

# We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For

*The Promise of Civic Renewal  
in America*

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PETER LEVINE

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*Contents*

|                                                                 |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 1. Overview: The Public and Our Problems                        | 3   |
| 2. How to Think About Politics: Values, Facts, and Strategies   | 23  |
| 3. Values: Collaboration, Deliberation, and Civic Relationships | 35  |
| 4. Values: The Limits of Expertise, Ideology, and Markets       | 64  |
| 5. Facts: The State of American Democracy                       | 91  |
| 6. Facts: A Civic Renewal Movement Emerges                      | 120 |
| 7. Strategies: How to Accomplish Civic Renewal                  | 162 |
| <i>A Note on the Title of This Book</i>                         | 191 |
| <i>Notes</i>                                                    | 193 |
| <i>Index</i>                                                    | 225 |

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## Overview

### THE PUBLIC AND OUR PROBLEMS

GOOD CITIZENS DELIBERATE. By talking and listening to people who are different from themselves, they enlarge their understanding, make themselves accountable to their fellow citizens, and build a degree of consensus.

But deliberation is not enough. People who merely listen and talk usually lack sufficient knowledge and experience to add much insight to their conversations, and talk alone rarely improves the world. Deliberation is most valuable when it is connected to work—when citizens bring their experience of making things into their discussions, and when they take ideas and values from deliberation back into their work. Work is especially valuable when it is collaborative: when people make things of public value together. They are typically motivated to do so because they seek civic relationships with their fellow citizens, relationships marked by a degree of loyalty, trust, and hope. In turn, working and talking with fellow citizens builds and strengthens civic relationships, which are scarce but renewable sources of energy and power.

A combination of deliberation, collaboration, and civic relationships is the core of citizenship. If we had much more of this kind of civic engagement, we could address our nation's most serious problems. Indeed, more and better civic engagement is a necessary condition of success; none of the available ideologies or bodies of expertise offers satisfactory solutions, which must emerge instead from a continuous cycle of talking, working, and building relationships. Unfortunately, genuine civic engagement is in decline, neglected or deliberately suppressed by major institutions and ideologies and by the prevailing culture. Our motivation to engage has not weakened, but we have lost institutionalized structures that recruit, educate, and permit us to engage effectively.

Nevertheless, we live in a period of civic innovation, when at least one million Americans, against the odds, are working on sophisticated, demanding, and locally effective forms of civic engagement. These Americans

see the need for citizenship and are building impressive practices and models. Their work remains scattered and local because it is contrary to mainstream national policy. Civic engagement cannot achieve sufficient scale and power without reforms in our most powerful institutions. The way to achieve such reforms is to organize the one million most active citizens into a self-conscious movement for civic renewal.

That is the argument of this book. In this introduction, I begin not with civic engagement but with the tangible problems that afflict us as a nation. I want to suggest that these problems are intractable without civic engagement but are beginning to yield where citizenship is strongest.

Certainly, we Americans are in a bad mood about our nation and our public life. Unemployment, bankruptcies, bailouts, and other repercussions of the great recession are surely on our minds, but our pessimistic mood started well before that. Between 1998 and early 2002, a majority of Americans said they were satisfied with the way things were going. At all other times since 1993, most Americans have been dissatisfied.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this is because we face an accumulation of profound problems. They have been called “wicked problems” because better policies alone could not fix them (although our bad policies surely make matters worse).<sup>2</sup> Our problems interlock, so that each one can be seen as a symptom of another. They are entangled with cultural norms and personal behavior as well as conflicting rights and limited resources. Any of the purported solutions could do more damage than good. How to define and diagnose our problems is fundamentally controversial, inseparable from our diverse religious and philosophical commitments. Advancing some Americans’ interests and values would set others back. For citizens who identify with particular interests and ideologies, watching opponents express themselves in public can be deeply frustrating. For those who feel little stake in national debates, the bitter controversies are alienating. Because our problems are complex, entangled, and divisive, the status quo is favored in ways that special interests can exploit to block even the most straightforward reforms.

I do not claim that our condition is worse than it usually is. On the contrary, we are richer, safer, and more respectful of rights than we were half a century ago—and far more so than when Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office. A consistent theme in American politics is the Jeremiad, a lament that we have suddenly lost our way and face imminent destruction. Just six years after the Pilgrims had landed in Massachusetts, one of their leading pastors was already accusing them of having forgotten their principles.<sup>3</sup> After four more centuries of such Jeremiads, we should doubt that our current problems are unprecedented. The end is not nigh.

But I do claim that the obligation to address our problems falls on *us*—American citizens—more profoundly than in the past. Our political institutions are inadequate to address our accumulated problems, and the prevailing ideologies offer no plausible solutions.

Consider, for example, that we have put 2.2 million of our own people in prison, far more than any other nation in the history of the world.<sup>4</sup> (China is second with 1.5 million incarcerated citizens, although its population is three times as large.) That is vastly expensive: the corrections system alone costs \$68 billion annually, not counting the expense of law enforcement, courts, and the lost work of those imprisoned.<sup>5</sup> It also represents millions of tragedies for all those convicts *and* their victims. Yet imprisoning millions of Americans does not make us safe. Our homicide rate remains at least three times as high as the rate in any other wealthy nation in the world.

Perhaps one cause of the incarceration problem is the failure of our schools. After all, one in ten young men without a high school diploma is in jail or juvenile detention. We spend more per child on K–12 education than almost any other country in the developed world, yet one-third of our young people drop out before they complete high school.<sup>6</sup> Considering that almost all stable and well-paying jobs today require *more than* a high school diploma, the dropout crisis is a human disaster, quite apart from its link to crime and incarceration.

We also spend far more on health care per citizen than any other country in the world, yet unlike other wealthy nations, we provide no health insurance at all for many of our people. Roughly 45,000 Americans die prematurely each year for lack of medical insurance.<sup>7</sup> Even if the Affordable Care Act of 2010 meets expectations, we will still have the most expensive system in the world, with some of the worst health outcomes for poorer people.

At the time of writing, we have recently survived one of the worst economic decades in our nation’s history, with no net creation of jobs between 1999 and 2009. Modern economies are cyclical, and it is possible that from the perspective of 2020, the past decade will appear a mere dip. But it is significant that no party or movement has a plausible plan for how to prevent such a period from recurring. And other economic disasters are unfolding more slowly. Detroit’s population is less than half what it was in 1950, the exodus compelled by the permanent closing of factories and the withdrawal of capital from the region. Again, no one has a plan commensurate to this problem, which interlocks with the others mentioned so far. Detroit’s high school dropout rate is 75 percent; Michigan incarcerates five times as many people as it did in 1973 and spends 20 percent of its state’s general fund revenue on

prisons. We could add that Detroit's traditional industry contributes significantly to global warming, which is another serious "wicked problem."<sup>8</sup> Detroit is just one example among many in the Rust Belt that stretches from Baltimore to Milwaukee. Even though Congress is often described as ideologically polarized and dominated by political extremes, national politicians actually show little appetite for debating such matters as deindustrialization, mass imprisonment, or serious responses to climate change. The scope of debate is in fact very narrow.

Plainly, our institutions do not work. Their failure is not just wasteful; it is deadly. They are not just broken; they are corrupt—making some people rich and comfortable while failing the rest of us.

Libertarian-leaning conservatives diagnose the problem as the corruption of the public sector. The federal government, they say, was created for sharply limited purposes (the enumerated powers of the Constitution) and has since been corrupted by elites to serve their own illegitimate ends at the expense of individual freedom. One can debate whether the functions of the modern federal government are appropriate and beneficial. But it is not the case that the federal government has expanded in scope or power domestically. Between 1947 and 2012, federal revenues have fluctuated in a narrow band between 17 percent and 21 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), with no consistent trend over time and no expectation that they will rise above 21 percent in the future.<sup>9</sup> What has changed is the nature of federal regulation and activism. Forty years ago, the national government was involved in welfare and school integration, it drafted many young men to fight in an unpopular war, and it regulated the financial markets, which were basically public stock and bond exchanges. It has *retreated* in all those important—and potentially invasive—areas.

Good-government liberals argue that the root of our problems is corruption, the illegitimate use of private money to influence campaigns and government. I am sympathetic to that argument, having worked for two years for the reform lobby Common Cause and written a book largely about campaign reform.<sup>10</sup> But I think the focus must be broader because corruption—in the sense of the perversion of the purposes of institutions—is much more pervasive. Consider, for example, that financial markets are supposed to allocate resources to the most productive purposes, but the cost of the financial sector grew from 1.5 percent of the economy in the 1800s to 8 percent in 2009—a sure sign (along with Wall Street bonuses and other blatant evidence) that this sector is seizing value for itself and not allocating it productively.<sup>11</sup> Another sign: in 1970, 5 percent of male Harvard graduates worked in the financial sector. In 2007, 58 percent of male Harvard seniors said they were headed

for jobs in that industry.<sup>12</sup> We need Wall Street, and we need some smart people to work there. But when an outright majority of the graduates of America's most famous university choose to devote their talents to finance, Wall Street is absorbing far too much of our assets, offering excessive rewards, and distorting other institutions, including the university itself.

It is certainly worth considering the possibility that better laws might fix our institutions. For example, a steep tax on carbon would cause people to burn less of it. The money raised from the tax could make every American eligible for Medicare. Reforming criminal sentencing laws would cut the prison population. These and many other plausible ideas have been proposed for addressing our problems.

But we lack the political will to do anything difficult. Consider the struggle to get even a modest health reform bill through Congress in 2009–10, which seems to have exhausted the nation's capacity and appetite for significant legislation. Besides, we do not necessarily know the answers. In the past, many promising proposals—radical, liberal, and conservative—have failed because they did not work as expected in the real world. Especially when institutions are broken and corrupt, we cannot count on wise laws to be implemented well.

Finally, we cannot rely on laws to make people and institutions work better. Some of our school systems have plenty of money, yet they still produce high proportions of dropouts. We could change our criminal penalties, but that wouldn't stop individuals from committing violent crimes and victimizing others. We can provide better health insurance by law, but if not enough doctors provide primary care to low-income residents, the insurance won't help.

To make schools, neighborhoods, hospitals, police departments, and public institutions in general work better, we must get inside them and change people's hearts and minds—not just reform the rules or provide more money. But outsiders have a poor record of changing other people's hearts and minds (although sometimes a bit of external advice or inspiration can be helpful). So my thesis is that people must change the norms and structures of *their own* communities through deliberate civic action—something that they are capable of doing quite well.

An example that I know from direct, personal experience is the public school system of Washington, DC. Educational outcomes in DC are very poor: less than half of public school students graduate on time. Spending per student is quite high (approaching \$13,000 per year), but the actual services delivered at the school level are worth much less than that. In 2008, only

\$5,355 per pupil was spent on teachers, classroom equipment, and other forms of "instruction." The rest of the money seems to be lost somewhere between the taxpayer and the classroom.

Many of the city's schools are chaotic and sporadically violent. News reports frequently reveal startling examples of bureaucratic failure: warehouses full of new textbooks that are never distributed to students, and payroll systems that cannot keep track of employees. There are excellent teachers—much more skillful and dedicated than I would be—but the system as a whole is dysfunctional.

The context outside the schools is certainly difficult and could be blamed for some of the failures of the system. Thirteen of every 1,000 babies born in the District die in infancy, twice the rate for the United States as a whole. More than one-third of the city's children are obese. The death rate for teenagers is more than twice that of the United States as a whole, and the violent crime rate is more than three times as high.<sup>15</sup> As usual, each problem can be seen as a symptom of a different one.

There is also a question of motivations, which can lead us to different diagnoses. An opening point is to ask why a student should align his or her efforts with what the schools expect. The *Washington Post's* Lonnae O'Neal Parker wrote a fine series about a young man who graduated from Washington's Coolidge High School—barely, years late, after scraping through the required courses. He was smart, he had supportive parents, but he rarely attended class or completed assignments, and he aimed for Ds.

Jonathan walks toward the cafeteria doors. A question follows him: If you want to make your mother proud, if you know you can do the work, if you swear to everybody you see that you want to graduate, why don't you go to class?

Jonathan stares silently for a few moments.

"I don't know," he says quietly. "I really don't know."<sup>14</sup>

A similar question would have had a straightforward answer half a century ago. In 1950, more than half of 19-year-olds in the District had not graduated from high school—the same rate as today. But the city then housed 35,000 industrial workers, including more than 1,000 each of machinists, typesetters, and automobile mechanics. Washington was never an industrial city (compared, for example, to nearby Baltimore, where 30,000 men used to work in the Sparrow Point steel mill alone), but the federal government offered thousands of positions, like stenographer and office boy, that were the local

equivalent of factory work.<sup>15</sup> Young people could obtain these jobs without college diplomas—sometimes without graduating from high school.

Most adults held working-class jobs. They collaborated in teams composed of people from similar backgrounds, with middle-class authority figures keeping a distant eye on them. This was an orderly world, with a reasonable social contract: you did what was required, and you received a secure paycheck. Work life was a continuation of classroom life, with foremen and office managers replacing teachers and principals. Skills were concrete and could be learned on the job. A large, anonymous, urban high school, like Coolidge, served the purposes for which it had been designed. Youth culture within the school reinforced a sense of solidarity, compliance, and limited deference to distant authority that would continue in the workplace. It was easy for young people to envision concretely the benefits they would obtain from completing school. Crime and academic failure occurred, but they were marginal, not prominent.

Today, only about 7 percent of the city's jobs are traditionally blue collar (including maintenance, moving, and repair jobs), whereas more than half are "management, business, science, and arts occupations."<sup>16</sup> Despite the presence of the federal government in Washington, this ratio is not unusual: management and professional jobs outnumber construction, extraction, maintenance, and repair jobs by three to one in the United States as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

If you obtain credentials and skills for the business and professional world, you have wide opportunities. Sex, skin color, and age are less profound obstacles than they once were. But it is a long way from today's Coolidge High School to the professional world; the curriculum is too easy to prepare students for college, and there are few role models in the community. It is unrealistic that most teenagers will be self-disciplined enough to delay gratification and get themselves through a school like Coolidge. Even if they do, the benefits will be hard to see. If most other students basically doubt the social contract and do not want to participate, it is difficult for any individual student to comply.<sup>18</sup>

College-educated parents in a city like Washington have adjusted by spending unprecedented sums on their own children's education (including private schools and after-school activities)<sup>19</sup> and by applying what Annette Lareau calls a strategy of "concerted cultivation" to raise their children.<sup>20</sup> They devote almost every waking minute of the day to giving their offspring educational experiences. Even ordinary conversations are opportunities to develop kids' cognitive and language skills. Working-class parents are in no position to provide this kind of investment and, for valid moral reasons, prefer a different

strategy, what Lareau calls “the accomplishment of natural growth.” They want to spare their children from the rigors of the adult world but expect them to organize their own games and entertainment. The poor and working-class children in Lareau’s book are in many ways more admirable than the middle-class children. But the middle class is preparing its offspring to succeed in a white-collar world without any help from the local public schools, while working-class youth are set up to fail. Although the segregated nation’s capital was very far from utopia in 1950, a prevailing social contract then made parenting styles, teaching styles, neighborhoods’ norms, school structures, and employment markets work together to produce adequate results.

The breakdown of that whole system is the kind of “wicked problem” that America faces today. Could better public policies change cause schools to succeed in a place like Washington? During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the city underwent two major reform experiments. First, one-third of the city’s public school students began to attend publicly funded schools that are independent of the central bureaucracy and governed by charters. Most of the charter schools are small and have specialized themes or missions. To move one-third of the student population from a centralized system to new, highly diverse, small, independent charter schools represents a fundamental reform. And the results seem positive: students in DC charter schools do perform somewhat better than those in regular schools.<sup>21</sup> But that statistic does not account for all differences among the students and their families before they entered school, nor is the gap impressively large. Other research on charter schools finds mixed results. They may be part of the solution; they are no panacea.<sup>22</sup>

The second reform experiment was a cleanup of the bureaucracy that still oversees two-thirds of the city’s public school students. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee was photographed on the cover of *Time* magazine holding a broom, a metaphor for her efforts to sweep out waste and corruption. She argued that the *teacher* matters most to a student’s success. Every classroom should be led by a competent and motivated teacher who is supported by efficient systems for distributing textbooks, cutting paychecks, and so on. The most skillful teachers should be deployed in schools where they are needed most, those where test scores are lowest. The least effective teachers should be fired. The chancellor’s priorities were to remove poor teachers, assign strong ones to troubled schools, and reduce bureaucratic waste. She was not interested in civic engagement, democratic participation, parental voice, or other strategies I will recommend here. In fact, she said openly that “cooperation, collaboration and consensus-building are way overrated.”<sup>23</sup>

Research lends her strategy some support: the best teachers have a lasting, positive impact on their students.<sup>24</sup> But leaders cannot cause better teachers to appear in the classrooms where they are needed most—and persuade them to remain there, year after year—simply through better management. Urban teaching will remain a frustrating job if the social context is difficult, the motivations of students and parents are misaligned with the goals of the schools, and even high school graduates face poor job prospects. I have personally known teachers who were reassigned to more difficult DC schools and who immediately left for the suburbs instead.

In order for Rhee’s top-down, housecleaning strategy to work, she would need to maintain political support. She had a patron in Mayor Adrian Fenty. But Fenty was defeated after one term in office, in a Democratic primary in which the teacher’s union spent \$1 million against him and voters who were teachers—or relatives or sympathizers of teachers—clearly played a large role.<sup>25</sup> Just 12 percent of the city’s voting-age population turned out on primary day to reelect the mayor.<sup>26</sup> Rhee blamed her own failure to “communicate . . . the great things that are happening” to voters.<sup>27</sup> She seemed to acknowledge that leaders must pay attention to the democratic political process, because voters ultimately rule. She did not say, however, that democracy is a good thing. In fact, a low-turnout primary election in which private money has substantial influence does not seem like an excellent way to assess and change public policies. If civic engagement means voting and spending money on campaigns, then one could sympathize with a leader who thinks that collaboration is “overrated.”

But assume that the chancellor’s strategy worked better than the alternatives could. In other words, assume that by firing bad teachers and streamlining administrative procedures in the teeth of self-interested opposition, she improved students’ test scores and graduation rates. If the teachers’ impact was limited to the classroom and the school day, it could not be profound enough to overcome crises in the broader society, from obesity and violence to a lack of jobs. If the teachers *were* able to change parenting styles and other aspects of their students’ home environments, we should ask whether this change was desirable. A working-class culture would have been modified to match the norms and expectations of Georgetown and Cleveland Park. In the case of Washington, DC, a specifically African American, urban culture of long-standing would be modified to resemble more closely the white precincts of the city. There are good reasons to admire that culture and to resist outsiders’ right to change it. As usual, our social problems are entangled with culture and connected to our deep moral commitments, about which we have no consensus.

The previous mayor, Anthony Williams, had introduced different ways for citizens of the District to discuss and shape policy. In particular, his Citizens Summits (large, representative, deliberative meetings) had generated strategies to “support [the] growth and development of all youth.” In addition to holding summits and other forms of deliberative democracy to engage citizens in planning, a city could build daily opportunities for citizens, civic groups, churches, businesses, youth, and others to collaborate with schools on the actual work of education. After all, Robert Putnam finds that “states where citizens meet, join, vote, and trust in unusual measure boast consistently higher educational performance than states where citizens are less engaged with civic and community life.” Such engagement, he finds, is “by far” a bigger correlate of educational outcomes than is spending on education, teachers’ salaries, class size, or demographics.<sup>28</sup> Engaging citizens would have been an alternative to both top-down administrative reform (Michelle Rhee’s strategy) and radical decentralization in the form of charter schools. But civic engagement has not yet been tried in the District of Columbia.

My thesis is that citizens must address our most serious problems, exemplified by the situation of children in Washington, DC. There is no alternative to more and better work by the residents of a whole community.

That is not an unusual conclusion. For example, after listing some of our grievous national problems, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman concludes, “The standard answer is that we need better leaders. The real answer is that we need better citizens.”<sup>29</sup>

This position tends to provoke pessimism. We know what it means to get better leaders—we can at least hope for that—and we know how they would improve the world: by changing laws and policies. But how are we supposed to produce better citizens? The problem seems insoluble.

In fact, a whole network of groups and individuals has already sprung up to produce better citizens and to solve serious problems through civic engagement. The process of urban revitalization and school reform in Bridgeport, Connecticut, offers just one, rather typical example. Bridgeport, an old port and manufacturing city of 139,000 people, was a basket case in the 1980s. It was hard hit by the loss of manufacturing jobs, crime, and the flight of middle-class residents to the suburbs. The city literally filed for bankruptcy in 1991. The schools were so troubled that 274 teachers were arrested during a strike in 1978.<sup>30</sup>

Bridgeport is now doing much better, to the point that its school system was one of five finalists for the national Broad Prize for Urban Education in both 2006 and 2007. A major reason for Bridgeport’s renaissance is active citizenship.

In 1996, a local nonprofit group called the Bridgeport Public Education Fund (BPEF) contacted organizers who specialized in convening diverse citizens to discuss issues, without promoting an ideology or a particular diagnosis.<sup>31</sup> No one knows how many forums and discussions took place in Bridgeport, or how many citizens participated, because the 40 official “Community Conversations” were widely imitated in the city. But it is clear that at least hundreds of citizens participated, many individuals moved from one public conversation to another, and some developed advanced skills for organizing and facilitating such conversations. A community summit convened in 2006—fully ten years after the initial discussions—drew 500 people. The local League of Women Voters estimates that a minimum of 25 local residents, quite diverse demographically, are now highly skilled moderators and conveners of public discussions.<sup>32</sup> The mayor, the superintendent, the city council, and the board of education had agreed in advance to support the plan that participants developed. The business community also signed on. The president of the Bridgeport Regional Business Council said, “Our business community has learned to be very patient with change here, because they know that community involvement is one of our cultural traits now and we’ve got to have it. [It] is the preferred route because the end product is normally better. The more inclusive it is, the more supportable it is.”<sup>33</sup>

So far, I have described talk, but the civic engagement process in Bridgeport involves work as well. Each school has an empowered leadership team that includes parents along with professional educators. The professionals take guidance from public meetings back into their daily work. People who are employed by other institutions, such as businesses and religious congregations, also look to the public discussions for direction. Meanwhile, citizens are inspired to work as volunteers. The school district has a large supply of adult mentors, many of them participants in forums and discussions. In turn, their hands-on service provides information and insights that enrich community conversations and improve decisions.

Bridgeport’s citizens have shown that they are capable of making tough choices: for instance, shifting limited resources from teen after-school programs to programs for younger children. Collaboration has become routine for businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies. Everyone feels that they share responsibility; problems are not left to the school system and its officials. The school superintendent says, “I’ve never seen anything like this. The community stakeholders at the table were adamant about this. They said, ‘We’re up front with you. The school district can’t do it by itself. We own it too.’”<sup>34</sup>

This is a local example, typical of hundreds that could be cited. Other cases are threaded through this book. They are not uniform. Bridgeport's process was highly deliberative and began with private nonprofit organizations. In Hampton, Virginia (discussed in chapter 6), a nonpartisan city-manager-style government built a system for engaging citizens in service and deliberation. In San Antonio (also discussed in chapter 6), a much more confrontational social movement, rooted in the city's traditionally oppressed Hispanic communities, ultimately added deliberative and collaborative practices that resembled those in Bridgeport. The organizers won more than \$1 billion in funding and enough political clout to choose mayors. Universities, schools, and news organizations, as well as cities, have been venues of civic renewal.

These efforts have been called "public work" to emphasize that participants do not just volunteer their time in the evenings, nor do they merely discuss issues. They actually create, build, and teach, often as part of their paid jobs.<sup>35</sup> These projects have also been called "citizen-centered" to emphasize that they are fundamentally about people in their capacities as members of a community. The starting point is a group of citizens rather than a problem or a formal system.<sup>36</sup> This does not mean that organizers must recruit citizens by inviting them to amorphous and interminable discussions. Often, effective recruiters emphasize specific issues and potential solutions. But the goal in citizen-centered politics is to strengthen citizens' capacities for deliberating, defining, and addressing problems together.

Yet another possible title would be "open-ended politics." The origin of "politics" is the Greek word for citizen, *polites*. When politics is open-ended, citizens decide what to do as they work together. Their goals are not predetermined. I will emphasize the open-ended nature of this kind of work because I think its main alternatives are ideological or interest-group movements whose goals are set in advance.

None of these phrases is catchy. In fact, we know from national surveys that no appropriate terminology really excites people or conveys the core values that I defend in this book. Offered the opportunity to comment on the phrases "democracy," "politics," "service," "civics," "citizenship," "activism," "social entrepreneurship," and "community organizing," representative Americans either gave lukewarm responses or indicated that they were not thinking about open-ended, citizen-centered, public work.<sup>37</sup> For example, many liked the phrase "community organizing," but thought that it meant raising money for charity. It seems that no phrase is more popular or resonant than the others. We have the opportunity to choose the most accurate terminology and then build support for it. I write in this book about "civic engagement,"

with the understanding that it means deliberation (talking and listening in reasonably diverse groups about public issues), collaborative work, and the strengthening of civic relationships.

Civic engagement, so defined, is essential for addressing really serious, large-scale problems. That means that you and I can contribute to solving grievous problems by engaging civically. But it is not enough for individuals to want or try to participate as good citizens. Major institutions are set up to ignore and even frustrate civic engagement. The kinds of practices that I advocate in this book are poorly funded, invisible in federal and state law, understudied by academics, neglected in education, and ignored in news and popular culture. Thus our task is not only to engage as citizens but also to work together to reform rules, incentives, and ways of thinking so that civic engagement becomes much more common and influential. I will use the phrase "civic renewal" to mean efforts to expand and enhance civic engagement.

In order to make a persuasive case for civic renewal, I must demonstrate that it can address the kinds of wicked, intractable, interlocked problems with which I began this chapter. That is not a simple case to make, since most of the efforts are small and beset by local challenges. Only a much larger and more robust civic renewal movement could really change the objective circumstances in America. But I will offer suggestive evidence of impact here.

An example of a serious social problem is unemployment, acute during and after a recession, but chronic in our poorest communities. My colleagues and I have found that when more residents were engaged in civic work, unemployment rose less in counties, cities, and states during and after the recession of 2008. After accounting for the major economic factors thought to influence unemployment (demographics, dependence on the oil and gas industries, housing-price inflation, and residential mobility), civic engagement emerged as a stronger predictor of communities' resilience against unemployment. The two most important elements of civic engagement were the density of associations in each community that engaged local citizens as members or clients, and the degree to which residents reported having friendships and relationships with other people nearby.<sup>38</sup>

Previous studies suggest possible explanations. Maybe participating in civic affairs teaches skills that are also useful in the job market, encourages people to trust one another so that they are more likely to undertake business partnerships, strengthens citizens' affection and loyalty to their communities so that they choose to spend and invest locally, or creates a strong set of independent organizations that hold governments accountable and improve their performance.<sup>39</sup>

All these explanations are plausible and consistent with my theoretical framework. But I think Sean Safford offers the most persuasive explanation by means of his close look at Youngstown, Ohio, and Allentown, Pennsylvania. These two old manufacturing cities were economically and demographically similar when the crises of global competition and automation hit American manufacturing in the 1970s.<sup>40</sup> Youngstown entered a downward spiral and now has a median household income of \$25,000 and a median home value of \$50,000. Meanwhile, Allentown has turned into a successful postindustrial economic center with a median household income almost twice that in Youngstown, homes worth almost three times more, just one-fourth as many murders per capita, and a substantially higher life expectancy.<sup>41</sup>

Safford traces the starkly different outcomes to the civic infrastructure of the two communities. In their heyday as manufacturing cities, both had economic networks dominated by the interlocking boards of their local businesses. And both had social networks composed of private clubs. But only Allentown really had a separate, robust civic network. Safford defines "civic organizations [as] those for which the primary goal is to improve the community in some way."<sup>42</sup> In Allentown, the universities' boards and the Boy Scouts were among the most prominent civic groups. Youngstown also had civic organizations but not a network of overlapping civic boards. When the economic crisis killed Youngstown's businesses and left the local elite competing for scarce financial resources, they had no place to gather, plan, and collaborate. But in Allentown, local leaders talked and cooperated in their overlapping civic organizations.

Their discussions launched specific new initiatives, like the Ben Franklin Technology Partnership, which has incubated high-tech businesses. They also developed new overall strategies. The business elite, organized as a civic cadre through the Lehigh Valley Partnership, converged on a similar development strategy as the grassroots activist groups, organized as the Community Action Coalition. Meanwhile, Lehigh University reoriented itself as a civic hub that connected to both activists and businesses.<sup>43</sup>

Allentown has not drawn much more external investment than Youngstown but has used its indigenous capital much more effectively, with less damaging competition.<sup>44</sup> Importantly, it was not the number of associations or the rate of associational membership that mattered. Rather, organizations were configured into a network that encouraged deliberation and collaboration in Allentown but not in Youngstown.<sup>45</sup> In national data, we find a correlation between the number of civic organizations per capita and a community's economic success, but Safford's closer look suggests that the density

of organizations is probably just a rough proxy for the strength of the local network that permits discussion, collaboration, and relationship building.

In a magisterial study of Chicago neighborhoods, Robert Sampson finds that a strong organizational infrastructure boosts a community's capacity for collective civic action, which has substantial benefits for the neighborhood's safety and health. Sampson observes, "It is the totality of the institutional infrastructure that seems to matter in promoting civic health and extending to unexpected economic vitality, whether in the form of rebuilding New Orleans or in rehabilitating vacant houses in economically depressed neighborhoods in cities around the country."<sup>46</sup>

The benefits are not solely economic. As I noted earlier, Allentown has much better social outcomes than Youngstown, including lower crime rates and longer lives. A different stream of research also finds that people are much healthier and happier—in the original Aristotelian sense of happiness as flourishing—if they can say that "their own daily activities [are] useful to and valued by society" and if they have a "sense of belonging to, and comfort and support from, a community." In turn, strengthening civil society at the community level increases the odds that people will flourish in these ways.<sup>47</sup> YouthBuild USA is a program that enlists marginalized young people and gives them opportunities to serve and lead. One graduate of the program told my colleagues, "Doing those kinds of things changes something inside of you, you develop a whole new kind of happiness inside of you—that you don't feel like smoking weed, buying \$150 dollar sneakers—it's the kind of happiness that only you can get by doing good deeds and helping others."<sup>48</sup>

A different kind of social problem is the incarceration crisis.<sup>49</sup> Incarceration involves highly controversial public policy, and nowhere has civic engagement led to dramatic or lasting reforms of the criminal justice system. In fact, the huge number of prison sentences can be understood as the *result* of citizen action. Draconian sentencing laws often begin with referenda or with legislative votes that respond to popular pressure. The phrases "populist punitiveness" and "penal populism" are used to describe an international phenomenon: politicians seeking approval by posing as tough on crime and denouncing lawyers and other elites who would coddle or protect criminals.<sup>50</sup>

But accumulated evidence suggests that when citizens deliberate, they arrive at merciful or nuanced decisions. For instance, when judges disagree with jury verdicts, it is generally because they think the jury was too lenient.<sup>51</sup> Capital punishment is a popular policy in the United States, yet juries reach capital verdicts in very few cases.<sup>52</sup> When a random sample of British citizens

deliberated about criminal justice policy, they shifted markedly against the proposition that incarceration reduces crime and became much more protective of defendants' rights.<sup>53</sup>

Unfortunately, public deliberation is now rare within the criminal justice system. The severe and inflexible penalties required by referenda strongly encourage plea bargaining, which is one reason that the proportion of felony cases that go to trial has dropped from one in 12 during the 1970s to just one in 40 recently.<sup>54</sup> Ninety-seven percent of criminal convictions in the federal system and 94 percent in the state systems result from plea bargains and not trials.<sup>55</sup> The people (using the ballot box) have chosen to remove the people (convened as jurors) from criminal law.

Why would they do that? In 1964, three-quarters of Americans said they generally trusted the government and 53.4 percent said they generally trusted other people. By 2010, trust in government was down to 30.4 percent, and trust in other people had fallen to 34.6 percent, both having lost ground steadily over the decades.<sup>56</sup> Distrust of people of color, especially young African American men, is particularly acute and directly relevant to the incarceration problem. (In fact, "distrust" is much too soft a word for public attitudes toward young black people.) If we trusted the government but not our fellow citizens, we might be willing to let judges set sentences. If we trusted our fellow Americans but not the government, we would be less eager to incarcerate citizens and more protective of the jury system. Trusting neither, we are tempted to require the state to put people in jail without trials.

A minimum sentencing law is a simple, understandable rule imposed on a complex system. It is a classic example of the prevailing view of accountability as external and driven by numbers, rather than deliberative and determined by arguments. (See chapter 4.) It transforms criminal cases from transparent public events, full of explicit moral rhetoric and judgment, into bargaining sessions managed behind the scenes by lawyers.<sup>57</sup> That is a recipe for even lower trust, which encourages even more draconian sentencing laws. The resulting crisis of incarceration is largely invisible because citizens do not serve on juries or even read about jury trials. Even though criminal justice is officially public business and transparent (in the sense that one has a right to obtain court records), it rarely impinges on public consciousness.

In Oklahoma in the 1990s, the League of Women Voters saw the state's incarceration rate—the third-highest in the nation—as a serious public problem. They also recognized that politicians were afraid of any reforms that could be depicted as weak on crime. So they organized a series of meetings across the state that involved nearly 1,000 citizens who held diverse views.

Many participants expressed anger about the costs of incarceration and favored prevention and rehabilitation. Politicians and reporters attended these meetings and witnessed the prevailing mood, which changed their estimate of what would be popular. The League then recruited participants to advocate a bill that would reduce certain felonies to misdemeanors while devolving some authority over sentencing to "community boards with citizen representation." The bill passed by wide margins. It reflected deliberative public opinion, and it created a mechanism for the kind of sustained public engagement in criminal justice that might restore public trust.<sup>58</sup>

The sentencing reform legislation was later repealed after lobbying by law enforcement officials. The state chose instead to reduce costs by expanding private, for-profit prisons.<sup>59</sup> In 2008, companies that run such prisons spent almost \$69,000 on Oklahoma state political campaigns and received almost \$77 million in state funding; the state even imported prisoners from Arizona.<sup>60</sup>

This chapter of the Oklahoma story is a reminder—as if one were needed—that engaged citizens face formidable enemies and need political reform to prevail. The relationship between institutional reform and civic engagement is a central theme in chapters 5 and 6. But even though the legislature retreated on incarceration, community sentencing boards still handle nonviolent cases in most Oklahoma counties. The state's Department of Corrections argues that these boards save money and reduce incarceration.<sup>61</sup>

Oklahoma's community boards resemble other widespread initiatives in which the justice system engages lay citizens. Problem-solving courts, for example, specialize in particular issues, such as drugs or domestic violence. They reject the traditional measure of success in a judicial system (speedily rendering appropriate verdicts in cases) and instead try to address an underlying problem, whether drug abuse, violence, or urban blight. Effective problem solving requires partnerships both within the government and across the community. Thus these courts "aggressively reach out to neighborhoods to educate community groups and find new ways for citizens to get involved in the judicial process."<sup>62</sup> The cast of characters traditionally involved in a court broadens to include social workers, community organizers, and planners, and their relationships shift. In Portland, Oregon, the president of an advocacy group called the Black United Front naturally refers to a local problem-solving court as "we." He does not officially work for the court, but he helps set its agenda. Judges, for their part, frequently speak in community settings and even serve on nonprofits' boards.<sup>63</sup>

In youth courts, panels of teenagers are empowered to sentence their peers for minor offences. In restorative justice programs, violators negotiate

agreements with representatives of their community to repair the harms their actions have caused.<sup>64</sup> Modern restorative justice was first proposed by outsiders to the legal system (Mennonite activists and others), but it has grown thanks to the support of prosecutors and corrections officials, who see substantial financial savings and much higher satisfaction among victims and other residents.<sup>65</sup> Like youth courts, restorative justice has shown promising effects on recidivism. These reforms also engage citizens in deliberations within the legal system.

By expanding such opportunities, we may be able to change the national conversation about crime and punishment.<sup>66</sup> Restorative justice tends to satisfy both victims and offenders.<sup>67</sup> Jurors who successfully reach verdicts in conventional trials hold more favorable views of political institutions (including the jury trial itself), trust their fellow citizens more, and are more likely to vote in regular elections compared to citizens who are not randomly selected for jury service or whose trials end without verdicts.<sup>68</sup> That finding suggests that by making traditional juries (or modern alternatives such as restorative justice programs) more common and more prominent in the public discourse, we could raise public trust in courts and reduce the demand for draconian sentencing. In chapter 6 and throughout this book, I advocate other ways to engage citizens in governance beyond courts. If alienation from institutions and from our fellow citizens is a root cause of the incarceration epidemic, these strategies offer the best hope for a solution.

These cases suggest that civic engagement offers answers to large-scale, serious, wicked social problems. I still owe an argument that we can expand and enhance civic engagement. To do that would require not only shifts in priorities and resources (described later) but also a change in our public philosophy.

*In general*, we treat the people who will be affected by social policies as “at-risk,” as victims, as baskets of problems or potential problems. Those labels apply especially to the young and the old, poor Americans, and minorities. Civic engagement acknowledges inequalities and injustices, but it treats all people as assets, capable of addressing their own problems and contributing to the whole community. We should welcome and expect them to contribute not only because doing so has good effects, but also because respecting them is a fundamental moral obligation.

*In general*, we see education as the job of teachers, professors, and administrators, whose clients are students. Education is a specialized task to be measured by experts. Success then boils down to passing tests. But education should be a community-wide function, the process by which a whole community chooses and transmits to the next generation appropriate values,

traditions, skills, practices, and cultural norms. Civic engagement at its best crosses the lines between schools or colleges and communities and reflects a more inclusive definition of “education.”

*In general*, our politics is government centered. Liberals want the government to accept new tasks, such as health insurance; conservatives believe that problems would be mitigated if the state were shrunk. Governments are important, but they are not the only institutions that matter. Furthermore, a state-centered view of politics leaves citizens little to do but inform themselves and vote. In citizen-centered politics, however, people form relationships with peers, express their interests and listen to others, and then use a range of strategies, some having little to do with the state.

*In general*, our democracy is threatened by the mobility of capital. A community cannot govern itself if it relies for jobs on private companies that are able to move their operations and investments at will. Capital mobility is a threat to progressive policies, such as corporate taxation and unionization, and also to conservative policies regarding social issues. But an array of economically powerful not-for-profit institutions—colleges and universities, co-ops and land trusts, community development corporations and social enterprises—are anchored in communities and accountable to local citizens because their fates are permanently tied together. These are no longer marginal elements of our economy: for example, America’s 4,600 community development corporations finance and build 86,000 housing units annually.<sup>69</sup>

*In general*, our politics is manipulative. Experts—politicians, pundits, consultants, marketers, leaders of advocacy groups, and the like—study us, poll us, focus-group us, and assign us to gerrymandered electoral districts; they slice-and-dice us; and then they send us tailored messages designed to encourage us—or to scare us—into acting just how they want. This is true of liberal politicians as well as conservative ones. It is true of public interest lobbies as well as business lobbies. It is true of big nonprofits as well as political parties.

It is also true of many civic groups. For example, my organization, CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement) has been part of the movement to increase youth voter turnout. Techniques for that purpose are becoming increasingly sophisticated. In the 1990s, you might just mail people flyers reminding them to register. Then organizations began to test various messages with focus groups before they printed their flyers. Now they do true experiments, randomly selecting some addresses to receive one flyer instead of another and keep track of the response rates. (The messages that people like best in focus groups often perform worst in the

field.) This is just an example of growing efficiency in public-interest, nonpartisan politics. CIRCLE has embraced it because resources are scarce and the environment is competitive. We believe that engaging young people is valuable, and resources should be used in the most efficient possible way. We collected research-based “best practices” in an influential 2006 guide, and many of those techniques were used by the 2008 Obama presidential campaign to mobilize an unprecedented share of under-30 voters.<sup>70</sup>

These techniques work. Yet overall, Americans know they are being manipulated, and they resent it. They want to be able to decide for themselves what is important, what should be done, and then act in common to address their problems. They are interested in what other people think; they want to get out of what students call their “bubbles.” They want an open-ended, citizen-centered politics in which the outcomes are not predetermined by professionals. We should not try to manipulate our students or neighbors into adopting opinions or solutions that we think are right. We should give them opportunities to deliberate and reflect and then act in ways that seem best to them. In a time of increasingly sophisticated manipulative politics, these opportunities are precious.

## 2

# *How to Think About Politics*

## VALUES, FACTS, AND STRATEGIES

WHEN I SPEAK to groups of civic activists and educators, I often read the following quotation: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” I ask people to raise their hands if they recognize the quotation and who wrote it. Sometimes every hand goes up, and everyone seems able to cite Margaret Mead, the great American anthropologist, as the author. I have jokingly asked audiences to keep their hands up if they have printed these words and hung them on their office walls. Quite a few hands remain raised.

In fact, this quotation is only attributed to Margaret Mead. It cannot be found in her printed works and may be apocryphal.<sup>1</sup> But it is certainly popular among Americans who see their goals as “civic.” Google found it on more than four million websites in 2012.

I think I understand the motivations behind these two sentences. Margaret Mead—or whoever composed this quotation—was exhorting us to work together and make the world better. That is a worthy objective.

But these propositions are literally false. Not only small groups of thoughtful citizens “change the world.” So do technological inventions, institutional inertia, markets, clashes of social classes and ethnic or religious groups, governments, armies, violence, terror, and sheer accidents.

For instance, a huge flood changed New Orleans profoundly in 2005. Hurricane Katrina changed New Orleans for the *worse* (at least in the short term), and that brings up a separate problem with Margaret Mead’s quotation. Changing the world is morally ambiguous—change can be good or bad. The World War I veterans who gathered around Mussolini and Hitler were “small group[s] of . . . committed citizens,” and they made the world a lot worse. I deleted the word “thoughtful” in describing them, but they did think a lot about social issues and strategies. They just thought in a bad way.

Mead also implies that small groups of thoughtful and committed citizens always succeed. She begins: "Never doubt . . ." But it is easy to list groups of deeply thoughtful and fully committed citizens who have failed—some at the cost of their lives, and some with hardly a ripple. A cynic might counter: "Never doubt the capacity of large groups of ignorant and selfish people to squelch good ideas and make the world worse."

I do not mean to disparage Margaret Mead (or the real author of these sentences), but rather to emphasize that we need a serious investigation of three questions:

1. When can "a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens" change the world?
2. How can they be most effective?
3. What are good means and good ends for these groups?

One would think that these three questions would be essential to the whole enterprise of research and education. To be sure, they are not the *only* questions that matter to us as human beings. We should also consider what private individuals may and should do. For instance: "Is it acceptable for me to lie?" "Is an abortion permissible?" "What will happen if I buy this product?" "Would this be a beautiful object for me to create?"

We should think, too, about large social forces and mass behavior (not to mention the natural world, the past, and purely abstract truths like those of mathematics). But the scale of human affairs that lies between a lone individual's decisions and entire societies seems especially important. This is the domain of groups that one can choose to join or to leave, that one can tangibly influence through one's own choices and actions, and that can (in turn) influence the larger world. "Civil society" is the name for that scale of human action where the minuscule powers of an individual obtain enough leverage to count but are not lost entirely in the mass. It is the world of "we," but not such a huge or abstract "we" that "I" no longer matters. It is politics at the human scale.

When we discuss macropolitics, our grammar is typically passive or impersonal. We use phrases like, "The US should support Greece," or "The budget should be balanced." When we discuss politics at the human scale, our grammar becomes active and personal: "We can balance our budget," or "I support Greece."

Civil society—the human scale of politics—is certainly studied, but not sufficiently in ways that combine three matters: *facts*, *values*, and *strategies*. We

need to know facts because we should not try to do something that is impossible, or redundant, or that has harmful but unintended consequences. If, for example, a small group decides to create a co-op to sell local food, but there is no market for their product, or the supply is inadequate, or the law forbids the form of business that they prefer, or their activity will inadvertently destroy natural ecosystems or desirable businesses, or if experiments show that individuals *never* cooperate voluntarily in the way that they dream of, then they had better be aware of these facts.

We need values because otherwise we cannot distinguish between the effective, small group action of Mussolini's *fascisti* in 1922 versus the civil rights movement's leadership in 1955. Both groups were thoughtful and committed, and both won their political battles, but one group was bad and the other was good.

Finally, we need strategies. It is insufficient to wish for better outcomes and determine that those outcomes are possible. We need a path to the desirable results.

Developing a fully adequate strategy is difficult, just as empirical research and moral argument are difficult endeavors. It is not enough to say that something "should be done." People should stop having unprotected sex; if they did, there would be no new cases of HIV/AIDS, and the virus would go extinct. But saying that does nothing to address the HIV crisis. Nor is it sufficient to say that major institutions should change their policies. Many lives would be saved if governments spent more money on HIV education and anti-retroviral medications, but again, saying that achieves nothing. *Sometimes* one can be effective merely by expressing the truth. Usually, however, political success requires more than expression; it takes organization and effective tools that may include laws, votes, payments, electoral campaigns, strikes, boycotts, or lawsuits—depending on the situation. To choose a strategy, one must be smart about what will work and also understand facts and values.

It is ideal to address a real audience that has the capacity to do something, to influence another group to do something, or otherwise to start a helpful chain of events. One must persuade that audience to take beneficial steps, using some effective combination of moral suasion and plausible appeals to self-interest. Sometimes it works to address particularly powerful individuals: billionaire philanthropists, national politicians, or celebrities with huge popular followings. But it is hard to get those people's attention and to persuade them to act differently. Despite their disproportionate power, they are not omnipotent, and they are always asked to do more worthy things than they

can manage. Finally, we may not want our strategies to be contingent on the goodwill of an elite. For all those reasons, a fully adequate strategy must address *whomever chooses to listen* and must give those people effective ideas and reasons for action. Engaging anyone who chooses to listen is a civic approach to strategy because it treats citizenship (membership in a community) as a sufficient condition and does not privilege status, expertise, or power. But finding something effective for everyone to do is no easy task.

I believe there is much less scholarship than we need that combines facts, strategy, and values and that deals with the human scale of politics. Empirical social scientists pay relatively little attention to the effects of small-group politics because to do so seems naive. They know that the decisions and strategies of "small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens" generally matter less than economic forces, institutional structures, mass public opinion, and technology. To mention just one example, the outcome of presidential elections in the United States is strongly correlated with the performance of the economy in the previous year.<sup>2</sup> That means that all the deliberate work of campaigns, parties, and independent advocacy groups matters less than the blind, impersonal force of the business cycle.

Nevertheless, working together in small groups is *morally* important—it is what we should do and should care most about. To be a good person is to do this work well. That is reason enough to make it a central question for reflection and research. In addition, deliberate human action has significant impact. Small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens do make a difference under appropriate circumstances, as shown by the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the conservative legal movement, and numerous other examples. Until recently, research on social movements tended to emphasize the external (and uncontrollable factors) that caused some to succeed and others to fizzle. The ones with adequate resources and favorable positions would win; the others would fail. But recent scholarship emphasizes that leaders of movements and other active participants make choices that affect their success. Leadership is emerging as a significant causal factor in the outcomes of social movements.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Elinor Ostrom won the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for demonstrating that the organization and governance of voluntary groups affects whether they can solve social problems. These findings suggest that "small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens" matter, even if other factors matter too.

If the leaders of the South African freedom movement reviewed the scholarly literature on democratization during the apartheid years, they must have found it depressing. Prosperity, economic equality, and ethnic homogeneity

were the factors that had been found to increase the odds of a successful transition to democracy. These structural factors were all evidently absent in South Africa. Only the country's heritage of British rule was thought to increase the odds of success, and that was an ambiguous matter in South Africa, where the British influence had been limited.<sup>4</sup> Thus, if the African National Congress and other democratic reformers had been guided by hard-nosed, empirical research, they would have chosen a goal short of democracy, something like a negotiated arrangement among separate authoritarian communities. But they were right to ignore the scholarly literature because it was based on empirical data—in a word, on the *past*—and the past can never determine the future. So far, their peaceful revolution appears a monumental work of deliberate human agency. To his credit, one of the leading empirical scholars of democratization, Seymour Martin Lipset, after reviewing the standard preconditions of success (none of which applied in South Africa), said in 1993:

There are a number of assertions we can now advance, with considerable confidence, about the structural, cultural, and institutional factors that are conducive to the development of democracy. But specific outcomes depend on particular contexts, [including] the abilities and tactics of the major actors. For example, Washington and Lincoln, Lenin and Gorbachev, Nehru and DeGaulle, each had a profound effect on the prospects for democracy in his time and country. Clearly then, we cannot generalize by a formula. The various factors I have reviewed here do shape the probabilities for democracy, but they do not determine the outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

Wise citizens will take into consideration the factors that "shape probabilities," because it is naive to ignore barriers and threats, but they will not renounce their agency just because those factors look daunting.

A master question for social theory during the twentieth century was structure versus agency: whether people's voluntary choices made any difference in politics or underlying structures determined everything. This question divided, for example, French existentialists (who preached the value of intentional political acts) from French structuralists (who thought that political events, including major elections and revolutions, were superficial perturbations on the permanent structures below).<sup>6</sup> But the question for the twenty-first century should be different: not how much impact agency has, but how that impact can be expanded. The reason to expand it is not that

agency is intrinsically good. Hitler was an effective political agent. Rather, deliberate and effective human action is one necessary condition of a worthwhile human life. If there is no agency, life is pointless.

Another obstacle to helpful research is the enduring positivist bent of the social sciences. Positivism presumes that there is a sharp distinction between facts, which can be observed and tested, and values, which are sheer matters of opinion. Social scientists acknowledge that they have values but regard them as biases and try to reduce their impact on their own scholarship. They use sophisticated techniques for that purpose. For example, to construct a survey or a test, a researcher often generates many potential questions and then has them screened by several different sets of diverse experts and lay reviewers and tested with a sample of the target population to see which questions correlate with each other. Items that prove controversial or that fail to correlate with others are rejected. The final test or survey then has a patina of objectivity and value neutrality, because the researcher did not control the choice of questions. Often the topics included on the test are drawn from previous literature that has been thoroughly peer reviewed and thus deemed scientific. Finally, careful researchers disclose their remaining biases in the limitations section of their articles.

But having the right values is not a bias; it is the most important achievement. You cannot tell that your values are right simply by asking whether they are uncontroversial or prevalent in the published literature. A whole discipline can be morally misguided, as the examples of Soviet and Nazi sciences clearly demonstrate. Our deepest obligation is to have the *right* values, and that requires being able to propose and assess moral reasons. A good examination, for example, is not merely composed of questions that are scientifically valid and reliable. A good exam tests knowledge and skills that are valuable—that a person really should have or that a just society really needs.

In this book, I draw on several empirical research programs that try to help something good work in the world. For instance, scholars who study positive youth development (PYD) assess initiatives that give young people opportunities to contribute to their communities. Scholars of common pool resources study how communities manage common property, such as fisheries and forests. Scholars of deliberative democracy investigate the impacts on citizens, communities, and policies when people talk about public issues in structured settings.

These are empirical research efforts, committed to facts and truth. They do not seek to celebrate, but to critically evaluate, their research subjects. Nevertheless, an obvious goal is to make the practical work succeed by identifying

and demonstrating positive impacts and by helping sort out the effective strategies from the ineffective ones. Underlying these intellectual efforts is some kind of hope that the practical programs, when done well, succeed. Along with hope, another relevant virtue is loyalty to a field of practice that shows promise.

These motives or virtues are largely hidden, because positivist social science cannot handle value commitments on the part of researchers; it treats them as biases to be minimized and disclosed if they prove impossible to eliminate. Often a search for motives is critical and suspicious: one tries to show that a given research project is biased by some value judgment, cultural assumption, or self-interest on the scholars' part. But we can look for motives in an appreciative spirit, believing that an empirical research program in the social sciences is only as good as its core values.

Note that it is not at all obvious why we *should* hope that PYD, common property resource management, and deliberative democracy work. These are expensive and tricky strategies. For instance, the core empirical hypothesis of PYD is that you will get better outcomes for youth if you help them contribute than if you use surveillance and remediation. But it would be cheaper and more reliable if we could cut crime with metal detectors in every school instead of elaborate service-learning programs. So why should we hope that PYD is right?

Likewise, it would be easier to turn all resources into private or state property than to encourage some communities to manage resources as common property. And it would be easier for professionals to make city plans and budgets than to turn those decisions over to citizens. So why do scholars evidently hope that good common property regimes produce more sustainable and efficient economic outcomes than expert management and that citizens' deliberations generate more legitimate and fair policies than governments?

Part of the reason is simply that things are not going very well in the world, and scholars seek alternatives that may be obviously better (for example, more efficient or sustainable and less corrupt and wasteful). That is part of the reason, but it doesn't fully explain the focus of these research projects. If you're worried about violence in American high schools, you should look for something new that works. But why should that new approach include service and leadership programs, instead of better metal detectors and video cameras?

Ultimately, all three of my examples are anchored in commitments that I would describe as Kantian. Immanuel Kant argued that the individual is a sovereign moral agent, and our responsibility to others is always to help them develop their capacities for autonomy and voluntary cooperation. Real

Kantians are willing to defend autonomy even if the consequences for health and welfare turn out to be bad. But real Kantianism persuades few people and has little influence. Thus, I think the research projects I have mentioned here are motivated by a kind of soft or strategic Kantianism. The best initiatives, on this view, are the ones that achieve efficient and reliable improvements in tangible human welfare by enhancing people's autonomy. Strategies like PYD and common property regimes stand out as worthy of study because of their Kantian values. But they deserve critical scrutiny on utilitarian grounds. If they fail to deliver the promised practical outcomes, they should be improved before they are abandoned. The same attention should not be given to surveillance systems or top-down managerial structures. In theory, those solutions might work just as well but helping them succeed would not enhance autonomy. That is the implicit moral theory behind these research programs.

In our time and culture, it is a risky strategy for scholars to admit their core moral commitments. The smartest move is to pretend that a research program is simply scientific and all the outcomes of interest are utilitarian. But those assumptions have the disadvantage of being wrong. They distort research in various subtle but damaging ways. For example, if we try to justify youth service programs because they cut dropout rates and teen pregnancy, we are likely to shift those programs in the direction of noncontroversial service, when the real (but undisclosed) motive is to make young people into political actors. Besides, when we are influenced by an *implicit* moral philosophy, we may make judgments that we would not actually endorse or defend if we spelled them out clearly. Kantian premises may motivate PYD, common property resource management, and deliberative democracy. Those motivations are commendable, but they do not show that Kantianism is *right*. Most people reasonably resist Kant's full-blown moral philosophy. By spelling out our actual views, we can analyze them critically, take responsibility for them, and make them more complex and persuasive. Talking in this way is a form of accountability; a running theme of this book is the importance of accountability as reason giving.

Political philosophy (as practiced in philosophy and political science departments and by some independent writers) directly addresses questions of value. It takes as its central objectives not only to analyze or describe values but also to identify the *best* ones. Political philosophy is often informed by facts: for instance, economics influences it deeply. The problem with political philosophy is that it takes too little account of strategy. Strategy is studied and taught in academia but predominantly in fields far removed from philosophy, such as business.<sup>7</sup>

In the most influential book of political philosophy written in English since the Second World War, John Rawls says that his subject is "justice," which is a feature of "the basic structure of society."<sup>8</sup> This way of thinking about politics can be deeply misleading to an individual who is deciding which groups to join, create, or lead and how to steer those groups. The individual cannot determine "the basic structure of society." He or she might have opinions about the basic structure: for example, Rawls himself favored a more equal distribution of economic goods than actually prevails in the United States today. But if you agree with him about that, it doesn't mean that you should join an association for economic equality. Such an association might gain no traction, or it might provoke a public backlash, or it might divide an existing political coalition, or it might lead to a massive new government program that does not work. Depending on the situation, you might do better advocating a particular reform in the health system that has a real prospect of passage. Rawls's theory by itself would send you in the wrong direction unless you also understood strategy.

In private foundations today, it is popular to ask grantees to articulate a "theory of change": a set of steps that will lead from the existing situation to the desired outcomes. Like any theory, it can be experimentally tested—it will either yield the promised outcomes or not. Sometimes political philosophy has a theory of change. For example, Plato's plan was to develop the blueprint of an ideal state and then persuade the tyrant of a city-state (Syracuse in Sicily) to implement it. This theory did not work—Plato had to flee Syracuse before he was killed there—but it seemed plausible in advance.<sup>9</sup>

Almost 2,000 years later, Machiavelli addressed *The Prince* to another Italian tyrant, Lorenzo the Magnificent. Perhaps Machiavelli's real intent was to give Lorenzo advice, or maybe—as Rousseau believed—Machiavelli was hinting to his fellow Florentine citizens that rule by one man would inevitably turn vicious and tyrannical. In that case, Machiavelli's theory of change was to subvert Medici rule by writing a book that would be read with irony.

In turn, Rousseau addressed his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* to the leaders of republican Geneva, with a plea to govern it differently. Since they were sovereign lords, they could change their policies if he persuaded them successfully. Still later, Hamilton, Madison, and Jay addressed their Federalist Papers to Americans who could vote to ratify the Constitution or influence public opinion. Thanks to the American Revolution, the majority of white men collectively held the power of Lorenzo the Magnificent, but they were not yet so numerous or so deluged with media that thoughtful essays would be lost in the noise. It made sense to address and persuade them.

What is the theory of change of modern academic philosophy? John Rawls is a leading example, and his *Theory of Justice* is dedicated to his wife—an appropriate and even touching gesture but interestingly different from the choices made by Machiavelli, Rousseau, Hamilton, and Madison. Either Rawls did not take responsibility for changing the world, or he hoped to change it by the following roundabout strategy: first develop a theory of the best possible society by means of academic scholarship, primarily addressed to colleagues and advanced students, and then popularize (or let someone else popularize) the results so that they might influence public opinion and thereby change influential popular votes.

I see no evidence that this strategy had any impact, despite Rawls's enormous prestige in the academy. Public policy in the United States is less Rawlsian than it was in 1970, and liberal activists and leaders who share some of his principles rarely look to him for arguments or guidance. Nor has any other political philosopher had more success than Rawls or his followers and interpreters.

This is not a refutation of Rawls's philosophy, which may be correct on its own terms. I am not a pragmatist who thinks that the only justification of intellectual work is its impact, what William James used to call its "cash value." A theory can have intrinsic merit. I would, however, assert that Rawls and his colleagues are no longer writing in the same genre as Plato, Machiavelli, Hamilton, and Madison (and many in-between). Contemporary academic political philosophy does not offer a path to a better society but only an indication of what one would be like. It is a highway without the on-ramp.

In political philosophy, "ideal theory" means the effort to define a fully just society. Proponents assert that it is useful for guiding our actual political decisions, which should steer toward the ideal. Amartya Sen, in *The Idea of Justice*, offers one of several recent and prominent critiques of this method. Sen argues that there is no way to settle reasonable disagreements about the ideal state. Knowing what is ideal is not necessary to make wise and ethical decisions. And even an ideally designed set of public institutions would not guarantee justice, because people must be given discretion to make private decisions, and those decisions can always be unjust.

Sen finds an alternative to the tradition of developing ideal social contracts, as Plato, More, Locke, Rousseau, Rawls, Nozick, and many others did. The alternative is to compare on moral grounds actually existing societies or realizable reforms in order to recommend improvements, a strategy epitomized by Aristotle, Adam Smith, Benjamin Constant, Tocqueville, and Sen himself (among many others).

I would push the critique further than Sen does. The non-ideal political theories that he admires are still addressed to some kind of sovereign: a potential author of laws and policies in the real world, a "decider" (as George W. Bush used to call himself). Sen, for example, in his various works, addresses two kinds of audiences: the general public, understood as sovereign because we can vote, or various specific authorities, such as the managers of the World Bank. In his work aimed at general readers, he envisions a "global dialogue," rich with "active public agitation, news commentary, and open discussion," to which he contributes guiding principles and methods.<sup>10</sup> In turn, that global dialogue will influence the actual decision-makers, whether they are voters and consumers in various countries or powerful leaders.

Unfortunately, no reader is really in the position of a sovereign. You and I can vote but not for elaborate social strategies. We vote for names on a ballot, while hundreds of millions of other people also vote with different goals in mind. If I prefer the social welfare system of Canada to the US system, I cannot vote to switch. Nor can I persuade millions of Americans to share my preference, because I don't have the platform to reach them. Even legislators are not sovereigns, because there are many of them, and the legislature shares power with other branches and levels of government and with private institutions.

This book has a different theory of change and is meant to exemplify a different approach to scholarship. It is directed at readers who can act to enhance democracy in the United States. But because we are far more effective when we act collectively rather than singly, this book identifies networks of organizations that an individual can join and influence. The book's strategic recommendations, empirical evidence, and moral arguments are all addressed at members (and prospective members) of these networks.

Since the late 1980s, I have had the privilege of working for the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, Common Cause, CIRCLE (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement), the National Commission on Civic Renewal, the Institute for Philosophy & Public Policy, and the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University. I have served on the boards or steering committees of the American Bar Association's Division of Public Education, *AmericaSpeaks*, the Paul J. Aicher Foundation (fiscal agent for Everyday Democracy, which brought Study Circles to America), the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, the State of Maryland's Task Force on Civic Literacy, the Newspaper Association of America Foundation, and Street Law, Inc. I have completed projects for the National Conference on Citizenship,

the New America Foundation, the Aspen Institute, and the Corporation for National and Community Service. I have served on advisory committees for America's Promise, Mobilize.org, Generation Citizen, and the Obama campaign's Education Policy Committee and Urban Policy Committee.

These institutions are demonstrably connected—not in one organized structure but as a dense network with many common ties. The same network also encompasses such organizations as Campus Compact, Demos, the League of Women Voters, and the Industrial Areas Foundation, with which I have not worked as directly. Most important, the network touches many citizens who are members of one or more of these organizations or who simply participate in, or follow, civic renewal as individuals.

This book is primarily addressed to that network and to anyone who wants to join it. My theory of change is to try to elucidate the underlying values of the network—anticipating that my analysis will provoke some disagreement—and then to propose strategic next steps in light of the current situation. If the network grows and has political impact, the reasons will go far beyond this book. But if the book contributes to its success, its theory of change will be vindicated.

### 3

## *Values*

### COLLABORATION, DELIBERATION, AND CIVIC RELATIONSHIPS

IN CHAPTER 2, I argued that we need a combination of values, facts, and strategies to think wisely about politics. Chapter 3 turns to values. The core proposition is simple: most Americans should be involved in deliberation and collaboration. In other words, they should talk, listen, and work together on public problems. To do so requires certain kinds of relationships with one's fellow citizens. Thus chapter 3 introduces deliberation, collaboration, and civic relationships as its core concepts. I argue that a combination of these three produces beneficial results, it yields knowledge about what is right, and it enhances the dignity and agency of participants. In other words, the advantages of civic engagement (thus understood) are pragmatic, epistemological, and ethical.

### *Talking and Listening*

The dominant view of political scientists during the 1950s and 1960s was that individuals and organizations *wanted* things. They had options, such as to vote, to contribute money, to run for office, to strike, to sue, or to threaten violence, and they made their choices in order to get as much of what they wanted as possible. Political outcomes were the result of many simultaneous choices. Harold Lasswell's famous book was entitled *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, "deliberative democrats" have argued that we should not be satisfied with policies that arise because individuals and groups try to get what they want. People may not want good things, their power is starkly unequal, and some of their tactics are unethical. Besides, people often don't know what they want until they have communicated with others. Although our views about matters very close to our own lives may emerge out of private