

Citizen-Centered Democracy in a Power Politics World

By Claire Snyder-Hall

If a deficit of deliberation contributes to the problems of democracy, then shifting to a citizen-centered vision might help get American democracy back on track.

As an academic political theorist, I began working with the deliberative democracy community, with its vision of citizen-centered politics, over 25 years ago. Over the course of all those years, that community of theorists, researchers, and practitioners has been talking about the “disconnect” between citizens and government. Trust in government was low 25 years ago, and the situation has only gotten worse. Today, the divisiveness has reached dangerous levels, with some people talking about civil war and others about “how democracies die.”

After leaving the ivory tower in 2011, I became heavily involved in the realm of electoral politics, serving as a political party leader in various capacities, running for state senate, lobbying in the state legislature, and doing communications work with candidates. Having taught democratic theory at the graduate and undergraduate levels for 20 years and read many books on the subject, I knew I would not find a Jeffersonian-style democratic community when I decided to get more involved in party politics. But I did not expect to discover an almost Hobbesian world of power plays and payback, bullying and submission, quasi-authoritarian demands for conformity, and anemic levels of democratic courage. Political parties ostensibly exist to facilitate civic engagement, yet today party operatives often seem to have a vested interest in shoring up their own power even if that exacerbates the toxic polarization that currently embroils US politics.

Not surprisingly, many citizens feel angry or disenfranchised, and an increasing number refuse to affiliate with either party. While many

causes contribute to our current dysfunction, the lack of opportunities everyday citizens have to participate in self-government, by engaging in democratic practices or exercising civic skills, definitely plays a large role. And therein lies the good as well as the bad news. That is to say, if a deficit of deliberation contributes to the problems of democracy we face, then shifting to a more citizen-centered vision of democracy might help get American democracy back on track.

Citizen-Centered Politics? Never Heard of It!

I find it a challenge to tell friends and allies accustomed to power politics about my work and academic background in citizen-centered politics because such a huge divide exists between deliberative democracy and power politics as usual. Most people in my experience are familiar with only our society's dominant understanding of politics—voting and elections, the advancement of interests, the struggle for power, the dishing out of payback—and many find that world off-putting. That is probably why so many people are turning their backs on party



politics by refusing to register as either Democrats or Republicans, a rising trend that keeps political party operatives up at night.

Many of my politico colleagues also have difficulty understanding that electioneering is not the only political work worth doing. Indeed, politics includes a lot more than just what political parties and governments do. Political work also takes place in the arena of what political theorists call “civil society,” defined as “the realm between state and market,” where citizens come together in formal and informal voluntary organizations to engage in collective activities from acting to solve public problems (such as feeding the hungry or organizing neighborhood watch groups) to deliberating about public issues. People engaged in such activities hone their democratic skills and accrue local knowledge that could contribute to solving societal problems, particularly those “wicked problems,” such as substance abuse or bigotry, that cannot be fixed by government alone.

A citizen-centered vision of politics focuses not exclusively on what political parties and elected officials do, but also on what citizens do in their own communities to make the world a better place. This vision of politics understands that in order to establish and maintain a fully functioning democracy, we need active citizens, engaged in their own communities, willing to work with others to address shared problems. Citizen-centered democracy focuses on the work only citizens can do—things such as naming and framing issues in their own (generally nonpartisan) terms, deliberating together about the trade-offs inherent in various approaches to issues on the public agenda, identifying human and other resources, organizing actions to solve

problems, and learning collectively from their experiences.

In addition to engaging in these activities, however, citizens also elect representatives tasked (theoretically at least) with implementing the policy agendas citizens support. And it is important to note that, in the United States, those representatives emerge from the people themselves; they are not born to rule, as would be the case in a feudal or monarchical society. Active citizens want to work *with* government actors as partners and not be reduced to subjects, clients, or customers. Ideally, citizens and their representatives should work together collaboratively, as coproducers. But in actuality, distrust is high on both sides.

Shut Out and Disrespected

American democracy is currently in flux, and many people, both elected officials and citizens, do not quite understand what is going on. When Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election, it took a lot of political operatives by surprise—on both sides of the partisan aisle.

Many analysts argue that the so-called Trump voters feel disrespected and silenced by cultural elites (at universities and in the media) who demand political correctness. Trump voters, according to this argument, do not like being told what to think or how to talk. Who does? In the US context, we can point to Clinton labelling them “a basket of deplorables” as the latest wound. The phenomenon of feeling disrespected, however, does not exist only in the US context. Timothy Garton Ash argues that in Central Europe, you also see a similar sentiment among “right-wing populists.”



Having studied democratic theory, I suspect that feelings of disrespect arise not only from actually being insulted but also from being shut out of politics, from living in a society in which everyday people do not have control over the forces that govern their lives. That is the case in post-communist Central Europe and in the United States not only because of unaccountable governments but also because economic decisions that affect entire communities get made with little or no input from the public. In Central Europe, the democracy people expected would follow the fall of communism has been less than expected; people do not have the sense of control they desire, and so they feel ignored and disrespected by decision-makers.

In the US context, while it may or may not be true that cultural elites and urban dwellers look down their noses at rural voters, it is definitely true that many citizens feel shut out of politics. Back in 1994, David Mathews argued that American citizens were angry because they

“felt they had been pushed out of the political system by a professional political class of powerful lobbyists, incumbent politicians, campaign managers—and a media elite.” They saw the system as one in which votes no longer made

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any difference because money ruled. Sadly, the situation Mathews described 25 years ago continues and probably for the same reasons.

When I ran for state senate in 2014, many of my supporters recounted how they had been shut out of the local decision-making process by the county council. My supporters had gone to public meetings to voice their concerns about unchecked development and were told that because they were “not experts” on land use, their voices did not matter. Sadly, some responded that they used to be experts before they retired, instead of challenging the premise that citizens need experts to govern on their behalf. Such an argument probably would have fallen on deaf ears anyway though, given that one councilman actually said he was “advised by counsel not to talk to the public.” So much for popular sovereignty and the accountability of elected officials to the people.

One of the strategies the county council used to avoid engaging the public was convening public hearings without publicizing them. For example, during my campaign, a big developer

wanted to build a gigantic mall on environmentally sensitive land, on the side of one of our most congested highways that already had horrendous traffic, which would have hurt the entire community. As I went door to door campaigning, I discovered that nobody knew about the public hearing. So, I started telling them; I distributed a flyer with information about the upcoming public meeting at which the project’s fate would be determined.

To our surprise, the developer suddenly decided to pull the project because it “had become a campaign issue,” and that success got me invited onto a local talk-radio show, during which the host depicted me as a crazy radical. “You distributed flyers,” she exclaimed. “Tell us what you said on those flyers and why you did it.” The flyers just let people know that the county council was holding a public hearing, I told her.

A lot of politicians worry about an engaged citizenry. When I lobbied in the state legislature for same-day voter registration, I discovered that incumbent politicians on both sides of the aisle opposed the bill because it would empower people to vote who had not been figured into the “voter universe,” the known list of voters that candidates contact during an election, drawn from the file of registered voters. With new people coming to the polls, who knows what they might do?

When I briefly considered running for school board back in 2011, I wanted to frame the issues based on the idea that in order to have strong public schools, you need an engaged public. My campaign manager at the time, a retired congressional staffer, told me, in no uncertain terms, that I was not to use that framing because “the

average voter has a sixth grade mentality and won't understand" what I am saying.

I think she meant to say that she did not understand what I was saying because it exceeded her bandwidth. She actually said that the public's only role is paying taxes and we do not want parents involved in the schools because they just cause problems. The public schools should be run by "experts," she insisted. Shortly thereafter, I decided not to run for school board after all.

In contrast, during my state senate campaign three years later, I took the argument about the need for citizens to get more involved in politics directly to the people, not to the political experts who were advising me, and I found that everyday people had no problem understanding the concept of an engaged citizenry. While one self-appointed expert said, "nobody cares" about "problems of democracy," like the distorting impact "big money" has on our political process, my grassroots supporters understood immediately what it meant that my opponent was funded by big developers. It meant he would put the interests of his funders before theirs: profits over people.

Working with Legislators

For the past year and a half, I have been exploring how to strengthen the connections between citizens and those who represent them. We have long known from past research by John Doble that citizens want a tighter connection with their representatives, but in recent years, the desire for a stronger relationship has emerged among legislators as well, according to a study by Rich Harwood.

Some legislators have found that connecting more strongly with the public can benefit the

work they do. One legislator shared that when he knocks on doors during a campaign, he begins the conversation with voters by asking them whether they care about broad issues like health care, education, and safety. The conversations that result from that entree resemble the types of conversations that occur when citizens name and frame issues for themselves in deliberative settings. Another legislator explained that he engages in mini-deliberations with people when he door-knocks. While one-on-one conversations are not the same as public deliberations, they have a deliberative flavor, according to his account.

When I first heard about such interactions, it did not strike me as exceptional because that is how I campaigned. I did a tremendous amount of door-knocking, and when people came to the door, I asked them to name the issues that most concerned them. That is how I came up with my platform, and that is how I continued to campaign even after I had determined my platform. And I found that people tended to name the same issues over and over: the lack of doctors and dentists, the overemphasis on high-stakes testing in the schools, the need for



better transportation options for seniors, and the problems caused by unchecked development, none of which were partisan, by the way. Today, when I help first-time candidates get their campaigns off the ground, I recommend they do what I did.

I recently realized, however, that such methods of campaigning are not, in fact, standard practice; it felt normal to me probably because of all the years I spent in the world of deliberative democracy. It just came naturally for me to ask people to name the issues that concern them and to share what they consider valuable. But that is not the norm in the world of power politics. A lot of candidates, particularly incumbents, do not listen to citizens; they talk at them, simply pushing their own agenda. Indeed, in my experience, when I speak with elected officials, most of the time I barely get a word in edgewise.

That is because real conversations are deemphasized in today's campaign "best prac-

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tices." An authentic conversation is not the goal of interacting with voters. The goal is simply to identify people on your side and get them to the polls; engaging in a conversation aimed at persuasion is currently considered a waste of time by campaign experts. There is, however,

a new trend in progressive circles called "deep canvassing" that entails in-depth conversations with people about a variety of important issues, but it is not the norm. Campaign experts generally recommend talking only to those who already agree with you.

How Deliberation Could Help Both Citizens and Legislators

The idea that everyday people should have a say about the issues that affect their lives constitutes a basic premise of almost any school of democratic theory. While acting without any substantive input from citizens might strike many elected officials as an efficient way of managing their demanding workloads, marginalizing members of the public can also produce anger and hostility, resulting over time in a toxic political culture that makes the lives of elected officials more difficult.

In contrast, inserting deliberation into the realm of power politics could actually help ameliorate some of the challenges faced by American democracy today. Deliberative democracy theory maintains that engaging with others in a deliberative forum helps build relationships. We know that to be the case among citizens. As Mathews recounted back in 1994, deliberation can strengthen relationships even between the most unlikely allies. As one man put it in *Politics for People*, "What you need is a redneck like me and a black fireman over there to come together and talk about crime and realize the other person is not so bad. We'll . . . leave talking to each other. The attitude of the whole group will improve." And that perspective is commonly shared by citizens who have had the opportunity to deliberate together.

Consequently, deliberative forums could play a positive role in decreasing the toxicity in today's divisive political culture. This might sound absurd at first, but in reality, people today are not actually as divided over political issues as certain vested interests want us to believe. As research from Liliana Mason shows, political polarization is less about issues and more about proclaiming an identity—treating political parties like ball teams. For example, Republicans loved “Romneycare,” but when Obama offered essentially the same plan, they hated it with a passion. So, the disagreement was not about the substance of the plan, but rather which party advocated it. And Democrats can operate the same way, being critical of the CIA until Trump criticizes it, for example. Consequently, a deliberative forum that brings people together to discuss issues, framed in nonpartisan terms, might reveal a path forward on a previously gridlocked issue.

When considering the hyper-partisan dysfunction of Washington, DC, some have argued that because of the “permanent campaign,”



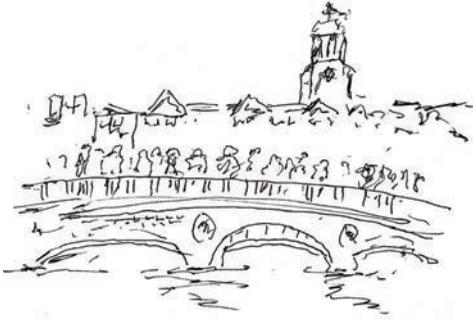
members of Congress no longer stay in town and socialize together during weekends and recesses as they used to do. Consequently, they do not develop the “social capital” that used to underwrite bipartisan cooperation.

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Recently, I had a dinner conversation with two young elected officials from different parties who serve together in a state legislature. They explained that they are able to work together effectively because their families socialize together outside of politics; they are friends. They do not shrink from making strong arguments in session, but their underlying relationship prevents the emergence of animosity.

Relationships matter. I know that when I served as a lobbyist for a democracy reform organization, my work got done more effectively once I became close enough to elected officials to have their text numbers and when I could message them on Facebook. On the flipside, I also know that having a conflictual relationship with a couple of legislators made my job more difficult.

Hearing from people in communities is particularly important in light of the tumultuous nature of contemporary politics. The 2016



election revealed high levels of dissatisfaction with establishment candidates, and we see an upward trend toward voters registering as Independents. That turmoil follows on the heels of the uprisings on both ends of the political spectrum, from the Tea Party in 2010 and Occupy in 2011. Clearly, American politics is in flux, and it is often hard to understand what is going on and what people are thinking. But we do know that increased levels of anger, divisiveness, and partisan polarization have eroded the quality of life for elected officials. Indeed, many are retiring early.

Deliberative forums, which have been shown to improve relationships among citizens, might help improve relationships between citizens and legislators as well. Given the levels of anger often expressed at public meetings, particularly since 2010, the reluctance of elected officials to subject themselves to angry incivility might be understandable, but that refusal to meet with citizens makes people even angrier. I have learned from conversations with lawmakers, however, that their constituents express less anger and frustration when they have relationships with them, when their constituents know

they can pick up the phone and be heard. Even if they do not get what they want, they are more likely to remain civil.

It seems to me that it might be particularly appealing for legislators interested in building stronger relationships with citizens to connect with people already working in a deliberative fashion in communities around the country. Hearing the deliberations of citizens in communities might provide legislators with important information, and working with the support of communities might take the pressure off legislators when they have to make tough decisions. In short, legislators cannot solve public problems on their own. They need the insight and support of communities to make hard choices and get things done.

Listening to communities of citizens who are already having conversations about issues of concern to them would be a convenient and productive way for legislators to connect with

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constituents. It would be easier and more beneficial than having legislative staff organize events that draw only a small number of constituents, despite widespread advertising, or convening traditional town hall meetings that result in partisan eruptions. In other words, instead of, or in addition to, trying to entice people to attend

legislator-sponsored events, legislators could attend events convened by citizens that are already happening. Inviting legislators to become more engaged with what is happening in their states already would benefit the work legislators want to do anyway. And having a relationship with their representatives would certainly help

citizens accomplish the goals they have determined for their own communities.

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