



Avoiding Politics

How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life

by Nina Eliasoph
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Take-Aways

- People tend to hold back from expressing their personal opinions in public.
- Ideas have evaporated from public life, because most citizens are unwilling to engage in public debate.
- Ideally, we should all engage in open, forthright and active communication.
- We don't place enough value on everyday political conversation.
- Democratic citizenship is impossible unless we have a vibrant political sphere.
- Unless people have the power to decide what issues they want to talk about in public, they are deprived of an important right of citizenship in a democracy.
- Often volunteers and social group members don't raise political issues because they want to get along with each other.
- Generally, people involved in volunteer work aren't interested in issues unless they feel they are close to home or touch them personally.
- There is a shrinking circle of concern about political issues, because people hesitate to speak publicly especially before a large audience.
- Citizens need to become more involved in political debate, since this can create a civic power in which citizens can lead change to improve community life.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
6	6	7	4

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) Why volunteers avoid public discussion of political issues — even issues that affect their volunteer work; and 2) How the resulting apathy dangerously stifles civic involvement and free public debate.

Recommendation

Nina Eliasoph describes the ways that volunteers get involved — or don't get involved — in political activity. Most volunteers, she notes, intentionally shy away from discussing the core political issues related to their volunteer efforts. She suggests that these volunteers have learned apathy in order to avoid the confrontation that public political debate might provoke. The volunteers she studied are willing to raise difficult issues in private, but not in public. Instead of finding — as might be expected — that joining groups helps people become activists, she finds the opposite. Group membership seems to blunt personal action. Eliasoph can be academic and repetitious, in that she uses multiple examples to make a single point. So, while respecting her research and her passion, *getAbstract.com* suggests this book is primarily aimed at political scientists and at readers who are truly concerned that more institutions should foster public debate and more of us should engage in it. The author is deeply worried about apathy's effect on democracy. The question is, do you care?

Abstract

The Limitations on Public Discussion

Generally, people involved in community volunteer work, such as anti-drug or child welfare programs, aren't interested in getting involved in issues that don't affect them in their personal lives.

For example, when volunteers in one coastal town were asked if they cared about battleship oil spill problems, most thought the issue did not affect them although they lived within a short drive of a nuclear battleship base with a large toxic pit that had been deemed dangerous by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. These volunteers also didn't think that they personally could do much about this problem.

Volunteer group members may have broad private concerns, but they generally don't speak about such issues at meetings or to the press. They tend to be reluctant to share their real concerns with others because they prioritize group harmony and prefer not to deal with hard political issues. Such reactions reflect a kind of "shrinking circle of concern." This hesitancy to speak in public shows a disconnection between what people feel and believe privately, and what they are willing to talk about openly. The agenda that matters to them seems to contract, or shrink, in a public setting.

This kind of behavior undermines the democratic process, since everyone is a part of some kind of political world. Decisions made in the political sphere affect our daily lives, even if we don't pay attention to the decision making process. Thus, even though few Americans vote and many are ignorant about politics — or even tell interviewers they have little faith in government — the effects of politics are all around us.

Politics Are Personal

Ironically, most of the people interviewed sounded more aware of political issues in the personal part of their lives, where they were freer to relax and less concerned about

"When good manners prevent publicly minded speech in the potential contexts of the public sphere, the public sphere has a problem."

"What was announced aloud was less open to debate, less aimed at expressing connection to the wider world, less public-spirited, more insistently selfish, than what was whispered."

“In families, work places, and schools, we assume that open, forthright, active communication matters, as a good in itself; why do we value everyday political conversation so much less?”

“Without a vibrant public sphere, democratic citizenship is impossible.”

“Ideally, this sense of connection helps people learn to think about the wider world.”

the impression they might make on other people. But as those interviewed got involved with larger groups and audiences, they became more reluctant to discuss or debate anything political. The process was a kind of “political evaporation,” in which anything proclaimed publicly became less likely to be discussed.

This kind of split between private concern and public expression is a problem because our society values passionate communication and forceful debate. Americans tend to feel that we ought to express ourselves with vigor in our families, workplaces and schools. Thus, it is problematic when we don’t express ourselves openly in political conversation. The result is that ideas of consequence to citizens of the United States are no longer forged in public debate.

The Nature of this Research

To document this evaporation of publicly-minded ideas from public life, a study was conducted in which the author participated in a variety of civic groups for about two and a half years. These groups represented a mix of volunteer, recreational and activist organizations. The volunteer groups included two anti-drug groups, a high school parents’ group, supporters of a recycling center and a local League of Women Voters group. The recreational groups included a country-western dance club and a fraternal organization. The activist groups included a group trying to prevent a town from building a toxic incinerator and a peace vigil organization trying to block arms shipments from the U.S. to other countries. Besides going to meetings, the author socialized with many group members and interviewed members individually and in groups.

The basic question that guided her research was: “How do citizens create contexts for political conversation in everyday life.” In other words, she wanted to look at whether the members of these groups were led to have open discussions about political issues or not — and, if not, what held them back.

The Importance of Public Discussion

The public sphere is very important in a democratic society as a place for learning democratic principles and social responsibility through participation in face-to-face organizations. This should be an arena where private citizens can carry on freewheeling discussions as equal participants as they measure the pros and cons of issues of shared concern in the community. Such discussions can also lead private citizens to join together to shape and conduct political action related to their individual priorities. They won’t do this if they fear polarized politics will lead them into hostile situations.

Citizens need to embark upon these dialogues because general political life today is guided by a growing number of forces which sap power from the individual, from limited opportunities for debate to the sharpness of special interest politics. These forces act without any governing concern for public well-being, so they should be balanced by citizens who get together to create strong bonds for a better, more humane society, which they can build by engaging in plain talk. This is the only way ordinary people can reveal and combat ideas they find ethically or morally suspect.

Unfortunately, if citizens don’t create an active forum for public debate, it is impossible to have truly democratic citizenship. There is no other way to “generate the kinds of selfhood, friendship, power and relations to the wider world that democracy demands.”

Participation is so important because it helps citizens feel more attached to the wider world and to see their role and their country’s role in it. This attachment comes from getting together and becoming more familiar with social issues, even though social

“Nearly all of the people I met wanted to be good, caring members of the community, they wanted to cultivate a sense of belonging and companionship. They wanted to care about people, but they did not want to care about politics.”

“Trying to care about people but not politics meant trying to limit their concerns to issues about which they felt they could ‘realistically’ make a difference in people’s lives — issues that they defined as small, local, and unpolitical.”

“Volunteers worked hard to keep that circle of concern small — in cultivating a sense of connection to each other, they curtailed their ability to learn about the wider world.”

gatherings might not be motivated by political concerns. But through such groups, friendships can form that help people become good citizens and good people. These social groups can develop their community awareness, fight against learned apathy and evolve into activist or volunteer groups that focus on promoting the public good.

Participation in such groups is critically important because these gatherings can create a force for civil good, a channel through which citizens can ask questions about the way things are done and get concrete, immediate answers. For instance, many politicians think of volunteer groups as a way to get unpaid workers to help non-profit organizations when government funds are cut back or when agencies are under funded. Politicians see these volunteer organizations as sources of free labor to repair rips in the social fabric. But citizens can do more than provide free labor. They can ask questions, advocate for getting additional funding for agencies that are relevant to their lives or learn about alternative approaches they can pursue, including classic public advocacy.

People Lose Power When Public Speech Stops

Citizens are effectively muzzled and lose power in the face of the operational approach taken by most volunteer groups. Yet, even when people are invited to speak in public, many filter their own words and feel that they cannot say certain things, particularly anything controversial, or engage in certain types of speech.

As a result of these self-imposed restrictions on their speech, citizens relinquish the power to raise questions about issues they believe are worth discussing in public life, if only they personally don’t have to do it. They surrender (or never learn) the ability to define what is important, good or right to discuss. They also don’t think about what can be changed and what kind of social conditions are just or natural. Because they have been conditioned to be apathetic, they don’t have the power to promote their agendas or to create a popular groundswell. As a result, most people don’t raise these issues, don’t think about questions of meaning and undermine their own best interests.

Group Pressure to Hide Political Interests

Many people don’t express their true feelings in meetings or small gatherings because they feel pressured to focus on particular tasks, or to be friendly and get along well with others. Burdened by this timidity, they may believe that political discussion would be a distraction or could even cause interpersonal conflicts, so they avoid such conversations.

For example, all the citizens in a group may engage in acts of charity to help others, but they don’t ask questions about the government or public policy failures that necessitate these acts of charity. For instance, they don’t raise questions about the lack of job training or the persistent homelessness that defeats people to the point that they need charitable assistance.

Most citizens don’t examine the way the market operates or how public policy works that leaves some people disadvantaged and needy. In fact, many volunteers denied that their work was even remotely political, even when they confronted racism, child welfare, impoverishment and lack of equality. They understood local issues, but could envision only individual private solutions.

In some cases, volunteers showed their lack of interest in public policy debate by shutting off other people’s discussions whenever a potentially difficult issue arose. When a teacher at one meeting made what some people considered a racist remark, no one said anything. Most people just listened quietly, and one commented that it was not the group’s role to do anything about the incident. The volunteers who heard her slur reacted as they did not hear it — not because they are also racist, but because that is how they react to any hint of

“While we might rightly cheer when ‘the little people’ rise up to defend their own, very local interests, my point is that without this power to create this etiquette for political participation, citizens are powerless.”

“Without this power to determine what sorts of questions are worth discussing in public, citizens are deprived of an important power, the power to define what is worthy of public debate, what is important, what is good and right, what is changeable and what is just natural.”

dissention amid public political discussion. They ignored the uncomfortable tension and stuck to their jobs: to work on projects, not to have debates and discussions.

Most volunteers have personal political concerns but feel it is wrong to bring up these concerns in a charitable group setting. Political officials support this approach because they, too, believe volunteers should simply work on various public service projects and should not be politicized. Even at this level, the author found widespread support for keeping issue-based discussions private.

This approach was also supported by political officials, who felt the volunteers’ role was to take part in various volunteer projects. It was their job to focus on doing good works, not to offer great public details and support about negative events and needy people, and not to try to reach public consensus on policy matters. In short, the author found a deep vein of general support for keeping any negative, political or controversial discussion out of the public eye.

In short, people felt they weren’t supposed to talk about certain types of topics because these subjects were unpleasant or negative, and so they didn’t. They wanted to get along and they absolutely did not want to risk offending anyone by bringing up potentially touchy, controversial or difficult topics.

Additionally, both the volunteers and the public officials regarded public discussion as boring. It made them unhappy. They didn’t want to engage in what they considered dull discussions about heavy problems. As a result, people who dared to pose troubling questions typically were met with silence.

Likewise, when volunteers suggested even small changes, they were often ignored. The author observed as one volunteer brought her school’s adult support group a magazine article that described an ecologically beneficial approach to designing school grounds. No one at all even wanted to discuss the design idea.

This avoidance of debate on political matters has become so common that one might consider such avoidance to be a culture of learned apathy, a subset all its own, as opposed to just a casual strategy unconsciously designed to avoid disagreement or to maintain harmony. Rather, this aversion has become an institutionalized muzzling of political speech and a pervasive stifling of disagreement.

The volunteers and public officials studied both saw the volunteer’s role basically as one of doing good works and lending a hand. But volunteers, as both groups seemed to feel, were not even supposed to discuss the political underpinnings of their own activities.

About The Author

Nina Eliasoph teaches in the Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and was a Visiting Scholar at the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. She has published articles on sociology, politics and communications, and has produced radio news and public affairs programs.

Buzz-Words

Circle of concern / Civic power / Public sphere