

KETTERING REVIEW



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the quality of public life in the American democracy

Editor	Robert J. Kingston
Associate Editor	Noëlle McAfee
Art Director/Production	Long's Graphic Design, Inc.
Assistant to the Editor	Sarah Dahm
Copy Editor	Lisa Boone-Berry
Formatting	Long's Graphic Design, Inc.
Illustrations	Carol Vollet

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Contents

	5	Editor's Letter
John Dewey	8	Democracy
Daniel Yankelovich	14	Searching for Public Judgment
Harry C. Boyte	22	Reinventing Citizenship
Harold H. Saunders	30	Politics Is About ...?
Ramón E. Daubón	38	Speaking in Prose
Noëlle McAfee	47	The Affective Dimensions of Public Will
David Mathews	54	. . . afterthoughts

Politics Is About ...?

by Harold H. Saunders

“The capacity of citizens, outside the structures of power, to relate constructively is critical to human survival and progress.”

Starting points for thinking about the character of politics have varied widely. It is worth taking a few moments to situate the paradigm presented here in that larger spectrum. As Thomas Kuhn says about paradigm shifts in science, “the decision to reject one paradigm is always simultaneously the decision to accept another, and the judgment leading to the decision involves the comparison of both paradigms with nature and with each other.”

On one side of the spectrum have been scholars of politics, understandably concerned to define the study of politics as an academic discipline. Their need is to define their field rigorously so as to make research manageable and to distinguish it from others. The prevailing mantra has been, “politics is about power”—with power defined as control or coercion. This approach has led to focus on institutional politics, while others in the field argue for a broader approach. Many have defined problems in terms amenable to mathematical analysis. But across the spectrum have been some political and other social scientists, philosophers, practitioners, and citizens-at-large who felt that the capacity of citizens, outside the *structures* of power, to relate constructively has been neglected, yet is critical to human survival and progress. They have relied more on the description and conceptualization of experience than on quantification.

I suggest that the mantra of this second group might be “politics is about relationships,” of which power is one component—only one and frequently not the most important. My own deep concern is that a focus on the structures of power leaves out most of the world’s citizens. Yet many of today’s conflicts and problems are

beyond the reach of governments acting alone. Power as traditionally defined—whether the power of office or the power of a gun—has proven itself a deadly principle around which to organize politics. It is divisive, exclusive, and too often destructive.

A paradigm that limits thinking about politics to the actions of governments and institutions is incomplete. A paradigm that builds thinking about politics around the struggle for power, defined as control, cannot capture the complexity of human efforts to act together peacefully and constructively. A paradigm that leaves out most of the world's people can only be of limited use. Most important, such a paradigm ignores human resources critical to meeting the countless challenges to our survival. Politics is what happens when citizens outside government come together and build relationships to solve collective problems. Power—their capacity to influence the course of events—is generated by their capacity to concert. This seems quite different from a government's power to control, to coerce, or to impose punishment or sanctions. The capacity to influence the course of events through an open-ended political process seems sharply different from “producing intended results.”

Five ideas are basic to this view of politics: First is the concept of the citizen as a political actor. Second is the concept of civil society as the complex of associations that active citizens form and through which they interact with other groups to do their work and to extend their reach. Third is the view that politics is a cumulative, multilevel, open-ended process of continuous interaction—not just action and reaction—involving these citizens and associations. Fourth, the interactions of citizens around a particular problem seem to unfold and deepen through a progression of

stages that I call the “citizens’ political process.” Fifth, since citizens do not normally exercise power in the form of coercion, power, in *their* context, must be defined as the capacity through the relationships they form to influence the course of events.

A disparate collection of citizens can form itself into an engaged public.

Through the citizens’ political process, a disparate collection of citizens, taking responsibility to deal with problems, can form itself into an engaged public with capacity to change the course of events. The process, in effect, provides the public space in which citizens can come together to make the choices and form the relationships and associations within civil society that they need to solve their problems in the larger body politic. That public space is where each citizen can feel he or she belongs,



not the territory of any single faction. It is psychological in that participants experience the views and feelings of other citizens in a way that creates a new context for personal thought and a different way of relating. By working within that process, citizens can generate their

To deliberate is to agonize within oneself and with others over advantages and disadvantages.

form of power, which lies partly in their effective conduct of the process.

Lest I be charged with idealizing this process, or ignoring that many citizens choose not to engage, let me say that this is a conceptualization of the experience through which citizens seem to progress when they tackle a problem together, over time. In transforming their relationships, they develop the capacity to talk, plan, and work together to accomplish goals on which they agree. This conceptualization is rooted in participation with and observation of countless groups that have chosen to engage.



The process begins when a citizen concludes that a situation hurts her or his interests badly enough to require change. Seeing a connection between personal interests and this situation, the citizen reaches out to other citizens whose interest may also be hurt. Citizens with comparable concerns talk informally. This can take time; the problem may seem daunting; citizens may fear the reactions of those who oppose change; widening circles of talk may be needed to create a critical mass who are ready for systematic talk.

Then beyond the internal interactions that define individual groups are the interactions among groups. Much new thinking about politics recognizes that many political problems are fundamental problems of relationships. Sometimes citizens' organizations have concluded that basic change can be made only by fundamentally changing working relationships—how people habitually deal with one another. Their idea is to construct relationships that can solve problems whether or not the individuals involved like and fully trust each other. The associations that citizens form are held together by the promises citizens make to each other, that is, their covenants.

When such groups meet, participants need to spend time talking about the situation to identify its important dimensions, the relationships that cause it, and the interests affected by it. I call this “mapping” the problem, laying out its main elements. As participants say how the problem affects them, they provide the ingredients for a “naming” of the problem from the citizen's viewpoint, not the experts' or the government's. An important task at this stage of their talk is to learn why and how the problem threatens what these citizens value. Unless they name the problem in a way that reflects their connection to it—why it hurts their interests—their efforts to deal with it will not be as effective as they

might be. Naming the problem in a way that engages each participant is essential in building the common ground necessary to start tackling it. When the group has named the problem in this way, they need to probe its dynamics in ways that help them frame the questions that enter their minds about possible approaches, opportunities, and consequences as they prepare themselves to weigh possible directions for dealing with it. But citizens do not frame questions as experts do, in terms of technical approaches; they frame choices in terms of what they value: they have defined the problem they must deal with and identified the approaches they must take in tackling it.

Citizens meet to deliberate—to weigh possible approaches in light of what they value. To deliberate is not just to “talk about” problems; to deliberate is to agonize within oneself and with others over the advantages and disadvantages—the consequences—of each possible approach they have framed. Often more than one approach contains elements that a person individually values; so, too, together they must

The most important resource in a community is often political will.

make difficult trade-offs. As they weigh the approaches with others, they deepen their understanding of the consequences of different approaches—for themselves and for those whose cooperation is critical in dealing with the problem. Their deliberation gradually identifies common ground, and this defines the starting point for setting the broad direction in which to move together to create a situation that all can live with. It does not signify total agreement—just enough agreement to undergird shared purpose in a particular situation.

Thus deliberation involves choice. Citizens must choose before they can act. Taking responsibility for their future begins with citizens recognizing that they have choices. They remain subject to forces beyond their control, but choices come partly from the way they deal with those circumstances.

As citizens grapple with their questions and possible approaches together, they begin to change the quality of their relationships. They emerge with a sense of what is tolerable and intolerable for each actor—and why. They consider their commitment to engage in the common task of dealing with the problem. The mutual promises they make will bind them in whatever associations they form to accomplish the task.

Deliberation leads to determining whether there is political will to pursue the course chosen. Their final question is this: do the consequences of doing nothing outweigh the anticipated results of the chosen course, or not? If the consequences of maintaining the status quo are more serious than attempting the course chosen, there is presumably a tentative will to move ahead. The most important resource in a community is often political will: citizens’ commitment to pursue a problem until they have it under control.

When citizens have determined the direction in which they want to move, they must then decide how to get there. Perhaps to work through these five steps:

- List resources they can marshal for tackling the problem.
- List obstacles to moving in this direction. Responses include not just physical obstacles but deep-rooted human resistance (often cancerous relationships are more serious than practical obstacles).
- List steps for removing these obstacles. (And these may include psychological moves to change relationships as well as concrete actions to remove material barriers.)



- List actors who can take such steps. The aim is to engage multiple actors who can generate momentum through complementary actions.
- Try to connect actions so they become mutually reinforcing and encourage cooperation, as one actor responds to a previous actor and stimulates another to join the process.

Unlike the discrete actions of institutions, complementary actions are not directed toward a single objective. Rather, they are organic and repeating, like a jazz group in which each player supports the others within an overall theme but is free to improvise and express individual style without following a conductor. Or sometimes I call this “building a scenario” of interactive steps because it unfolds much as a scene of a play might develop. Party A is asked whether it could take Step 1 and responds that it could do so but only if Party B would respond constructively by taking Step 2. Party B agrees in principle but wants Party C to take supportive Step 3. And so on, until more and more actors join and momentum for change builds and is consolidated.

Once a scenario of complementary actions has been designed, the group must decide

whether and how it will put that scenario into action. The options include moving insights from this small group out into the community through the associations to which members relate in order to engage a complex of groups. If the group has not consulted with others along the way, it may need to spend time within its own associations sharing the experience in the deliberation with others and allowing time for them to digest insights from the deliberation.

An essential component of each stage is taking stock: What did we set out to accomplish? How are we doing? A relationship is not fully formed until parties to it have asked and responded to these questions together. The process of learning together—the systems analysts write of feedback—strengthens a relationship.

These five stages are not intended to be rigid or linear. A group can at any point go back and reexamine initial assumptions or judgments in light of new developments, learning, or insights. The human mind is not always bound by a conclusion that has been reached; it often washes back and forth through thoughts that are in formation or relationships that are unfolding in unexpected ways. Nor does this framework ignore power; it recognizes broader bases for power and defines power in terms less absolute than control—essentially as the capacity to make things happen that are within the reach of the actors. Citizens’ capacities to influence the course of events have a different quality from government’s ability to coerce: by acting together with no apparatus of raw power they create conditions in which government could function adequately.

I do not suggest that any group will necessarily follow the stages of the citizens’ political process exactly as described here. But, experience does suggest that these stages reflect a *progression of interaction*, through which citizens seem

to move in tackling a problem together. The process is a conceptualization of experience rather than a theoretical construct. Citizens, outside formal power structures, can have their own systematic processes, practices, and political strategies with a sense of direction, destination, and potential. Through such processes, they can generate the capacity, or

This view of politics as relationship—the citizens’ capacity to concert—opens a door.

“power” they need. Such a process is a citizens’ instrument for change, *their* version of political instruments. Focusing on citizens interacting in concert—human beings in relationship—enables us to integrate whole human beings, in whole bodies politic, into our view of “politics.” It includes the arena where political practitioners work, the arena where many conflicts are initiated and resolved, the arena where citizens build spaces for resolving differences peacefully, the arena where citizens improve the quality of their own lives. Above all, it includes the arena where most human beings live!

This view of politics as relationship—the citizens’ capacity to concert—opens a door from politics to economics, particularly economic development. One exciting idea formulated in the 1990s was the concept named “social capital” that burst on the scene with Harvard professor Robert Putnam’s 1993 book, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. It observed that, as citizens interact through their associations, networks among these groups develop. These networks nourish continuous interaction that becomes the context for gradual development of what Putnam calls a “normal

generalized reciprocity.” As citizens observe the predictability and the reliability of how each interacts with others, trust grows, and a glue of potential cooperation is added to the social mix. This reservoir of predictable reciprocity becomes part of what Putnam calls “social capital.” It is essential to sound relationships.

The economic premise underlying the concept of social capital is that the economy of a community with dense civic interactions is more likely to function effectively than one without. Citizens in a community with a rich civic culture have developed broadly accepted “rules” of interacting that one might call “unwritten covenants.” A consistent environment makes investors’ calculation of risk more reliable than when economic behavior is unreliable or erratic.

Economists at the World Bank, after analyzing this proposition in widespread communities, have generally accepted this analysis. The problem next is how to put the theory into practice. Michael Woolcock, then at the Bank, distinguished between the “bonding” social capital of smaller, coherent communities or regions where inhabitants know each other, and “bridging” social capital when strangers interact. In smaller regions, people are likely to meet commitments because they believe that a favor for a known person will be reciprocated or that a promise



broken will be “punished” in some way. The greater economic opportunity results when communities of strangers develop shared rules of relating—covenants.

It is now clear that a long missing ingredient in economic development theory is the citizens’ capacity to act in concert. Placed in the context of the citizens’ political process, the common practice of international organizations providing development assistance has been to enter the picture when a community has a problem. They bring experts, design a solution for the problem as they define it, and offer money to implement that solution. They ignore or short circuit these stages in the citizens’ political process when people in the community themselves name the problem and decide what needs to be done, utilizing methods and materials consistent with their culture and skill level. International grant-makers began to recognize, in the mid-1990s, that loans for big projects had not produced the broadly based, sustainable development that funders had anticipated.

Those who say that politics is about power defined as control or coercion focus on instruments that institutions of state and government use: force, economic sanctions, taxation, law enforcement, mediation, negotiation. Those whose point of entry into the study and practice of politics is the citizen as political actor focus on the instruments for change that citizens use—their instruments of power. If citizens generate the capacity to change through the relationships they form, the key to their generation of that capacity is the instrument they use to form these relationships. At the heart of the citizens’ political process is dialogue in some form. Its exact form as a political instrument depends on the setting in which it is used.

In some communities with well-formed relationships, citizens can talk together reasonably,

even when they disagree sharply about how to approach a problem. Relationships and political practices are strong enough to enable citizens to resolve their differences collaboratively. Toward the other end of the spectrum are communities that are divided by deep-rooted human conflicts,

Citizens generate the capacity to change through the relationships they form.

ranging from violent intercommunal wars to subsurface tensions not yet violent that nevertheless block collaboration. For these situations, we have developed a process of “Sustained Dialogue” to transform relationships that block collaboration and must be changed if citizens are to work together. This process develops with distinctive attention to a *dual* agenda—*both* the practical problems at hand *and* the relationships that may be the main cause of these problems. Such a process can extend over months or even years.

The stages of Sustained Dialogue are essentially those of the citizens’ political process, but the process itself is anything but neat and orderly. When they sit down together, participants are often so angry that they can barely look at each other. Their language for mapping problems and relationships is accusation and vituperation. One stage does not fully end before the next begins. Participants move back and forth across the stages when they need to update a situation, rethink an earlier judgment, or tackle a new problem. Or their minds may be all over the place when they are groping for focus. Despite their rocky path, they continuously deepen their experience with their relationships, through dialogue.

At the heart of citizens' capacity to act in concert are nonviolent and constructive ways of relating. Human beings in relationship—acting in concert with one another—have too long been neglected in the study of politics. It is time to highlight the human dimension of politics and the enormous potential of citizens working in concert to complement the work of governments in meeting the world's challenges.

As a practitioner, I am interested in what would happen to political thought if one started from citizens outside formal structures of traditionally defined power as a point of entry into the study and practice of politics. Some conflicts seem beyond the reach of governments until citizens achieve understanding on living together in peace. Some problems such as drug addiction, alcoholism, and AIDS will not be dealt with until human beings change their behavior. Even corruption has roots in what citizens will tolerate in their daily interactions. It is unfair to expect governments to solve problems that can only be dealt with by citizens in and out of government collaborating as citizens of whole bodies politic.



Many of us hold to an aspiration of whole bodies politic in which governments and citizens each take a strong place and, in the best of worlds, collaborate creatively. As this happens, political thinking must respond to the new reality. Not to change lenses to bring this emerging, troubled, and demanding world into focus seems unthinkable and possibly catastrophic. As our political thinking makes room for multiple actors, the focus of our senses widens. Whereas we used to focus on a few key institutions, we must now find a way to keep track of a complex of continuous human as well as institutional interactions. It probably never was adequate to think only about how institutions *acted on* each other. Even in the simplest of communities, human beings shaped interactions. Now we must focus on politics as a multilevel process of continuous interaction among citizens in whole bodies politic.

Harold Saunders is director of international affairs at Kettering Foundation and the founder and president of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue. This essay is drawn from his book, Politics Is about Relationship: A Blueprint for the Citizens' Century (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
