

A RESPONSIBLE PUBLIC VOICE

POLITICS FOR PEOPLE

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David Mathews

POLITICS FOR PEOPLE

Finding a Responsible Public Voice

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Politics for People

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Introduction

Popular discontent erupted in American politics in the early 1990s with the force of a pent-up volcano. The upheaval was so dramatic that it obscured its own context—the erratic but ever-increasing popularization of politics in our republic. From President Jackson’s unruly inaugural guests to angry populists in the next century to the champions of civil rights in our time, citizens demanding more attention, more access, and more power have marched their way onto the pages of our history, welcomed or not. Contemporary citizen discontent may actually be a prelude to still another rise in popular participation. So the question is not whether to put the public back into politics. Angry citizens have already made their presence felt. The question is what impact this latest wave of popular intervention will have.

The result may not be a stronger democracy. Greater popularization is not necessarily greater democratization. The consequences that follow from popularization are not preordained. They can be superficial and inconsequential, adding to people’s frustrations and cynicism, if citizen participation is romanticized as it has been in the past. The effects of popularization can even be destructive, actually countering the good objectives of civic activism, or the effects can be constructive if more and more people come to politics as a responsible public.

A new wave of popularization, of greater access and more attention to popular opinion, will require much more of citizens. If people have more of a say, what they say will be more important. So this is a book about how “the people” might become a responsible public.

Of course, many Americans hate politics; they don't want to be put back into business as usual.¹ "Politics" makes them think about what they see on television and read in the newspaper: massive and indifferent bureaucracies, corrupt officials, pressure tactics, negative campaigns, and crowds screaming at one another. In other words, it is a mess. The elections of 1992 marked a suspension of this hostility but not an elimination of its causes. Many people will still tell you they aren't involved in politics and that politics has nothing to do with their lives.

Yet, these same people—the ones you see in factories and shops, that you pass at the malls and on the streets, the people who live around you—are deeply concerned about the common problems that confront everybody every day. They are concerned about having clean water to drink, having a good job and affordable health care, being safe from drugs and crime, and getting a good education for their children. These are what people call "the things that matter." And they are all political issues. In the 1992 elections, citizens took every opportunity to make the candidates stay focused on these substantive issues. They watched the debates in record numbers and, when given an opportunity to ask their own questions, they generally focused on the things that mattered. People wish that politics dealt more with these common problems. And although busy with other concerns, Americans will take time out for this kind of politics if they see any possibility of making a difference.

This book is about a politics that is more than what politicians do. It is about a politics that people actually practice—yet never call "politics."

Working together with others to solve common problems recreates a sense of community that people like.² Americans deeply regret the loss of community. They believe that people should know their neighbors and help one another. They fear deep divisions in society and the conflicts among those of different races and beliefs. They find themselves confronted by a multitude of problems that grow out of a lack of community—and that further exacerbate the loss of community—problems that range from street crime to decreased competitiveness in a world economy.

The curious thing is, people don't think of working with others to solve common problems as "politics." They call what they do "community involvement" or "public activity." Americans seem to have lost that broader sense of politics that goes beyond what governments do. They have lost the names for what citizens do. The very idea of citizenship has eroded. Therefore, this book proposes a reconsideration of what politics is, who "owns" it, and who is responsible for it. It is a book about citizen or public politics—not about citizens as consumers or voters or taxpayers. It is about citizens as the primary officeholders in a democracy.

This book has two major sections. The first is on the way Americans react to politics as usual; the second (beginning with chapter 6) is on the way people feel about the politics they don't call politics—the politics of public problem solving and community involvement. Each begins with a report on what people actually say. These reports are followed by more interpretive chapters that try to account for why Americans act and react as they do. They also suggest what citizens might do to make politics more like what they want it to be. These suggestions grow out of what some people are already doing to make politics work for them.

Much of the information on how people feel about politics came from studies done by The Harwood Group, a public issues research and consulting firm in Bethesda, Maryland. Using focus groups, The Harwood Group did several studies of both citizens and officeholders. Some of this book is taken directly from these studies.³ The quotations by people who are identified not by name but by location (Des Moines, Virginia, the West Coast) or occupation (a county commissioner) all come from the studies.

Focus group studies are quite different from polling. Representative groups of citizens have an opportunity to talk through issues and questions thoroughly. Such research doesn't claim to show what everybody thinks, yet it is a good indicator of perceptions and attitudes that are hard to gauge with other techniques.

Focus groups allow researchers to learn not only what people think about politics but also why they hold those views and how they think about them. This kind of information is often impossible

to gather through opinion surveys. In surveys, questions need to be predefined for respondents to answer; people are unable to discuss issues and then reconsider their own views; and new information cannot be entered into a discussion for respondents to consider.

Still, the interpretations that emerge from focus groups need to be viewed as hypotheses that should be tested by other methods. The people who speak out in these groups can only testify to their personal experiences with politics. The validity of their conclusions ultimately rests on whether other people have had similar experiences and have come to similar conclusions.

One reaction to the Harwood study of citizens' views is that it grossly overstates the problem and is based on an idealized view of democratic possibilities. (Haven't Americans always been distrustful of government and cynical about political leaders?) Yet, as we read what people said, we can sense how deeply Americans feel about the problems of the political system and how justified they believe their expectations to be. Other studies may have reached similar conclusions, but what is powerful and compelling in the Harwood study are the voices of real people. They let us hear the tone and texture of what the public is saying. Their complaints are far too serious for electoral reforms or campaign finance laws to remedy. Although such reforms can be helpful, legal remedies by themselves aren't enough to address what people see as fundamental flaws in the political system.

This criticism fails to take into account what the public says about itself. The people quoted in this book are not just making excuses and looking for scapegoats. They believe that although decent folks go into politics, they are inevitably captured by a system so powerful that everyone must "play the game." People don't just blame politicians for the system. They know that the public itself is responsible. They know the public can also "play the game."

While the Harwood study found citizens angry about what they see happening in the political system, people are not unyielding cynics. Their anger comes from their idealism; America's sense of civic duty is not dead. Citizens are not indifferent to the issues that challenge our country. They look for things to do that have the

possibility of bringing about change. Still, citizens have difficulty finding effective ways to act politically. Something seems missing in politics as usual; there seems to be little space for the public.

A sense of civic duty compels a number of Americans to work for fundamental change in the political system. Most of these people would also like to see reforms in government. They want government to be more effective at solving the problems that it is responsible for solving. But they want more; they want the political system to improve. This interest in better politics shouldn't be confused with interest in good government. They are different but related. Good government doesn't just mean efficient government, it means *our* government. This book is about how better politics can lead to better government.

Any book that makes a case for putting the public back into politics will trouble those who doubt the ability of ordinary people to be effective citizens, capable of making difficult decisions to advance the larger public interest. That includes those who genuinely wish that people were up to the demands of democratic citizenship. Before going on to the first chapter, a word needs to be said about these concerns.

First, putting the public back into politics does not mean that the public has to become the sole political actor, that direct democracy should replace representative government. Neither is popular opinion considered to be the voice of God. Obviously, people sometimes act in ways that are unworthy of citizens. Nonetheless, the citizens you will meet on these pages are more optimistic than pessimistic about their fellow citizens' ability to make sound decisions affecting their common life.⁴ And the book is also optimistic about the public's ability to learn and to move from first impressions to more shared and reflective judgments about the interests of the public. But note that "the public" in this context refers to a deliberative body of citizens, not a mass of individuals. There is a great difference between what a direct or popular democracy can do and the abilities of a deliberative democracy.⁵

Still, under any circumstances there are doubts about people's competence to be effective citizens. The doubts usually take form

in two charges. One is that the common people have neither the intellectual nor the moral capacity to make decisions about the well-being of society. And even if they did, the argument is that they wouldn't take the time. The other charge is that even if people have a measure of common sense and decency, the world in which they live is too complex for them to understand and too subject to centralized forces for citizens to control their own destiny. Those persuaded by these arguments look to elites to be guardians of the public's true interests and well-being. They cannot escape their pessimism, which they believe to be realistic or in accord with the "facts."

Optimism and pessimism, however, are attitudes or habitual ways of seeing the world; these worldviews are not the same as facts. There are not enough "facts" to convince the deeply pessimistic that ordinary people have the ability to govern themselves. There will always be cases of irresponsibility and selfishness to confirm their fears. Any evidence in this book to the contrary will never be persuasive to them.

Optimists, on the other hand, usually base their perspective on what they regard as common sense. Each individual has to have an equal stake in the decisions of the political community because those choices affect everyone's life. Therefore, people are political equals, with the right to make decisions about their shared fate. However unequal people may be in other respects, these inequalities are not thought to be so severe that only management by political elites can ensure a common well-being. This line of reasoning, long a characteristic of the optimist, is more fully laid out in Jeffrey Bell's *Populism and Elitism*.⁶ Even some pessimists share this conviction. They urge citizens to take responsibility for the commonweal because they think it is necessary that people try to be the best citizens possible.

Those who rely on ordinary people are not naive. As Bell notes, they don't believe that "each voter has exactly the same ability as every other, or even that every group within the electorate is roughly equal to every other in level of education or political sophistication." They just believe in "the competence of the elector-

ate to handle its own affairs relative to the competence of elites.”⁷ In the case of those citizens who are not as competent as others, optimists don’t think their competence can be developed by consigning them to the guidance of more knowledgeable elites. They are confident in people’s ability to learn, to grow as citizens by doing the work of citizens.

The distinction that Bell makes between those optimistic about citizens and those not has its limitations—as all generalizations do. Its value is to remind us that we are not just dealing with issues of fact but also with the influence of personal predilections and notions of what is fair. Still, even with these qualifications, the question remains, Is there any basis for optimism about citizens’ abilities, other than a moral conviction about people’s right to decide their own fate? Do people really know what they are talking about when they talk about the public’s interest? Are people just too selfish and self-centered to act in the interest of their common well-being? And even if they try to act as citizens, is it just impossible—outside of some very local situations—for people to contend with a technology that overwhelms them and “the powers that be” that oppress them?

Americans who believe ordinary people must be—and can be—effective citizens have had some experiences that reinforce their optimism. Experiences are not the same as generalizable evidence. Experiences are what certain people have done in certain situations. No one argues that all of the people are good citizens all of the time. But if good citizenship can be found in some places some of the time, perhaps it can be found in more people, in more places, and on more occasions. Maybe politics doesn’t always have to be as it is. Maybe we can do better. Some Americans believe in these possibilities even though they know full well that being a citizen isn’t easy.

With each changing of the guard in the White House, we have a tendency to think that our problems will be solved. Deep in our hearts, however, we know better. For our democracy to work as we want it to, the public must do certain things. This book is about how the public can claim and act on its responsibilities. After all, if

we criticize the political system because our role is too limited, it follows that many of the changes have to be citizen-initiated. Reforms from on high are hardly consistent with a quest for stronger democracy.

Notes

1. See Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics*.
2. The phrase *solving problems* is used often in this book because that is what people say they want politics to do—solve problems. However, there are no final solutions to political problems. No political solution is more than temporary, suitable only to some people for a limited time. Circumstances change, people change, and even the best solutions have unintended side effects that require a search for new solutions. Citizens understand this principle when they reflect on their civic work, as later sections of this book will show. People will often say that citizens acting responsibly is the only real solution.
3. See The Harwood Group, *Citizens and Politics* and Harwood, *The Public's Role in the Policy Process*.
4. In *Populism and Elitism* Bell uses the term *populism* to describe this belief. But because populism has so many other meanings, I have not used the term in this book.
5. For a clear description of the difference between deliberative and direct democracy, see Santiago Nino, *Deliberative Democracy and the Complexity of Constitutionalism*, ch. 5.
6. Bell, *Populism and Elitism*, 13.
7. *Ibid.*, 11.

Part 1

Politics from the People's Perspective

We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

—Abraham Lincoln

1

Forced Out of Politics by a Hostile Takeover

For many years, the conventional wisdom has said that the majority of Americans were apathetic about politics, that people just didn't care. Here is how one textbook described our political system to students: "If the survival of the American system depended upon an active, informed, and enlightened citizenry, then democracy in America would have disappeared long ago; for the masses of America are apathetic and ill-informed about politics and public policy, and they have a surprisingly weak commitment to democratic values. . . . fortunately for these values and for American democracy, the American masses do not lead, they follow."¹

A study in 1991 of how people felt about politics—and why they felt as they did—provided some of the first evidence that Americans were not apathetic at all but were “mad as the devil” about a political system that has pushed them out of their rightful place in governing the nation. This was the Harwood study of *Citizens and Politics*, subtitled *A View from Main Street America*.

The Harwood study went beneath the usual popular dissatisfaction with government and politicians to discover strong feelings about powerlessness and exclusion, coupled with deep political concerns and an untapped sense of civic duty. According to the study, no interpretation of the public is less accurate than the often-repeated contention that people are apathetic and too consumed with private matters to care about politics. Certainly the people who participated in the study were far from apathetic. In fact, they were