can build when they join social organizations or movements. The first kind of social capital helps people to build the second kind, but the second kind also helps to build the first kind. Which one comes first? That question has been examined in other studies and lies beyond the scope of the present analysis.

⁴⁵ "Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence. . . . For example, a group whose members manifest trustworthiness and place extensive trust in one another will be able to accomplish much more than a comparable group lacking that trustworthiness and trust. . . . In a farming community . . . where one farmer got his hay baled by another and where farm tools are extensively borrowed and lent, the social capital allows each farmer to get his work done with less physical capital in the form of tools and equipment." Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990: 302, 304, 307), cited in Putnam (1993).

⁴⁶ For social psychological research in perceived self-efficacy and engagement, see Bandura (1977 and 1997). For efficacy and students' attention and engagement, see Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003).

When democratic citizens can do as they like, politics seldom fares well in the taste test. Not only now but also in most previous eras political affairs have attracted citizens' enduring attention only when faced with few and boring competitors.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, understanding our capacities and proclivities equips us to think about effective responses to disengagement. That is exactly what this book aims to do: diagnose democracy's tendencies and limitations and then prescribe pragmatic means of making democracy work better.

Thus the diagnosis of attention deficit democracy also entails a kind of public philosophy, a set of beliefs that "specify general directions for public policy within a basic understanding of how the world works."⁴⁸ In other words, the diagnosis plus the prescriptive directions that follow from it—which I will detail in chapter 6—comprise the public philosophy of attention deficit democracy. Some public philosophies are formulated from the top down, meaning that they are held by politically active intellectuals who hope to guide the public's practices and institutions.⁴⁹ Examples include the worthy political theories of deliberative democracy and civic republicanism. Self-described deliberative democrats, giving priority to political equality and democratic legitimacy, generally insist upon widespread participation in deliberative political forums, with procedures that prioritize reason over narrow interests and conditions that guarantee all an equal voice.⁵⁰ Self-described civic republicans, for the sake of meaningful political liberty and self-governance, tend to stress an ideal of active citizenship and civic virtue more than reason-based deliberation. They insist upon greater citizen control over "the forces that govern our lives" and greater participation in timely moral and political debates.⁵¹ Other theorists concerned with public freedom exhort citizens to assert themselves, exercise their full prerogatives as citizens, and hold governments as well as corporations fully accountable for their actions.⁵² But as William Galston reasonably cautions, "given most Americans' ambivalence about

⁴⁷ "Men may be frustrated in their primary activities [involving work, play, love, family, friendship and the like] without ever turning to politics for solutions . . . since the primary activities are voracious in their demands for time, political activity must enter into competition with them. For most people it is evidently a weak competitor." Dahl (1961: 180).

⁴⁸ Galston (1998: 64).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Fishkin (1997); Weeks (2000); Gabardi (2001); Ackerman and Fishkin (2004).

⁵¹ Sandel (1996); Barber (1998). Not all civic republicans emphasize participation and moral deliberation; see, for example, Pettit (1997). Here I am concerned with the more participatory version. For more on the varieties of civic republicanism, see Honohan (2002) and Berger (2010).

⁵² Villa (2008: 25) writes that "the only way of combating this bogus inevitability [of overreaching, emergency-power governments doing whatever they like] is to reclaim our capacity for action as citizens, rather than as members of single-issue focused interest groups." Meyers (2008: 264–66) insists that a renewed dedication to active citizenship remains our only means of resisting overly ambitious and possibly malicious governments.

the place of political activities in their lives, it remains to be seen whether ideals of a more engaged and demanding citizenship can gain public support and become the basis of an effective new public philosophy.”⁵³ Top-down public philosophies can play a valuable role in our political discourse, proffering ideals and goals toward which we might strive. As political theories they may have much to recommend them; they prescribe what Dennis Thompson has called “reconstructive ideals,” without which political philosophy would lack imagination or vision.⁵⁴ However, such reconstructive theories rely upon a majority of citizens adopting practices and commitments that most have tended to regard with distaste when regarding them at all. So for the foreseeable future these public philosophies are far more philosophical than public.

Attention deficit democracy, conversely, points to an accessible public philosophy, a set of ideas about the public that is embraced by the public as well.⁵⁵ It summarizes the belief that marshaling continual, widespread political attention and energy is nearly impossible, but that we can and should do more with our collective resources than we have in recent years. Rather than implying cynical resignation, attention deficit democracy entails an enlightened and chastened idealism that pragmatically battles democracy’s ever-present tendencies toward privatism. It prescribes what Thompson calls “constructive ideals,” or improvements that could be implemented without foundationally restructuring society or the citizenry.⁵⁶ It eschews utopian plans not out of pessimism but rather to focus on the concrete steps by which we can fight the costs of preventable disengagement.

A surprising number of canonical political theorists agree with my empirical diagnosis. For example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, John Dewey, and Hannah Arendt, all commonly perceived as participatory enthusiasts, recognize that free societies will struggle to muster and maintain political attention and activity. But they do not develop the implications of their observations, so their uneasiness generally goes unnoticed even by the scholars who celebrate their work. Recovering this aspect of our philosophical tradition—philosophers’ underappreciated unease about the challenges of sustaining political attention and energetic

⁵³ Galston (1998: 79). Galston here addresses deliberative democracy but his comment could just as easily apply to civic republicanism.

⁵⁴ Thompson (1970).

⁵⁵ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (2002: 183) find that “in contrast to theorists’ speculations,” a vast amount of survey data indicates that “people’s dislike of politics runs deep and is unlikely to be eliminated if they would only get involved with other people in political procedures.” However, subjects also acknowledged that problems could arise from too much disengagement.

⁵⁶ Thompson (1970).

activity—helps us to view our current predicament as part of an age-old struggle rather than as a new and uniquely frightening development.

My empirical diagnosis should prove relevant and useful even to those who disagree with my prescriptions. To ignore the diagnosis entirely would be to practice what Robert Nozick ironically calls normative sociology, or “the study of what the causes of problems *ought* to be.”⁵⁷ Incomplete diagnoses invite misleading prescriptions. For example, some social and political theorists in the communitarian or civic republican schools lament a perceived decline in political and social engagement and prescribe increased political participation to remedy democracy’s alleged malaise.⁵⁸ Some of them blame the impersonal forces of an unfettered free market or an unresponsive “big government” for dampening public discourse and political engagement.⁵⁹ Others criticize an ethos of excessive individualism that undermines our commitments to one another and to the public interest.⁶⁰ Those diagnoses arise from sound observations and thus have struck a responsive note with many citizens. But sometimes they overlook equally sound observations that complicate any prescriptive advice. While market forces and bureaucratic government may be partly responsible for subduing political engagement, we citizens also play a significant role. Thus, while I do not deny that global, economic, and governmental forces can stifle political engagement I choose to focus here on voluntary disengagement, not only because others have extensively indicted those larger, impersonal forces but also because citizen inattention has plagued democracy for as long as democracies have existed, long predating big business, big government, and modern mass media.

Indeed, despite our concerns about political and social engagement most citizens shrink from changes and commitments that might counter the perceived trends. We may value a sense of community, but we also value economic opportunity, privacy, and mobility, which helps to explain why we relocate frequently, spend considerable time alone or with intimates, and find it difficult to feel rooted in any particular place.⁶¹ We

⁵⁷Nozick (1974: 247).

⁵⁸Michael Walzer claims that some communitarians “prescribe citizenship as an antidote” to modern isolation and atomization. Walzer (1992: 90). Bellah et al. (1992) and Barber (1984) belong to that camp.

⁵⁹Pateman (1970); Barber (1996); Wolin (2008). Dana Villa acknowledges some self-incurred aspects of citizen disengagement but places more blame on an arrogant, arrogating executive branch for ignoring popular dissent and creating an “atmosphere of generalized fear,” as well as the “tyranny of public relations and advertising,” not to mention “robustly global competition,” because “far more than government, the marketplace throws us back upon ourselves.” Villa (2008: 5–9).

⁶⁰Bellah et al. (1992: 270).

⁶¹According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 43 million Americans (approximately 16 percent of persons one year old and over) changed their residences during the one-year period between March of 1999 and March of 2000. Of these 43 million, 39 percent were considered “long distance mov-

rue low rates of voter participation and generally intend to vote, but often fail to follow through.⁶² We value political participation, but not participation that is compelled. Cherishing our individualism, we are loath to allow our peers, let alone our government, tell us (without invitation) how to live, what to think, or how to spend our time. In other words, we Americans value community and political engagement but hold other values that make them difficult to sustain, and we do not want to be forced to resolve the discrepancy. Thus we wrestle with political antinomy, an opposition between equally reasonable principles. Such tensions are neither rare nor incoherent; in almost every society “the themes of common sense . . . pull in contrary directions,” and the ensuing struggles can elicit fruitful moral debates.⁶³ Attention deficit democracy’s diagnosis acknowledges the fact of our reasonable antinomies, and its prescriptions try to accommodate our conflicting values.

This book assumes from the outset that our own choices may lead to undesired outcomes. I draw upon classic works of political theory to illuminate those outcomes: how they arise, why they are undesirable, how bad they are compared with available alternatives, and what can we do to effect a change. Our response must be tempered by a sobering question. If preservation of democratic freedom is one of our animating concerns, can we reverse trends of voluntary disengagement without coercing citizens illiberally and hence compromising the very ideals that we had hoped to serve?

Jürgen Habermas, articulating a common theme of democratic theory, maintains that democracies should establish a public sphere in which all citizens can participate equally in rational deliberation, a situation that he calls the “ideal speech situation.”⁶⁴ Indeed, the public realm could and should be more inclusive, welcoming, and fair. Nonetheless, if my argument is correct then even Habermas’s “ideal speech situation”—itself a distant if not unrealizable goal—might not be enough to counteract voluntary political disengagement. That daunting realization should not dampen but only redirect our aspirations from an exclusive focus on political supply—the opportunities for citizens to engage on equal footing—to the less commonly appreciated problem of political demand.

ers,” having changed residence across counties or states. A fairly normal annual relocation rate is 16 percent; in the mid-1980s as many as 20 percent of Americans moved in a single year.

⁶²According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, in late October of 2000, 97 percent of registered voters said that they planned to vote in the November elections, whereas 67.5 percent actually turned out to vote. Voter turnout was substantially higher in 2004 but still far lower than the level of those who expressed an intention to vote.

⁶³Billig (1995: 64–81; and 1996: 238). As an example of reasonable antinomy, “patience is a virtue” and “he who hesitates is lost” each represent sound advice in the appropriate context.

⁶⁴Habermas (1984a and 1984b).

The motivation to engage involves many complex factors, including citizens' levels of social connectedness, educational attainment, and economic status. Providing an "ideal speech situation" without addressing widespread deficiencies in these socioeconomic resources will not yield widespread political reengagement, as Habermas acknowledges.⁶⁵ But wealth and education do not guarantee political engagement, either; political attention and energy wander even among the well educated and well heeled.⁶⁶ The public philosophy of attention deficit democracy focuses on stimulating our demand for political engagement through liberal democratic means.

Four possibilities for pragmatic reform follow immediately from my diagnosis, and I will develop them more fully in later chapters. First, citizens and their representatives can strive to make local and national politics more appealing to widespread tastes. Second, we can look to habituation and early education to make our tastes more political. Third, we can reform our political institutions so that they channel existing political attention and energy more efficiently. Fourth, we can target the attention (and energy) of constituencies most prone to disengagement. Aside from working with tastes, we can strive to make political institutions more welcoming—to give citizens a meaningful sense of political efficacy. That aspiration points us toward local political institutions and engagement, where any individual citizen might hope to make an impact.

Chapter 2 shows how and why the term *civic engagement* quickly rose to prominence, illustrating the term's meteoric rise and the confusion that accompanies its widespread use. Civic engagement has remained popular, influential, and ultimately misleading for a number of reasons. The second half of the term, engagement, is one of those reasons. *Engage* entails a combination of activity and attention, an investment of energy and a consciousness of purpose. At some level that has registered with the public; during the very same years of civic engagement's meteoric rise, public discourse showed an accelerated concern with attention, distraction, and the difficulties of engaging with the pace of modern life.

But not all engagement is political, although the term *civic engagement* lumps league bowling together with town hall meetings. Nor is political engagement necessarily moral; consider the Ku Klux Klan or other violent hate groups. Thus chapter 2 distinguishes among political, social, and moral engagement—distinctions usually elided in civic engagement scholarship—and sketches examples of each type. It further differentiates among engagement undertaken at the local, national, and international level, each of which entails unique challenges, commitments, and

⁶⁵Held (1980: 396).

⁶⁶See, for example, Putnam (1995 and 2000).

rewards. I consider the somewhat striking and unpopular possibility that liberal democracies may require social and a certain kind of moral engagement (stressing toleration, reciprocity, and law-abidingness) more or less continuously, but political engagement only episodically.

That claim brings up the question of whether political engagement is really as valuable as most of us seem to think. Advocates of political engagement either take its worth for granted or make one of two kinds of claims on its behalf. They assert that political engagement is an instrumental good for citizens of representative democracies or an intrinsic good for human beings.⁶⁷ Intrinsic arguments differ from instrumental arguments in that the former praise political life not for what it can elicit but because of what it is. Political participation, in the intrinsic view, is excellent or strongly choice worthy simply for what it represents, and it carries a dignity all its own.

Chapters 3 and 4 turn to Hannah Arendt and Alexis de Tocqueville for representative versions of the intrinsic and instrumental defenses of political engagement, respectively; these two views still strongly influence contemporary debates. Tocqueville and Arendt share an intellectual link—Arendt acknowledges a debt to Tocqueville's work—and a common focus.⁶⁸ Both are anxious friends of democracy who worry that withdrawal from public life, whether voluntary or involuntary, may undermine the foundations of democratic freedom. At the beginning of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville promises to address the question, "where . . . are we going?"⁶⁹ At the beginning of *The Human Condition* Arendt proposes to "think what we are doing."⁷⁰ Both Tocqueville and Arendt hope to improve their readers' vision or, as Tocqueville puts it, to help readers "see not differently but further."⁷¹ They offer long-term perspective to citizens who can be too closely immersed in day-to-day activities to realize that their choices may jeopardize their interests.

Both Arendt and Tocqueville associate political engagement⁷² with a motivating force or dynamism that inheres in all individuals but finds its fullest expression when exercised in concert. Tocqueville calls both the individual and the collective capacity by the single name, "energy"

⁶⁷For similar distinctions between intrinsic and instrumental goods, see Parfit (1997: 203–21). See as well Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* (1985: 1096b15). Additionally, David Miller (1995: 194) distinguishes between liberals and "nationalists" according to their instrumental and intrinsic valuation of politics, respectively.

⁶⁸On the point of Arendt's acknowledged debt to Tocqueville, see Lloyd (1995) and Benhabib (1990).

⁶⁹Tocqueville (1969: 12).

⁷⁰Arendt (1959: 5).

⁷¹Tocqueville (1969: 20).

⁷²Neither Arendt nor Tocqueville uses the term *political engagement*, but both are concerned with active, attentive involvement in community and political affairs.

(*énergie*). Arendt calls the individual capacity “action” and the collective phenomenon “power.” For Arendt and Tocqueville, the societal environment—institutional arrangements as well as political, social, and moral norms—strongly influences whether energy or power will flourish or fade. Tocqueville goes one step further, focusing on citizens’ attention as well as their energy. A close reading shows that in Tocqueville’s eyes, political energy fades when citizens’ political attention wanders, which in democratic societies will probably be the norm. (That claim might not in itself seem revolutionary, but previous scholarship has not emphasized the vital link between attention and energy in Tocqueville’s thought, and the possible means of countering their dissipation.) For Arendt and Tocqueville, the problem of sustaining political engagement might be conceptualized as the problem of generating political energy or power.

Arendt, one of the twentieth century’s most influential philosophers, is often cited by those who promote the participatory democratic theories sometimes known as civic humanism, civic republicanism, or communitarianism because she champions political engagement for its own sake and lauds the dignity and joy of spontaneous, unfettered political action.⁷³ But Arendt’s arguments exemplify the difficulties of defending political engagement for its intrinsic merits. I will propose a new reading of her work suggesting that her praise of political engagement and action should be interpreted as intentional overstatement. If interpreted literally it either lapses into internal contradiction or else into elitism, neither of which seem likely from a thinker of Arendt’s stature and egalitarian commitments. Arendt is ultimately more successful at expanding our understanding of the evils that we must avoid at all costs, which include political, social, and moral disengagement, than at teaching us about the goods that we must pursue together.

In recent years Tocqueville’s star has burned even more brightly than Arendt’s. A great number of books and articles in the civic engagement literature cite Tocqueville approvingly to illustrate how citizens can learn about democracy through engagement with local associations and

⁷³ Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves (1993: 2) writes, “Arendt’s conception of politics, with its stress on civic engagement and unconstrained political deliberation, is clearly indebted to [classical civic republicanism],” and certain strains of modern-day civic republicanism in turn owe a debt to Arendt.

Participatory civic republicanism, sometimes termed *civic humanism* and tracing a lineage to ancient Athens, comprises the strain of modern civic republicanism associated with Arendt. But other forms of civic republicanism, such as the *institutional* version—which traces its lineage to ancient Rome and is espoused by contemporary theorists such as Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner—do not stress participation as an intrinsic good and have no particular affinity with Arendt. For more on the participatory and institutional strains of republicanism, see Berger (2010).

government and then steer society meaningfully.⁷⁴ But too often scholars celebrate him for the wrong reasons. Many of them cite the same few passages from Tocqueville's voluminous works and pass over the many observations that contradict their assumptions. Even the recent term, neo-Tocquevillean—occasionally used as an epithet to characterize scholars who overvalue civic engagement as the sole or primary ingredient for making democracy work—reflects an imperfect grasp of his teachings and insights, demeaning Tocqueville along with the alleged neo-Tocquevilleans.⁷⁵ To be sure, Tocqueville stresses the importance of voluntary associations and political participation, but he also stresses the need for institutional design that can channel citizens' collective energy into useful political outlets and connect local energy with regional and national politics. Further, political scientists commonly misinterpret Tocqueville as an optimistic champion of American democracy, ignoring his suspicions that Jacksonian America's high political engagement could not endure.⁷⁶ This book provides insights into the ways in which Tocqueville and Arendt should, and should not, be drawn upon when we theorize about democracy in America and elsewhere.

For all of their similarities Arendt and Tocqueville ultimately value political engagement for different reasons. Arendt defends participation in public life as an intrinsic good, one of the most valuable experiences of human existence, the essence of human freedom, and an end in itself. Tocqueville values political engagement instrumentally, doubting that it directly constitutes the good life for most people. In truth, each thinker shares ground with the other. Arendt understands politics' instrumental benefits and Tocqueville grasps that exceptional individuals might cherish political life for its own sake. But Tocqueville alone stresses political engagement's instrumental value as the primary reason why democracy cannot do without at least some of it, and Tocqueville alone implies practical prescriptions for regenerating some of that value even as the world changes in ways that threaten social and political engagement. After mining Arendt's and Tocqueville's work for underappreciated insights into our relationship with political, social, and moral engagement, chapter

⁷⁴ Among political scientists, Putnam, Skocpol, and Fiorina all cite Tocqueville in introducing their works on civic engagement. The *American Prospect* chose the name "The Tocqueville Files" for its multipart, multiauthor debate on civic engagement. In the political theory compilation *Freedom of Association* (1998), Amy Gutmann, George Kateb, Sam Fleischacker, Daniel A. Bell, Alan Ryan, Nancy Rosenblum, and Yael Tamir all cite Tocqueville to contextualize their claims about the importance of association in liberal democracies. Gutmann and Tamir, in fact, open their essays with quotes from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

⁷⁵ See Berman (1997).

⁷⁶ This point might surprise Tocqueville dilettantes but not specialists such as Craiutu and Jennings (2004) and Villa (2008).

4 finds Tocqueville's instrumental defense of political engagement more persuasive.

None of the scholars who defend widespread political engagement, including Tocqueville, makes a fully convincing case that democracy always (or even usually) requires such engagement from all or most of its citizens, all or most of the time. Chapter 5 catalogs the most prominent arguments for political engagement's importance and shows that each, individually, presents circumstantial evidence: suggestive and perhaps plausible but ultimately inconclusive. But in political theory as in courtroom trials, circumstantial evidence can prove decisive if compiled in quantity and assembled coherently. From the available evidence I build a case for political engagement's importance that can stand up to critical scrutiny where others, individually, fall short. The case suggests that political engagement is likely to bring at least some of a wide range of benefits to at least some of liberal democracy's citizens at least some of the time. Thus we cannot be indifferent to political engagement, as some theorists of "elite" democracy hold.⁷⁷ But neither can we regard it as the grand solution to what ails us.⁷⁸ Liberal democracy cannot do without political engagement but does not necessarily need high and widespread levels either. In fact, in the area of political engagement liberal democracies' top priority should be preventing radical *disengagement*, which threatens a variety of undesirable consequences, and also to promote political attention and activity among those segments of the population most likely to suffer when disengaged.⁷⁹

That proposal accords with my general approach to democratic reform. We are hard-pressed to establish the exact conditions required for liberal democracy's health, but we can discern those conditions that will almost certainly undermine it. They include not only radical political disengagement but also balkanized social engagement, very low levels of liberal-democratic moral engagement, and weak or unresponsive political institutions. Before embarking on potentially coercive and paternalistic

⁷⁷ Schumpeter (1942); Somin (1998).

⁷⁸ Meyers (2008: 191–93).

⁷⁹ In chapter 3 and 4 I describe some of the harms that can accompany radical disengagement. Regarding those groups most likely to be harmed by political disengagement, Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995: 178) demonstrate a robust correlation between income and education levels, on one hand, and political engagement on the other. They also demonstrate the presence of "participatory distortion." Distortion refers to "the circumstance in which political activists do not reflect accurately the larger population from which they come with respect to some politically relevant characteristic," and it occurs much more significantly among poor and poorly educated segments than the rest of the population. Those with fewer economic and educational resources are less likely to engage politically and more likely to be misrepresented when disengaged. Bartels (2009) and Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) also provide extensive data on the disproportionate participation and representation of white, wealthy, and well-educated citizens.

campaigns to increase political engagement nationwide, liberal democracies should promote a number of conditions that are not yet well established. Specifically, they should take care to ensure responsive political institutions, generalized social engagement, generalized liberal-democratic moral engagement, episodic political engagement, and what we might call political attention monitors—nongovernmental, independent actors and institutions (including partisan watchdog organizations, newspapers, television shows, weblogs, and community activists) that pay attention to political developments and can attract citizens' attention (and mobilize their energy) when exceptional circumstances demand it.

Chapter 6 closes with some modest proposals intended not to cure democracy's attention deficit but to keep its worst effects enduringly in check. As mentioned above democratic citizens can elect to alter their tastes through political education and habituation; can change the tenor of political discussions, debates, and media coverage so that politics appeal more effectively to existing tastes; and can alter political institutions so that they utilize and channel existing political attention and energy more efficaciously. I am least sanguine about the first option and most sanguine about the third, but the second is of special interest because—as I will explain in chapter 4—it follows from Tocqueville's teachings yet is almost totally ignored in today's political engagement scholarship.

In addition to prescriptions directed at all citizens equally, checking the worst effects of democracy's political attention deficit means focusing on certain groups' disengagement more than others. Promoting political engagement among the upper middle class or among college students at elite institutions—who already tend to participate at much higher rates than the rest of the population—is unlikely to improve democratic representation, fairness, or legitimacy commensurate with its cost. The poorest and least educated citizens are most likely to be disengaged both politically and socially and least likely to be accurately represented by politicians or activists.⁸⁰ Engaging these marginalized citizens would improve their prospects and serve the broader polity as well by promoting the widely shared goals of fairness and democratic legitimacy.⁸¹ By the same token promoting political engagement at the local rather than national level speaks to a broad range of democratic values and goals and can pave the way for national-level engagement.⁸²

The preceding issues affect not only political theorists but also a broad range of citizens, so this book addresses multiple constituencies. To political scientists it promises that clarifying our discourse and specifying our terms can improve the study of democratic politics. By distinguishing

⁸⁰ Verba et al. (1995: 463–508). Also see Strolovitch (2007).

⁸¹ Lijphart (1997: 1).

⁸² Cf. Fung (2006); Sirianni and Friedland (2001); Sabl (2002b).

among political, social, and moral engagement, which do not always coincide, it encourages political scientists to specify the attentive activities most essential for democratic societies rather than lumping them all into one “civic” category. By highlighting attention and energy as the fundamental concerns shared by almost all scholars using the infelicitous term *civic engagement*, it encourages future studies to consider means of attracting, sustaining, and harnessing those resources more effectively. This book also encourages political scientists to extend their study of limited attention’s political implications beyond the realm of periodic voting. Limited attention can affect all forms of political engagement and can affect social and moral engagement as well, all of which matter greatly in projecting democracy’s success.

To political theorists this book recommends a more earnest engagement with the empirical evidence of human beings’ limited attention and of citizens’ tastes, values, and choices regarding political and political participation.⁸³ Tocqueville shows us the way with his “new political science,” dictating philosophical inquiry based on empirical observations. But some political theorists overlook the evidence of our limited political attention and participatory ambivalence, projecting their own taste for political engagement onto the public.⁸⁴ Theorists must acknowledge contemporary empirical data and also the diagnoses of wandering political attention that recur throughout the philosophical canon, and they must grapple with the means of accepting, rejecting, or overcoming those assessments.

To scholars in other academic fields—psychologists, sociologists, and any researchers interested in the capacities and limitations of attention, energy, and tastes—this book recommends an interdisciplinary dialogue that benefits from diverse expertise. Political scientists and theorists tend to focus on what I call *political engagement* (even when we mistakenly call it *civic*); sociologists focus on what I call *social engagement*; social and cognitive psychologists focus on *moral engagement* and *disengagement*. But we should be talking to one another instead of working by ourselves.

We should be talking to ordinary citizens as well. This book gives an account of political engagement, social engagement, and moral engagement—their meaning, value, and challenges—in which we citizens can

⁸³To be sure, many political theorists take a close account of empirical evidence regarding political participation. Cf. Thompson (1970); Pateman (1970); Mansbridge (1999); Fung (2006). But many more do not, especially regarding attention and tastes.

⁸⁴Democratic theorists seldom cite studies chronicling American citizens’ dislike for political engagement, such as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) or suggesting that “people whose political networks involve greater political disagreement are less likely to participate in politics. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002: 183–208). See also Mutz (2002 and 2006).

recognize ourselves and our experiences. The public philosophy of attention deficit democracy is currently on the tips of our tongues, capable of invigorating public debate once articulated. Because it speaks to widely held commitments, values, and doubts, it complements rather than supplants top-down theories such as civic republicanism and deliberative democracy. Any public philosophy that prescribes worthy but controversial changes in our policies and practices, such as deliberation guided only by neutral reason or greatly increased political participation, should try to persuade the public to its point of view by engaging citizens on their own terms, respecting their current values, tastes, and goals.

This book's commitment to addressing a broad audience follows from Immanuel Kant's insistence that scholars employ their reason before "the entire reading public."⁸⁵ Citizens are the core element of democratic politics, so political theorists who take democratic politics seriously must take citizens seriously as well. When we citizens begin to understand why political engagement is esteemed yet frequently deserted we can begin to consider realistic solutions. I present attention deficit democracy not as a cynical last word on our plight but as the beginning of a hopeful public conversation.

⁸⁵ "What Is Enlightenment?" in *Kant: Political Writings* (1991: 55). For Kant the "entire reading public" meant a much smaller group than it does now, so in a sense my aims are even more democratic.