

CONNECTIONS

VOLUME XIV

ISSUE 1

July 2003

- **Reassessing the Relationship between The Public and The Government**
.....page 2
- **Our Political Awakening**
.....page 6
- **Is There a Public Interest in Political Campaigns?**
.....page 8
- **Voter Participation**
.....page 11
- **The Vanishing Voter**
.....page 13
- **Understanding the Nature of Representation in a Democracy**
.....page 17
- **Opportunity for State Legislatures**
.....page 19
- **Communicating the Value of Deliberation**
.....page 22
- **Erskine College Hosts a Legislative Orientation**
.....page 25
- **Public Engagement with Government Agencies**
.....page 27
- **Deliberation Where You Least Expect It: Citizen Participation in Government**
.....page 30
- **Books Worth Reading**
.....page 34



Our Political Awakening

By Richard C. Harwood

Conventional wisdom held that the events of September 11, 2001, would change the tone of politics and public life in America. Now, more than a year later and after the commitment of our troops abroad, what is the state of our national condition?

For months following 9/11, Americans made donations to relief funds, flags adorned buildings and cars, and patriotic hymns were sung. Public opinion polls showed that Americans' trust in government had gone up, and news media coverage took on a more serious tone. New commitments to bipartisanship and civility were avowed by Washington's political leaders and echoed throughout the land; many of us recall the moving scene of members of Congress joining hands and singing "God Bless America" on the steps of the Capitol. Patriotic sentiment was on the rise.

Even Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, which had cataloged the decline in social capital among Americans in recent decades, noticed a change in American attitudes. Based on polling data after 9/11, he reported that Americans are "... more united, readier for collective sacrifice, and more attuned to public purpose.... [A] window of opportunity has opened for a sort of civic renewal that occurs only once or twice a century."

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But this newfound spirit does not appear to have transformed our expectations about politics and public life. By January 2002, a Harwood Institute/Gallup survey found that Americans expected that the conduct of political leaders, the news media, and citizens would be about the same or worse than in previous years, despite the wave of patriotism that had swept the nation. I cannot help but think of the earlier Persian Gulf War in which similar claims were made about changes in our nation's politics. Amidst the upsurge of patriotic fervor, there was a mistaken optimism about the effects of that conflict on politics and public life.

In January 1991, we at The Harwood Institute were preparing to release our report, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, when the Persian Gulf crisis abruptly interrupted our plans. The report was one of the first studies to point out that Americans were not apathetic about politics but felt pushed out and disconnected. Based on then-rising perceptions of patriotism and claims of a changed political terrain, we decided to wait until the war had subsided and then repeat the research.

We learned that the war had very little effect on people's thinking about politics and public life. In fact, we discovered that unless the moderator explicitly raised the issue, the Persian Gulf War was barely mentioned in the discussions among participants. When asked about the war, one person in Memphis said, "I thought we were here to talk about politics. That's the reason I didn't bring it up." And expressing a sentiment that was widely shared, another participant remarked, "Patriotism has gone up dramatically, but I don't think that has anything to do with political issues."

Over the past year, as part of our New Patriotism Project, we toured the nation again and engaged more than 300 civic leaders, officeholders, and news media personnel in nine communities in daylong conversations about politics and public life in America. We heard people talking in a new way about changing politics. Just as in our conversations after the first Gulf War, participants in these recent



discussions did not choose to focus on September 11. They did not think that flag-waving, speeches, or donations to charity would lead to the changes in politics that were needed. Instead, they believed that real change would take hard work by all of us. Based on our research into public life over the last dozen years, I think there is a new awareness of what is required to change the way American politics is conducted.

In the early 1990s, our report, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, captured the extent to which people were lashing out in anger toward politicians and the news media. This widespread feeling gave rise to a series of blunt instruments, including term limits, balanced budget amendments, and the advent of Ross Perot, that were intended to administer shock treatment to the political system.

In our 1995 report, *America's Struggle Within*, we noted that people were no longer so single-minded in their anger, but they were frustrated that the nation had not made more progress on their concerns. Indeed, they were especially exasperated that America had not changed *how* it addressed its common challenges. People argued that individuals and institutions must change their behavior if America was to set the right course for its future.

Then in 1998, as we reported in *The Nation's Looking Glass*, people told us that they and their fellow citizens had retreated from American life; they experienced a nation in which societal messages and values and behaviors did not square with the America they sought. This time, though, the message for change was more personal: it must start not with legislative fixes or grand schemes but with individuals examining their own conduct and responsibilities. As one person told us, "People as a whole gotta take responsibility, too. We all shift the blame on each other and everyone. Everybody has to assume some responsibility."

Now as part of the New Patriotism Project, we have conducted a series of nationwide Citizen Assemblies on politics and public life. During these conversations, people wanted to talk about their aspirations and not just their complaints. They did not just voice their concerns about the conduct of political leaders and the news media, they also specifically included the conduct of citizens as part

of what needed to be changed. Their point was that action was necessary, and citizens had to be part of the equation. These conversations suggest that it is no longer acceptable to blame political leaders and the news media for all the ills of politics and public life.

Over these ten plus years the nation's conversation on politics has shifted, with people moving closer and closer to holding up a mirror to themselves and declaring that their individual conduct is part of the issue at hand. We hear a growing sentiment: "We must find ways to act."

But how?

At the heart of people's aspirations is the belief that there is much work to do in America, and that such work requires a strong and vibrant politics and public life. People seek a political climate in which vigorous and robust debate occurs; in which character is of genuine concern; and in which all people and all perspectives have a place at the public table. These aspirations stand in direct opposition to the kind of superficial and hollow politics we so often produce.

Americans seek a new covenant among political leaders, the news media, and themselves. The covenant calls political leaders to establish a different kind of relationship with citizens; it calls the news media to work in ways that help people truly come to know about public issues and political leaders so that they can form their own judgments; and it calls citizens to rise above complaints about the state of politics and public life and to take responsibility.

The people I have met across America say that too much time is spent wallowing over just how "bad" politics is; more and more, and with increasing fervor and passion, we hear people wanting to state what they stand for — not merely what they are against.

It would be a march of folly to look to September 11 to transform the tone of our politics. Waving the flag is a symbolic way to express patriotic sentiment; it is not a means of changing our politics. That task must be taken up by all of us, and the encouraging news is that the American people are finding their voice to do so.

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Americans seek a new covenant among political leaders, the news media, and themselves.

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