



# Attention Deficit Democracy: The Paradox of Civic Engagement

*Ben Berger*

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Handwringing about political apathy is as old as democracy itself. As early as 425 BC, the playwright Aristophanes ridiculed his fellow Athenians for gossiping in the market instead of voting. In more recent decades, calls for greater civic engagement as a democratic cure-all have met with widespread agreement. But how realistic--or helpful--is it to expect citizens to devote more attention and energy to politics? In *Attention Deficit Democracy*, Ben Berger provides a surprising new perspective on the problem of civic engagement, challenging idealists who aspire to revolutionize democracies and their citizens, but also taking issue with cynics who think that citizens cannot--and need not--do better.

"Civic engagement" has become an unwieldy and confusing catchall, Berger argues. We should talk instead of political, social, and moral engagement, figuring out which kinds of engagement make democracy work better, and how we might promote them. Focusing on political engagement and taking Alexis de Tocqueville and Hannah Arendt as his guides, Berger identifies ways to achieve the political engagement we want and need without resorting to coercive measures such as compulsory national service or mandatory voting. By providing a realistic account of the value of political engagement and practical strategies for improving it, while avoiding proposals we can never hope to achieve, *Attention Deficit Democracy* makes a persuasive case for a public philosophy that much of the public can actually endorse.

*Attention Deficit Democracy: the paradox of civic engagement* has been named the Winner of the NASSP (North American Society for Social Philosophy) 2012 Book Award as the best social philosophy book published in 2011. Previous winners include Amartya Sen, G.A. Cohen, Will Kymlicka and Seyla Benhabib. It was also named one of the Top 10 Nonfiction Books of 2011 by Zocalo Public Square, a project of the Center for Social Cohesion.

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