

## **Introduction**

Technology is remaking our political life. News media continue to celebrate new apps designed to connect citizens to local social services when they are in need, to their city's non-emergency desk when they require repairs in their neighborhoods and to their neighbors when severe weather hits. These new ways for citizens and government to interact represent a widening gap in the study of American political behavior. With research focused on election cycles and policy outcomes, the work of political science proceeds with models of participation that limit what counts and has little to say about the rest. This practice adds up to a political science that has no answer for what popular government requires of American citizens and whether or not they are ignoring activities of little consequence or the ones that make all the difference.

A dangerous dissonance hides in the background between the commitments of American political thought, the data of our political behavior and how the average citizen applies them all to questions of a shared political life. The American people argue that popular government is the only legitimate form of government while also believing that the people have no capacity or no will to participate in governing. The promise of democracy is hollowed out and American citizens in one category or another wear the blame. Our measures of political behavior often find participation only makes sense for those who are the most interested in policy outcomes and the most motivated by winning electoral contests. At the same time, the opportunities for citizens to support their communities through connecting with one another, elected representatives and government services multiply and transform into mechanisms for redesigning the processes of government itself.

The work presented here offers a Framework for Civic Involvement that asks us to evaluate a full scale of political behaviors with an understanding of what is necessary to sustain American popular government. Uncovering a theory of civic involvement in operation throughout early political debates, the Framework comes into view through themes recurring in James Madison's discussions of what keeps government oriented toward good work and then asks what these commitments mean for the citizen's role. Through the course of the work presented here, the Framework will be applied to the descriptions of American citizens appearing in American political thought and the studies of political behavior to bring their assumptions about the American people out of the background and to show how these models work to constrain or coerce their behavior.

The dissonance in the representations of the American citizen point to a troubling void in our civic life that Madison, Tocqueville and contemporary thinkers have all contemplated. In response to Jefferson's proposition to institutionalize regular constitutional conventions, Madison shared a vital observation about human nature that, "the reason of man, like man himself, is timid and cautious when left alone, and acquires firmness and confidence in proportion to the number to which it is associated."<sup>1</sup> Also predicting an apathetic citizenry, Tocqueville warned his readers that democracy breeds disinterested and disconnected individuals. Comparing democratic and aristocratic peoples, Tocqueville noted that members of democratic regimes "become indifferent and almost like strangers among themselves," who adopt a "habit of always considering themselves in isolation, and... willingly fancy that

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison. 1961 [1787-1788]. *The Federalist* ed. Jacob E. Cooke. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press., 49.

their whole destiny is in their hands.”<sup>2</sup> A disconnected formlessness and indifference threaten to rob civic life of both meaning and momentum.

Madison does not prescribe the specific activities or behaviors of the American people as much as he offers a framework for thinking about how different activities and behaviors address the void described above and support the political community. His ideas of the citizen’s role appear within his discussions of how the American people could achieve a sustainable model of popular sovereignty. Madison embedded his ideas about the citizen’s role in the commitments he made for the citizens, candidates, office holders and institutions he put into motion as the American model of popular government. Alan Gibson proposed that political science reconsider Madison’s work in this way. He suggested revisiting Madison to read his ideas about the proper role for government and to consider them instead as statements of his “beliefs about the character or content that civil society had to have if republicanism was to survive in America.”<sup>3</sup> This approach transforms each statement about good government into a vantage point for considering the citizen’s role in sustaining popular government.

### **A Madisonian Framework for Civic Involvement**

The Framework of Civic Involvement (pictured below) utilizes three different themes that appear throughout Madison’s work to uncover what he believed popular government would require of American citizens. These components, their characteristics and the

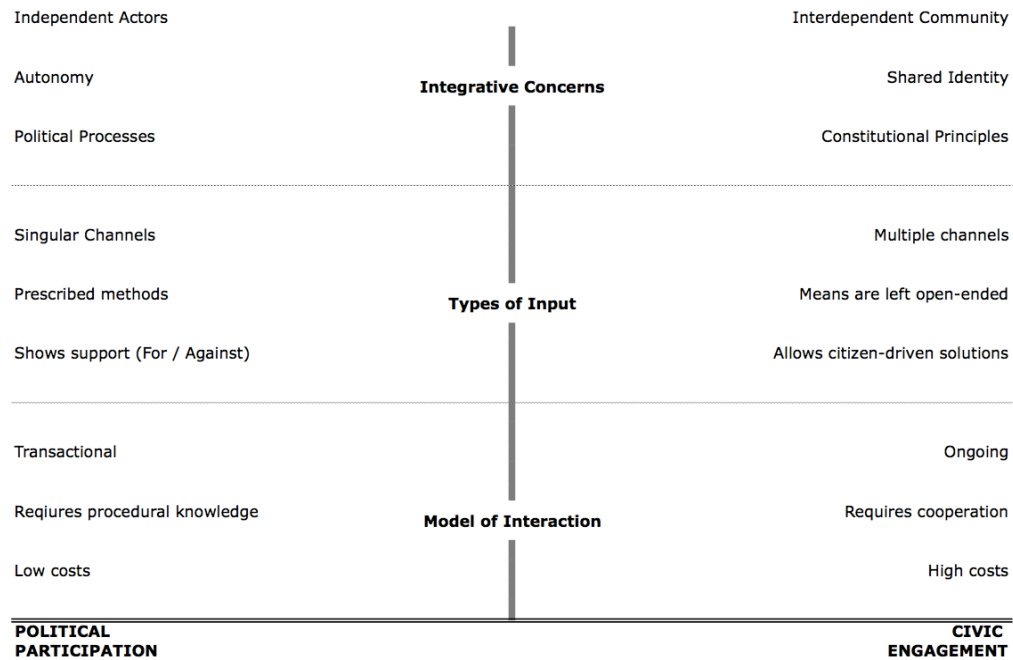
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<sup>2</sup> Tocqueville, Alexis de. 2000 [1835-1840]. *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press., 483-484.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Gibson. 2000. “Ancients, Moderns and Americans: The Republicanism-Liberlism Debate Revisited.” *History of Political Thought. Vol. XXI. No. 2. Summer.*, 298.

questions that accompany them will help us evaluate the strengths and shortcomings of the different political behaviors operationalized through political science literature and contemporary discourse.

**Figure 1: Madisonian Framework for Civic Involvement**



The three components (interaction, input and integrative concerns), each represent potential strengths and weaknesses. As we revisit Madison's work to build our understanding of each component, we will see that they each offer their own corrective and corruptive forces. For this reason, Madison often discusses each component as a choice between competing commitments and an effort to balance bad tendencies with good ones. The center line represents the point of origin Madison imagined for each of these choices.

On either side of the center line, at the extreme left or right, there are three characteristics for each component provided to describe a particular mode of civic involvement. They add up to a description of either political participation or civic engagement through terms borrowed from more recent research interpreting the political behavior of American citizens. The competing conceptions of civic involvement at each pole aim to institutionalize a particular way of thinking about the citizen's role and popular government. The framework is a tool for uncovering those commitments and unveiling their consequences for the sake of further investigation and discussion.

The questions represented by each component of the Madisonian Framework for Civic Involvement offer leverage on the assumptions embedded in our models of civic involvement. They outline a mode of inquiry for evaluating different models of civic involvement, our study of political behavior and the country's own efforts to enroll citizens in the work of governing. Three questions accompany the Framework:

1. How does the behavior utilize interaction with other citizens to facilitate communication, deliberation and cooperation? [Model of Interaction]
2. How does the behavior balance different channels for citizens to contribute to political life by identifying issues, investigating potential solutions and campaigning to demonstrate support for specific outcomes? [Types of Input]
3. How does the behavior work to enlist the individual citizen's independent inclinations into the pursuit of the constitutional principles and shared identity of the political community? [Integrative Concerns]

The questions motivating our studies of American political life, not just behavior, require extending the inquiry beyond how much or how little civic involvement occurs in the American system and whether or not it is sufficient for popular government. Madison's model demonstrates that the assumptions behind political participation and civic engagement are both necessary and that they work together to support popular government. When we allow the relatively small acts of electoral participation to either be the extent of our expectations or to be considered equal to the more demanding acts of civic engagement, we minimize the citizen's role and undermine ideas about political life. For this reason, the Framework functions like a scale with more and less of each component, its strengths and weaknesses, available for understanding and evaluating a range of possibilities for civic involvement.

Civic involvement represents the efforts we make to connect with one another in the worthwhile pursuits of political life or the need to connect that we neglect. It includes acts political science has discussed as political participation and civic engagement and provides a mechanism for considering the differences between the two. Civic involvement is our means to confront the dissonance that persists when we discuss our expectations of popular government and the American people, and it offers a construct for challenging these commitments when they are either too limited or too extensive.

### **Plan of Book**

Chapter 1 offers a thorough exploration of the Framework for Civic Involvement through the themes of Madison's work. It looks at how Madison's portrayal of healthy political life

relies on interaction between citizens, their interests and reason and the public will. Each component of the Framework comes into view through Madison's work in this first chapter.

The work of Chapter 2 then applies the Framework to understanding how scholarship analyzing Madison's work has narrowed or otherwise revised our understanding of the citizen's role as he presents it. The approaches to Madison's writing and other work institute a particular understanding of the citizen's role and fail to recognize the sometimes more pragmatic and sometimes more demanding role Madison described for American citizens. These shallow representations of Madison's work then limit our expectations of the citizenry and make it difficult to agree on a way to evaluate American political behavior.

Chapter 3 looks at the American citizen as understood through the study of political behavior. The citizen's role is small, with little influence and no reason to participate. A call to fulfill a civic duty that is rarely articulated except to coerce participation reveals what is lost in this transition from qualitative questions about the political life that supports popular government to quantitative answers that leave those questions embedded in models of political behavior.

Chapter 4 then focuses on what we can reclaim through the Framework for Civic Involvement. The citizen's role and the work a citizen attempts align to the understanding of mankind and government that appear in American political thought. A civic perspective develops as citizens expand their own experiences with civic involvement. Experience and constitutional principles combine to integrate citizens into the work of the political community that enjoys a durability beyond the reach of election cycles. Lastly, the chapter looks at Madison as an example of this civic perspective.

Chapter 5 looks at how the Framework resolves the more practical questions of civic involvement. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas provide one example through their debates on how to best meet the requirements of popular sovereignty. Two different ideas about the proper role of citizens motivated each man's understanding of the popular sovereignty they promoted. A second example comes from Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs, specifically the Community Action Programs. When Johnson spoke about these programs, he spoke of realizing the fullest measures of popular sovereignty by creating opportunities for citizens to work with one another to solve the biggest problems in their communities. In application, however, the programs never measured up to Johnson's big ideas. The Framework helps us see the distance between the programs as they were imagined and how they were instituted. Finally, the chapter applies the Framework to understand the criticism of President Obama's online petition site, We The People, and to reimagine it. The conclusion returns to the question of 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology and what it makes possible for participation and popular government if we require it to operate according to more comprehensive models of civic involvement.