Editor's Notebook: The Crisis in American Citizenship

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol2/iss3/3
It is now over twenty years since Americans were challenged to become better citizens by John F. Kennedy’s call to “ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” Although those words spurred some to join the Peace Corps or fight to overcome racial injustice, the vast majority of Americans were never really moved to examine their responsibilities as citizens or for that matter to become actively involved in politics or governmental affairs.

Since the Kennedy years the state of American citizenship has degenerated. The Vietnam war created deep divisions at home as large numbers of citizens became alienated from government and in some cases ashamed of their country. The post-war era did little to revitalize citizen support for government as the Watergate scandal left Americans with a tainted view of the presidency and political ethics. Politicians were stereotyped as “crooks” and “liars,” while government appeared oblivious to the wishes of the average citizen. The resignation of President Nixon and the Administrations of Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter may have cleared the air of corruption, but the public’s view of leadership and national pride were severely affected. President Ford’s pardon of the Watergate conspirators was “not very” or “not at all” interested in politics. Moreover, there was no political or governmental career among the top thirty careers they wished to pursue once out of high school. And when asked to identify their United States congressman, only twenty-seven percent of the teenagers answered correctly.

It is fashionable today to blame such responses on the failure of education, television and of course the politicians themselves. But the poor record of American citizenship is not something new or the result of periodic scandals. Our attitudes toward citizenship seem to be handed down from generation to generation. Even worse, we don’t seem to be interested in changing these attitudes. We have become accustomed to low voter turnout, and we fail to realize that citizens of many other democracies feel an obligation to participate. We complacently accept the cliche that bad government is the fault of the politicians rather than the result of our negligence. We have lost hope in trying to make government work for us, primarily because we refuse to take the time to understand how it works.

Rebuilding a sense of citizenship in this country will not be easy, since strengthening the ties between people and their government requires a long process of civic education. More than just classroom government courses, civic education seeks to develop a greater commitment to participate in government affairs through reforms that allow for wider participation in political decision-making.

To be effective, civic education must be targeted at the new generation of American citizens who need to be reminded of both their rights and their responsibilities in our democracy. Being a good citizen is really not difficult. It is in many ways a matter of training; not blind brainwashing as is found in Communist countries, but frequent reminders at home, at school, over television and on the job that participating in government affairs is a vital part of life. For too long Americans have abdicated their citizenship responsibilities and relied on the “other guy” to take care of governmental affairs. We continue to call ourselves a democracy, but in reality we may be participants in a democratic facade – a society where the citizens have little interest in preserving their own way of life.

United States in the woeful lack of interest in politics and knowledge of the political process by American youth. A Gallup Poll a few years ago showed that sixty-one percent of sixteen to eighteen-year olds were “not very” or “not at all” interested in politics. Moreover, teenagers did not cite a political/governmental career among the top thirty careers they wished to pursue once out of high school. And when asked to identify their United States congressman, only twenty-seven percent of the teenagers answered correctly.

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