



# **Becoming Citizens in the Age of Television: How Americans Challenged the Media and Seized Political Initiative during the Iran-Contra Debate**

*David Thelen*

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An inspired, original argument about the nature of democracy in American society, *Becoming Citizens in the Age of Television* explores a political process out of touch with everyday needs and concerns of citizens. Instead of focusing on polls and election results, historian David Thelen listens to Americans through their calls and letters to congressmen in which citizens define for themselves the issues they want to raise and the ways they want to be seen and heard.

Thelen argues that the self-referential world of politics and journalism during elections excludes the concerns and voices of Americans, resulting in lower voter turnouts and increased voter apathy. Televised hearings and trials, however—from O. J. Simpson to Anita Hill vs. Clarence Thomas to Oliver North and Iran-Contra—have ignited storms of controversy and public debate. Focusing upon the spontaneous, unmediated reactions of American citizens to these events, Thelen discovers a new kind of political participation in which Americans shape their interventions.

Through an analysis of a remarkable documentary collection—the correspondence sent by citizens to the House Select Committee on Iran-Contra in the wake of the Oliver North testimony—Thelen explains how Americans are reclaiming the political process. Examining more than 5,000 letters and telegrams, Thelen uncovers the anger and resolve of a vocal public insulted by the media and opinion-managers who have misrepresented them as mindless supporters of "Olliemania."

Concluding with suggestions on how citizens can reclaim their voice from the opinion managing industries, this work promises to provoke the kind of public discourse on which democracy depends.

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