

**Review of Ben Berger , Attention Deficit Democracy; The Paradox of Civic engagement.  
Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2011\***

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Ben Berger is a self professed US liberal academic. In an attention deficit society his book's main title 'Attention Deficit Democracy' successfully captures our limited attention to draw us into the more cerebral discussion suggested in the book's sub title 'The Paradox of Civic Engagement'. He was right to do this; some of the subject matter of the book including an in-depth reflection on the work of Hannah Arendt is a tall order for those of us with attention deficit.

Essentially, he argues few of us are political junkies, while some of us are 'attention monitors' and more of us are 'issue publics', most of us are 'inattentive citizens'. We have a healthy preference for sex over political engagement (p142). The challenge he identifies is balance, not to ask too much of citizens in terms of political engagement, but not to settle for too little either (p146). As such he is broadly consistent with and maintains affinity to Sandels 'reasonable republicanism' (p129).

In Chapter 2 he makes an early and useful argument to reject the use of 'civic engagement' and to make sharper sense of the different types of engagement implied in the generic term 'civic'. He separates out the content of 'civic' to distinguish political, moral, social and civil engagement (p49), arguing all are necessary and valid, some may overlap, but none are the same. This plea for conceptual clarity about what we mean by engagement is well received by this reviewer, as is his argument that the focus on civil engagement in Putman's seminal 1993 work *Bowling Alone* created 'seminal confusion' (p 31).

URL: [http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/\[163\]](http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/[163])

He draws on Arendt and Tocqueville to define power as collective energy and action. He goes to great lengths to reject Arendt's (and others') arguments for an intrinsic value on political engagement. However he recognises the value of her 'cautionary political principle' that leads her to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary disengagement. He is clearly taken with her fears for the type of involuntary disengagement experienced under totalitarian regimes and conditions of isolation. He acknowledges Arendt's utility in assisting us identify the social and political outcomes we should avoid; this is reflected in his primary insistence on the need to prioritise avoiding non participation over an exaggerated affinity with promoting excessive levels of participation.

For all the attention focused on the work of Hannah Arendt it is clear that Berger is a fan of Tocqueville and an advocate of a less theoretical and more practical and pragmatic approach to political engagement. He draws extensively on Tocqueville and elaborates what Tocqueville considers to be essential prerequisites for engagement, tastes, energy and attention or long term perspectives (p89). He agrees with Tocqueville that the challenge is to shape and entice engagement through associational life and the tools of institutional design, political education, moral suasion and appeals to citizen's attention or tastes. All these are, in Berger's liberal view, preferable to and more balanced than the zealous civic republicans' or participatory democrats' calls for coercion or bribery to achieve engagement.

He may exaggerate the extent to which there are calls from such quarters for coercion and bribery but his broad point is that participation has always been hard to procure and we should be realistic about its value and how much we can expect in modern democracy. At points he unnecessarily over stretches the extent of difference between different ideological positions concerning political engagement. He essentially advocates a balanced approach to engagement that accepts where citizens 'are at' instead of trying to lead them, normatively from the higher ground, towards a somewhat utopian participatory democracy.

He advocates four approaches to enhancing political engagement. The first three are inspired by Tocqueville. The first is to change our approach to politics. He wants us to make politics fun. He argues we need to appeal to citizens tastes, he suggests diverse approaches that have popularised politics in the US and includes the US West Wing series, Jon Stewart's Daily Show, Rush Limburgh's radio programmes and 'Rock the Vote' mobilisation programme as evidence that people can find interest in politics. The second is following John Dewey's approach to change ourselves through education and habituation. Here he advocates approaches like the US 'Project Citizen' but accepts they are most likely to work in younger

age cohorts. The third, and he argues, the more important of the first three, is to change our institutions including political parties and municipal organisations. He wants us to put the fun back into 'parties'. He stresses making the most of institutional linkages, federations and networks. He knows this is not new and that this approach was effectively pioneered by Obama in 2008.

Like his pragmatic hero Tocqueville, he wants democracy to work better as opposed to working ideally. However, unlike his hero, he seems to have a finer appreciation of the dangers that poverty and inequality pose to participation. For all his liberal leanings he is sober in his assessment of the great failure of democracy – that of the involuntary disengagement of the poor and marginalised. His fourth approach focuses on meaningful recommendations to enable marginalised voices; these prioritise governing through associations, cross class partnerships and institutional linkages. He is critical that civic education advocates focus more on civic engagement of privileged students on college campus than they do on poor communities. While recognising that political engagement correlates with economic and educational attainment he does not go far as to recommend resource or income redistribution.

An honest and provocative book that perhaps draws too sharp a contrast between liberal and republican ideals, at times he is unnecessarily provocative. It is also an American book written for an American audience and its recommendations will have more resonance in the US than in European political cultures. Despite the lively title and arguments that engagement needs to be fun the book is at times arduous. The chapter on Arendt is too theoretically indulgent and at times the argument he is making could be made more quickly and cogently. To balance this however he draws on an interdisciplinary dialogue and from diverse sources, he has excellent footnotes, makes great use of a range of quotes and is humorous.

While often dismissive about 'Arendt and company' there is little doubt she has influenced his thinking and that he agrees with her about the danger of forms of 'isolation that deprive people of the capacity to act and generate collective power '(P167). The book is a useful reminder that free societies will always struggle to muster and maintain political attention and activity, and that there is great danger in the non participation or unequal participation of marginalised groups.