

Resolved: Voting is Sufficient for Good Citizenship

Affirmative: George Eliot (Caitlin O'Keefe), '13

Negative: James Madison (Isabelle Albi), '13

Perhaps the most fundamental question to confront the democratic citizen is his relationship to his rights. Must I fight to sustain them or am I free to exercise them without fear of their usurpation?

In his *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville champions the imperative of self-government, essentially demanding that we fight for our rights. He observes that the Americans - through their engagement with local government, civic organizations, or even the proliferation of newspapers - are invested in the maintenance of their free society. This commitment to political action imprints all of America's governing institutions as distinctly local, personal, and tethered to the interests of the people. The vote is not the most righteous of political offerings. Nay, good citizenship means service to the township. That is the price of freedom; for otherwise, the self and governance are wrenched apart from one another, leaving an administrative state to blunder its way down the path of civic lethargy and tyranny. Success in private ventures and innovations must be coupled with a commitment to the public good.

Meanwhile, the legacy of John Locke and America's first generation of genius, the transcendentalists, calls upon us to make the most of our rights. The quest for a negative space conducive to private creation compels our consent to be ruled by a sovereign human or body of humans. In this system, democratic freedom is secured in our pledge to withhold from violating the life, liberty, or property of another. The exercise of the franchise signifies the renewal of our consent to the fact or iteration of the sovereign. Without this, the citizen falls asleep at the wheel and no man or woman can lay claim to good citizenship. Beyond voting, however, we are without public obligation. Rather, it may be argued that we are beholden only to ourselves and our private ventures - to become artists, poets, entrepreneurs, athletes, or politicians. Even in this last instance, the individual remains the author and fulfiller of his own compulsions.

Do we expect too much of politics or not enough? Does the contemporary intractability of American politics call upon us to reinvest in political activity and local governance or does it suggest increased attention to personal and private adventures? Need the citizen camp out in her town hall to be considered good or responsible? In what direction is our country headed and how politically involved must the people be to ensure "government of the people, by the people, for the people?"

Join us this Thursday, September 13th, at 7:30pm in the Faculty Room of Massachusetts Hall (third floor). You are encouraged to dress formally.

Sincerely yours,
Maimonides