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A Different Kind of Politics, with a Long Tradition

Nicholas V. Longo

My first introduction to deliberative democracy came as an undergraduate student in the mid-1990s. As part of a course on diversity, my classmates and I participated in a deliberative forum on affirmative action with inner-city high school students at their school in the local neighborhood. The conversation with these local high school students—who were mostly students of color—made me think more clearly about the policy choices we must make to overcome the pervasive racial injustice in American society; it also helped me see the power of a different kind of politics to address contentious issues like racism.

I grew up in a political family, worked on political campaigns all of my life, and was a political science student in college. Yet, like many students from my generation, I had become cynical about conventional politics and weary of the partisan nature of “politics as usual,” perhaps embodied best by the shutdown of the federal government in late 1995 and then the impeachment of President Clinton. I also felt discouraged and somewhat powerless about what I, as a young person just getting started in public life, could do to change these overwhelming forces of incivility, partisanship, and unresponsiveness.
At the same time, I was on a campus that was promoting my intellectual curiosity and my desire to change the world, while also just beginning to take seriously its commitment to the local neighborhood, which was the type of poor, urban community that surrounds many American colleges and universities. My experience with deliberation at the local high school, along with my ongoing organizing and community work in the neighborhood, gave me an introduction—and insights, or practical wisdom—into a type of politics that was new to me.

I began to see that politics could be about building relationships across diverse cultures, races, ages, languages, and economic classes and then working together to solve public problems.

A Different Kind of Politics: Ordinary People Engaged in Reciprocal Learning and Collaborative Work

My introduction to citizen politics in college led me to the University of Minnesota’s Center for Democracy and Citizenship for an immersion in this political approach. I became most deeply involved in the center’s community-based education initiative, the Jane Addams School for Democracy, which partners immigrants with college students in intergenerational public work projects on the West Side of St. Paul, Minnesota.

“Everyone is a teacher, everyone is a learner,” is the motto for Jane Addams School, and it serves as a touchstone for all of the activities of the community learning center. The school started in the summer of 1997 with the simple insight that democratic education involves creating public spaces for reciprocal exchanges among a diverse group of people addressing real community concerns. “We thought we should get started and let people teach us what it is they want to learn,” explains Nan Skelton, one of the founders of Jane Addams School. “We’d then figure out what we needed to learn to address those issues.” On the very first night of the school, for example, John Wallace, another founding participant began: “None of us are expert teachers, so we’re all going to have to become experts in learning.”

Today, hundreds of people meet two nights per week on the West Side of St. Paul in “learning circles” partnering new immigrants from Southeast Asia, Latin America, and East Africa with American-born English speakers. While many immigrants come to Jane Addams School with the immediate need to pass the U.S. citizenship exam and to practice speaking English, most gain an essential insight about their own civic capacities and the power of creating a broader culture of civic learning. “Jane Addams School has taught me that I have the power to help my community. There is a power when people share ideas and work together,” reflected Koua Yang Her, a Hmong immigrant involved with Jane Addams School. Yang Her then concluded, “One thing is for sure: one person can’t do it alone.”

Thus, the idea of democracy as the collaborative work of ordinary people is central for this approach to politics.
A Long Tradition

My experiences with a different type of politics—while still somewhat marginalized given the continued challenges to our democracy described by Keith Melville and Noëlle McAfee in this edition of Connections—are by no means unique. There is an emerging movement for citizen-centered democracy in an array of fields, as Peter Levine and others in this volume have identified. What might be less apparent, however, is that the work at Jane Addams School, like the research done by the Kettering Foundation, is part of a long tradition of citizens working to build democratic communities in a different way.

The Jane Addams School, for example, takes the “citizenship schools” of the civil rights movement, developed by civil rights pioneers like Myles Horton, Bernice Robinson, and Esau Jenkins, and then expanded throughout the South by Septima Clark, Dorothy Cotton, and Martin Luther King Jr., as the basis for its reciprocal education and democratic practice. These democratic, community-based schools enabled thousands of blacks to claim their roles as first-class citizens in the segregated South of the 1960s.

When asked about his ideas on democracy, Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Folk School and the citizenship school idea, responded that his notion of democracy came from, among others, Jane Addams and her then 40-year experiment with democracy through America’s most well-known settlement house, Hull House. Horton met with Addams at Hull House in Chicago as a young man in the 1930s to get ideas and examples for what would become the Highlander Folk School in rural Tennessee. Addams, of course, won a Nobel Prize and helped inspire a generation of reform movements. But perhaps her greatest legacy is her unique understanding that “none of us can stand aside” in the important work of democracy.

Addams wisely advised Horton that democracy means that the people have the right to make decisions. She gave an example: If there is a group of people sitting around a country store and there’s a problem they’re talking about, there are two ways to address it. The group can go out and get some official with expertise to tell them what to do; or the group can talk it out, discuss it themselves, and then solve the problem in the best way they can. Democracy, by this definition, was the approach in which the people solved the problem themselves.

Addams also realized that this conception of a citizen-centered democracy went back much further than the settlement house movement. When Myles Horton asked Jane Addams how she developed this idea of democracy—an idea practiced at Highlander Folk School, Hull House, Jane Addams School, and countless other places around the world—Addams said that she heard it from her father who had served in the state legislature with, and was a friend of, Abraham Lincoln.

With an awareness of this tradition connecting people like Martin Luther King Jr., Myles Horton, Jane Addams, and Abraham Lincoln, I realize that at the Kettering Foundation, we are asking timeless questions about what it takes to make democracy work as it should. We do not have a blueprint for what should be done by every citizen, community, or institution—not would we want one. However, we do have the wisdom of 25 years of research on this “different kind of politics” informed by centuries of public work.

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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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