Advanced democracies are facing considerable democratic and citizenship deficits (Macedo 2005; Nabatchi 2010). Public administration scholars have been investigating the potential of government agencies to correct these deficits through more and better-organized public forums under the twin guises of deliberative democracy and collaborative governance (Fung 2003; Nabatchi 2010; Sirianni 2009). In New Participatory Dimensions in Civil Society: Professionalization and Individualized Collective Action, Jan W. van Deth and William A. Maloney bring together a collection of empirical and
conceptual chapters that add to this debate by focusing on the challenges and potential contributions that civil society can make to reducing these deficits.

Focusing on developed democracies in Europe, the chapters are linked by the premise that democratic participation in civil society has a new face: the majority of citizens are content with passive or episodic forms of engagement rather than active, ongoing engagement in voluntary associations. This new face is a product of two key shifts: (1) increasing professionalization of civic participation in civil society organizations and (2) greater individualization of collective action of citizens. In the introduction, the overall message is that if civil society is going to share the burden of closing the democratic and citizenship deficits, we have a long way to go. But the concluding chapter suggests that new forms of participation are complementing older ones, creating more opportunities for civic engagement, but also heightening inequalities in participation.

The professionalization of civic participation, the first of the two shifts, stems from the drive for voluntary associations to be more “successful” and goal oriented. “Faced with the demands of quality, efficiency and accountability[,] many organizations—in an increasingly competitive market—have chosen to replace the amateur volunteer with the technocratically trained professional” (231). With this shift has come a greater focus on market-based strategies of social change such as formal and targeted recruitment and marketing as well as lobbying, to the neglect of member organizing. Greater individualization of “collective” action, the second shift, takes such forms as donating money, signing a petition, and boycotting unethically produced products, all of which can take place in private and/or nonpolitical arenas rather than through face-to-face engagement, which many argue is at the heart of a healthy democracy.

The chapters, drawing largely from political science and political sociology perspectives, set out to “address several issues at the core of these parallel developments” (3). If the book has a thesis, it is that the spread of “checkbook participation” (the individualization of participation) and the rise of the “protest business” (the professionalization of participation) are mutually reinforcing. As the editors argue, “The two strategies strengthen each other and result in a growing distance between civil and political associations on the one hand and citizens on the other” (4). This interaction results in a paradox of contemporary participation: “it delivers both more participation and simultaneously a democratic deficit” (5). More people write checks, for example, but this is a weak, passive form of engagement compared to “internal democratic content,” in which citizens play a role in electing group leaders, selecting organizational tactics, and so on. The contributors are divided on whether this is a problem.

The book is organized into two parts that examine the professionalization and individualization of participation separately. Here I focus primarily on part I, as it offers new perspectives on professionalization, and highlight some chapters in part II. Part I focuses on professionalization and examines ways in which associations function differently as they become more professionalized.

The next several chapters offer conceptual frameworks for thinking civil society and participation. First, Sabine Saurugger focuses on the role of civil society organizations in improving the democratic character of institutions at the level of the European Union. She argues that civil society organizations face a considerable tension between being effective and efficient enough to gain access to European institutions and being able to provide the organizational infrastructure for civic engagement and representation. Her central hypothesis is that “the more efficient groups are at representing their interests in a constructive, precise
and coherent manner, the more influence they exert. These activities, however, require major expertise on the group’s and movement’s side which contributes to … greater internal professionalization” (79).

Second, William A. Maloney discusses three factors that help explain low levels of participation in professionalized public interest groups: group push and supporter pull effects, patronage (i.e., financial contributions), and the increasing professionalization of the policy-making process. Despite the low levels of participation in professionalized groups attributable to these factors, Maloney concludes that shallow involvement can be “presented as an efficient market … Both parties get what they need” (94). Furthermore, donors may exit to express their dissatisfaction with interest group activities or positions, provide their opinions through surveys, and find more active forms of participation if they choose. Public interest groups must be responsive to member/donor demands, as they are in fierce competition for their support.

Third, Grant Jordan also examines the role of professionalized public interest groups in supporting civic engagement. Focusing on the supply side, which suggests that participation is generated by group activity rather than by individual rational calculation, he argues that the increasingly professionalized recruitment strategies used by public interest groups bring in financial donors rather than active members or volunteers. The groups, by which he means “large-scale, mail order, checkbook groups,” produce nothing like the kinds of democratic benefits that more face-to-face deliberative organizations might offer. This chapter is largely concerned with describing the type of participation that these groups supply rather than judging whether they are good or bad for democracy.

These chapters are permeated with references to the trade-offs between efficiency and democracy in associations. But they tend to come out on the same side of what could be a fruitful debate: to be successful, groups need to professionalize and sacrifice internal democracy and representation. To illustrate, Francesca Polletta (2002) offers an alternative argument: prioritizing internal democracy may be done for developmental and strategic reasons. In other words, greater attention to democracy and participation can help citizens develop democratic skills but also make associations more efficient and effective at securing the changes they seek by, for example, producing a cadre of trained activists who work for change. The chapters also come out on one side of a debate about the tension between collaborative and confrontational strategies. The argument in the book is that associations are less able to be confrontational because they want to maintain good relationships with decision makers. But it is possible for associations to be effective by engaging in a dual strategy that simultaneously includes collaborative insider tactics and confrontational outsider tactics (Dodge 2010).

On a less substantive note, a stronger editorial hand could have improved the redundancy throughout the chapters in discussions about the professionalization of associations, as well as addressed the unevenness in the quality of the contributions and how well they draw out implications for the key concerns that focus the book.

Part II focuses on the changing forms of democratic engagement of citizens in democratic societies. Reflecting on the shift toward more individualized forms of participation, Jan W. van Deth examines the relationship between new individualized forms of participation, such as boycotting products and ethical shopping, and norms of citizenship. He finds that citizens are satisfied with “contracting out” participation to professionalized groups. Other highlights include Isabelle Stadelmann-Steﬀen’s chapter, which evaluates the relationship between welfare provision at the national level and individual civic engagement. She finds that welfare provision tends to crowd out volunteer civic activities among the affluent but reduces the negative effect that low affluence might have on individual civic participation. Eline A. de Rooj’s comparative analysis of nonelectoral participation across European countries finds that several factors related to mobilization—such as living in a politicized context in which opportunities to mobilize are available or a variety of interest groups and social movements are active—increases the likelihood of participation.

The editors take pains to draw conclusions from the evidence presented in the chapters in ways that speak to their original thesis. They argue that professionalization and individualization of participation are driven by four factors: associations find that offering limited involvement is an efficient way to mobilize (the authors call this “shared interests,” but it is not clear why); professionalized groups round up citizens who are most socially and politically interested in participation, thus creating a bias in who is mobilized; public agencies require high levels of expertise and technical knowledge rather than large numbers of concerned citizens, which has resulted in the rise of the unelected; and members can be an unnecessary distraction when “institutional patronage provides the resources required to engage in professional lobbying” (6–7). But they conclude, rather anticlimactically, that “a closer examination of the four main explanations and interpretations about the probable linkages between these two developments is required” (232). Unfortunately, dividing the book into two parts limits the possibility for testing the relationship between the two trends, a key goal set out in the introduction. The result is that the collection of chapters that they bring together does not suggest cohesive answers.
Perhaps we could have learned more if the editors had stepped away in their conclusions from what seemed to be preformulated ideas about the relationship between the two trends—professionalization and individualization of participation—and developed themes that emerged from the chapters’ analyses. The tensions between democracy and efficiency, and between collaboration and confrontation, that I mentioned earlier seem like two promising places to start. Yet, we are left not knowing what civil society organizations might contribute to shrinking the democratic and citizenship deficits that seem to be so problematic for developed democracies.

References


