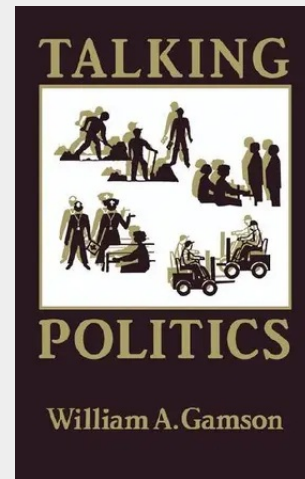


Talking Politics

Those who analyze public opinion have long contended that the average citizen is incapable of recounting consistently even the most rudimentary facts about current politics; that the little the average person does know is taken strictly from what the media report, with no critical reflection; and that the consequence is a polity that is ill prepared for democratic governance. And yet social movements, comprised by and large of average citizens, have been a prominent feature of the American political scene throughout American history and have experienced a resurgence in recent years. William Gamson asks, how is it that so many people become active in movements if they are so uninterested and badly informed about issues? The conclusion he reaches in this book is a striking refutation of the common wisdom about the public's inability to reason about politics. Rather than relying on survey data, as so many studies of public opinion do, Gamson reports on his analysis of discussions among small groups of working people on four controversial issues: affirmative action, nuclear power, Arab-Israeli conflict, and the troubles in American industry. Excerpts from many of these same issues have been treated in the book. In addition, Gamson analyzes how these same issues have been treated in a range of media material, from editorial opinion columns to political cartoons and network news programs, in order to determine how closely the group discussions mimic media discourse. He finds that the process of opinion formation is more complex than it has usually been depicted and that people condition media information with reflection on their own experience or that of people they know. The discussions transcribed in this book demonstrate that people are quite capable of conducting informed and well-reasoned discussions about issues, and that although most people are not inclined to become actively involved in politics, the seeds of political action are present in the minds of many. With the appropriate stimulation, this latent political consciousness can be activated, which accounts for the continual creation of new social movements.

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83,20 €

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Lieferfrist: bis zu 10 Tage

Artikelnummer: 9780521430623

Medium: Buch

ISBN: 978-0-521-43062-3

Verlag: Cambridge University Press

Erscheinungstermin: 10.01.2011

Sprache(n): Englisch

Auflage: Erscheinungsjahr 2011

Produktform: Gebunden

Gewicht: 625 g

Seiten: 288

Format (B x H): 157 x 235 mm

