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Whereas citizenship studies in Europe have been largely focused on social class and welfare provision, research on citizenship in American sociology has concentrated on migration and civil rights. Susan Ostrander’s excellent Citizenship and Governance in a Changing City, a study of the history of migration and civil society in the town of Somerville, is no exception. Her ethnographic and community-based approach is primarily concerned with the practice of local democracy, the history of migration, and the character of civil society and its civic associations. Mass migration is a relatively recent development in the town’s history. Settled originally in 1630 as part of Boston’s Charlestown, Somerville’s foreign-born population doubled as a percentage of the total population between 1970 and 2000. She identifies three waves of migration. The first is, unsurprisingly, the Irish and Italian
working class, which then gave way to a white, professional middle class.
More recently the newcomers are from Central and South America. Her
research traces the tensions and struggles between these social groups during
the process of their social and cultural assimilation. She found that, despite
these cultural differences and tensions, civil society may evolve relatively
harmoniously and coherently when communities act collectively to protect
newcomers, thereby allowing them to engage actively as citizens.

These findings to some extent repeat the story of immigration to the
United States in the existing literature on migration and social rights.
However, Ostrander brings some new elements to this sociological genre.
Citizenship exists in the intersection between state, civil society, and the
market. One can reasonably argue that the majority of studies of citizenship
focus on civil society, develop a strong critique of the market, and
neglect the state. By contrast, Ostrander has a clear notion of how government,
especially local government, plays a major role in either helping
or hindering the enjoyment of social membership and access to the rights
and privileges of citizenship. She insists correctly that, from a sociological
perspective, citizenship is never simply a juridical status. Her focus is on
social citizenship, that is, the practices, both individual and collective, that
contribute to social solidarity and engagement. She notes, for example, that
while education and income are the two factors that explain individual engagement, for new immigrants it is politics that determines their social participation. Thus the engagement of the Latino community in conflicts with the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids against Latino youth in 2007 and 2008 is best understood within a larger political context, namely democratic representation and the election of the city’s leadership.

For Ostrander, civic engagement consists of individual and collective actions to address public concerns and to participate in public life. In order for people to engage with community issues such as housing and policing, it is necessary for them to exert control over public matters. This measure of control is what she means by shared governance—hence the title of her book. This type of research requires attention to the interaction between the civic realm, the realm described classically by Alexis de Tocqueville, and the political sphere of government at its various levels. This approach is systematically explored in chapter 3, in which she examines the struggle over affordable housing involving the activities of two grassroots voluntary associations, namely the Affordable Housing Organizing Committee and East Somerville Neighbors for Change. Her approach therefore offers a modification of urban regime theory, which contends that power relations in
cities play out between business and political elites. By contrast, she demonstrates how voluntary associations are actively involved with city planning departments in shaping urban development to preserve cultural diversity, local services, and public goods. Consequently her research stands out from the conventional view that treats voluntary associations as existing within a purely social sphere and thus disconnected from politics and public issues.

This emphasis on the political does not exclude consideration of the cultural dimensions and subjectivities of citizenship. For example, in chapter 4, while recognizing ample evidence of racial prejudice and xenophobia in Somerville’s history, she proposes that there exists an “immigrant imaginary” or shared consciousness of the experiences of migration, displacement, and alienation that can build a social bridge between the old and the new migrants. The problems of language, color, and low income can be to some degree overcome by a strong sense of Somerville as first and foremost a town of migrants. She is not, however, unduly optimistic or naive about the role of these shared experiences in creating community, and in chapter 5 she fully recognizes how American politics has been deeply divided over the status of migrants, especially illegal migrants or so-called illegal aliens, in relation to formal or juridical citizenship. Ostrander goes on to
challenge the legacy of the mainstream sociology of migration that has concentrated on social mobility and assimilation to the neglect of civic and political engagement, presenting a useful comparison of the United States and Canada. For Ostrander, the main problem with what are often referred to as “paperless citizens” is not their association with crime and disorder; it is that passive, disengaged, and marginalized denizens cannot contribute to democracy because they have little effective means of engagement.

Although of modest dimensions, this volume offers an important contribution to the study of citizenship and governance. There are, however, two interesting lacunae. The sociology of voluntary associations and civil society has traditionally paid significant attention to the role of churches and religious institutions, especially in support of migrants. The place of the Roman Catholic Church in the history of Irish and Italian migration into the United States is well documented, but I cannot find a single reference to religious groups in this otherwise comprehensive study of the civil sphere. Somerville must be unusually agnostic. Second, much of the recent literature on civil engagement from Occupy Wall Street to the Arab Spring has examined the important role played by Facebook and Twitter in mobilizing the public, but these means of mobilization and shared governance are absent in her account.