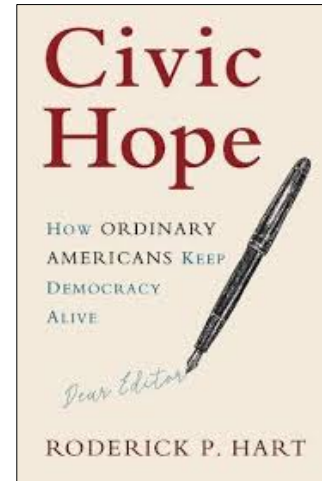


Roderick P. Hart, **Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive**, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 370 pp., \$18.58 (paperback).

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In a climate of dissent, disagreement, and political polarization, Roderick Hart offers something different—civic hope. In contrast to other, less flattering portrayals of the public’s engagement with politics, Hart instead suggests a segment of the population does a remarkable job perpetuating democracy in **Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive**. These citizens not only engage with politics, but they also offer hope to a broader community audience. Where does Hart find these hidden gems? In letters to the editor published over 60 years (1948–2012). To advance his argument, Hart draws letters from 12 “ordinary” medium-to-small-sized cities sprinkled across the nation. From these cities, Hart extracts and analyzes three levels of data—content analysis of the letters themselves, survey data from each city, and interviews from editorial page editors responsible for publishing letters to the editor.



The central argument of the text is the existence and inherent value of civic hope. Hart argues that letter writers both represent and sustain civic hope through the perpetuation of healthy arguments about the nature and function of politics. These discussions, he argues, are normatively beneficial and necessary for our democracy to thrive in an increasingly divisive and hostile political climate. Carefully distinguishing civic hope from other concepts, such as optimism and social hope, the book demonstrates how civic hope plays out in communities outside the population centers of the United States. Each major theme is discussed in turn below.

Who Writes and Who Reads Letters?

Letter writers and nonwriters are compared through careful analysis of the letters as well as survey data from each city. While decidedly ordinary in terms of their cultural, social, economic, and emotional location in society, writers still stand apart. They are more engaged and interested in public affairs than those who don’t write letters, yet they are less politically efficacious. Whereas their fellow citizens keep their opinions out of the public sphere, letter writers instead take action—transforming their emotions and opinions into outward-facing public dialog.

To triangulate the characteristics of letter writers, Hart also analyzes phone interviews with editors—illustrating the gatekeeping processes behind publishing letters to the editor. Overall, editors attempt to achieve three goals when cultivating the editorial page: ensuring ideological fairness, embracing community members, and maintaining compositional standards. Overwhelmingly, Hart’s analysis reveals the respect and sensitivity with which editors approached letters and the citizens who composed them.

Why Are Letters Both Compelling and Irritating?

Two chapters also highlight the pros and cons inherent in letters and the valuable role they play in the body politic. Hart argues that letters are primarily important, as they represent continued public engagement with politics and constant pressure on the system to conform to the needs of citizens. Without this tension, Hart suggests democracy is vulnerable and weak.

Letters typically come from a negative perspective—critiquing some aspect of society or some political action, couched in a hopeful framework. Writers hope their letters will have impact and doggedly contribute in order to see that change realized. Conversely, however, letters and their writers are often irritating to the general public. They are perceived as bossy, opinionated, nagging, and gloating. According to Hart, those who write letters are often portrayed negatively in the media, in contrast to the increasing power given over to public feedback in digital spaces.

How Have Letters Changed?

Over time, letters have changed—as our democratic system has evolved through the three eras identified in the book. These include the Cold War era (1948–1964), the Human Rights era (1968–1992), and the Partisan Politics era (1996–2012). Although Hart admits these are imperfect distinctions, they provide some context for evaluating progression in letters to the editor.

Two key features of the letters mark these changes over time. The first is a shift in the presence of national touchstones. Touchstones are “the nation’s core beliefs” (p. 196), representing ideals such as personal freedoms, educational opportunities, civic responsibilities, and more. Overall, most of the identified national touchstones appear less frequently in letters moving from past to modern eras. Capitalism, religious traditions, mass education, the popular vote, volunteering, and family structure are touchstones that fit this overall trend. Hart suggests that letter writers’ stepping away from these touchstones represents the overall decline of shared central values and growing political divisions among the public.

Secondly, oppositional literacy has also declined over time. Defined as the ability to understand and articulate the argument of the other side, growth in oppositional illiteracy suggests less ability of citizens to engage with diverse viewpoints effectively. This study indicates that even within geographically confined regions—such as the cities in this study—oppositional illiteracy is alive and well. It is not simply an artifact of the broad global networks found online—it is a local problem and national one. Whether this shift is attributed to selective exposure, features of the political and media environment, or simply an unwillingness to engage in other viewpoints meaningfully, Hart suggests this trend is troubling for democratic health.

How Do Letters Differ?

Lastly, Hart describes how the letters differ from one another based on when they were written (primary versus general election season), party affiliation of the letter writer, emphasis on local or national issues, and overall “strength” of the cities from which letters were drawn. Emphasis on the role and value of the local is central to this text’s contribution to the field. One way that letters differ nationwide is linked

to the very nature of the cities in which they were written. Hart classifies his cities based on current economic and social struggles, identifying those in distress, cities facing challenges, and robust cities. Letter writers engaging in “distressed cities” emphasize the significant challenges they face and are overwhelmingly negative in their discussion of issues.

Conversely “challenged cities,” those that face real issues but are not yet overwhelmed with difficulties, exhibit the most “spirited” discussion of issues in their letters—suggesting that civic hope is alive and well in these locations. Finally, letters from the “robust cities” that are growing and reinventing themselves successfully reflect the positive upturn that life in such places has taken. These letters reveal an overall mellowing of discussion and a shift to other topics, compared to those in less healthy cities.

Weaknesses

Although the breadth and depth of the analysis in this book is impressive, in some ways, the argument offered is somewhat anachronistic. In the world of endless and often anonymous comment sections of news sites, Twitter, and Facebook, the realm of public comment on politics has shifted dramatically since the era of local newspapers. While letters to the editor may have served as the dominant voice of the public in years past, the digital era has changed the role and position of public comments in politics. Although Hart acknowledges in chapter 7 that divisive digital discussion is distasteful to news editors as well as the public, this invokes questions about the utility of conclusions drawn from letters exclusively.

Using letters to the editor as a potential ideal form of public political discourse, Hart stops short from offering recommendations or suggestions that would improve the quality of political debate moving forward. He does acknowledge it is impossible to “turn back time” to a more civil world of political discussion in online spaces but suggests anonymity is a contributing factor to vitriol used in online forums. When applying conclusions drawn from this book, it is important to note that online discussion is merely adjacent to the central analyses and that these findings may not necessarily apply to political conversations in public digital spaces.

Strengths and Implications

Despite these weaknesses, the book does offer important contributions to the field of political communication. First, the book illustrates that place-based analysis is meaningful. In a political world that overlooks the local in favor of national political issues, this study of ordinary Americans in ordinary cities demonstrates that local still matters. Furthermore, by understanding local citizens—the ways they interact with each other and with the nature of the place in which they write—Hart offers us a compelling narrative of hope. While online discussion boards and media-covered political discourse is wrought with hostile conflict, letters instead offer a more dignified and respectful way of engaging with the critical issues of our day. Through this type of connection between citizens and their communities, Hart finds civic hope and details why it remains a critical feature of broader and national democracy.

Lastly, although largely implicit in the analyses, the text suggests that there is an important and irreplaceable role for local media in our political system. Without local outlets to reflect and magnify central

community issues, it becomes difficult to detect sources of civic hope. While editors do cull letters, selecting certain ones for publication and leaving others in the discard pile, Hart's analyses suggest they approach this task with care rather than with ulterior motives often attributed to the press.

This text is an excellent and thought-provoking read for academics, media practitioners, and graduate students interested in a new perspective on public opinion in the context of politics.