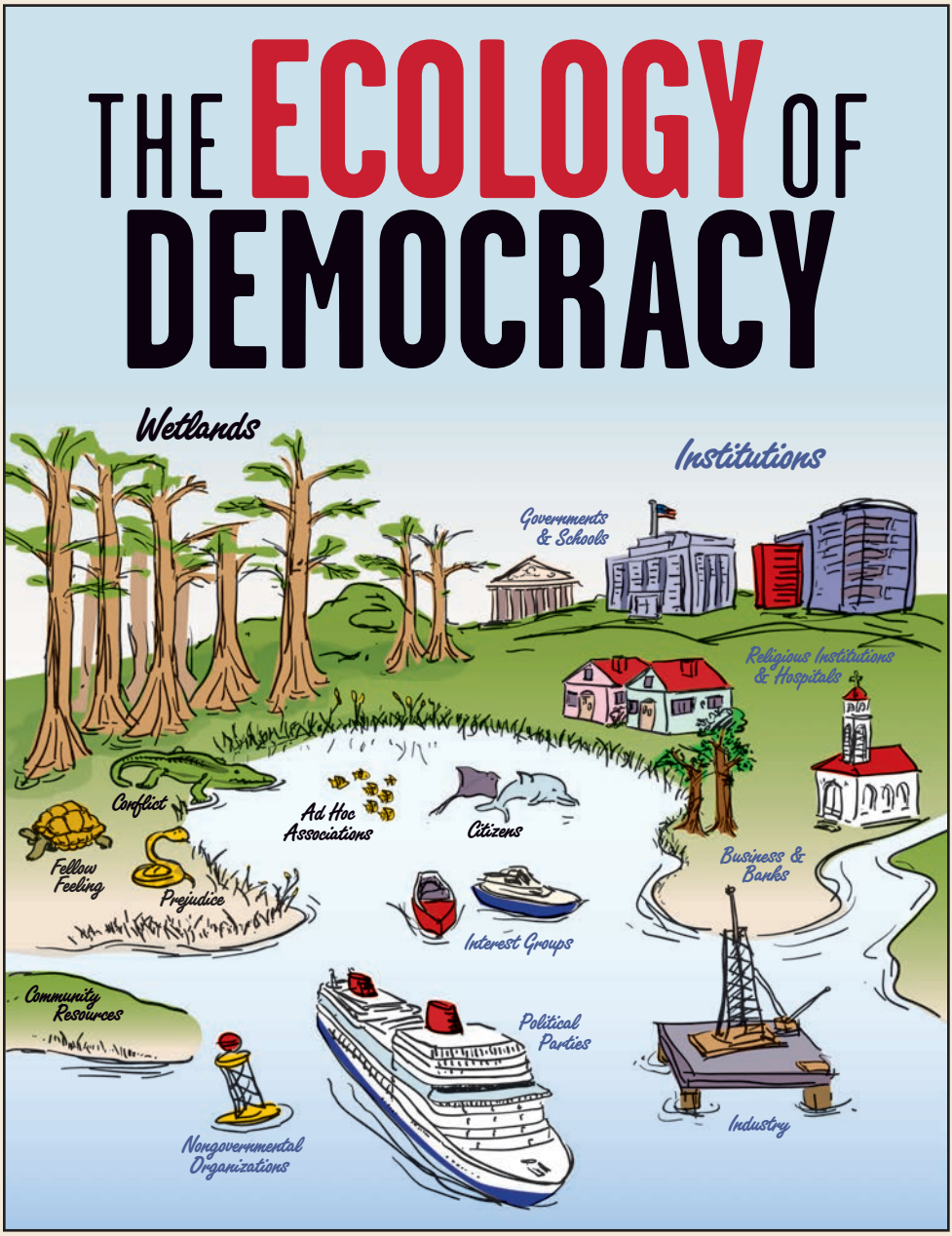
THE ECOLOGY OF DEMOCRACY



Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future

DAVID MATHEWS

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INTRODUCING THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE OUR DEMOCRACY WORK AS IT SHOULD

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT PEOPLE who are trying to help our country realize its dream of democracy with freedom and justice. However, they would never describe themselves that way: it would be far too grandiose. They would just say they are trying to solve a problem or make their community a better place to live.

Ruth was director of programming at a public radio station. I met her as a young woman, before her life was tragically cut short. She lived in Ohio and later in South Dakota with her son, Gabe, and her husband, Jim, a Native American artist. For Ruth, there was no division between her professional and her community life, and she was an early member of the Miami Valley Issues Forums, moderating deliberations on contentious community issues. A well-known radio personality, she pioneered using the airwaves to hold public forums. One issue that she was passionate about was juvenile crime, and she partnered with a number of different groups to help spark a civic response. The larger effort was dubbed "Kids in Chaos," but Ruth—conscious of the power of a name—called the radio segment "Peace in the Valley." When Ruth moved to South Dakota in 1996, she cofounded the Indigenous Issues Forums, which built on traditions of deliberative decision making in Native American culture. Although Ruth didn't always have an official position, she had considerable authority in the communities where she lived and an enormous impact on them.

When I met Gene, he was an athletically lean and wiry senior citizen with an infectious smile who lived in Pennsylvania. He was almost always in positions of authority, notably serving two terms as mayor of his hometown. Before that, he had taught math at the high school and college levels, coached track and cross-country teams, and managed an athletic department. No wonder he was always trim. Over the course of his life, he was involved in more than 25 civic groups. At 77, after leaving the mayor's office, Gene became president of a public access television station where he hosted an interactive community program that encouraged intergenerational deliberations on hot-button issues. In 1983, he moderated forums on security and nuclear arms and shared the results at a national teleconference at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in 1984. Although not a policy expert, he could explain how citizens make up their minds on complex, controversial issues.

To me, Ruth and Gene represent the kind of neighbors, friends, and colleagues that *Newsweek* called the "real fixers" who make our country work better. "From keeping kids in school to rebuilding devastated cities, they're rolling up their sleeves and getting things done."[1] Let me introduce you to a few more of these problem solvers to illustrate the kinds of things they do, not as lone leaders, but always with others.[2]

LIVING ORDINARY LIVES: DOING EXTRAORDINARY THINGS

Sandy went back to her small, rural hometown after retiring from a successful career in an urban center miles away. She still wanted to contribute, so she took a job teaching math in the school she had attended as a youngster. But shocked by what she found, she left the school after a year. Students were ill prepared; many had been passed up the ladder without having learned to read, write, or do the simplest arithmetic. Their parents didn't appear to care; many of them had left school by the eighth grade. Other than the mayor, few of the town's leaders seemed upset by how bad conditions were in the schools.

Sandy decided the remedy wasn't in the schools but in the community, yet she wasn't sure what she could do in the face of what appeared to be widespread indifference.

She sensed that the indifference was a symptom of a deeper problem: the public had become disconnected from the public school. When they drove by the building, they would call it *the* school, not *our* school. Sandy saw her job as rebuilding a sense of ownership.[3] However, she realized she couldn't start with the school and its problems. She had to begin with the things everyone, not just parents, really cared about. Many were concerned that young people were having trouble finding jobs, and, with nothing to do, were getting into trouble. So, Sandy decided to start with people's concerns about both their future and the future of the next generation. She went from being a teacher to being a community builder, which meant creating a citizens' coalition to combat some of the problems in the community that were spilling over into the schools. Curbing alcohol abuse was the coalition's first issue.

Max, a public health professional, was dismayed by the political polarization that quickly stymied his agency's efforts to deal with sensitive issues like reducing pollution and creating landfills for garbage. Unresolved, these problems ended up in the courts, and delays there meant that health hazards went unattended while lawyers wrangled. Max decided that the only way to break the logjams was to go to the people before the polarization set in. But how? Nothing in his training or career provided an answer.

Then Max realized that issues were seldom described in ways that resonated with people's deepest concerns. The descriptions coming from his agency were usually highly technical. Water quality reports, for example, listed possible contaminants by their scientific names and their presence by parts per million. People wondered what all the numbers meant. Furthermore, the options for solving problems quickly became polar opposites—add fluoride to the water or ban all additives. Maybe these ways of identifying and presenting issues were contributing to the divisiveness. Max began working with his commu-

nity to rename issues to include more than just technical data and to lay out a wider ranger of options to consider. He started holding community forums that changed the way his agency related to the public.

From a Typical Water Quality Report[4]

Regulated Substance	Highest Level Allowed (MCL)	Ideal Goals (MCLG)	Highest Level Detected
Regulated at the Treatment Plant			
Flouride (ppm)	4	4	1.19
Nitrate (ppm)	10	10	1.87
Turbidity (NTU)	TT=1	N/A	0.17
	TT: ≥ 95% must be ≤ 0.3		100%
Cis-1, 2-dichloroethylene (ppb)	70	70	.53
Total Organic Carbon (TOC)	TT	N/A	1.0 ppm
Toluene	1	1	0.62

Sue admitted, with considerable anguish, that her community spent a good deal of time "recovering," as she put it, from the last round of supposed solutions to local problems. The solutions weren't really solutions; they didn't hold long enough to counter persistent difficulties. The problems kept coming back: crime, economic reversals, tornados. In fact, these problems didn't have solutions, but they could be managed.

Local, state, and federal agencies had programs to help and were of some benefit. Yet the problems facing the community had a human side and couldn't be solved without assistance coming from citizens working with other citizens. "Programs don't solve our most serious problems," one minister in Sue's community said, "only people can." He may have had in mind the epidemic of drug abuse that was sweeping over the community.

Sue thought her fellow citizens failed to recognize and commit resources they controlled, which could be used to combat local problems. For example, one of the neighborhoods wracked by joblessness and deteriorating homes wanted to protect its children. Yet even though citizens had opportunities to work with young people in their churches, businesses, and civic organizations, they decided to turn troubled youngsters over to the city's social services department. Certainly the department could help; still, Sue was convinced that families, churches, and even businesses had many of the resources that were needed. She set out to identify these assets and encourage those who had them to put them to use.

Citizens like Sue, Max, and Sandy do useful work, but I don't want to give the impression they are civic saints. Citizens who solve problems aren't all self-sacrificing altruists. And they aren't always right or successful. They can and do fail. They also aren't immune from the concerns, doubts, and even cynicism that affect other people. Nonetheless, they are determined to make their communities better.

By shining a spotlight on these individuals, I am not saying that only certain people are citizens and others aren't. I believe most everyone plays a role as citizen sometimes—even when they don't think what they are doing is citizenship. An act of citizenship can be as simple as voicing an opinion about a problem that affects everyone.

OPERATING THROUGH NETWORKS

After completing these sketches of citizens, I realized I had left out their most important characteristic. "Fixers" don't work alone; they are enmeshed in any number of overlapping networks of people. Their networks are sources of civic energy for getting things done in their communities and organizations.

Like Gene, my cousin Bumpy is a consummate networker. A retired educator in her youthful eighties, she lives in, draws energy from, and adds energy to a host of networks in our hometown. She is a member

of the congregation of the Methodist church, the alumni association of the public school, the hospital auxiliary, her bridge club, the county historical society, the cemetery association—just to name some of her connections, which also include our extended family.

All of the citizens I have described need to be seen in this larger context. Otherwise, accounts of their contributions reinforce the familiar "great man" or "great woman" narrative, which give the impression that only extraordinary people produce extraordinary results. Of course, and fortunately, we benefit from exceptional citizens who go above and beyond the call of duty. Yet what they do is so impressive it could overshadow the importance of the networks that allow them to be effective.

This book isn't about extraordinary people; it is about the extraordinary potential in civic relationships, which all of us can create, even with strangers. Civic connections can extend to those who aren't like us and may not particularly like us. We need these people if we are to solve our common problems.

I recall a community that was having terrible difficulties: the economy was stagnant, race relations were strained, the schools were below par. The situation didn't change until a small group of citizens, not a charismatic leader, began to ask who wasn't present when community problems were being discussed—yet needed to be there if the problems were going to be solved. That question led the group to a surprising conclusion: the person they needed most wasn't the mayor or the leading business owner. It was the S.O.B. down the street—the person who wasn't like them and certainly didn't like them. Why weren't this malcontent and other outsiders included in the community discussions? No one invited them. If they had been invited, would they have come? Probably not. So the members of the small group began looking at what discussions the S.O.B.s were in and how the S.O.B.s might join them. That's when the community began to change.

Civic relationships aren't just with friends and neighbors; they are the pragmatic working relationships we create with anyone who is needed in order to solve the problems that threaten everyone's well-being.

COMBATING THE PROBLEMS-BEHIND-THE-PROBLEMS

The citizens I introduced have been called the "real fixers," but they aren't interested in quick fixes. They deal with obvious problems: failing schools (Sandy), disagreements over protecting the environment (Max), and youth-at-risk (Sue). However, they sense that more fundamental and systemic problems are behind the obvious ones and that these have to be dealt with. Otherwise, all of their efforts would just treat symptoms.

Americans are quite aware of problems *in* our democracy because they hit us in the face every day: mortgage foreclosures, the high price of medical care (especially the little pills that cost big bucks), the factory that had been in the community forever but is being dismantled to go overseas. We may suspect that there is more to these problems than meets the eye, although we aren't sure what it is.

Behind the obvious difficulties are often more basic problems that cripple our ability to respond. I would call these problems *of* democracy itself. Like the pollution that kills the microorganisms of a pond or bay, they foul the inner workings of democracy. These systemic problems are different from the circumstantial difficulties that affect all countries, democratic or not. Take worldwide economic recessions; these hit nearly every nation regardless of its political system. Recessions are unquestionably serious, yet they aren't the same as the root problems of democracies, malfunctions in the political system that interfere with responding to disasters like recessions.

Look at the problem-behind-the-problem that Sandy encountered. While failing schools are a terrible problem in any community, improving them is often blocked by a problem *of* democracy. In Sandy's hometown, there wasn't a sufficient public with ownership of the public schools.

Why is that a problem of democracy? Historically, schools have been one of the citizenry's principal engines for democratic progress. Citizens used them to change a colonial system into one that promoted

both individual freedom and social stability.[5] When people lose ownership of the schools, they lose some of their ability to shape their future. That's a problem of democracy.

Max sensed that another problem of democracy was behind the divisiveness that was hamstringing his public health department. The problem was in the way issues were being presented to the public. This blocked the thoughtful decision making that is needed to reach sound judgment and come to a pragmatic resolution of differences.

Sue also saw a problem of democracy in her community. It was a lack of what scholars call "political agency or efficacy." People didn't think they had the resources or power within themselves to make a difference.

The problems of democracy that Sue, Max, and Sandy encountered are only three of the systemic problems that prevent democracy from working as it should. The next chapter identifies seven of these problems-behind-the-problems, and they are used as reference points throughout the text.

Frankly, systemic problems aren't always very eye-catching. They don't provoke the emotional reaction that problems in democracy do. Laid off and no job prospects! Homes lost; couldn't pay the mortgages! Children going to school hungry! Those are the issues that get our blood boiling. Underlying problems, on the other hand, may lack this visceral oomph. Nonetheless, the less obvious problems-behind-the-problems cripple a democratic system and its ability to respond to the more visible, in-your-face problems.