Changing Perceptions of the Relationship Between Citizens and Their Elected Representatives

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America's cherished system of self-government is based on the principle of representative democracy in which the election of legislators by the citizenry is the defining element. But how this principle plays out in practice depends chiefly on the relationship of legislators to their constituents. What that relationship means and why it should be accepted as legitimate has changed over time. This essay reviews these changes in the meaning of representation as they are reflected in classic works on American democracy, with a view to illuminating some of our present discontent with government.

The Founders

As they do in many other governmental matters, The Federalist Papers offer insight into the standards of political practice at the time of the adoption of the Constitution. In the debate over ratification of the Constitution, the idea that representatives were to reflect the preferences and interests of their constituents went undisputed. In Federalist #37, Madison wrote:

The genius of Republican liberty, seems to demand on one side, not only that all power should be derived from the people; but, that those entrusted with it should be dependent on the people by a short duration of their appointments, and, that, even during this short period, the trust should be placed not in a few, but a number of hands.

This understanding was grounded in a frankly materialist sense of politics. In Federalist #52, Madison expressed this as the search for a “common interest”:
As it is essential to liberty that the government in general, should have a common interest with the people, so it is particularly essential that the branch of it under consideration [the House of Representatives], should have an immediate dependence on, and an intimate sympathy with, the people. Frequent elections are unquestionably the only policy by which this dependence and sympathy can be effectually secured.

Madison's prediction that U.S. representatives would be tied closely to their electorates' own interests was, to him, a critically important element in the overall plan of the Constitution, and should be part of the public understanding of how the House would work. In Federalist #57, Madison offered an expanded explanation of why the Constitution's provisions for the House of Representatives would secure the election of Representatives who would "have sympathy with . . . [the mass of] the people." He introduced his argument:

If we consider the situation of the men on who the free suffrages of their fellow citizens may confer the representative trust, we shall find it involving every security which can be devised or desired for their fidelity to their constituents.

Election was a process that would seek out candidates of some distinction, and success in getting elected would produce at least a temporary affection by the winner for those who made him a winner. Most elected members would see their advantage in continuing to court public favor, not in subverting it. The short terms in office and the likely prospect of returning to whence they came would temper the tendencies to stray from careful attention to the interests of constituents. "Duty, gratitude, interest, ambition itself, are the chords by which they will be bound to fidelity and sympathy with the great mass of the people."

Madison's representative was a creature of the society that produced him. He was sent to the halls of government to enhance the well-being of those who sent him, and could
expect to be replaced should that not happen. An individual representative was thus seen as an agent for the locality that sent him, and by no means an independent leader. This sense of the role of elected officials, especially legislators, is quite in keeping with the expectations Jefferson voiced in the Declaration of Independence. In the Declaration, government is an instrumentality external to society, created at society’s will, and meant to serve widely known, agreed-upon ends. Governments are “instituted among men” to preserve natural rights and may be “altered or abolished” when they do not serve those purposes.

Then, underscoring the use of government as a tool, to be picked up or not as it suits the occasion, the Declaration goes on to assert that the governed may “institute new government, laying its foundations on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to secure their safety and happiness.” Like the legislator who is sent to do certain things and who is to be dismissed if those things are not done, government is conceived as a means to an end, a way to safeguard the rights (especially the property rights) of the citizens and, like the elected official, dispensable if the job isn’t done. The thinking of both Madison and Jefferson was, of course, considerably more qualified and complex. Both spent their lives in public service, and each was a notably independent thinker. And it should be remembered that practice either at that time or later did not necessarily reflect the prevailing theory. But these leading shapers of the American idea of popular sovereignty laid out what became an easily grasped and easily repeated theory of the relation between government and society that included within it the relationship between the electors and the elected.

As conscious as the Founders were of doing something new, the sense of instrumentality underlying this theory of government was not very far from an overall view of the conduct of affairs that had already been expressed in the context of the modernizing European monarchies. This understanding was linear. That is to say, it carried with it the presumption that events move in a more or less causal, straight-line sequence. The notion that the universe is consti-
tuted so that A leads to B, which eventually implies C, and so on, is one of the distinctive characteristics of post-Renaissance thought. It underlies the acceptance of science as an investigation of the rational sequence of causes; it underlies the sensibility of painting that uses perspective to arrange objects in the proper order of near to far. It underlies the notion that history is a series of related events leading toward a goal or at least goes in a nameable direction, such as progress. And it underlies the notion that society can operate in a reasonably orderly way where one thing leads to another, if we can just get the causal sequences right.

A sense of strict, responsible hierarchy is not far removed from the presumption of linearity. It doesn’t take much mental effort to rotate the sequential line 90 degrees and visualize a top-to-bottom hierarchy, rather like a modern corporate organization chart. At the top is the sovereign, who when he or she moves, sets in motion the next level, then the next, and so on, until at the bottom of the social pyramid, the people carry out the will of the sovereign, by building better roads or sending their children to school. If society can thus be caused to become more civilized, and if life can be made less “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” then the establishment of the right order with the right sovereign is a very important matter, indeed. It was a conceptually easy, if rhetorically bold, matter to argue that having a traditional hereditary monarch was not a reasonable way to select the sovereign. The people should be the cause of things, so why not invert the pyramid and put them in charge? At the foundation of the American republic the Founders made clear that, whatever reservations they had about some democratic practices, they accepted the basic principle of popular sovereignty, and they gave expression to the idea that governing officials had now become the people’s servants.

Though much has happened since the adoption of the Constitution and much more has been said about political relations, this basic notion has not disappeared. A vivid contemporary expression of the same thought shows up in the common phrase: “We hired ’em; we can fire ’em.” Candidates get elected by pledging they will do “what the people want.”
Official decisions may be made because “this is what my constituents asked for.” Whether the relations between elected officials and citizens are quite so simple in actual practice is another matter. It is not unknown in politics that even strongly held and widely subscribed prescriptive views may not match concrete practice.

Madison also provided the foundation for a broader theory of politics through his argument that nationally acceptable legislation would spring from the interplay of the different interests represented in the new Congress. The clarity and precision of this vision has continued to attract admirers. Though framed for an era when the United States had a small population and an agricultural economy, its depiction of the benefits of the orderly pursuit of self-interest has much in common with present-day neoclassical economics. This contemporary movement has repopularized Adam Smith’s doctrine that the public interest is often best served by encouraging the members of the body politic to undertake a rational pursuit of their own self-interest. By so doing, they will contribute to a “general opulence” that is itself one of the best of public goods, benefiting even the poorest members of society. It sounds similar to Madison’s conception that the public interest (or an approximation of it) may be served by self-interested negotiation among competing interests.

But as the young nation underwent astounding growth and as American political practice became transformed after the election of 1800, the formulations of the Founders were amended by those who were developing their own understanding of this new dynamism. The ideas of causality and hierarchy assume that the servants will obey the sovereign fully and that they will adopt the sovereign’s goals as their own. But, as democratic politics became a reality, so too did the public recognition of the servants’ tendency to serve their own ends. It seemed that the legislators of adolescent American democracy had ambitions and agendas of their own and were quite capable of manipulating their constituents.

As their conduct of democracy came increasingly to the attention of the democratic public, a new vocabulary appeared to identify these practices. Madison’s careful, abstract
formulations of “clashing interests” and “a Republican remedy for the diseases of Republican Government” (Federalist #10) were replaced by such blunt terms as “logrolling,” “lobbying,” and “pork barrel.” Another was “buncombe,” “bunk,” for short. It derived from the practice of one U.S. representative who would preface remarks made in Congress purely for home consumption, not for legislative action, with the line: “This one’s for Buncombe [County, North Carolina].” Thus, his legislative colleagues were alerted to the fact that they need not take the speech seriously. So a new word passed into the language as everyone came to understand that in democratic practice elected officials were not just passive transmitters of the people’s will.

Frederick Grimke’s Nature and Tendency of Free Institutions is not nearly so well known as Tocqueville’s Democracy in America, but it is also a careful, comprehensive effort to analyze American democracy in the mid-nineteenth century. Grimke, who was from a distinguished South Carolina family, lived most of his life as a bachelor judge in Ohio. He retired in 1842 and spent the rest of his life writing. Unlike Tocqueville, who was concerned with tyranny of the majority, he was a firm defender of majority rule. Moreover, he was a confident democrat, not a reluctant one. He was neither cynical nor apprehensive about the operations of democracy and saw democracy’s problems as potentially self-correcting. He noted that, once elected, many officials applied themselves to even “laborious drudgery” with “singleness of purpose and indefatigable industry” in the performance of their public duties. He also opined that the public would tire of demagoguery and buncombe: “I predict that the reaction of public men on the one hand and of popular sentiment on the other will give rise to a more healthful public opinion and that the intercourse of the two classes will be more rational.” This mutual education would “abate the violence of party spirit” and render the representative “the instrument of communication between his constituents and the world of politics.”

Partisanship and Reform

American politics in the remainder of the 1800s did not
bear out Grimke's optimism about the course of events, at least in the short run. The Republican Party was born in an atmosphere of bitter struggle, taking on a militant character from its very beginning. In 1860, the most dramatic aspect of local participation in the national campaign were nighttime torchlight parades conducted by local Republican military drill units known as "Wide-Awakes," surely an anticipation that a Republican victory would bring a war for which it would be best to begin preparing. A period of ferocious partisanship followed the Civil War. The Union veterans organization, the Grand Army of the Republic, played a powerful continuing role in Republican Party politics. The partisanship following the war was not national, as it had been during the comparatively brief period of Whig-Democrat national competition; it was regional, with a few Northern swing states as the only battlegrounds where the outcome was in doubt. In most places it was not even possible for adherents of both parties to face each other in a local debate about party principles and policies. After Reconstruction, the South was exclusively Democratic, and fanatically so. The original Ku Klux Klan became a terrorist organization in order to end Republican efforts to enfranchise former slaves. Many areas in the North were single-mindedly Republican. In Sherwood Anderson's fictional Winesburg, Ohio, Democrats were hunted with shotguns.

Such profound antagonisms made the parties instruments of ideological conformity. In this kind of environment, elected officials are sought for their willingness to adhere to the party line. The issues are set, the enemy is identified, and the voice of the people has already been heard and given force by the party program. What's needed is someone who is sound on the issues. Therefore, elected officials and citizens alike come to be judged on the basis of their fidelity to the party, not to the product of an independent interaction between official and citizen.

Corruption frequently finds a home in one-party, ideological regimes. Power is in the hands of those who hand down the party line, but in matters where the party is silent or absent, personal considerations may prevail without running
afoul of the cause. In America's new industrial cities of the latter part of the nineteenth century, the ward heeler came to prominence through the skillful use of personal favors.

Literature has made New York's George Washington Plunkitt, or at least his literary manifestation, the symbol of the ward heeler. Assisted by a newspaper reporter who followed Plunkitt through his daily activities, Plunkitt recorded his version of political wisdom in *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*. The narrative of this book revolves around his unremitting efforts to maintain the loyalty of the voters in his New York City Assembly District to the Democratic Party and to him, personally. Plunkitt saw this work as his business and made no apologies for becoming wealthy. In response to criticism that he used his office for private gain, Plunkitt asserted that he was proud of it and wanted the epitaph on his tombstone to read: "He seen his opportunities, and he took 'em." The secret to getting rich in politics was not to take money from the public treasury or to accept direct bribes; the secret was to understand how to use "honest graft." In present-day terms, this was done through the advantageous use of inside information. But as Plunkitt reported, it was a business, and Plunkitt had to spend money in order to make money.

Staying in office meant spending money to get elected, and for Plunkitt and others like him, this meant doing direct favors for constituents to elicit public approval. Such favors might include helping a family that had lost its home in a fire, attending weddings in the district (and bringing gifts), using political influence to get someone released from a public drunkenness charge, or getting someone a job with the city. In return for these material and social services, Plunkitt expected electoral loyalty.

Recruiting people to work for the party at election time was a principal goal. From the ranks of these activists would come future candidates for office: "Show me a boy who hustles for the organization on election day, and I'll show you a coming statesman." In practice, this often meant that the boy became a city employee. Though the term that described this was the patronage system, Plunkitt's version was not quite a patron-client relationship so much as an exchange of value for value
with newcomers to the city. He had knowledge and political influence; they had votes. Why not trade? If this constituted corruption in the eyes of some, then that was their problem. As Plunkitt saw it, everyone gained. In a phrase that carries echoes of Madison, he had only “studied human nature and acted accordin’. “ Plunkitt was a public servant in personal and immediate ways, but he had to be compensated for his time and expense.

As others saw it, Plunkitt and his political friends benefited at the expense of the general public and the taxpayers. The system of using governmental power for personal gain led to dirty, backward cities marred by crime and vice, and growing discontent. The assassination of President James Garfield by an electoral supporter who didn’t get a federal job despite his efforts on behalf of the organization precipitated the beginning of the reform of the federal government’s patronage system. At the state and local levels, reforms proceeded both independently and in concert with broader national reform movements.

The population of the United States was growing rapidly, and the distribution and character of that population was changing. The census of 1890 noted that the frontier was closed; the census of 1920 would confirm the existence of an urban majority. The technology of everyday life was changing: automobiles, electric power grids, elevators, electric lighting, radio, telephones, movies, and the airplane appeared. Universities became integral elements of social and economic life. Large corporations dominated economic life. In response to the power of the corporations, the labor union movement began. The demographic changes prompted a series of public responses: the control of communicable diseases in the new cities through municipal water systems and sanitary sewers; the construction of paved roads for the new automobiles and trucks; and, the construction of mass transit that enabled masses of people to move from one place to another; and the effort to control the growth of cities through zoning regulation. Many judged that the old way of doing politics could not deal with these kinds of change.

Religious life saw the rise of the social gospel, efforts to
purify society by prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages, banning prostitution, restricting gambling, eliminating child labor, expanding education, and improving neighborhoods. The immigrations of Catholics and Jews meant the advent of greater religious variety in what had become a much more diverse population. The present-day civic clubs, such as Kiwansis and Rotary appeared and grew rapidly. Interest in self-improvement and civic-improvement efforts was widespread.

The political reformers committed themselves to an extensive program of legislation and institutional change aimed at the two existing political parties and at all levels of government, especially municipal government. The movement was not unified; it sometimes pursued contradictory courses of action. But a deep distaste for government, the way it was run, and who ran it, permeated this broad, heterogeneous movement. So, reformers, at different times and in different ways, sought to do things that would alter the relationship between citizen and elected official.

In the critical matter of elections, reformers mounted a two-pronged effort to eliminate abuse and to make greater use of elections to lessen public dependence on career politicians. Voters would have to be properly registered before they could vote, and literacy tests were introduced to limit the impact of ignorant (and, hence, more corruptible) voters on the political process. Voting machines would eventually supplant the paper ballot in order to eliminate the stuffing of ballot boxes and other abuses. The administration of elections was subject to more extensive legal regulation. The hold of party bosses was weakened by the primary election; individual voters, rather than party boss-dominated conventions, would choose the party nominees. Nonpartisan elections became the law in some states. Direct democracy could bypass elected officials in the states that adopted the devices of initiative, referendum, and recall. The goal of this was the elimination of government by the mediocrities and the election of the best men to office. If the parties nominated party-line hacks as candidates for office, then those who understood the need for the best available talent in office could more easily organize alternative
parties or political clubs to make good nominations and give
the voters a choice.

The original reformers saw their hopes dashed. Plunkitt
had been confident that reformers “were only mornin’
glories,” and, in the large cities, they did frequently resemble
quickly fading flowers. However, the reformers had seized the
intellectual initiative and over the next 50 years made some
version or other of the reform agenda the preferred course of
action. Tammany Hall, Plunkitt’s base of operations, and the
oldest machine, was nearly the last to fall. But well before
Tammany finally succumbed in the 1960s, two U.S.
Presidents who made notable contributions to reform politics,
Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, had been elected.
It can be argued that they were manifestations of the
ambition to put the “best men” in office.

The relationship between citizen and elected official
promoted by the reform movement can be seen most clearly
at the municipal level. The particular local government
changes that most clearly embody the range and intricacy of
the reform agenda are the invention and promotion of the
council-manager form of municipal government and the
establishment of the new profession of city manager. Most
nineteenth-century cities had bicameral councils, multiple
elected administrative officials, numerous committees, and
elections dominated by parties. Over time, it became clear
that the old institutions and the old politicians were not equal
to the task of planning, financing, building, and maintaining
the infrastructure that twentieth-century cities required.

The first council-manager arrangement appeared in
Staunton, Virginia, in 1908. The old city council had become
immobilized in a controversy over the paving of a downtown
street that had become impassable in wet weather. The matter
was turned over to a three-member committee, for whom the
clerk of court served as secretary. The committee included the
district railroad manager, who, buttressed by his professional
knowledge, got the street paved. Public approval was such
that the charter was changed and the temporary arrangements
made permanent. Council-manager municipal government
was born.
The leading advocate of council-manager government, business executive Richard S. Childs, spelled out its requirements. The manager serves full time at the pleasure of the council, supervises all department heads, prepares the annual budget, and provides information to council members. The council is small (five or seven members) and is elected at large on a nonpartisan basis. “The city council looks like, and proceeds like a board of directors.” This was not just management science; it had political implications for those who would run the city. When Dallas, Texas, considered adoption of the plan in the 1920s, the *Dallas News* editorialized:

*Why not run Dallas itself on a business schedule by business methods under businessmen? The city manager is the executive of a corporation under a board of directors. Dallas is the corporation. It is as simple as that. Vote for it.*

Corporate boards of directors are responsible for the well-being of the corporation and are expected to use their best judgment in decision making. The new ideal of elected officials, acting together as a board of directors, is a significant departure from the old Madisonian ideal of the elected official as an agent of the public. It is much closer to the sense of representation articulated by Edmund Burke in his oft-quoted 1777 “Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol.” In a response to a campaign question about his willingness to follow the instructions of his constituents, Burke replied:

*Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion. Government and legislation are matters of reason and judgment, and not of inclination. . . . You choose a member, indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not a member of Bristol, but he is a member of Parliament.*

Bureaucracy had made its appearance in industrialized countries. The German sociologist Max Weber spelled out his “ideal type” of bureaucracy: the carrying out of work by
full-time, trained, appointed careerists on the basis of established procedures and full documentation; working in a hierarchically organized office; and, working according to law set down by the legislative authority. This closely matches Childs’ description of the city manager as a full-time, trained professional who keeps accurate records and provides proper supervision for the city employees who are organized under the manager, all of whom are under the legislative direction of the elected council. The council makes “the tough decisions,” and the politically neutral staff has the duty of carrying them out.

According to Childs, decisions in the new bureaucratic regime do not spring from anyone’s untutored preferences. Council is fully informed by professionals:

Firm, factual data comes in from a trusted and trained full-time city manager. Orderly finances, daily balances, tight budgetary restraints keep the facts in sight. If new business comes into council from citizens beyond the rail, it is routinely referred to the city manager for investigation and a report at the next meeting, as is new business brought up by a member of the council. Thus every piece of serious business commonly carries a memorandum of acts, attached by the city manager.

In this setting it will be possible to “enlist . . . some of the ablest men in town for a tour of duty at City Hall in the same spirit they would serve on a hospital board or a community chest or the governing committee of a union or a church.” This would make it possible for people to serve on council without disrupting their businesses or careers. They were not to be full-time politicians. The kind of relationship between officeholder and public epitomized by Plunkitt was to be excised from public life.

The Limits of Reform

Childs and his followers certainly considered these reforms democratic, but a proposal to change the relation between elected official and citizen necessarily involves a revision,
either explicit or implicit, of the practice of democratic governance. Nothing we have considered so far involves a direct rejection of the original understanding of popular sovereignty. In these reform proposals the people are still at the top of the pyramid.

But in the council-manager form of government, the position of the voters at the top of the heap is beginning to look more like a formal position than a substantive one. Almost as an aside, Childs makes a point about the relationship between professional manager, elected council members, and the public, that highlights a profound, if subtle, shift. In a discussion of the manager’s expert preparation of reports and studies, he notes that for the manager’s professional recommendations to be carried out, some political work will have to be done. According to Childs, “preferably the councilmen do the talking when there is persuading to be done on controversial issues.” The terms “persuasion” and “controversy” point to a new understanding of the relationship of knowledge to politics. It goes beyond the prudential arrangements made in Staunton, Virginia, to get a street paved, to a more general claim about who was suited to inform public decisions. The professional manager would prepare the recommendation and the elected officials would figure out how to convince the people to approve what was being done on their behalf.

Perhaps this move to a passive role for the public was foreshadowed in the partisan boss-client relationship of Plunkitt, or even in Grimke’s acknowledgment that officials had an educational responsibility to their constituents. By the turn of the century, it was clear that governance was being changed by the bureaucratization of governmental institutions. Council-manager government was patterned on Continental ideas of efficient bureaucracy. The justification for this lay in the question of knowledge, specifically the growing availability of scientific knowledge, and the conviction of those who thought that the fruit of scientific knowledge was greater organizational efficiency.

These notions were firmly supported by academics in the rising universities. For example, in his history of the city
management movement, Stillman cites the remarks of Dr. A. R. Hatton of Northwestern University to the 1926 city managers’ convention: “You managers are the exemplars of a radically different idea in municipal affairs, of the idea that intelligence and the scientific method have a place in city government.” And quoting the leading academic historian of public administration in the same year: “The managers have been successful in maintaining praiseworthy standards of administration. In most cities they have greatly reduced the influence of politics. . . . They have planned intelligently and executed efficiently.” The public had become passive clients or, perhaps, customers. In either case, their main function now was to consume public services.

Science thus came to be seen as a source of knowledge about governance that was independent of what the public may or may not have known and may or may not have wanted; it was also independent of politics. Woodrow Wilson foresaw the tension between the adoption of scientific public administration and the expectations of democracy and addressed this tension in a widely known essay first published in 1887. He was an advocate of the new scientific administration and thought it could be harmonized with democracy. In the course of making his argument, he laid out the change in the relationship between government and citizens in terms much stronger than Childs used. His solution to the problem was to separate politics and administration, and in the course of making his recommendations, he included a number of salient observations about both.

Administration was not merely a matter of the internal concerns of the bureaucracy; administration was the essence of governance. “Administration is the most obvious part of government; it is government in action; it is the executive, the operative, the most visible side of government, and is of course as old as government itself,” according to Wilson. The actor in this is the state itself, which becomes the source of the ethics as well as the action of administration. “The idea of the state and the consequent ideal of its duty are undergoing noteworthy change, and the idea of the state is the conscience of administration. Seeing every day new things which the
state ought to do, the next thing is to see clearly how it ought to do them.” The state, not the citizenry, has become the principal actor, guided by “the idea of the state.” The public has become an idle and indulged sovereign.

In an autocracy, the reformer of administration has only to convince the autocrat for the proper course of action to be taken. In a democracy, according to Wilson, “wherever public opinion exists it must rule.” Therefore, public opinion must be limited and guided, it must be “efficient without suffering it to be meddlesome.” This is true even for the educated portion of the citizenry. The movement to provide “universal political education will prepare the way for a sure-footed understanding of the general principles of government, but it will not necessarily foster skill in conducting government.” The operation of public opinion should be confined to the making of law. Since law is the source of both bureaucratic organization and program authority, this will ensure that the people will be in charge, because their elected representatives make the law. But this is the only role for the public. They are in charge, but they have nothing else to do. Actually carrying out the law is the province of scientifically trained administrators.

Thus, the relationship between citizen and elected official is one of citizens expressing wishes to lawmakers. It seems that in governance, legislative politics is the realm of the irrational, and the function of legislatures is to determine the most widely acceptable irrationality, which can then become the basis of policy. To keep administration rational, it was important to separate it from “the hurry and strife of politics.” But this raises again the need to have somebody persuade the public when scientific knowledge and public opinion disagree. In Wilson’s case, it is the reformer who must persuade. “He must first make public opinion willing to listen then see to it that it listens to the right things. He must stir it up to search for an opinion, and then manage to put the right opinion in its way.” Once the right opinion has been embraced, then elections will presumably provide elected officials who will act in accordance with it. But it seems doubtful that reformers would always be readily available to do whatever persuading
was required. In the normal course of events, it must certainly fall to the lawmakers to be able to explain the operation and results of the steady stream of new laws.

From the Enlightenment to the early years of the twentieth century, the causal, hierarchical sense of government underlay the most influential thinking and writing about governance. Its elaboration reached its zenith in the vast range of prescriptions developed by the reform movement. By their own account, the reformers made every effort to make this model a reality by putting what they understood to be the scientific method to work.

In formal terms, the relation of elected officials to citizens remained the same during the evolution of our political system; the officials, especially representatives in legislative bodies, were chosen to exercise governing power on behalf of those who chose them.

But in substance, the position of the legislator in a systematically bureaucratic government shifted radically from the old expectation that a legislator would act mostly as an agent for his constituents. The representative would not just take the views of his or her constituents to the seat of government. The representative would also bring scientific knowledge back to that public who, if not completely ignorant, was certainly not scientific and, therefore, in need of persuasion. As a consequence, the elected official now takes on an unforeseen role. Aware of public desires, the elected official must persuade the citizens to approve the rational means the government's administration will use to satisfy those desires. As a mediator or negotiator between administrators and citizens, the official must listen, cajole, bully when necessary, supervise, and bargain — and do most of this in public. This is not the sort of relationship that the causal model seemed to anticipate, and this is a matter of some significance.

The most striking aspect of this altered relationship is the evident duty of the elected official to persuade the public that policy should be based on scientific findings made by the trained bureaucracy. Today, we would be more likely to talk about technical expertise, than about scientific findings. And at the level of common sense, it is clear that the completion of
such jobs as building bridges, laying sewers, or building and maintaining a water system requires trained professionals who can apply tested expertise. It also makes great sense that an elected official who has read and understood the relevant reports should try to share that knowledge with his constituents. None of these are problems. But what does become problematical is the extension of the authority of scientifically confirmed knowledge from particular projects to governance in general and the spread of faith that the scientific method could be the sole form of knowledge that guided public actions.

If Wilson’s claims are correct, then Childs’ description of the task of elected officials follows. The unscientific public needs scientifically informed expertise in government to give citizens what they want. In such obvious cases as building public works or epidemiology, the elected official’s role seems fulfillable. And it must be acknowledged that in the first half of the twentieth century, the decentralized American system of governance achieved a very high level of public health and urban infrastructure development.

The Post-Reform Era

But we do not live in the time of the reformers. The country has grown enormously in both population and wealth. Bureaucratic government has been the norm, if not always the practice, in the memory of almost everyone living today. College education has become a standard expectation; it is no longer the province of an elite. Since the 1960s, there have been a number of efforts to make the policy process fairer at the electoral level, particularly in making sure that elected officials have been chosen by an inclusive, broadly constituted electorate. Criticism of the errancy of public opinion is more muted. The early protestations that professional administration could be separated from politics have been discredited. Few localities are still governed by small committees of businessmen who call the shots for a community. Among other reasons, this change has resulted from corporate mergers in commerce and industry that have severely reduced the pool of local independent business
owners who are available to serve as community leaders. Evidence has been accumulating that success in carrying out policy requires the public to be something other than passive recipients of bureaucratic ministrations. Most significantly, the best-man conception of the relationship of elected officials to constituents has been made obsolete by the matured bureaucratic state.

This is evidenced by the need for elected officials to be educated in the complexities of law and administrative arrangements or to acquire staff with that kind of expertise. At the federal, state, and local levels, legislators and council members are typically provided with both educational materials and training sessions on a regular basis. It has become standard practice in many jurisdictions to offer formal training for newly elected officials. Various national associations of officials have active publication programs and conferences to make more information available. Legislative staff has grown considerably over the past generation. And on top of this, there is a thriving sector of businesses and individuals who provide help to elected officials on a consultative basis. Rather than stand above the bureaucracy, as our deeply ingrained sense of order would have it, the elected official must become a quasimember of it. With little purposeful public discussion of the matter, legislative bodies at the federal, state, and local levels have taken the place of libraries, universities, or the media in becoming the major repositories of information about public affairs. Elected officials are in the most convenient position to access this information, but the broader consequences of this have not been widely discussed.

A second piece of evidence that the reform idea is untenable comes from the personal reports of elected officials and contemporary studies of their daily schedules. Elected officials are very busy people. The amount of time they devote to their jobs is much closer to Plunkitt's full-time workload than the genteel part-timers predicted by Childs. A major part of the representative's workload since the advent of the bureaucratic state is constituent service, the widespread practice of intervening with the bureaucracy on behalf of a
constituent. Childs and Wilson did not predict it, but this has become one of the most time-consuming tasks of elected representatives. The growth of government has brought an increase in the number of laws and regulations, the number of activities that government undertakes, and in the number of appointed officials. Today's array of programs and properly kept records are no longer a novelty or a refreshing change. They are an overwhelming, unalterable fact, and people are accustomed to seeking help in navigating the masses of rules and decisions by turning to the people they elect.

An elected official may be asked to provide something as simple as public information that a constituent might more efficiently get directly from the proper agency. The official may also be called on for much more complex efforts such as using political pressure to change an administrative decision. The orderly hierarchy of rationalism does not reflect the webs of political influence that have spread over the institutions of the bureaucratic state. But it is settled practice that the elected official serves as an ombudsman, an institutionally identified intervener with bureaucracy on behalf of interested constituents. This role grew, unforeseen, from the consequences of professionalized administration.

Just as previous understandings of the relationship between elected official and citizen were eroded by new thought and new circumstances, so has the reform understanding been worn down over time. We are no longer a small agricultural republic. We are no longer a burgeoning new democracy. We are no longer a nascent empire, reveling in new knowledge and new industrial strength. But no new expression of the relationship between elected official and constituent has taken the place of the reform version that was articulated a century ago, so it is necessary to consider what possibility might be inherent in the situation we face now. Americans may still be adaptable and inventive in their public life.

One notable contemporary development makes the question of social knowledge a matter of pressing importance and not just an academic curiosity. As the claims of the exclusive authority of science weaken and the idea of causal, linear hierarchies loses its force, there is growing recognition
of the significance of practical knowledge in public affairs. In
general terms, practical knowledge is simply that knowledge of
something that we get from actually doing it. It is not, as
formal science is, a matter of explicit hypothesis and recorded
test. It is not necessary, for example, to be able to explain the
complicated physics of bicycles to be able to ride one, and in
reaching or learning how to ride, it may be best to ignore the
general explanation and just get on with trial-and-error riding.
Perhaps some practical knowledge is verbalized or even written
down, but even if, like most bike riding, it's wholly tacit, it
suffices to get the person through the activity. In fact, it may
be the only reasonable way to learn to ride.

Of course, practical knowledge in public affairs is more
complex; it involves other people. And it involves not just
technical knowledge about the means to achieve an end, but
also an understanding of the purposes to be served. It may be,
like the classical Greek notion of phronesis, the practical
wisdom necessary for good ethical and political decision
making. In this sense, citizenship is an activity in which
people engage to become more fully human, and it requires
the use of information, wisdom, and the skill to deal with
fellow citizens all at the same time. To appreciate the
significance of this, it may help to turn to an example from
American public affairs. In Democracy in America, Tocqueville
attributes the success of American democracy to the practical
knowledge of the New England townsman who was not
instructed in democratic doctrine but, instead, was immersed
in democratic life:

_The native of New England is attached to his township
because it is independent and free; this co-operation in its
affairs insures his attachment to its interest; the well-being
it affords him secures his affection; and its welfare is the aim
of his ambition and his future exertions. He takes a part in
every occurrence in the place; he practices the art of govern-
ment in the small sphere within his reach; he accustoms
himself to those forms without which liberty can only
advance by revolutions; he imbibes their spirit; he acquires
a taste for order; comprehends the balance of powers, and_
collects clear, practical notions on the nature of his duties and the extent of his rights.

Here there is no science of government, based on stable principles. There are, instead, accumulated habits and sensibilities that are embedded in the life of the community. In this view, the practice of public responsibility doesn't grow after the inculcation of a doctrine; rather, if public practice is widespread enough, it will be possible to build the language and concepts that are the prerequisites of assembling a shared understanding of effective public participation by basing them on practices in which they are already engaged. The broader success of democracy depends on it.

This sounds unfamiliar because it is based on a sense of society and social order that is radically different from the hierarchical understanding that has become the common sense of our time. Ironically, it is borne out by current scientific research, which indicates that the institutions of the state cannot achieve public policy ends unless citizens understand what is proposed and willingly help make the policy work. The effort to involve citizens in community policing is one revealing example of this. Of all the day-to-day functions of government, policing is surely one of the activities that most closely fits the sense of the state action expressed by Wilson. The officers are in a special uniform that sets them apart from the rest of the population; they carry weapons; they are trained in “police science”; they travel in special, unmistakably marked vehicles; and, their principal function is to remove aberrant people from society. They have computers and other high-tech equipment. They seem far removed from the rural world of Tocqueville's New England townsfolk.

Yet, the experience of trying to control illegal drugs, for example, has made it clear that the police cannot do these things on their own. In ways very similar to what Tocqueville described, the public must be willing to accept, and must be allowed to accept, some responsibility in controlling illegal drugs. And they must know how to do these things. If this practical knowledge of how to work with the police on behalf
of the community is not widely shared, even the most
dramatic police prerogative, the monopoly on the use of
force, is unlikely to accomplish much in a society where
some measure of freedom remains.

This point has been underscored by a major academic
study of the causes of crime and delinquency. This multiyear
study began in 1990 and is projected to continue until 2003.
It is conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health and
the University of Chicago and funded by the federal govern­
ment and private foundations. A key portion of the study
was conducted in 1995 and attracted wide attention when
results indicated that the most significant difference between
neighborhoods with more violence and those with less was
not ethnicity or economics. The distinguishing factor was
informal social control and cohesion and trust. In neighbor­
hoods where the residents took action based on their moral
sense—that a violent neighborhood is a bad place, there was less
violence. Citizen acceptance of responsibility for events they
know about, and are involved in firsthand, may be a necessary
element of successful policy.

A renewed appreciation of the utility of practical
knowledge points to a possible purpose for the elected official
that does not rely on the ritualistic repetition of old slogans or
efforts to revive old ways of doing things. In a situation such
as the one we face, where the capacity of the state to carry out
its presumed role as the principal actor in public life has been
called into question on a number of issues, and where citizens
have lost confidence in their ability to give meaningful
guidance to governance, the elected official faces distinct
difficulties. The reform tradition has demonstrated its
continuing power over our imagination by continuing to call
for more efficient ways of doing things—automating and
computerizing, downsizing, more training, benchmarking,
best practices exercises, and most comprehensively, reinvent­
ing government. Other techniques are being tried to revital­
ize community sentiment by promoting group processes such
as visioning, community goal-setting, forming neighborhood
committees and, in general, promoting more public partici­
pation in governmental activities. But this does not come
easily to government professionals. A recent study of how city managers engage the public shows that thinking about the community and how to engage it requires managers to take a different outlook than the usual manager's approach.

The possibility suggested here — public deliberation — is not so much the addition of more things to do, as a way to rethink the foundation on which political activities take place. Deliberation is not entirely new. It is quite in keeping with the practice of renewing the central elements of a very long-standing political tradition. How to conduct government on a basis other than force or propaganda has been the central question of political philosophy since its founding by Plato in ancient Athens. Engaging in deliberation and using everyday reasoning to direct public affairs is the practical expression of the idea that government is not just a matter of physical or verbal compulsion, but something better — active, intelligent, democratic practice.

If, as has been suggested, the failure to recognize different kinds of knowledge is a key to understanding at least some of our difficulties, then the remedy may lie with the elected official. This is the person who is in the logical position to address the need of both citizens and government officials to know things in more than one way. The elected official has a foot in both camps. Because practical knowledge must be expressed in everyday language and linked to common experience, campaigns might become occasions for candidates to grasp, develop, and articulate the practical knowledge of a given matter. Once elected, the new official undergoes an extensive initiation into the arcana of our complex, rule-bound government. No others — not academicians, not journalists — are similarly equipped. Elected officials are distinctively positioned to encourage the sorts of gatherings and the ways of meeting that could be used to foster open, honest encounters about the realities of public life and what it might take to improve it. If we made such a beginning, we might see the ways we can undertake the repair and care of institutions for which we have no replacement.
REFERENCES


