

they ask? Has anyone demonstrated that variations in civic engagement are related to welfare measures of any interest? Thus far, plausible argument substitutes for hard evidence. Others are dubious about the purported decline of civic engagement in America, believing that even the independent variable has not been accurately characterized.<sup>1</sup> The chapters in this collection explore some of these issues.

This chapter too reflects a skeptical stance, but of a somewhat different sort. While many have questioned whether purported declines in civic engagement have had identifiable adverse consequences, only a few curmudgeons have suggested that civic engagement may not necessarily be a good thing.<sup>2</sup> That is what I argue here. Put simply, at least in the political realm I am doubtful that the relationship between civic engagement and social welfare is generally positive. For present purposes we can stipulate that high levels of civic engagement are optimal,<sup>3</sup> but I think that intermediate levels of civic engagement may well lead to outcomes that are inferior not just to outcomes produced by higher levels of civic engagement but also to those produced by lower levels.<sup>4</sup>

I begin by presenting a brief case study to illustrate the argument. Then I discuss an ironic development—that Americans have grown increasingly unhappy with government at the same time that government has grown ever more open to their influence. I believe that these trends are causally related, because people who take advantage of increased opportunities to participate in politics often are unrepresentative of the general population. Then I consider some of the normative arguments about civic engagement in light of the unrepresentativeness of those so engaged. In particular, how might society dilute the extreme voices that dominate political participation? Finally, an appendix explores the more social scientific question of why participators are unrepresentative.

1. For the views of one skeptic see Ladd (1996).

2. Do those whose engagement takes the form of joining the Ku Klux Klan or a militia make a net positive contribution to social capital? Clearly, one group can deploy its social capital to the detriment of other groups or of society as a whole.

3. But only for present purposes. There are reasons for doubting this claim as well. The classic example in the literature is the high voter turnout in Austria and Germany at the time their democracies were crumbling; Tingsten (1937, pp. 225–26). These high levels of political engagement apparently represented anger, desperation, and other motivations that normally are not viewed as things societies should seek to maximize.

4. Verba and Nie (1972, chap. 18) offer an earlier version of this argument. Their discussion seems to have been forgotten during the intervening years.