

Citizenship, Liberalism And Republicanism

Kankhita Sharma

Ph.D Research Scholar Department of Political Science Cotton University Guwahati Assam,
India.

Abstract

This article explores two philosophical perspectives: Liberalism and Republicanism on the pertinence of active citizenship in the modern world. It illustrates the difference between the two on the subject and identifies the different questions that must be considered before upholding either position.

Introduction

Active political participation is no longer deemed as a sine qua non of citizenship. Majority of citizens, especially those who acquire citizenship by birth, tend to view their status as natural, rightful beneficiaries of the resources of the nation to which they happen to belong. By themselves, they see no necessary requirement to do something such as participate with the system to sustain their status as citizen. Political participation rather feels like a special calling, a vocation that should be taken up by those who aspire to rise to power, lead society or to govern the system. As such, sharing in the government of the nation or political community to which one belongs is not deemed as a sine qua non of citizenship per se. Awareness of one's position as a citizen has increasingly come to be restricted to occasions such as elections, wars and border tensions with neighbouring nations, while seeking inclusion in a foreign state as a refugee, displaced person or following diasporic residence or during international sports events. At other times, one mostly remains oblivious of their role and status as citizens. Such a state was lamented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "We have physicists, geometricians, chemists, astronomers, poets, musicians, and painters in plenty; but we have no longer a citizen among us". How do contemporary philosophers reckon with this?

Liberalism and Citizenship

Liberal philosophers appear to not be particularly worried about this state of affairs. For them, what matters above all is the dignity and liberty of the individual. While they do not see any incompatibility between active citizenship and individual liberty, they also do not see any necessary linkage. Playing the role of an active citizen is not necessarily the way to secure and sustain individual liberty. Individual liberty consists in being capable of deciding for oneself, without being interfered with. This can be achieved by articulating and defending the rights of

persons in a manner that can effectively limit the extent to which the government and other individuals can legitimately regulate the freedom that individuals enjoy. Duly defended human rights and constitutional rights are thus enough to protect individuals and these can and are availed by persons regardless of whether or not one plays an active role as citizens. As such, Liberals lack an essential commitment to ensuring active and virtuous citizenship and hence they see no serious danger in the spectacle of citizens taking their role somewhat lightly, as long as they respect each other's rights.

Attempts to engage in civic education or having in place such laws that make it mandatory to uphold their roles and responsibilities as citizens are thus viewed by many Liberals as being too intrusive and invasive of an individual's freedom of choice. Thus, Liberalism does not regard it vital for freedom that voting be made compulsory or that one be knowledgeable of political development in their own country and elsewhere. Instead, membership of a political community is viewed as a matter of one's choice and so unless there remains little scope to enforce civic duties without first establishing that a person is bound by some clear contract to do so. Civic duties, political obligations and civic virtues are thus matters subject to individual's consent, instead of being grounds on which a person could be legitimately coerced to act, even against their will.

To be sure, Liberals do not claim that hence, no person takes citizenship seriously. Instead, Liberal philosophers since Locke and Hobbes have shown how rational self interest and prudence naturally leads persons to acknowledge the significance of cooperating with fellow citizens. Later Liberals such as Mill and Green went even further to argue that citizenship ought to be virtuous rather than purely self centric. Yet, for all Liberals, the bottom line remains that civic and political obligations associated with citizenship must either be left to the choice of individuals or should be promoted by appealing to the interest of individuals, interest being defined by themselves rather than being defined for them, by society or the government.

Republicanism and Citizenship

The case is very different from the Republican vantage point. For Republicans, citizenship is not merely a formal label but an indispensable means to secure and sustain individual liberty. To undermine citizenship is thus to endanger one's own liberty, the latter being unachievable and unsustainable without the former. The term 'citizen', is derived from the Latin *civis*, or member of the *civitas* meaning city-state. Being a citizen was a privilege in ancient Greece that was limited to an exclusive minority of the population consisting of adult, male natives. It is only very gradually and following protracted struggles that citizenship historically came to be achieved by slaves, property-less men, non-natives and finally by women. Against that background, when citizens fail to realise the significance of their position, it is worrisome for Republicans. For them, freedom depends on being capable of self government.

Mainstream Republicans argue that freedom consists in being protected from arbitrariness and arbitrariness can be checked only by the Rule of Law. Observance of the Rule of Law in turn depends on active citizenship or participation in self government. This establishes the pertinence of democracy to republican understandings of freedom, thereby setting it apart from the Liberal view.

Another group of Republicans argue that the freedom consists in self government in a much more intrinsic fashion. They argue that engaging in self government results in the perfection of human character. Such views presuppose, at least partially, that political association is inherently capable of effecting positive transformation of human character in ways that no other non-political activity can afford. In their view, liberty concerns the sublimation of human nature, the broadening of outlook and enhancement of one's capacity to identify with a whole, larger than themselves and narrower and sectional concerns. It comes only through 'a politics of the common good' to use the words of a famous advocate of this view, Michael J. Sandel.

Thus Republican thinkers argue that it amounts to self sabotage if citizens fail to take their role and responsibilities seriously enough. In this connection, they chide Liberals for failing to take adequate account of the growing indifference towards citizenship across the western democracies.

Questions Born of the Debate

In the light of these differences, there is reason to ponder on what might and ought to be the actual or due weightage of citizenship in the modern world. This gives rise to a whole range of questions: How far is living a private, secluded life conducive to being free? What ought to be the proper limits of an individual's public role? What concerns the distinction between citizens who wish to pursue politics as a professional career and those who like to keep it at arms length? Should there be promotion of active citizenship or should that be left to the free choice of individuals?

There are no settled answers to these questions. And thus the debate continues. Nonetheless, the recent revival of Republicanism especially since the second half of the 20th Century has attracted greater support for the Republican view.

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