



CHAPTER ONE

AMERICA'S CIVIC CHALLENGES

For more than a decade, political scientists and commentators have argued about the health of the civic culture or civil society in the United States. To put these disputes to rest, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam set out to prove in his recent book, *Bowling Alone* (2000), that the quality and kinds of civic engagement in the United States have declined substantially over several decades. An extensive search of trends in church attendance, voting rates, union membership, volunteerism, philanthropy, and other areas leads him to conclude that Americans are more isolated and less capable of engaging constructively on public concerns than at any other time in the past fifty years.

Although his evidence is exhaustive and, for many readers, conclusive, Putnam has critics. Some accept his evidence as far as it goes but think he overlooks the phenomenal growth in the number of nonprofit organizations and associations. New and different kinds of associations may have replaced those in decline, like the bowling leagues he discusses. Others find fault with the reasons he gives for the decline in civic engagement. Some of the criticisms seem mere quibbling—more denial than acceptance. It may simply be that graphs and statistics fail to capture the disillusion, disappointment, and despair that many Americans feel about public engagement in their communities. Listening to the stories of civic engagement—or the lack of it—playing out in American communities like Boulder, Colorado, may provide a better place to start.

School board members in Boulder have been fighting over the need for honors classes in middle schools as part of a larger school reform effort for several years. In 1994, the majority voted to halt discussion of the issue because, as one board member put it, “This has been disruptive to our school communities. You don’t turn around every time there’s an election and say we changed our mind and we’re going the other way” (Taylor, 1994a, p. 1). An opposing board member angrily responded, “I am losing the battle, no doubt, but I intend to win the war!” (Taylor, 1994b, p. 1). In 1995, the woman who was “losing the battle” became the new board president when citizens elected a new majority. Exploiting her new position, she pushed to reverse past decisions about middle school policy. After only two years, citizens, dissatisfied with her heavy-handed attempts to impose her views on the community, voted her out of office. Her defeat removed a divisive force; the damage of a community deeply divided could not be so easily undone. Although few citizens doubt the need for fundamental change in education, opposing views of school reform fragment efforts to achieve sustainable improvement. Everyone is losing.

Other subtle aspects of Boulder’s civic culture contribute to its inability to engage constructively on public concerns. Known far and wide as a politically active community, the city is often called “The People’s Republic of Boulder” because of its tradition of taking controversial stands on social, environmental, and foreign policy issues. The recent Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (Saguaro Seminar, 2001), conducted by Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, confirms this history of civic engagement. Boulder ranks sixth in civic engagement out of forty communities studied. This measure, however, glosses over a more troubling statistic. A large number of community activists and grassroots organizers call Boulder home. As a result, the city ranks third, behind San Francisco and Seattle, in terms of protest politics. Boulder’s limited repertoire of tools for civic engagement helps instigate the city’s “wars.”

Virtually every community has similar stories. The details differ, but the dynamics are the same. One side organizes around a particular position and tries to find allies and gain enough influence to have its way. Meanwhile, others in the community organize in similar ways backing opposing positions. Having mastered the capacity to advocate for particular positions or interests, these groups use their skills to browbeat, oppose, pester, pummel, or otherwise beat their opponents into submission. If one side wins, the victor takes all without much grace. If no one wins, each group can, at the least, stop or delay the action.

Experts have turned this practice into an art form. Partisan groups transform the most trivial or transparently self-serving interest into a cause célèbre, as if no other issue merited consideration. This capacity to narrow issues, stake out ex-

clusive positions, and divide citizens obviously diminishes the community and precludes constructive action. Indeed, Peter Drucker describes the current situation in the United States as “battlefields between groups, each of them fighting for absolute victory and not content with anything but total surrender of the enemy” (1994, p. 80).

This antagonistic approach to public engagement has significant negative consequences. It cannot produce sustainable change because of fickle alliances and shifting majorities. It divides citizens one from another and alienates many from public life. And it sets up future conflict on issues yet to come. No one can argue with the need for progress in addressing complex public issues, but the means to do this have become unproductive and divisive. The way we decide is destroying civility and the fragile bonds of community that bind us together.

The Civic Challenges

Several disparate factors converge to incite confrontation as the emerging civic norm. Many more people with a stake in public problems demand a voice in the political decision-making process. The problems themselves are complex and systemic and not amenable to expert or top-down solutions. Few people agree about the precise nature of the problems, so few agree on solutions. Lack of shared vision or values prevents concerted action. Distrust and mistrust pervade the relationships between sectors, races, and other disparate groups and interests. Most of these groups do not know how to work with others.

These conditions present unprecedented challenges for America's governing institutions, civic leaders, and citizens and raise a set of critical questions about the future of America's communities and regions:

- With the increasing diversity of citizens in virtually every American community, will we be able to create opportunities for all citizens to participate in the public life of their communities without inviting chaos?
- Given the tradition of adversarial politics and increasingly strident public discourse, will communities be able to develop constructive and effective means for addressing public concerns that engage citizens rather than alienate them?
- As the population of communities becomes more diverse, will we be able to build relationships of respect and tolerance across the dividing lines of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class?
- With the increasing impact of human activity on the natural environment, will human action be congruent with a healthy and sustainable environment?

- As family, school, and community problems magnify, will we be able to meet the basic personal and social needs of citizens necessary for a healthy and fulfilling life?
- As tensions over educational goals and curriculum increase, can we provide education necessary for civic and economic life in a democracy to all citizens?
- With the increasing pace of change in a global and technologically driven economy, will we be able to build and sustain healthy and effective institutions and organizations?
- As the discord between race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class intensifies, will we be able to effectively address issues of social justice and equity?

The future health and well-being of America's communities and regions depends on how we answer these questions and how we go about searching for these answers.

New Standards for Civic Engagement

This foreboding analysis does not mean that Americans are not troubled by the way they make public decisions. Citizens and civic leaders alike seek to improve public decision making in a variety of ways, but with little success. Rather than more haphazard efforts at political reform, America needs new standards for civic engagement to guide political innovation. Adopting standards such as these would once again make politics a source of hope rather than despair:

- *Any response to the emerging political challenges must produce tangible, substantial, and sustainable results.* Civic practices and governing institutions must be capable of constructively addressing the real concerns of a community or region, especially in circumstances involving diverse groups with competing values. Public conflicts commonly juxtapose arguments about differing technical or bureaucratic responses to complex problems when, in reality, different perspectives and experiences, disparate and competing values, and a diversity of interests keep citizens apart. Current civic and governing practices supported by the best of expertise fail to cope with this complexity. Quick fixes and shallow solutions offer only the illusion of real change. Fickle alliances and changing political tides bring only temporary and unstable results.

- *Responses to emerging political challenges must bring people together in ways that heal rather than divide.* Civic practices and governing institutions must bridge the dividing lines of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, interest, and sector in ways that help address the needs of the community or region as a whole. Citizens and

civic groups everywhere express exasperation at the lack of appropriate tools for working across these lines. When asked by *USA Today* (“Meeting Race Relations Head On,” 1993) what troubled him most about race relations, Cornel West, author of *Race Matters*, said, “We’re living in Balkanized spaces mentally as well as physically. There seem to be few spaces where human interaction can actually take place across the races, and that prohibits a coming together which for me is requisite for revitalizing democracy” (p. 11A). This balkanization makes it nearly impossible to focus on the broader concerns of communities and regions. Adversarial politics has left a legacy of anger, distrust, and alienation.

- *Responses to emerging political challenges must engage citizens in new and deeply democratic ways in the process of defining visions and strategies for their communities and regions.* Civic practices and governing institutions must provide avenues for citizens to take an active and substantial role in public life. According to political researcher Richard Harwood, “Citizens say that politics has evolved into a ‘System’ made up of various institutions and political forces that have seized control of the political process and driven a wedge between citizens and politics” (1991, p. 19). They feel “cut off from political debate: they neither see their concerns reflected in the way current issues are discussed nor believe there are ways to participate in discussions on those issues” (p. 11). Any new response to emerging political challenges must reengage citizens in public life in order to restore confidence not just in governing institutions but in democratic governance itself.

- *Responses to emerging political challenges must enhance the civic culture of the community or region.* Civic practices and governing institutions must build and sustain a civil society. Political scientist Robert Putnam (1993) documented the necessary relationship between what he calls the “civic community” and the performance of governing institutions. In a thoroughly researched comparative study of the twenty governing regions of Italy created in 1970, Putnam discovered that the degree to which trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement pervade the social fabric of the region—not the usual measures of prosperity such as wealth, level of education, or access to natural resources—determines the relative success or failure of each region. His findings were unambiguous: “Civic context matters for the way institutions work. By far the most important factor in explaining good government is the degree to which social and political life in a region approximates the ideal of the civic community” (p. 120). Civic practices, like those characterizing the civic community, must develop the capacity of the community or region to address future issues rather than subvert it.

Imagine if standards like these became the norms for how we make public decisions. The stilted, archaic language of governance would be replaced by a living language of stories and experience. Citizens would be legitimized and valued

for the perspectives and values they bring to public life rather than alienated and discounted. The experiences that shape their values would inform public decisions as much as abstracted, analytical information. Governance would become a learning process where needs are understood and ideas shared in place of unilateral, unequivocal edicts. The outcomes of the public decision-making process would be responsive to both time and place rather than constricted by an obsessive focus on politics and jurisdiction. Citizens would be engaged in a process of dialogue with the primary intent of discovering the best interests of the community or region instead of a contest between a few powerful groups over narrow ends.

Evaluating Alternative Responses to Civic Challenges

In the American tradition of innovation and adaptation, citizens and public leaders continue to experiment with new ways of responding to emerging political challenges. Some approaches attempt to restore confidence in existing institutions, while others seek revolutionary change in governance systems and civic values. The more reactionary, knee-jerk responses to the failure of traditional practices often lead to unintended and devastating consequences. Many of these responses fall short of meeting new standards for civic engagement. Without reflective analysis, no one knows which of these responses work and which should be cast aside; no one knows which of these responses is the more effective and enhancing of democratic governance.

Campaign Reform

Recent congressional and presidential elections set new highs for money spent and new lows for mud slinging. Coupled with disconcertingly sluggish election turnouts, these statistics pointedly mark citizens' lack of confidence in representative democracy. David Mathews, the Kettering Foundation president, says citizens find the skyrocketing costs of campaigns particularly abhorrent: "It reinforces the sense that money rules" (1994, p. 20). Citizens want effective ways to cope with the distorting influence of money on election results. They want to be informed about the issues without having every campaign cloaked in accusation, ideology, and innuendo. They rightly seek reform, but fairer elections and better candidates will not necessarily lead to better public decisions.

Campaign reform endeavors to make elections fair, informative, and accessible. It presumes, appropriately, that representative democracy underpins democratic governance. But representative democracy cannot, by itself, respond effectively to emerging political challenges. For one thing, it does not guarantee tan-

gible, substantial, and sustainable results. Too many other factors stand in the way. Some public issues—the escalating cost of social security, for example—are so politically explosive that public officials fear to deal with them. The polarization of debate among political leaders prevents dealing effectively with the complexity of most public problems. The resulting policies may address a narrow range of symptoms but fail to come to grips with underlying causes. Political alliances shift, overturning recent policy decisions. Court challenges as well as initiatives and referenda nullify or subvert decisions.

The voting process and decision making by representatives too often do not bring people together in ways that heal rather than divide. Public decisions determine winners and losers, and the losers, like the school board member in Boulder, press their case through confrontation, further inflaming the community.

Other than campaign activities and the physical action of pulling levers in the voting booth, representative democracy offers few opportunities for citizens to engage in public life. Mechanisms for public participation are notoriously ineffective and alienating. Once elected, public officials maintain only perfunctory contact with constituents and too much contact with lobbyists representing powerful interest groups. Most American citizens know they have little real influence over public officials.

With limited roles for citizens, representative democracy offers little help in improving civic culture. Campaign reform may restore confidence in the voting process and, at some point, in those elected, but it rarely builds relationships among citizens. It does little to build a sense of community or to help citizens work together on shared concerns. Campaign reform cannot by itself overcome the inherent shortcomings of representative democracy.

Direct Democracy and Ballot Initiatives

States and communities have sharply increased their reliance on the initiative and referendum process as a means of making controversial decisions. Part of the rationale for putting more issues on the ballot reflects a genuine desire by both citizens and elected officials to increase public participation in decision making. But there are more troubling reasons for the increased use. Citizens lack confidence in their elected leaders; elected leaders fear tackling politically dangerous issues. The use of direct democracy does little to enhance America's civic culture.

In November 1994, Californians voted 59 percent to 41 percent on ballot Proposition 187 to deny illegal immigrants access to the state's public health and education services. Equally contentious issues like tax caps on spending, prayer in schools, abortion, gay rights, and so on commonly adorn the public ballot. Voting outcomes on ballot issues like these regularly face court challenges. Opponents

organize to overturn decisions in subsequent elections. Most initiatives or referenda fail to address underlying causes of complex problems as they oversimplify solutions to accommodate a yes or no vote. The problems themselves remain vague and undefined. Given these conditions, ballot measures rarely lead to tangible, substantial, and sustainable results.

By presenting simplistic solutions, initiatives and referenda polarize citizens and, when the issue is as controversial as Proposition 187, inflame tensions between them. The distorting role of the media and money in campaigns aggravates this divisiveness. Political scientist Tom Cronin concluded in his study of direct democracy, “In general, the side with the most money . . . [has] the best chance of influencing voter thinking and voter preferences. As a result, the rights of those who cannot afford to be heard are diminished in direct democracy elections” (1989, p. 124).

Direct democracy provides neither the opportunities nor the incentives to engage citizens in addressing complex public problems. It cannot help communities and regions develop the civic networks and norms that improve civic capacity to address future public problems. The fight over parochial interests subsumes the broader public good. Direct democracy’s burdensome costs far outweigh the meager benefits of quick action and desultory participation.

Public Participation

One of the purposes of the public interest reform movement of the 1960s and early 1970s (initiated by Ralph Nader and others) was to open up public access to governmental decision making. By providing avenues for public participation, policymakers would receive input from all affected parties, and decision making would become an expression of the broad public interest. Helped by legislative measures that forced government agencies to provide for maximum feasible public participation and by sunshine laws that required meetings to be open to the public, the reform movement accomplished its immediate goals. For a short time, these mechanisms worked.

Lobbyists, associations, and interest groups quickly figured out how to regain a dominating role in the process. As public hearings proliferated, those interests with the necessary resources attended meetings and developed information that could influence the process. Public interest groups and ordinary citizens with little time or money were unable to keep pace. In some cases, court decisions limited participation of public interest groups to those with standing (interpreted as an identifiable selfish stake). Rather than opening up the process, the reforms, in William Greider’s words, “raised the cost of entry and participation. Democratic expression became much more expensive—too expensive for most Americans to afford” (1992, p. 50).

When citizens do participate in public hearings, they quickly become discouraged. Most find the process frustrating and intimidating and come away feeling they had no opportunity to make a difference. Even when public officials listen to citizens, the structure of the hearings provides no opportunity for dialogue and mutual learning. For many people, the hearings are a waste of time where grudging officials perfunctorily fulfill an obligation to solicit public input and subsequently do as they please. Public managers and well-organized groups reach decisions accommodating their own interests while ignoring public comment. Where citizens hoped for engagement, dialogue, and collaboration, hollow procedures developed. Where the broader public interest was to be reflected, those with money and information still dominate.

The ritualized, asymmetric structure of public participation subverts its intended purpose. When citizens do not see evidence that elected leaders or government agencies have considered their comments, they may challenge the process or the decision and impede implementation and action. Public participation routinely prevents real engagement, leading to distrust and alienation. Rather than healing divisions, it commonly exacerbates them. Public participation, at least in its current guise, cannot transform civic culture.

Reinventing Government

In 1992, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler published their popular and influential book, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit Is Transforming the Public Sector*. Believing deeply in government as a critical component of civil society, they propose ways to restore trust and confidence in the public sector to counter growing public cynicism. They want not more government but better government through a model they call *entrepreneurial government*.

They concentrate on how government operates, not on what it should do. The traditional bureaucratic approach is, in their words, “bankrupt” (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992, p. 12). Instead of relying on market forces with built-in incentives or on a system of government driven by overly bureaucratic rules and regulations, they focus on how the public sector can become more efficient and innovative in the delivery of services.

Despite a growing number of success stories with these approaches, “reinventing government” does little to respond to the emerging civic context. America’s civic challenges have less to do with service delivery than with the much more challenging problem of gaining political agreement about what government should do to help cope with complex, emotionally charged public issues.

Regaining the confidence of citizens will take more than efficiency and innovation in government services. By avoiding the questions that divide people,

reinventing government cannot bring citizens together. By ignoring the desire of citizens to have a larger role in public policy decision making, it cannot engage them. Defining citizens as customers denies a partnership with government in addressing the needs of the community. Without fundamentally changing the role and relationship of government and citizens, reinventing government cannot strengthen the civic culture of a community. It may contribute to revitalizing America's public institutions, but it cannot transform the civic culture.

Charismatic, Heroic Leadership

American culture glorifies the “heroic” leader who recognizes danger and galvanizes people into quick action and sure-fire results. This kind of leader knows what to do and has the charisma to convince others. From time to time, this myth of the hero becomes reality: people are rewarded with a leader who measures up to their excessive expectations.

Charismatic, heroic leadership naturally attracts followers. In a political world characterized by gridlock and hostility, people gravitate to leaders like Ross Perot and Ronald Reagan with their facile answers and comforting confidence. But the easy promise of heroic leadership cannot save citizens from themselves when impatience for change and action lead to blind trust in the charlatan.

The practical ability of the heroic leader to act in the face of today's political challenges is deeply suspect. Few political leaders have the credibility to bridge the deep chasms between races, sectors, and ideologies. The complexity of today's public issues precludes any one person (or group) from having *the* answer or from acting unilaterally. The old approach of finding the best and the brightest to develop policy initiatives no longer works in a world where there are no expert solutions. Even when the best and the brightest do come up with appropriate answers, those not consulted in developing them will not support the results precisely because they were not consulted. Consider the failure of the Clinton administration's health care reform initiative: the primarily expert-driven task force excluded representatives of significant interest groups such as the American Medical Association and ordinary citizens. The apparent complexity of the resulting plan and the exclusiveness of the process alienated many who might otherwise have supported it.

A more troubling aspect implicates the attraction to charismatic leaders: appealing to heroic leadership allows followers to escape responsibility for addressing common concerns. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1947), writing about the darkest aspects of charismatic leadership expressed in Nazi Germany in World War II, concluded that people—citizens—must ultimately be held accountable, collectively, for the way they are governed and the society they live in.

The charismatic leader who focuses on influencing others to follow his or her vision cannot take this responsibility away.

By definition, heroic leadership cannot enhance the civic community because it denies, fundamentally, the notion of shared responsibility. America needs leaders who can help citizens face common problems, not someone who can tell them what to do.

The Communitarian Movement

Communitarians begin with the observation that the culture of individualism in America undermines the capacity to focus on the broader good. This overemphasis on individual rights, communitarians believe, precludes the notion of responsibility to the larger community. The founder of the movement, Amitai Etzioni, points out that “Americans are all too eager to spell out what they are entitled to but are all too slow to give something back to others and to the community” (1993, p. 15).

Etzioni and his fellow communitarians seek to correct this imbalance. They advocate “a return to a language of social virtues, interests, and, above all, social responsibilities” grounded in an emphasis on family, self-restraint, and community service (Etzioni, 1993, p. 7). This “shoring up of our moral foundations” would provide a new “spirit of community” that would reduce contentiousness and enhance social cooperation (p. 11). Communitarians want to create a massive social movement that will lead to lasting reform in local, state, and federal government. They want democratic governance to be more representative, more participatory, and more responsive to all members of the community.

Despite its lofty goals, controversy plagues the communitarian movement. Some critics worry about the movement’s interest in social policy. They fear the possibility of an assault on individual rights that could lead to narrowly defined, exclusive, repressive, and coercive communities. Others agonize over politicians’ co-opting communitarian language for their own purposes. Still others see the movement as empty rhetoric with little capacity to create the change of heart communitarians count on to achieve their goals.

Communitarianism remains a fledgling movement, an idea still in flux. It has yet to prove that it can achieve results of any kind, tangible or otherwise. Although the ideas may be right, strategies for action have not followed. A new language of social virtues would undoubtedly improve the quality of public debate and bring people together in ways that heal rather than divide, but so far, no one has been able to communicate these virtues in ways that others can understand, let alone practice. Communitarians preach the value of civic responsibility and engagement but have not demonstrated the ability to go beyond books, position papers, and legislation

drafted mostly by scholars and theorists, not citizens. More exhortatory than engaging, communitarianism has yet to transform the civic culture.

Implications for Democracy and Civic Engagement

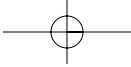
So what can we make of the varying effectiveness of these responses to emerging political challenges? What do these responses tell us about democratic governance when viewed through the lens of new standards for civic engagement? If these responses are not enough, what else do we need?

Representative democracy remains the backbone of democratic governance. Campaign reform may reenergize interest in elections. Neither can cope with today's civic challenges without the support of a strong and vital civil society. Mechanisms of direct democracy like initiatives and referenda are too simplistic and damaging to rely on. The limited venue offered by public participation undermines its goals. Reinventing government and charismatic, heroic leadership promise much but do not deliver enough. Communitarianism appeals to goodwill but has yet to put forward a coherent philosophy and plan for action. None of these approaches can transform America's civic culture.

Collaboration offers a way out of this quagmire. It provides a means for crossing the lines drawn by confrontation by bringing all parties together and creating the safety and space for constructive engagement. The possibility of working together embodies the hope for a new kind of politics—a politics of engagement—with a new role for government as a partner with citizens rather than as the primary source of public initiative. Citizens would be the force behind politics instead of its victims. Civic leaders and public officials would take on new leadership roles by bringing citizens together to address common concerns rather than telling them what to do. The skills of consensus building and collaboration would help build a new civic culture. All of these aspects would lead to a deeper, more constructive, and more inclusive form of democracy.

A Historical Legacy

Efforts to transform politics in ways that lead to more constructive ways of making public decisions are not new. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Dalai Lama asserted that nonviolence could be more productive than violence. They might not put it this way, but they saw the use of the strategy of nonviolence as a wager; there was no guarantee it would make life better, but they knew violence could make life worse. They took a chance and matched their courage against the



world's cynicism, and they came out ahead. In the face of oppression and impotence, they brought hope and healing.

Similarly, to choose to make public decisions differently, to be guided by another set of standards, is to make a wager. But it is a wager informed by the certain knowledge that the consequences of the current ways we make these decisions cost more than the country can bear.

