

# 1 Introduction

## MOURNING THE AMERICAN DREAM

“I went to college,” said Javier, who sat to my right, his arms wrapped around his squirmy one-year-old son.<sup>1</sup> “But I am still having trouble finding a good job, one where I can buy a house and take care of my family.” He was especially frustrated by the “myth,” as he called it, that if you followed a certain “linear path” that included college, then you would succeed. He repeated the word *linear*, as if this were the most frustrating part. He, like many other people in that room, had found that path to be anything but straight or predictable. And in recent years, it had felt more like a trap—leading them in circles and tightening around them all the time.

Javier was one of approximately one hundred men and women who had gathered that afternoon in the auditorium of a Lutheran church in the northeastern city where they lived. This Lutheran congregation was a core member of Interfaith, a progressive, faith-based community-organizing coalition that I had been studying for over a year. Interfaith was affiliated with the PICO National Network—short for “People Improving Communities through Organizing”—one of a handful of faith-based community-organizing (FBCO) networks operating throughout the United States.<sup>2</sup> Like other FBCO

coalitions nationwide, Interfaith was a coalition of multiple member organizations—in their case a diverse set of religious congregations—that came together to address local quality-of-life issues like public safety, health care, education, and housing in their communities. In so doing, they aspired to develop leaders capable of exerting power at all levels of public life.

Interfaith drew its members primarily from two neighborhoods located on opposite sides of the city where it operated. One neighborhood was predominantly white and middle class; the other was racially and ethnically diverse and lower income, having welcomed successive waves of immigrants over the past several decades. By organizing in a diverse set of religious congregations across these neighborhoods, the group sought to build a coalition that reflected the diversity of their city as a whole. This, they believed, provided them with the political legitimacy they needed to fight for programs and policies that promoted social justice, economic inclusion, human dignity, and the common good.

As I looked around the room that afternoon, the diversity of the coalition was on display. The men and women crowded around round tables and standing along the edges of the room were black, white, Latino, and Arab; Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim; middle-class and low-income. It was a Sunday afternoon, but most of the people present were not members of this Lutheran congregation; they worshipped in churches, synagogues, and mosques all over the city. They had traveled here not to worship together but rather to discuss how they could work together to confront the economic challenges that Americans around the country still faced in the wake of the Great Recession. Or as the pastor of the church put it before leading an opening prayer: “How do we live together as a nation under these circumstances?”

Before we broke off into the small group where Javier shared his story, Gabriel, one of the organizers running the event, polled the group. “How many of you—raise your hand—know somebody that has lost their job in the last couple of years?” Despite the fact that people came from a wide range of backgrounds, nearly every hand in the room went up. “Look around the room, everybody. Turn around, those of you in front.” People nodded knowingly as they saw the sea of hands.

“All right, put your hands down,” he told them. “How many of you know somebody who is underwater in their mortgage or is having trouble pay-

ing their bills?” Again, almost everybody raised a hand. “All right,” Gabriel responded, on a roll now. “How many of you know somebody—raise your hand again—that doesn’t have health insurance or lacks adequate resources for health care? Almost everybody.” He paused for effect. “Folks, it didn’t always used to be this way in our country.”

Looking around the room that day, I could not help but think of another group of men and women I had met during the previous year. I had concurrently been conducting fieldwork with the Patriots, a group of Tea Party activists who had mobilized in the suburban and rural communities that lay approximately one to two hours north of this urban church. The Patriots’ membership was primarily white and middle class, with an active base of small business owners, veterans, religious conservatives, and libertarian-leaning independents. As a group, they sought to empower ordinary citizens to hold government accountable and advance what they viewed as the core principles of the United States Constitution—limited federal government, personal responsibility, and individual liberty. They had mobilized in the wake of President Barack Obama’s election and debates about “Obamacare,” a policy that they felt represented everything wrong with American politics today.<sup>3</sup>

On the surface, the groups could not have been more different. But during my first year of fieldwork, as I shuttled back and forth between them, I became increasingly struck by their similarities. It would take another year of intensive fieldwork and several more years of analysis and observation from afar to understand more precisely what these similarities meant and how they could be reconciled with the ways in which the groups’ cultures and practices also diverged significantly. But on that Sunday afternoon with Interfaith, as I heard Javier’s distressed admission, as I saw the crowd’s hands go up in a signal of shared anxiety, as I heard Gabriel’s sober commentary about the current state of the country, I felt a flutter of familiarity. I flashed back to an event I had attended with the Patriots about a year earlier.

I had arrived late at a Comfort Inn in a rural hamlet north of the city and was directed down a back stairwell to a basement conference room. It was early in my fieldwork, and I was not sure what to expect from this “candidate meet and greet” that local Tea Party groups had organized. The room was packed with between seventy-five and one hundred people, and

the hotel staff was setting up additional chairs as I arrived. Someone motioned for me to sit in one of the new chairs, and I tried to quietly settle in as one of the candidates addressed the lively crowd.

After a few minutes, he handed the microphone to the main attraction, a feisty candidate for governor who had parlayed a successful career in business into a freewheeling campaign on behalf of overburdened “tax-payers.” He had also become a lightning rod for controversy, even among Tea Partiers.

He had been stuck in traffic and looked exhausted after a long day of campaigning. But his weariness lent authenticity to his remarks that night. Before speaking, he paused and looked around the room. “Everywhere I go, the faces are different,” he told them, quietly. “But the look is the same. It’s the look of hope. Hope and frustration at the same time. People want to believe they can believe in their government.”

“Everyone here has played by the rules,” he said to the group, gaining a bit of steam. “And the people in D.C. are trying to change the rules.” This has left us “ungrounded,” he explained. “We don’t feel the government is serving us, and we can’t move forward.”

“What do we teach our kids?” he asked, as the audience nodded. “We have taught them family values, respect, to go out there and earn it. But when our kids follow those rules, and then they find they can’t find a job in their community, and they have to move to another state to find work, that is not what we prepared for.”

Again there were nods; murmurs of agreement rippled through the room as if people had been privately struggling with this dilemma and now were reminded they were not the only ones. Hammering this point home, he offered a hopeful rallying cry. “They hear our rumblings coming down the road. I’ve seen you all over the state. You are not alone!”

During the question-and-answer period that followed, a woman shared her personal experience with this issue. Her voice quivered as she explained that her sons went to excellent colleges but could not find jobs. “They followed all the rules and made plans,” she said angrily, leaning forward and clenching her fists, “and now nothing is as they planned.” She was close to tears as she sat back down. A moment later, someone mentioned that people they knew were leaving the state to find jobs, to which

someone else added, “We all want to move!” Another voice piled on: “But we can’t sell our houses!” A few people shouted, “Yeah!”

I began my fieldwork with both Interfaith and the Patriots in 2010, two years after the financial crisis hit Wall Street like a tidal wave. Although the immediate danger had receded and the financial markets were slowly showing signs of recovery, the painful aftereffects of the ensuing Great Recession were still being felt on “Main Street.” Unemployment remained high, especially for new college graduates who were starting their adult lives with record high levels of debt. Families struggled to pay their mortgages. Health-care bills mounted. Between 2010 and 2012, as I crisscrossed the state attending town hall meetings, public hearings, events with public officials and political candidates, protests, rallies, and smaller, less public gatherings of these groups, I watched as people came to terms with a changed world.

In suburban community centers and urban church auditoriums—those specific locales that comprise “Main Street”—I heard a similar refrain: “I worked hard and followed the rules my whole life, and now I have nothing to show for it. What do I do now?” If there was ever a time when working- and middle-class Americans could come together in shared grief, I thought, it seemed that this was the time. And indeed, a wide swath of Americans had mobilized, their fear and frustration solidifying into an increasingly sharp critique of how the government was handling the fallout from the crisis.

Of course, much of this frustration had been simmering just below the surface since before 2008, reflecting mounting perceptions of government unresponsiveness to ordinary citizens, and unease that the increasing complexity of public policies made it impossible for ordinary people to participate in debates about issues that affected their lives.<sup>4</sup> For decades, the key mechanisms underlying representative democracy—trust, responsiveness, and accountability—had been showing signs of strain. The crisis stretched these already tenuous bonds to their limits. For many Americans, this not only threatened the political legitimacy of the system but also cast its moral legitimacy into question.

Local Tea Party groups like the Patriots were among the first to respond, to great media fanfare. The Occupy movement soon followed, billed by many as the Left’s answer to the Tea Party. Meanwhile, faith-based

community-organizing coalitions like Interfaith had been operating below the media's radar all along, voicing many of the same concerns about disparities between elites and ordinary Americans that were suddenly the focus of mainstream debates.

All of these groups shared similar populist concerns: the economy seemed to serve a few at the expense of the many; it was increasingly difficult for ordinary Americans to live the productive, healthy, and comfortable lives they had once enjoyed (or dreamed of); and ordinary people were not being included in decisions about how to chart a course back to the world they had been promised. Amid debates about how to stabilize and regulate the economy, these groups' impassioned reactions refocused attention on programs and policies intended to serve ordinary Americans.

#### WAKING UP, STANDING UP, SPEAKING UP

To be sure, there are myriad differences between the people who joined Tea Party groups like the Patriots, and the people who joined faith-based community-organizing coalitions like Interfaith. In addition to having demographic differences, the two groups lined up on opposite sides of nearly every national policy issue they confronted: while the Patriots vehemently opposed Obamacare, Interfaith members worked to support its passage and implementation; while Interfaith members took measures to improve conditions for their undocumented neighbors and called for a path to citizenship, the Patriots worried about the negative impacts of "illegals" on their communities and opposed most immigration reform proposals; the list goes on and on. Moreover, although both groups were formally nonpartisan, most members of the Patriots identified as and supported Republicans, and most members of Interfaith identified as and supported Democrats.

On this level, these groups could easily be situated in the context of rising partisan polarization, and their moral and political disagreements interpreted as evidence of a new front in the "culture war."<sup>5</sup> This kind of analysis would not be entirely wrong, but it would not tell the whole story. Moreover, this is the part of the story that everyone already knows—that when it comes to policy preferences, conservative and progressive activists hold starkly different positions on most issues. But focusing only on differ-

ences in their policy goals obscures more basic similarities between them that should not be overlooked.

These similarities are the untold story of these groups. Seeing these similarities requires that we shift our focus from the ends these groups seek—the policy demands that are often the most visible aspect of their efforts—to the *means* through which they make these demands.<sup>6</sup> It also requires that we shift our focus from their specific policy preferences to their concerns about the *political process* itself. When we focus on these aspects of their work, we can see that the groups share a surprising number of common features.

Most of the men and women who participated in these groups did not consider themselves activists; but in the face of rising anxiety and frustration, they had decided to act. They stopped feeling ashamed and started sharing their pain with others. They stopped worrying alone, yelling at the TV set, or setting aside the newspaper with a feeling of dread. They did not know how to solve the vast problems facing the country, but they shared a growing suspicion that they could not simply defer to political elites or trust that either political party would automatically serve their interests. Rather, they suspected that any durable solution to the country's problems would require higher levels of active participation by ordinary people like them, whose lives were most affected. If they wished to have a government "of the people, by the people," they would need to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in these complex debates.

They flocked to these local citizens groups, where they worked alongside their neighbors to become better informed, more vigilant, and well organized—to become, in short, what I came to call active citizens. Once they were there, they learned as they went along. The woman who stood to speak about her unemployed sons at the candidate meet and greet told me later that she had been volunteering for a candidate for the state senate who was rising in popularity among local Tea Partiers. She also planned to attend the upcoming Restoring Honor Rally in Washington, D.C., hosted by the popular Fox News host Glenn Beck.<sup>7</sup> While volunteering for a political candidate is a somewhat conventional way to get involved in politics, Beck's rally promoted an alternative vision of active citizenship. America, he said that day in Washington, D.C., needed to turn back to God. For Beck and for many of the Patriots, active citizenship fused political vigilance with personal virtue.

At the same candidate meet and greet, I also ran into Gilbert, a core leader of the Patriots, who told me that he was heading to Washington, D.C., that weekend for an activist training class run by the national organization FreedomWorks. “I know how to run my business during the day,” he explained, and then, motioning to the crowd of people milling around after the event, added, “but I’m excited to learn how to turn things like this into lasting electoral and legislative gains.” Knowing my politics were to the left of his, he smiled as he noted that groups on the left have been much better at organizing and activism than groups on the right. “But I’m excited to learn more!”

Meanwhile, Interfaith members were also learning how to become better organizers and activists. Early members of the group had gravitated toward a model of “community organizing” that was “faith-based”—meaning they organized people through religious congregations and then worked together on the basis of their shared values as people of faith, such as their commitment to justice and human dignity. These values were not viewed simply as powerful sources of shared motivation to act: by linking them to American values, Interfaith also sought to project them outward into public debates about how to achieve the common good.

In terms of their more practical tactics, Interfaith’s approach to building power in their communities can be traced to Saul Alinsky, considered by many to be the founder of contemporary community organizing. Alinsky—who wrote in his 1946 call to action: “The power of the people is transmitted through the gears of their own organizations, and democracy moves forward”—believed that citizens needed to develop enduring local organizations in which they could develop the knowledge, skills, and sense of empowerment necessary to exercise their “people power.”<sup>8</sup>

At events like the one where I met Javier, Interfaith members gathered to do just this. They learned how to have intentional “one-to-one” conversations with their neighbors in order to surface the concerns that no one was talking about; how to conduct research and educate others about these problems; how to organize public actions (this was their term, *actions*) that pressure public officials to work with them to solve these problems; and then how to evaluate this long process, learn from their mistakes, and start again.



While this basic model of community organizing is typically associated with groups on the political left, Gilbert was introduced to many of these same basic tactics when he attended FreedomWorks' activist training. This is because conservatives have increasingly seen in Alinsky's writings a set of practical strategies that can be powerfully applied to various political ends. Although Alinsky has developed a reputation in recent years—most notably among viewers of Glenn Beck—as a dangerous left-wing radical, FreedomWorks' leaders and employees studied Alinsky closely and were known to spread “the Alinsky gospel,” in the words of one reporter, as they provided early support to emerging local Tea Party groups, including the Patriots.<sup>9</sup>

All of the activities in which the Patriots and Interfaith engaged required a tremendous commitment of time and energy, as I discovered when I began participating in both groups and saw the little free time I had shrink to zero. Active citizenship is like a double shift, requiring people to attend meetings in the evenings after a full day at work and on weekends, when others are relaxing with friends or family. It requires them to spend more time every day reading the news and doing research on issues outside of their area of expertise. It requires them to put their relationships with friends, family members, and neighbors on the line by sharing stories and information about topics that are often viewed as too touchy or personal to discuss openly.

Their choice to pursue active citizenship thus sets these men and women apart from most of their fellow Americans. Of course, not everyone is equally capable of making this kind of time commitment—the demands of work or family life may not leave any free time for active political involvement; and the myriad social, cultural, and political barriers to participation are harder to overcome the fewer resources one has.<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising in light of this that the most active members of Interfaith and the Patriots were retirees, stay-at-home mothers, parents of grown children, the self-employed, and the underemployed. In different ways, each of these groups had control over their time that most people lacked—in the words of the sociologist Doug McAdam, they were “biographically available” to participate in this kind of political action.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, whether because of a lack of availability or of motivation, most Americans remain relatively inactive politically. Based on one of the most elementary measures of political engagement, voter turnout, the United States trails far behind most other developed countries.<sup>12</sup> Amid rising anxieties about their future, most Americans still choose distraction over action. Meanwhile, even those Americans who do pursue political engagement of some kind rarely take the active approach pursued by Interfaith and the Patriots. Their efforts are instead channeled to more passive activities (like signing on to advocacy organizations' mailing lists) or activities that do not address problems with the political system itself (like charity work). Active citizenship is one choice among many, and it is one of the more difficult and time-consuming choices. The fact that participants in both Interfaith and the Patriots chose it is noteworthy.

This is not to say that these groups were the same; it is to suggest that aspects of their work were homologous—as we will see, their efforts had shared historical roots, developed in response to shared political challenges, and as a result shared certain structural features in common. But while the groups' efforts *converged* at this level, the more specific ways in which they imagined what it meant for them to be active citizens in a democracy, and then worked together to enact these ideal visions, *diverged* significantly.

#### KEY ARGUMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS BOOK

By shifting our focus from the groups' ends to their means, and from their concerns about policy to their concerns about the political process itself, this book highlights similarities between these groups that are typically not acknowledged. At the same time, it also traces more subtle differences between them that typically go unrecognized. In so doing, it challenges some of our prevailing understandings of what divides groups on opposite sides of the political spectrum, of the role of religion in public life, of the cultural underpinnings of democratic practice, and of the contested nature of American democracy and citizenship. Here, I briefly preview the key arguments and contributions of this research, which are discussed in more detail in chapter 7.

First, the stories recounted in this book destabilize prevailing understandings of how conservative and progressive groups engage in political life. For example, contentious grassroots approaches to exerting power are typically associated with groups on the political Left, economically disadvantaged groups, and groups who lack other forms of political influence. Meanwhile, it is assumed that groups on the political Right and economically advantaged groups pursue more elite channels of influence. Yet both Interfaith and the Patriots engaged in grassroots organizing and protest. This similarity calls attention not only to the strategic value of these practices for a wide range of groups but also to the varied ways that groups across the political divide infuse these practices with meaning.

Similarly, both groups asserted that religion offers values, lessons, and notions of “the good” that can help solve the country’s most pressing problems—a claim typically associated with groups on the political right. By chronicling efforts to put faith into action at both ends of the political spectrum, this book disrupts popular accounts of a culture war between religious conservatives and liberal secularists. A careful parsing of the similarities and differences between these groups thus forces us to reconsider long-standing assumptions about the role of religion in American political life and enables us to develop a fuller and more nuanced picture of the contemporary political landscape as a whole.

Second, by tracing how these groups’ styles nonetheless diverged in practice, this book deepens our understanding of the cultural underpinnings of democratic life. Just as a single beam of light can, upon hitting some surfaces, split into two separate beams of light, so too did the groups’ shared vision of active citizenship, when put into practice, result in two different styles of active citizenship. But this split did not happen randomly or automatically. Rather, this book calls attention to two cultural processes that channeled the groups toward different ways of enacting their roles as active citizens. First, each group drew selectively from American culture and history to develop a group-level narrative of active citizenship that helped them cultivate a shared *democratic imaginary*—an understanding of how democracy ought to work and the role of active citizens (like them) within it. Second, group negotiations about what kinds of practices were most *appropriate* for “groups like them” led each group to embrace practices that were consistent with its ideal model of democracy and citizenship, even

when these were not necessarily the most effective ways of achieving the group's immediate political goals. Attention to these cultural dynamics is necessary in order to understand the relationship between how political actors imagine and enact their roles in democratic public life.

These findings also offer more practical insights into the possibilities of overcoming political disagreement. Namely, they suggest that even groups who share certain broad goals and ideals will face significant cultural barriers to cooperation. Although “strange bedfellows”—groups who partner on some issues while disagreeing on others—abound in American political life, such partnering may not be possible for groups who have significantly different democratic imaginaries. By filtering groups' perceptions of what kinds of practices are appropriate and meaningful in any given situation, divergent imaginaries lead groups to view alternative choices not only as inappropriate but also as undemocratic and even un-American. The notion that groups would be able to overcome these differences in order to pursue shared goals underestimates the moral salience of these distinctions.

Yet these differences need not be interpreted as threats to American democracy itself. This is the final takeaway of this book. Indeed, although these groups developed competing styles of active citizenship rooted in divergent democratic imaginaries, members of the two groups acknowledged the high stakes of the fight in which they were engaged. They shared an abiding faith in the American democratic project itself. This finding underscores the observation by the historian Stephen Prothero that “the nation rests not on agreement about its core ideas and values, but on a willingness to continue to debate them.” And this debate is never settled. Indeed, he states, “in every generation the nation must be imagined anew.”<sup>13</sup> Although Interfaith and the Patriots are only two of countless groups involved in the continual work of reimagining the nation, their stories offer insights that can help us understand this crucial (albeit messy and often painful) aspect of political life.

#### STUDYING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

While there are many possible ways to study groups like Interfaith and the Patriots, the story recounted in this book is the result of three choices.

First, this book situates the groups in the historical context of both the rise of active citizenship and the declining public authority of religion, rather than in the more common context of contemporary political polarization. This broader lens reveals important convergences between the groups' ideas and practices that may otherwise be obscured.

Second, this book provides detailed analyses of how the groups talked, acted, and interacted with others, across public and internal group settings. This on-the-ground and behind-the-scenes approach reveals details about these groups that would be missed by focusing on their public rhetoric alone. Namely, it illuminates the cultural processes through which their shared commitment to active citizenship manifested practically in two distinct styles of action, which reflected divergent ways of imagining how American democracy works and the role of active citizens in it.

Finally, this book is the product of a particular research method—multisite comparative ethnography—and a research design that juxtaposed two groups across the political divide. This approach draws our attention to unexpected parallels between the groups while also casting subtle differences between them into clearer relief.

### *Convergence: Active Citizenship in Historical Context*

#### THE RISE OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Active citizenship bears much in common with what the sociologist Michael Schudson calls “informed citizenship,” one of a handful of models of good citizenship that have developed over the course of American history.<sup>14</sup> As Schudson chronicles in his rich history of changes in Americans' conceptions of how citizens should behave, the ideal of informed citizenship emerged only recently, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although informed citizenship has come to be viewed as a standard, albeit difficult, way of becoming politically engaged, it represented a significant departure from previous ideas about the proper role of ordinary citizens in political life.

Most immediately, it was a reaction against the party-dominated system that emerged in the early 1800s, in which citizens' primary role was to fall in line with one of the mass-based political parties. Theoretically, citizens chose the party that best represented their interests, but in reality

this decision was typically based on a combination of ethnic tribalism and the potential for immediate economic gain—it was “a politics of affiliation,” in Schudson’s words.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, rooted as it was in saloon culture, this system was not only unruly but also deeply corrupt. Reformers were understandably concerned about the shortcomings of blind partisanship for democracy, but they did not wish to return to the previous system either. Before the rise of mass-based parties, American politics since the colonial era had been dominated by an elite-driven “politics of assent,” in which citizens’ primary role had been to politely defer to the judgment of recognized social elites within their communities.

Finding both of these models wanting, reformers imagined a new kind of politics and, by extension, a new kind of citizen, who would take a much more active role in political life than ever before in the country’s history. Creating the context for this new model of active citizenship would involve significant changes to the political system itself. As Schudson recounts, “The period 1890 to 1920 brought a flock of important reforms, not matched anywhere else in the world, to assault party control and the enthusiastic mode of civic participation that it fostered. State-printed ballots replaced party-printed tickets; nonpartisan municipal elections in many cities supplanted party-based elections; the initiative, the referendum, and the direct election of senators sidestepped party machinery; and the growth of an independent commercial press replaced party-directed newspapers. All of these changes provided the institutional groundwork for an ideal of an informed, rather than blindly partisan, citizen.”<sup>16</sup> In this new system, citizens were expected to become knowledgeable about issues, develop informed opinions and positions, and support or reject political candidates on these bases. They were also expected to advocate the policy changes they sought, often joining with others to form advocacy organizations that would have been viewed as dangerous only a century earlier. Although these organizations gained credibility by distancing themselves from the impurity of party politics, the parties began to change, too. Responding to reformers’ pressures, parties adopted a more “informational style of campaigning, moving from parades to pamphlets.”<sup>17</sup>

These changes also pushed the boundaries of who could officially participate in political life. Each new model of good citizenship incorporated a wider swath of Americans, expanding from propertied white males to

include white males who lacked property and, eventually, to include women and nonwhites (albeit conditionally).<sup>18</sup> Embedded in this vision of active and informed citizenship, then, is the notion that everyone has the right and the responsibility to participate, regardless of race, gender, social class, or status. It is rooted, in principle if not in practice, in a populist-minded ideal of mass empowerment.

For Americans during this time of transition, taking on a more active and informed role in political life was viewed not only as a more meaningful and democratic form of citizenship but also as a necessary duty—the only means of preventing their fragile democracy from slipping back into elitism or corruption. Avoiding this slippage would require the vigilant efforts of millions of citizens; this would be hard work, they reasoned, but it was a price all Americans should be willing to pay for their democracy.

Despite the reformers' democratic intentions, however, they unintentionally made it “more difficult and less interesting” for ordinary Americans to engage in the political process.<sup>19</sup> Suggesting that good citizens were obliged to develop basic knowledge of how the system works, of what alternative candidates believe, and of the benefits and drawbacks of various policy proposals significantly raised the barrier to entry into political life. Reformers sought to create a system that was “more democratic, inclusive, and dedicated to public, collective goals.”<sup>20</sup> Yet by elevating intelligence over loyalty as a condition for engagement, reformers effectively limited the share of Americans who were capable of participating in politics. Meanwhile, reformers also made the process “less politically engaging” than the party-driven competition and camaraderie of the previous era.<sup>21</sup> In the decades following this wave of reforms, citizens “began a retreat from political activity [and] voter turnout dropped precipitously.”<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, Schudson shows that active and informed citizenship became the dominant model of good citizenship at the time and, indeed, “remains the most cherished ideal” in American political life today.<sup>23</sup> That said, it did not replace the previous models of citizenship entirely, and newer models of good citizenship have continued to emerge during the past century, including a model that focuses on defending citizens' rights in the courtroom rather than at the ballot box, in the press, or in the streets. In short, Americans today have access to multiple models of good citizenship. Active citizenship is one option among many—to embrace

this form is also to reject other alternatives, from complacency to deference to blind partisanship.

This history of changes in Americans' ideals of good citizenship provides a necessary backdrop for understanding how Interfaith's and the Patriots' choice to become active citizens sets them apart from many of their fellow Americans, past and present. But this is not the only context that is necessary in order to understand the distinctiveness of their activities. Their efforts must also be embedded in the history of changes in the role of religion in the public life of a diverse democracy.

#### THE DECLINING PUBLIC AUTHORITY OF RELIGION

Over the past century, the American religious landscape has been redefined by a number of major changes. The country has become more religiously diverse at the same time that record numbers of Americans are disavowing religion. Meanwhile, religion's public authority has declined even as it has become increasingly politicized. Together, these forces have transformed the ways in which most Americans interact with religious others, as well as the ways in which they imagine religion's place in public life. Most relevant to my purposes here, these changes have prompted a decline in the role religious values play in public debates about many issues of common concern, particularly those related to the economy and the political process. When Interfaith and the Patriots participate in these debates, they do so against the backdrop of this complex religious landscape.

Perhaps the most significant background factor shaping these changes is a long-term historical shift in which modern societies like the United States have become secularized. We are now living, in the words of the philosopher Charles Taylor, in a "secular age." This does not mean that religion has disappeared, but rather that "belief in God is . . . understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."<sup>24</sup> This shift has also involved the differentiation of society into specialized spheres of activity, from science and medicine to law and government. As a result, the public authority and relevance of religion within society as a whole has declined.<sup>25</sup>

Most members of society have either welcomed these changes or viewed them as inevitable. But they have been met with hostility by some religious elites and communities who benefited from the previous social order



and feel threatened by the secularized order that replaced it. This sense of threat has been compounded by the rising religious diversity of American society. Whereas mid-twentieth-century America was marked by relatively predictable (if not always positive) relations between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, sweeping changes in immigration policy, beginning in 1965, brought newcomers hailing from nations in which Christianity was not the majority religion.<sup>26</sup> Although nearly three-quarters of Americans still affiliate with Christianity or Judaism, the presence of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, as well as new variants of global Christianity, has infused American religious culture with new traditions and practices and reshaped the context in which Americans experience and navigate religious diversity.<sup>27</sup>

Complicating this story of rising religious diversity, however, is the fact that a growing number of Americans no longer identify with *any* religious tradition. According to recent estimates, nearly one-fourth of the overall population and more than one-third of adults under thirty now fall into this camp.<sup>28</sup> Despite significant differences within this group between atheists, agnostics, and “spiritual but not religious” seekers, they are united by a desire to distance themselves from organized religion. And while researchers are far from fully understanding this emerging trend, one factor that appears to be driving it is concern about religious conservatives’ role in politics, which is viewed by many as exclusionary, majoritarian, and generally antidemocratic.<sup>29</sup>

Taking these various trends into account, the picture that emerges resembles influential accounts of a culture war between two irreconcilable camps.<sup>30</sup> According to this narrative, religious conservatives resisting societal secularization and rising religious diversity face off against liberal secularists, who responded to conservatives’ lack of concern for the rights of religious minorities by both disengaging from religious life and promoting a stricter separation of church and state. While there is much about this narrative that is accurate, it is incomplete.

Namely, it underestimates the extent to which a wide array of religiously motivated groups engage in public life and infuse public discourse with moral concern, and especially the role of progressive religious actors like Interfaith. There are reasonable explanations for why these actors have been overlooked. Most notably, since the 1970s, conservative religious

groups (known collectively as the Christian Right or the religious Right) have been far more visible and politically influential than their liberal counterparts. Although liberal religious groups were working below the radar all along, their voices have been eclipsed by these more strident conservative religious voices. Liberal religious groups have also struggled to gain prominence within the Democratic Party and progressive political coalitions that are dominated by secular (and secularist) voices and interests.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, when most members of the public think about the role religion plays in public debates, they picture conservative religious actors promoting conservative (and primarily Christian) values in the context of a relatively narrow set of debates about gender and sexual politics. Furthermore, many view these efforts as a threat to the fragile balance that the United States seeks to preserve between protecting each individual's right to freely exercise his or her faith and ensuring that no religious group is able to impose its beliefs on others, especially through the law. The association of *all* public religion with the religious Right has thus led to widespread efforts to limit the role of religion in public policy debates.

In addition to active efforts to expunge religion from public life, other factors, too, have led to the declining relevance of religious values to public debates. As American society has become increasingly religiously diverse and nonreligious, references to sectarian religious language have become less accessible and persuasive to wide swaths of the population. Meanwhile, scientific, technical, and ethical languages have grown increasingly persuasive, not only to members of the public, but also to political insiders. Together, these developments have produced a context in which religious values are no longer central to public debates about most issues of common concern, and especially those related to the economy and the political process.

While this could be viewed as a positive, even democratic, development, observers across the political divide have also raised concerns about potentially antidemocratic implications of this shift. In his influential 1984 book, *The Naked Public Square*, the conservative Catholic writer Richard John Neuhaus argued that American democracy cannot survive if widely held religious values are excluded from public debates. More recent debates among liberal political theorists have echoed this concern, arguing that when religious citizens are sent the message that it is inap-

appropriate, insensitive, or ineffective to publicly express their views in religious terms, this can limit their capacity to engage in public debates.<sup>32</sup>

This is because religion is not only a set of abstract values and beliefs but also, as sociologists of religion have shown, a widely accessible *language* through which ordinary people are able to express their views about how society should work.<sup>33</sup> And as much recent research has demonstrated, religious citizens continue to infuse public debates with moral significance, drawing on their faith values and traditions to offer critiques of policies and institutions that fail to take moral considerations into account.<sup>34</sup> It follows that without these religious voices a historically significant check on modern institutions would be lost.

Members of Interfaith and the Patriots echoed these concerns. They worried that American society would lose its footing if it lost sight of the broadly shared values that most Americans' faith traditions taught. And they suggested that any solution to the country's problems must involve bringing these values, and the ordinary people of faith who live them out everyday, back into public discussions about how to pursue the public good. In this way, both groups rejected the liberal secularist notion that there is no place for religion, or God, in the public life of a diverse democratic society. Thus, for these groups, active citizenship not only involved becoming more informed about and engaged in the political process but also involved publicly projecting their values into public debates.

#### *Divergence: Active Citizenship in Action and Interaction*

Despite these convergences in their broad ideals and goals, however, when the groups set out to enact their roles as active citizens—by working to hold government accountable and putting their faith into action—their practical choices about how to act and interact with others reflected markedly different “group styles” of active citizenship.<sup>35</sup> Understanding how the groups' styles diverged in this way is the second main goal of this book. It is tempting to conclude that the groups' divergent styles, like their policy preferences, simply reflect opposing political ideologies. But the organizational, cultural, and tactical choices they made were not clearly conservative or progressive. Consider the above anecdote about FreedomWorks' adoption of “Alinsky-style” community-organizing tactics, or the fact that

Interfaith adopted a faith-based approach more typically associated with conservatism. To make sense of these choices, it is necessary to keep in mind that although some tactics and styles may be more closely associated at any given time with the political Left or Right, a broader historical and comparative lens reveals that they have often been used by groups across the political divide.

The question thus becomes whether there is some other pattern in the ways that groups make these kinds of organizational, cultural, and tactical choices. Answering this question requires a close look at the internal cultures of both groups. Culturally oriented sociologists of civic life have increasingly found that the ways in which political actors act and interact with others is fundamentally shaped by the cultures of the groups in which they are embedded. This is because group members develop shared ways of understanding political issues and their relationships to other political actors. As they confront new situations, their interpretations of those situations and their decisions about how to act are filtered through these shared understandings.<sup>36</sup>

By examining how Interfaith and the Patriots talked, acted, and interacted with others, across public and internal group settings, this book illuminates aspects of these groups' efforts that would not be visible through an analysis of their public rhetoric alone. Not only does this approach provide a more complex portrait of how these groups imagined and enacted their roles as active citizens, but it also allows for careful specification of the cultural processes through which the groups' shared commitment to active citizenship manifested practically in two distinct styles of action.

This kind of analysis is possible only because I had access to both the public and the internal worlds of these groups and was able to observe how they reacted to events in real time. To study this complex process, I carried out what sociologists call ethnographic research. Between 2010 and 2012, I systematically observed the activities of both organizations at public events and internal meetings, interviewed participants, and participated in both groups, albeit in relatively limited ways, in order to better understand the experience of engaging in this kind of activity. I also conducted follow-up observations and conversations during the three years after this period of intensive fieldwork ended. (The appendix presents more specific details about my fieldwork with each group.)

It is rare for researchers to conduct ethnographic research simultaneously within groups on the left and the right. As discussed in more detail in the appendix, this kind of research can be challenging. But viewing the groups' activities in comparative perspective illuminated aspects of the two groups that researchers have not previously recognized.

*Juxtaposition: Active Citizenship in Comparative Perspective*

The method of multisite comparative ethnography—when one conducts ethnographic research in two or more groups for the purposes of comparison—provides a lens through which to notice details about each of these groups that may not seem important without contrast to the other.<sup>37</sup> It highlights surprising parallels across the groups while also casting subtle differences between the groups into clearer relief. Taken together, this allows us to discern both general similarities and general differences between the groups.<sup>38</sup>

Because local Tea Party groups and faith-based community-organizing coalitions have not previously been systematically compared to one another, observers have tended to overlook several aspects of these groups that are highlighted in this book. Our existing knowledge about groups like Interfaith and the Patriots, while incredibly rich and valuable, has largely been based on in-depth studies of *either* faith-based community organizing or the Tea Party movement, respectively. When FBCOs have been compared to other movements, these comparison cases have typically shared their progressive political goals.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, when the Tea Party has been compared to other movements, it has typically been to other conservative and right-wing movements.<sup>40</sup> These choices have rendered certain aspects of these groups visible while obscuring others.

One exception has been the effort to compare the Tea Party to the Occupy movement. Occupy, which emerged in 2011, was quickly hailed by journalists and academic observers as the Tea Party's progressive counterpart.<sup>41</sup> At the level of national discourse, this comparison has merit—together Tea Partiers and Occupiers were populist barbs in political elites' (right and left) sides, at least for a time. But organizationally, the comparison between the two movements becomes more fraught. While both movements mobilized large numbers of Americans quickly and engaged

in highly visible public protest activities, Tea Partiers also sought to develop a network of local chapters that would endure beyond this initial movement-like activity.

Although the jury is still out on what will become of the Tea Party movement in the future, it is evident that in a short period of time it spawned hundreds of these local groups across the country.<sup>42</sup> Despite claims that much of the movement's influence can be attributed to national organizations (like the Tea Party Patriots or FreedomWorks) and high profile donors (like the Koch brothers), this network of local Tea Party groups, which is largely independent from these national actors, should not be overlooked.<sup>43</sup>

When we shift our focus to these local groups, the Tea Party bears a closer resemblance to the growing field of faith-based community-organizing coalitions than to Occupy.<sup>44</sup> Yet the FBCO field is rarely cited as an appropriate comparison case. This is likely because the FBCO field has gone largely unrecognized by scholars and the media alike, despite the widespread presence of these coalitions in urban (and increasingly suburban) communities across the country.<sup>45</sup> This low profile makes sense in light of the field's localized focus. Although local coalitions have scaled up in recent years by joining together to intervene in selected state and national policy debates, their activities still rarely attract national media attention.<sup>46</sup>

This organizational field may also be overlooked because FBCO coalitions are not easily categorized as either social movements or civic organizations.<sup>47</sup> Like local Tea Party groups, community organizations around the country have been linked to episodic movement-like activity around single issues or themes (including Occupy). But Tea Partiers and community organizers both focus on building a different kind of grassroots citizen power, rooted in enduring citizens organizations. As networks of local groups around the country, which receive some combination of training, infrastructure, and coordinating assistance from national organizations, the Tea Party movement and the FBCO field both resemble some of the most influential mass civic organizations in American history.<sup>48</sup> And over the past several years, Tea Party activism and faith-based community organizing have been two of the most widely used platforms through which ordinary citizens have come together to build enduring power in their communities and across the country as a whole.

That these two prominent forms of citizen engagement have not been systematically compared to one another reflects a more general reticence by sociologists to compare groups across the political spectrum.<sup>49</sup> While there are some notable exceptions, this trend has had two problematic effects: first, it has led to oversimplified understandings of the differences between groups like these (e.g., conservatives are religious and progressives are secular; groups on the left are contentious, while groups on the right pursue elite influence); second, it has prevented us from seeing similarities between them.<sup>50</sup>

I have sought to avoid these assumptions, not only by comparing these two groups, but also by employing a symmetrical approach that is increasingly being used by researchers engaged in multisite comparative ethnography.<sup>51</sup> In practice, this meant suspending judgment about what motivated participants in each group, how they defined themselves and understood their actions, and how they situated their efforts in relation to others'. It also meant applying the same basic analytic strategy to both groups while making every effort not to squeeze both cases into an explanatory framework that fit one better than the other. (See the appendix for more details.)

While I do not expect members of Interfaith or the Patriots to agree with every aspect of the analysis in this book, I hope they view this approach as evidence of the seriousness with which I took the responsibility to be open-minded and evenhanded. Ideally, it has allowed for a careful analysis of both similarities and differences between the groups while avoiding normative claims about which constitutes the more authentic democratic vision.

#### OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Building on the foundation provided in this chapter, the following chapters trace how members of Interfaith and the Patriots imagined and enacted their roles as active citizens. Chapter 2 focuses on the parallel ways in which members of these groups described their choice to become more active. For members of the two groups, this involved waking up, standing up, and speaking up—acts that were described as political and

sacred responsibilities alike. In justifying their choices and distinguishing them from alternatives, participants in both of these groups drew loosely on a *civil discourse* that valorized the qualities associated with active citizenship, while critiquing or distancing themselves from fellow citizens who chose not to pursue this path.<sup>52</sup> In the process, they also drew on a *civil religious discourse* that infused active citizenship and American democracy itself with sacred significance.<sup>53</sup>

Chapters 3–5 trace how this shared commitment to the ideal of active citizenship generated two different styles of active citizenship. Chapter 3 identifies one key process through which the groups developed different ways of imagining what it meant to be an active citizen in practice. Both Interfaith and the Patriots drew from American culture and history to develop narratives of active citizenship. Yet the groups' narratives highlighted different combinations of characters, events, and plotlines that coalesced into different ideal-typical models of active citizenship—the prophet and the patriot. The fact that they told such different stories about the origins and development of the American democratic project reveals profoundly different democratic imaginaries—ways of understanding how democracy works and the proper role of active citizens in it. Consequently, when these narratives were referenced in the course of the groups' efforts, they offered different blueprints for their action.

Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate how members of the groups subsequently enacted their roles as active citizens by putting their faith into action and holding government accountable. Chapter 4 shows that although both groups asserted a public role for religion in a diverse democratic society, they differed in their understandings of how this should work in practice. Efforts by members of Interfaith to put their faith into action were driven by concerns about religious inclusion, while the Patriots were driven by concerns about religious liberty. Participants in the groups thus emphasized subtly different religious values, developed different ways of engaging with religious others, and engaged in different kinds of religious (and civil religious) practices.

Chapter 5 shows that although holding government accountable was a central component of both groups' efforts, the ways in which they organized their neighbors, developed skills and knowledge, and interacted with public officials differed in significant ways. Interfaith's efforts to work alongside



government to solve shared problems were grounded in a vision of a covenantal relationship between moral communities and political authorities. Meanwhile, the Patriots' confrontational relationship with government reflected a contractual model of citizenship that framed their individual God-given rights as perpetually threatened by government control.

In both cases, the groups' practical choices about how to enact their active citizenship can be traced to differences in their democratic imaginaries. While chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate a clear relationship between the groups' imaginaries and their respective styles, chapter 6 specifies a key mechanism through which these ways of imagining what it means to be an active citizen influenced how the groups actually practiced active citizenship. Close attention is paid to moments of disagreement and conflict within each group: over whether to be civil or confrontational in interactions with public officials; whether to pursue self-interest or the common good; whether to speak with a collective voice or as individuals; and whether to attempt to replace or persuade elected officials who did not represent the groups' interests. In each case, the choices both groups made were shaped by collective considerations of what kinds of actions were most *appropriate* for "groups like them" in light of their ideal visions of how active citizens should behave. As the groups embraced practices that felt appropriate and rejected others that seemed inappropriate, they were channeled toward different styles of active citizenship. Finally, chapter 7 summarizes the key findings, takeaways, and contributions of the book. The appendix supplies additional details about how the research for this book was conducted.

In the end, this is a story about how a handful of real people dedicated their time and energy to making a difference in their communities and in their country. Readers may find that this story destabilizes some of their assumptions about how citizens across the political divide engage in political life—conducting this research certainly had that effect on me. But this story is not intended to merely be provocative. Rather, I undertook this project out of a desire to improve public and scholarly understandings of two groups who are, in one case overexposed and thus caricatured, and in the other case relatively unseen and thus dismissed.

Although our images of these groups have led us to believe they share nothing in common, the closer vantage point these portraits provide

reveals surprising convergences in their concerns, their critiques of government, and their goals. Meanwhile, juxtaposing these portraits also provides the context necessary to understand how the choices they each made were meaningful to them, and how their practices ultimately diverged in the ways that they did. Overall, the book reveals how different ways of understanding what it means to be part of the American people can shape the ways in which people practice citizenship.

#### A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this book, I frequently use the terms *citizen* and *citizenship*. As I write these words, I am cognizant that members of Interfaith would likely point out that they sought to mobilize their undocumented neighbors alongside born and naturalized citizens. As a result, I want to be clear that I do not use these terms to refer to one's official status as a legal citizen of the United States. When I use the term *citizen*, I refer to a *role* that all individuals can play when they engage in the public life of their community, at the local, national, or global level. Regardless of one's legal status, playing this role involves a particular moral orientation toward other members of one's political community and toward political authorities—as fellow citizens and cocreators of a shared society.<sup>54</sup> Playing this role also requires a basic understanding of the rules and norms of the political “game” one is playing—in this case, of the American political system, which comprises both its formal institutions and its more informal political culture.

Throughout this book, I refer to this political system as a *democracy* or a *democratic project*. As I write these words, I am also cognizant that members of the Patriots would likely note that this is not in fact accurate—they often pointed out that the United States is technically not a democracy but rather a federal republic, a constitutional republic, or a representative democracy. They were correct to distinguish these forms of government from a direct democracy, which the United States is not. Yet they also acknowledged that the United States is “the greatest experiment in democracy and liberty in the whole of human history,” as their founder and leader once wrote. When I refer to American democracy, I am referencing this more general meaning of the term, which conveys the basic

principles and spirit undergirding the social and political system as a whole.<sup>55</sup>

As will become clear in the chapters that follow, there are many ways in which individuals can play the role of citizen and various visions of what it means for a society to be democratic. These meanings have not only changed significantly over time but also have been contested during each era. Debates over how these terms should be defined have informed American political culture since the country's founding and will likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future. An in-depth look at Interfaith and the Patriots not only reveals how members of these groups understand what it means to be a citizen in a democracy but also offers insights into these broader debates over the meaning and practice of American citizenship.