

Reviewer: Dominik Allenspach

Review of the Book: "Kritische Bürger. Gefahr oder Ressource für die Demokratie?" ("Critical Citizens: Risk or Resource for a Democracy?")

written by **Brigitte Geissel**

According to the theory of political system support, a political system and a democracy need the support of its members to persist. Critique towards the political system (political critique) is, therefore, seen as a threat to democracies. However, in the nineteen-nineties many scholars have abandoned this paradigm and have adopted the idea that political critique is a resource for democracies since critique can help to refine the political system. In summary, democracies need political support as well as political critique. Is this a contradiction? In her book "Kritische Bürger. Gefahr oder Ressource für die Demokratie?," Brigitte Geissel intends to untangle the two concepts: the concept of political support and the concept of political critique.

In the first chapter, the author rightly criticizes that political dissatisfaction has been used as an ambiguous proxy variable for political critique. Political dissatisfaction could be understood as a healthy inclination to question the political system, but also as a depressed withdrawal from the political system. Geissel suggests that in addition to the concept of political dissatisfaction the concept of political attentiveness should be included into the concept of political critique. According to Geissel, political attentiveness consists of the willingness to monitor the political process and of the willingness to intervene into the political process when considered necessary by the citizens. Unfortunately, she does not show how these two civic duties are correlated, although she merges them into the concept of political attentiveness.

By crossing the two concepts – political dissatisfaction and political attentiveness, Geissel classifies four types of critical citizens: 1) attentive-satisfied, 2) attentive-dissatisfied, 3) inattentive-satisfied, and 4) inattentive-dissatisfied. Although she develops this typology, she does not describe explicitly how the two dimensions are related on a theoretical basis. At the implicit level, however, Geissel hypothesizes that citizens get involved in the political process as long as they are politically attentive, regardless of their degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. In contrast, politically inattentive citizens withdraw from the political process, regardless of their degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

In the second chapter, Geissel examines the causes of political dissatisfaction and political attentive-

ness. Whereas political satisfaction is explained by the economic and democratic performance of the political system, political attentiveness is not explained by socio-demographic or by contextual variables. She concludes that political attentiveness is an independent core belief. Does this mean that individuals are born either as politically attentive or inattentive citizens? From the perspective of political sociology, this may be doubted. Considering Geissel's estimations, one must rather conclude that her models are insufficiently specified to explain political attentiveness.

In the third chapter, Geissel uses three steps to examine which of the four types of citizens can be considered "resources" or "threats" for democracies. First, after reviewing the literature, she summarizes the attributes which are considered as resources for democracies (such as political participation, political interest, etc.). Second, to examine whether there exist interaction effects, she correlates the four types of critical citizens with these democracy attributes. Third, using multivariate regression models, she examines whether the effects of political attentiveness and political dissatisfaction on these democracy attributes remain stable taking into account several control variables. Geissel reveals that politically attentive citizens have attributes that are beneficial for democracies, independently of their degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. In contrast, the politically inattentive citizens seldom have beneficial attributes. Furthermore, Geissel demonstrates that the effect of political attentiveness on democracy attributes remains stable taking into account several control variables. From a methodological viewpoint, this three-step approach, especially the construction of a typology to examine interaction effects, is interesting. However, if traditional interaction effects had been estimated more in depth results could have been generated.

In the fourth chapter, Geissel examines whether an entity with many critical citizens is more democratic than an entity with few critical citizens. The author reveals that there is a positive relation between an entity with many critical citizens and the democratic level of the entity.

Based on these results, Geissel concludes in her fifth and sixth chapter that politically attentive citizens are a resource for democracies and she suggests



that political attentiveness should be introduced into civic education.

Brigitte Geissel is one of the first researchers who intend to untangle the relation between political dissatisfaction and political critique by introducing the concept of political attentiveness. Even though her attempt to examine every aspect of political critique is commendable it also entails some inaccuracies. She gains, however, some new and interesting insights which advance the research on political critique.

Geissel, Brigitte. 2011. *Kritische Bürger. Gefahr oder Ressource für die Demokratie?* (Critical Citizens: Risk or Resource for a Democracy? Frankfurt