

KETTERING REVIEW



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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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Reinventing Citizenship

by Harry C. Boyte

“The challenge in politics is to cultivate the political skills that allow people to work productively with others.”

As a pundit once put it, we get the government we deserve. Today, politics is seen as the work of politicians. If most citizens claim a role, it is as marginal players in the game of politics: volunteers, complainers, or special interest advocates. Unless we reinvent the concept of “citizen,” few things are likely to change. Simple anger at politicians lets the rest of us off the hook.

What some have called the “paradox of democracy”—its efflorescence around the world and decline in the United States—is usually wrongly diagnosed. Symptoms are mistaken for causes. In this vein, many problems are identified in politics. Washington writer, E. J. Dionne argues for a shift from moralized posturings to a politics of pragmatic problem solving. *Common Cause* documents the corrosive impact of large sums of money and political ads. Conservatives argue for term limitations on the grounds that politicians have forgotten their status as “ordinary people.”

We might, however, reimagine these various proposals as attempts to address the underlying *civic* crisis rather than—as they now appear to be—attempts merely to address the crisis in governmental machinery. Term limits emerge, after all, from an intuition that a political class no longer sees itself as part of the citizenry. Proposals for change in the format of television commercials address the dilemma that campaigns are no longer discussions and debates among citizens about the challenges facing the country, but largely public relations efforts. Today’s dominant understanding of politics—as something politicians do—reflects that of James Madison’s *Federalist Paper* #10, where Madison argued that deliberations of representatives, “a

chosen body of citizens,” are “more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves.” He gave title to officeholders. But in fact, this view has been contested from the beginning of the republic. Thomas Jefferson had a far different understanding of politics—one that was eventually reflected in the ninth and tenth amendments to the Constitu-

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tion, reserving all powers not specifically assigned to officials to the citizens themselves,

where everyman is . . . participator in the government of affairs, not merely at an election one day in the year but every day [and] he will let the heart be torn out of his body sooner than his power be wrested from him by a Caesar or a Bonapart.

Whatever Madison’s hopes for an enlightened and virtuous political class that would adjudicate the contending narrow interests of the nation, in fact Americans’ voluntary and political involvements were closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Ordinary people acting in the world beyond government gained a sense of their stake and role in government itself. This is what gave rise to Abraham Lincoln’s famous formulation at Gettysburg: government of the people by the people and for the people. The decline of civic involvement in politics in recent years means that people lose a sense of their stake and ownership in the nation. They become outsiders and tourists of the age. The politics of serious democracy is the give-and-take, messy, everyday, public work through which citizens set about dealing with the problems of their common existence. Politics

is the way people *become* citizens: accountable players and contributors to the country. In place of government of the people by the people and for the people—a politics in which we have a role and personal stake—we see government as “for” the people, providing us services and giving us answers. From a nation of citizens, we have become a nation of clients. Many dynamics contribute to the erosion of responsible political participation, from mass communications and patterns of mobility to the emergence of the corporate economy and a consumer culture. But perhaps the least remarked and most central is this: civic relationships have become expert-client relations. In the process, public life has eroded from the fabric of America’s civil society. Politics is not likely to improve in any substantial fashion until this pattern, itself, is challenged and changed.

In the 19th century a flowering of voluntary, civic, and reform efforts in America significantly expanded citizens’ sense of the public world and the meanings of politics. Alexis de Tocqueville was surprised again and again in his travels across the country, in the 1830s, to discover that the public substituted its own activity for that of officials or government. In America when he observed that 100,000 citizens had declared their intention to refrain from alcohol, he said that in Europe they would have sent a petition to the king!

It is a commonplace of recent historical scholarship to observe that citizen-centered ideas of politics came under assault in the world of large institutions and transcontinental communications of the 20th century. The Progressive period of the early 20th century sought the radical relocation of politics to the state. Progressives spoke in democratic accents to confront rhetorically “the mighty forces” of commerce

and industry that dominated the American economy. But they also envisioned “control” over commercial interests in a sense far different than had earlier democratic movements of the 19th century. While Progressive reformers took aim at corrupt urban machine politics they also saw officials and professionals as the significant

The State is as real as the people who compose it.

public agents. Herbert Croly, the *New Republic* editor who redefined democracy away from any local civic activity to what he called the “great community” of the state, argued that democracy no longer could mean that citizens “assemble after the manner of a New England town meeting.” Instead of the communal experience of towns, the nation as a whole must be bound together by “a comprehensive social ideal,” mediated by modern media. Direct civic encounter was not necessary since “the active citizenship of the country meets every morning and evening and discusses the affairs of the nation, with the newspaper as an impersonal interlocutor,” providing “abundant opportunities of communications and consultation without any meeting” at all.



Yet historians who take such rhetoric at face value have also neglected a more complex side to 20th-century history. More active understandings of politics continued to flourish in what might best be called “mediating political institutions,” like parties, ethnic groups, local business organizations, active unions, neighborhood schools, settlement houses, publicly minded churches or synagogues, foreign language associations, and local press. Women’s suffrage organizations and their offspring, for example, did not only fight for the rights of formal citizenship through enfranchisement of women voters. They also sought to teach an understanding of politics and citizenship as “civic housekeeping” on a range of problems. Thus, the *Woman Citizen’s Library*, a 12-volume collection of practical and theoretical material on “the larger citizenship,” included among its authors leading suffragists such as Jane Addams and Cary Chapman Catt. In its 1913 inaugural edition, it declared that:

The State is as real as the people who compose it. The duties of citizenship are as definite as the duties of house-keeping. Only as these self-evident facts are fully appreciated will women be able to share in those many and splendid reforms which we can see must come in our social life.

The volumes included topics that ranged from the mechanics of political parties to questions of “the larger citizenship,” like “the liquor traffic,” “child labor,” “equal pay for equal work,” “schools,” and “safeguarding the woman immigrant.” Such a view of citizenship inspired lasting organizations like the League of Women Voters, direct successor to the National American Women’s Suffrage Association. Ethnic and machine political organizations continued as a strong presence in many large cities until the

1950s or 1960s. In Chicago, Mike Royko has described how precinct captains and ward bosses of the political machine created the connections between immigrants and larger society:

The immigrant family looked to the captain as more than a link with a new and strange government: he was the government. He could tell them how to fill out their papers, how to pay their taxes, how to get a license. He was the welfare agency, with a basket of food and some coal when things got tough, an entree to the crowded charity hospital. He could take care of it when one of the kids got in trouble with the police.

None of this should be romanticized; it had strong personal and parochial dimensions. Middle-class suffrage organizations which called for a “new citizenship” had racist and nativist features. They justified women’s voting in part by arguing it would reduce the influence of undesirable foreigners and blacks. Ethnic political bosses created organizations that resembled feudal strongholds. Neighborhoods like Bridgeport, the Irish enclave that produced Richard Daley and two earlier mayors of Chicago, was a parochial small town within the city, as quick to threaten an errant black as are the Howard Beaches of our day. Daley’s boyhood club, known as the Hamburgs, was found by a Chicago commission to have played a major role in instigating the race riot of 1919, which left 15 whites and 23 blacks dead after a black youth crossed the line separating the 27th Street beach from the 29th Street beach.

For all their limitations, however, political institutions like the suffrage organizations and the urban party machines created an everyday public scaffolding for politics, a kind of civic capital, that the nation could draw on in times of challenge and crisis. Under the umbrella of urban machines, for instance, immigrants



became involved in a range of civic initiatives, from building churches, synagogues, native-language newspapers, and ethnic organizations to launch reform efforts. All these could be considered a form of everyday politics that helped widen people’s particular identities to include a larger understanding of their role and stake in the nation. Boundaries between formal institutions like the local school and union were not nearly as distinct as they were to become.

The Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s was a powerful extension of these traditions of citizen centered politics. When Martin Luther King Jr. stressed the need to “make real the promise of democracy” and to bring our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers,” he meant considerably more than simply winning for blacks an end to segregation or the right to vote in elections. He also meant recovering a strong practice and understanding of citizenship and democratic politics. The Citizenship Schools of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference sought to put such language into practice, teaching skills of public problem solving and politics to black communities across the South.

Despite civil rights, however, our civic capital had begun to erode significantly with World War II. A view of the professional, manager, and expert as the significant problem solver spread through European and American politics alike. In the 1950s, the Swedish sociologist

The increasingly media-centered nature of election campaigns furthered the distance between citizens and politics.

Gunnar Myrdal could argue that “increasing political harmony [is emerging] between all citizens in the advanced welfare state. The internal political debate in those countries is becoming increasingly technical in character.” Social policy in countries like Sweden—long a model for progressively inclined Americans—was if anything farther advanced toward a professionalized view.

In America, McCarthyism and the atmosphere of the Cold War further contributed to a depoliticized, professional-dominated public environment. The citizen was reinvented as the oxymoron, “private citizen.” Home ownership, seen by community activists like Mary Parker Follett earlier in the 20th century as analogous to Jeffersonian small freeholds, a foundation for involvement in the public life of the community, had changed its meaning. The house was a “castle,” a fortress from the world. The ideal became isolated suburban families tied together by the consumer culture.

Television and the increasingly media-centered nature of election campaigns furthered the distance between citizens and politics. Candidate “packaging” reworked the link between citizens and candidates into a connec-

tion between audience and spectacle, with periodic moments of consumption when voters got to select the best “package.” Simultaneously, the growth of professional services in every field—from education to trade unions to voluntary organizations like the Red Cross and the YMCA—more and more rendered citizens as clients, not problem solvers, and detached professional knowledge from any larger civic meaning or context. Unions switched from being centers of community life, becoming service organizations that provide packaged benefits to members. Schools became suffused with professional jargon, which made them seem foreign territory to many parents. Organizations like the YMCA de-emphasized citizenship and stressed sports facilities and programs to enhance self-esteem. At the center of this, people came to see government less as their instrument—“of and by the people”—but as a service provider.

The professionalization of mediating political institutions, and the spread everywhere of the professional-client pattern, created a vacuum that has had disastrous consequences for both officeholders and citizens. The vacuum has been filled over recent generations by the rise of an insular, professionalized politics, on the one hand, often accompanied by a therapeutic language of caring and concern. On the other hand, it is populated by utopian, personalized, and righteous strands of activism.

The active understanding of democracy that emerged in the Civil Rights Movement inspired a generation of young radicals on college campuses and helped to spark important social movements such as contemporary feminism; but the New Left’s stance as critic on the outside of American institutional life and culture also created a considerably different dynamic than those SCLC citizenship schools that aimed at helping blacks become “first-class citizens.”

Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" positions the black struggle for freedom as the embodiment of America's diverse traditions and institutional aspirations. In contrast, *The Port Huron Statement*, a manifesto of 1960s' student radicalism, is an unrelenting attack on virtually every American institution.

Thus despite their democratic creativity, youthful protests generated a personalized, moralistic politics that advocated *for* the dispossessed and powerless even while activists sought to bypass the compromises and ambiguities of existing communal and institutional life. Such radicalism ironically but easily accommodated patterns of expert-client relationships in which professionals present themselves as benevolent outsiders who seek to rescue the unfortunate from depraved environments.

Today, a politics of professionalized, intimate care structures large sections of the economy, while it also is advanced as the solution for America's fragmentation and civic disengagement.

The language of care suffuses the community service. Educators and politicians advance community service as the most promising method for reconnecting the younger generation with the duties, values, and practices of citizenship. Yet in fact the common use of a personal development approach in community service turns programs into apprenticeships for professional service delivery, not environments in which young people learn the civic and political skills of public leadership. One recent study of high school community service programs found that educational objectives typically include such aims as "learning to care for others," "developing self-esteem," "a sense of personal worth," "self-understanding," and "capacity to persevere in difficult tasks." Learning "politics" through time worn *political* themes like interest, power,

and strategic thinking was absent. In settings like this, students may become "politicized" about the larger social problems and policies they confront in individual terms, but their resulting activism is moralistic, personalized, and not informed by any deep understanding

We are all inevitably implicated in the world's ambiguities and compromises.

of problems. Thus, it reproduces the pattern of middle-class solicitude for the poor and the unfortunate that erodes civic politics.

One result of this utopian, intimate, and sentimental quality of citizen activism is that people see themselves as aggrieved, righteous, and misunderstood outsiders. Countless variations on the theme of "send them a message" have, in consequence, become the main way in which many people are connected to the larger political world. People ask to be heard in politics and to receive things from government. They rarely imagine themselves as creators or producers of politics. As John Brandl, an economics professor who served several terms in the



Minnesota Senate, puts it: today government largely means the delivery of benefits to the appreciative, paid for by the oblivious.

The challenge in politics is not so much to generate larger numbers of experts, to find moral consensus, or to develop capacities for emotional self-revelation, as it is to develop a vocabulary and cultivate the political skills that allow people to work productively with others, whether or not they like or agree with each other.

Critics such as Michael Lerner or Amitai Etzioni proposed that in response to the fragmentation and discontents of the time, America needs a renewed spirit of community, shared values, and service to strengthen citizenship. But when community becomes the centerpiece of the vocabulary of public action it takes on an ethereal quality, sliding into a therapeutic idiom of care and solicitude that covers the boundless expansion in professional interventions. If we are to do much about the disconnection of ordinary people from democracy, we need a practical politics in which citizens claim and develop their own, self-directed efforts in a world of diverse communities, values, and points of view. Americans need to relearn the skills of

everyday problem solving—how to deal with others with whom we may not desire at all to share life in community, but with whom we recognize the need for common work.

To renew any substantial citizenship is a difficult and challenging task because it means shifting from righteous “clienthood” to an understanding that we are all inevitably implicated in the world’s ambiguities and compromises. It also means learning the strategic sense and practical skills of everyday politics.

Project Public Life, a civic and political education initiative at the University of Minnesota, regularly asked groups of young people and adults what to do about critical issues they saw in society. Almost invariably, “respondents” look to professionals and government to solve their problems. They had never been asked—nor have they imagined—what they might do about significant public issues, even those with immediate consequences for themselves. In one session, a group of deaf youngsters listed dozens of problems, from discrimination to phones that were unusable and teachers who did not know sign language. Afterwards, the two social workers with the group told our workshop leader that in more than 20 years of combined work with the deaf, they had never heard anyone ask hearing-impaired teenagers what they themselves could do about the problems they experienced in their lives.

Most mechanisms for citizen political action, aside from voting, involve learning the techniques of lobbying, pressuring officials, and gaining access to policymakers. But in fact, these techniques are in many ways a distraction. They assume that the citizens’ main role is to pressure government officials to act, rather than to take action themselves.

Politics comes from the Greek word, *politicos*, meaning “of the citizen.” Citizens need to include



themselves again in politics for reasons of both practicality and larger purpose. A class of issues has emerged that require for their resolution significant changes in behavior, values, and cultural assumptions—issues such as racial conflict, drugs, crime, homelessness, the education of a literate and sophisticated workforce,

We will have to learn to be more than outsiders.

entrepreneurial development, and protection of the environment. Recycling depends on citizen involvement. School reform requires parents as significant stakeholders and participants in the process. Reducing crime rests upon stronger neighborhoods and new cooperation between police and residents. Political problem solving is today too complex and many-sided a process to be satisfactorily left to political leaders, government, or any large systems alone. New ways to involve citizens as public problem solvers are essential.

To meet the challenge of developing a renewed practice of citizenship and public life, politics must show the connections between political society and public affairs, on the one hand, and citizens' daily lives and community interests, on the other. This requires remembering a history of practical Politics.

We will have to learn to be more than outsiders, innocents, and supplicants. "They" are neither the problem nor the solution. There is no they in this case. As Pogo put it, we have met the enemy and he is us. To do much about the challenges facing the nation, citizens will have to reenter the arena that we hate, rediscover its rewards, and take up its challenges. We need to become political again if we are to become participants in the creation of our common world.

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