

Professor Morris Fiorina, Citizenship in American Democracy: Foundations, Changes, Challenges, Rome, 5 June 2003.

What are the foundations of democratic citizenship in America? How has citizenship evolved with the changing American political landscape? What challenges confront both individual citizens and the American polity as a whole? Stanford political scientist Morris Fiorina examined these questions, illuminating for Europeans in our current state of transition, at our Euro-American Colloquium on Citizenship, held in Rome on 5 June, 2003.

According to Prof. Fiorina, American citizenship, in contrast to that of many European countries, is based in beliefs, not in blood. Anyone can be an American, if s/he subscribes to the basic principles of American democracy, liberty and equality. In theory, citizenship is open to everyone, regardless of race, ethnic, religious or linguistic background. The community of American citizens is and has always been heterogeneous, made up of people of diverse backgrounds. Another peculiarity of American citizenship is its focus on rights. Where more traditional cultures conceive of belonging in terms of the member's duties to the collectivity, the American citizen is a bearer of equal rights, first and foremost. This focus on rights is, however limited to *individual* rights. It is individual rights that count, not communities; conflicts between them will often be resolved in favor of the individual.

Interestingly, for all its emphasis on rights, American political culture rejects the notion of social welfare rights. The American creed looks unfavorably upon state efforts to provide social welfare, reduce inequality or intervene to soften the blow of unemployment. The idea is that citizens need to be able to make it on their own. Surprisingly, this idea is shared by poor and disadvantaged citizens, as much as anyone else, perhaps because Americans are optimistic about their chances of succeeding.

American citizenship has undergone profound changes, particularly in recent decades. Fiorina emphasized that citizenship in the U.S. has become much more demanding. Americans have always been active citizens, and certain citizens are more active now than ever. This can be seen in the proliferation of public, private and ideological interest groups, and their central role in American politics. These groups form a new breed of "citizen-activist", and it is these people who are most likely to work for political campaigns and determine the candidates. The rise of specialized interest groups goes hand in hand with the decline of mass-based political parties. Now the candidate him- or herself stands at the center of electoral politics. Each candidate builds his or her own organization out of citizens' interest groups.

Fiorina also noted that government has become much more transparent. This has created greater opportunity for citizen involvement in monitoring government activities, and also more work for the aspiring active citizen. This change has brought the benefit of subjecting government officials to citizens' scrutiny. But it has also carried the risk that the citizens motivated to monitor the government may not be representative of the population as a whole.

The changing role of American courts reveals another important change in the activity of citizenship, as well as in the relationship between citizens and the state. Civil procedure reform has given citizens a wide opportunity to sue the government in court,

either for monetary damages or a court order that the government modify its activity. Courts have also become more active in scrutinizing government actions, in ordinary cases brought by citizens. At the same time, bureaucracy has become much more proceduralized, and citizens can intervene at many different of the bureaucratic process. This has created extraordinary citizen participation, especially at the local level. But it has also made local public projects more costly.

Other important changes in citizens' relationship with government officials can be seen the explosion of advocacy organizations. In recent decades, citizens have become more able to influence legislation and title to public office through state and local referenda. American politics has also been revolutionized by the proliferation of polling, which has given government officials precise feedback on citizen participation. Furthermore, new technology has facilitated communication between citizens and their representatives. In all of these ways, government has become more participatory, at least potentially. There are more opportunities for citizens to be active, opportunities to do more than just cast a ballot. But the realization of this kind of citizenship has become more demanding in terms of time and effort. This means that not everyone can be an ideal active citizen in this political landscape. Moreover, not everyone is motivated to put public deliberation ahead of private pursuits. Fiorina argued that active citizenship is thus biased in favor of the wealthy, educated, white minority, the professional-managerial class.

What are the challenges to American democratic citizenship? Fiorina rejected the argument, sustained by many, that immigration presents a challenge or a threat to democratic citizenship in America. Immigration in fact fortifies and sustains the American conception of citizenship, according to which individuals can advance through their own efforts. New immigrants tend to share these basic values, and strengthen, through their opinions and their example, this libertarian conception of citizenship. While some argue that the current level and kind of immigration is unsustainable, that the U.S. cannot continue to incorporate increasingly diverse waves of foreigners, Fiorina noted that the current wave assimilates faster than ever. Because of television, the internet and mass transportation, immigrant communities are less isolated than ever, and nativist fears are largely unfounded.

The great challenge facing American citizenship is instead to produce an active citizenry that is more representative of the socio-economic whole. Contemporary activists tend to be more intense and extreme than the population as a whole. Small groups, allied with relatively obscure politicians, can set in motion policies that would never be supported by the majority, like the reestablishment of poison oak in San Francisco parks pushed by fanatical environmentalists. Political parties have become more polarized due to their activist base, in other words the people who work in campaigns. Republican activists are more conservative than party supporters as a whole, and Democratic activists are more liberal.

The population, however, is moderate in its views. Activists tend to pull candidates towards the outer margins. This can be seen in the political system's failure to reach a truce on the abortion issue. The American population could have settled this long ago, but the parties have made it a perpetual conflict. "Concerned citizens" have a disproportionate voice in American politics. The great challenge to American democracy

is to encourage people with more moderate views to get involved. American politics has become quantitatively more participatory, but qualitatively less representative. Participation needs to be made more accessible. The relative costs need to be contained, and the relative advantages increased, to better motivate normal, moderate citizens to get involved.

Fiorina signaled that he would be interested in learning more about how traditional communitarian notions of citizenship in Europe have responded to new immigration flows and the establishment of the European Union.