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We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise Of Civic Renewal In America



Synopsis

Chronic unemployment, deindustrialized cities, and mass incarceration are among the grievous social problems that will not yield unless American citizens address them. Peter Levine's *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* is a primer for anyone motivated to help revive our fragile civic life and restore citizens' public role. After offering a novel theory of active citizenship, a diagnosis of its decline, and a searing critique of our political institutions, Levine—one of America's most influential civic engagement activists—argues that American citizens must address our most challenging issues. People can change the norms and structures of their own communities through deliberative civic action. He illustrates rich and effective civic work by drawing lessons from YouthBuild USA, Everyday Democracy, the Industrial Areas Foundation, and many other civic groups. Their organizers invite all citizens—including traditionally marginalized people, such as low-income teenagers—to address community problems. Levine explores successful efforts from communities across America as well as from democracies overseas. He shows how cities like Bridgeport, CT and Allentown, PA have bounced back from the devastating loss of manufacturing jobs by drawing on robust civic networks. The next step is for the participants in these local efforts to change policies that frustrate civic engagement nationally. Filled with trenchant analysis and strategies for reform, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* analyzes and advocates a new citizen-centered politics capable of tackling problems that cannot be fixed in any other way.

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Customer Reviews

Writers have noted the declining levels of social cohesion and civic participation in the United States, and the resulting hand-off of political influence to professionalized special interests with access to lavish resources. We all see the symptoms: a lack of civility in public discourse, shallow and propagandizing mass media, and the corruption of electoral and legislative processes. Peter Levine's book is an important contribution to what I hope will be a rapidly growing literature on civic engagement. He calls for citizens to talk and listen to people different from themselves and thereby enlarge their understanding, build consensus, and then bring what they are learning into their work. He calls for work (both paid and unpaid) that is collaborative, where workers build civic relationships and together create things of public value. This combination of deliberation, collaborative work, and strong civic relationships defines the good citizenship that enables Americans to make progress on the many daunting problems of our society. Going beyond lofty ideals, he fleshes out what civic engagement looks like with many examples. I particularly liked the example of Hampton, Virginia, where a non-partisan city government engaged citizens in a range of grassroots collaborative processes to improve the schools, foster better race relations, and plan the city's development. A key component of this was seeing citizens, especially youth, not as problems to be solved but as resources that can be developed and enlisted to solve them.

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