

Strategies

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH CIVIC RENEWAL

THIS BOOK BEGAN with a litany of wicked problems: high school dropout rates, crime, and global warming. If more Americans were involved in constructive and empowered ways, we could make progress on these problems. Put more positively, as active citizens, we could help build a better commonwealth, with a better national culture, economy, and polity and more opportunities for deeply satisfying public work. Nor would the benefits of engagement stop at our borders: America's active citizens would collaborate with peers in other countries to address international problems and improve the earth.

Those predictions cannot be proved with existing data, because the strategy of engaging Americans has not been tried in our era. But I have argued (on the basis of theoretical considerations and concrete, local experiments) that more and better civic engagement is a path to social reform.

This is not an argument for revolutionary change or participatory democracy as an alternative to our constitutional order of markets and representative institutions. If we could only recover the level and impact of civic engagement that America witnessed in the mid-twentieth century (along with greater equity and integration), we would make enormous progress. That evocation of the past suggests that the project of civic renewal is in some respects conservative, but the strategies and means required today must be new, and entrenched interests will have to be checked and curtailed.

In the struggle for civic renewal, we have powerful assets, starting with the experimental projects and organizations identified in chapter 6. They provide a base of committed activists, tested strategies, and network ties. But we also face serious obstacles or deficits:

- Our political system is organized to favor professionally led, well-funded interests instead of deliberating communities and grassroots movements.

- Our major social policies are hostile to active civic participation. (For example, education is driven by standardized tests that experts write; public health depends on insurance companies and state bureaucracies rather than co-ops and community-based organizations.)
- Our voluntary associations no longer have the means to recruit millions of Americans and develop the skills and motivations to participate as active citizens.
- Our companies, because of their ability to withdraw investment, are virtually ungovernable by local authorities and communities.
- Our culture lacks positive and plausible descriptions of collective agency, although it provides many depictions of lone heroes and of apolitical groups of friends.
- Our news media generally overlook examples of deliberation and public work but relentlessly cover competition among professional politicians.
- Despite their commitments to political rights and their heritage of experiments with participatory democracy, liberals and progressives are enamored of expertise, command-and-control regulation, and redistributive politics to the exclusion of active citizenship.
- Despite their resistance to technocratic elites and their heritage of experiments with decentralization, conservatives are enamored of markets and negative liberties to the exclusion of active citizenship.
- Our schools and colleges offer inadequate civic education, distributed unjustly to favor the most advantaged students, with an emphasis on factual knowledge instead of civic skills.
- Our scholars in the social sciences and humanities produce an inadequate supply of knowledge relevant to active citizens (people who make moral and strategic judgments about how to improve the world directly).
- Our funders—in both the state and philanthropic sectors—provide negligible streams of money for participatory processes, as compared to the funds available for concrete services.

What is to be done? That classic question is the wrong one, because its gerundive verb form hides the subject and thus suppresses accountability. It is too easy to say what should be done (a start would be government funding for civic engagement) without explaining how to get there.

What should we do? is a better question, but the “we” must be concrete. It is no use saying that we Americans should prize active citizenship. That is true, but saying it achieves nothing. Instead, I mean to take the “we” quite seriously. What should *we* do—I who writes these words and you who reads

them—along with anyone whom we can enlist for our cause? That seems to be the correct question, but not if the answer stops with changes in our personal behavior and immediate circumstances. National and global needs are too great for us only to “be the change” that we want in the world. We must also *change* the world. Our own actions (yours and mine) must be plausibly connected to grand reforms in society and policy. That is a matter of civic strategy.

In an essay entitled “Why Last Chapters Disappoint,” David Greenberg lists American books about politics and culture that are famous for their provocative diagnoses of serious problems but that conclude with strangely weak recommendations. These works include, in his opinion, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* (1922), Daniel Boorstin’s *The Image* (1961), Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Robert Shiller’s *Irrational Exuberance* (2000), Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2001), Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* (2001), and Al Gore’s *The Assault on Reason* (2007). Greenberg asserts that practically every book on this list, “no matter how shrewd or rich its survey of the question at hand, finishes with an obligatory prescription that is utopian, banal, unhelpful or out of tune with the rest of the book.” The partial exceptions are works like Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* that provide fully satisfactory legislative agendas while acknowledging that the most important reforms have no chance of passing in Congress.¹

The gap between diagnosis and prescription is no accident. Many serious social problems could be solved if everyone chose to behave better: eat less fast food, invest more wisely, use less carbon, or study the classics. But the readers of a given treatise are too few to make a difference, and even before they begin to read they are better motivated than the rest of the population. Therefore, books that conclude with personal exhortations seem inadequate. Likewise, some serious social problems could be ameliorated by better legislation. But the readers of any given book are too few to apply sufficient political pressure to obtain the necessary laws. Therefore, books that end with legislative agendas disappoint just as badly.

The failure of books to change the world is not a problem that any single book can solve. But it is a problem that can be addressed, just as we address complex challenges of description, analysis, diagnosis, and interpretation that arise in the social sciences and humanities. Every work of empirical scholarship should contribute to a cumulative research enterprise and a robust debate. Every worthy *political* book should also contribute to our understanding of how ideas influence the world. That means asking questions such as: “Who will read this book, and what can they do?”

Who reads a book depends, in part, on the structure of the publishing industry and news media and the degree to which the public is already interested in the book’s topic. What readers can do depends, in part, on which organizations and networks are available for them to join and how responsive other institutions are to their groups.

These matters change over time. Consider, for example, a book that did affect democracy, John W. Gardner’s *In Common Cause: Citizen Action and How It Works* (1972). After diagnosing America’s social problems as the result of corrupt and undemocratic political processes and proposing a series of reforms, such as open-government laws and public financing for campaigns, Gardner encouraged his readers to join the organization Common Cause. He had founded this organization two years earlier by taking out advertisements in leading national newspapers, promising “to build a true ‘citizens’ lobby—a lobby concerned not with the advancement of special interests but with the well-being of the nation. . . . We want public officials to have literally millions of American citizens looking over their shoulders at every move they make.” More than 100,000 readers quickly responded by joining Gardner’s organization and sending money. Common Cause was soon involved in passing the Twenty-Sixth Amendment (which lowered the voting age to 18), the Federal Election Campaign Act, the Freedom of Information Act, and the Ethics in Government Act of 1978.² The book *In Common Cause* was an early part of the organization’s successful outreach efforts.

It helped that Gardner was personally famous and respected before he founded Common Cause. It also helped that a series of election-related scandals, culminating with Watergate, dominated the news between 1972 and 1976, making procedural reforms a high public priority. As a book, *In Common Cause* was well written, carefully researched, and clear about which laws were needed.

But the broader context also helped. Watergate dominated the news because the news business was still monopolized by relatively few television networks, agenda-setting newspapers, and wire services whose professional reporters believed that a campaign-finance story involving the president was important. Everyone who followed the news at all had to follow the Watergate story, regardless of their ideological or partisan backgrounds. In contrast, in 2010, some Americans were appalled by the false but prevalent charge that President Obama’s visit to Indonesia was costing taxpayers \$200 million per day. Many other Americans had no idea that this accusation had even been made, so fractured was the news market.³

John Gardner was able to reach a generation of joiners who were setting records for organizational membership.⁴ Newspaper reading and joining

groups were strongly correlated, and presumably people who read the news and joined groups also displayed relatively deep concern about public issues.⁵ Thus it was not surprising that more than 100,000 people should respond to Gardner's newspaper advertisements about national political reform by joining his new group. By the 2000s, the rate of newspaper reading had dropped in half, and the rate of group membership was also down significantly. The original membership of Common Cause aged and was never replaced in similar numbers after the 1970s. John Gardner's strategy fit his time but did not outlive him.⁶

Any analysis of social issues should take account of contextual changes like these. Considering how one's thought relates to the world means making one's scholarship "reflexive," in the particular sense advocated by the Danish political theorist Bent Flyvbjerg. He notes that modern writers frequently distinguish between rationality and power. "The [modern scholarly] ideal prescribes that first we must know about a problem, then we can decide about it. . . . Power is brought to bear on the problem only after we have made ourselves knowledgeable about it."⁷ With this ideal in mind, authors write many chapters about social problems, followed by unsatisfactory codas about what should be done. As documents, their books evidently lack the capacity to improve the world. Their rationality is disconnected from power. And, in my experience, the more critical and radical the author is, the more disempowered he or she feels.

Truly reflexive writing and politics recognizes that even the facts used in the analytical sections of a scholarly work come from institutions that have been shaped by power. For example, I have been able to cite historical data about voting and volunteering in the United States. The federal government tracks these indicators by fielding the Census Current Population Surveys and funding the American National Election Studies. Various influential individuals and groups have persuaded the government to measure these variables, for the same (somewhat diverse) reasons that they have pressed for changes in voting rules and investments in volunteer service. On the other hand, there are no reliable historical data on the prevalence of public engagement by government agencies. One cannot track the rate at which the police have consulted residents about crime-fighting strategies or the importance of parental voice in schools. That is because no influential groups and networks have successfully advocated for these variables to be measured. Thus the empirical basis of this book is affected by the main problem that I have identified in the book: the lack of official support for deliberative public work.

Reflexive scholarship also acknowledges that values motivate all empirical research. Our values—our beliefs about goals and principles—should be influenced and constrained by what we think can work in the world; "*ought* implies *can*." I have not argued from basic philosophical principles alone but have also considered salient and troubling trends in American civil society along with successful experiments that aim to reverse those trends. An experiment can be a strong argument for doing more of the same: in those cases, "*can* implies *ought*." If there were no recent successful experiments in civic engagement, I would have advocated more modest and pessimistic values. If recent experiments were more robust and radical, I might have adopted more ambitious positions. In short, my values rested on other people's practical work, even as my goal was to support their work.

Finally, as I have already suggested, reflexive scholarship should address the question of what readers ought to do. A book is fully satisfactory only if it helps persuade readers to do what it recommends *and* if their efforts actually improve the world. In that sense, the book offers a hypothesis that can be proved or disproved by its consequences. No author will be able to foresee clearly what readers will do, because they will contribute their own intelligence—and the situation will change. Nevertheless, the book and its readers can contribute to a cumulative intellectual enterprise that others will then take up and improve.

Two Inadequate Strategies: Messaging and Social Networking

The central problem under consideration in this chapter is how to obtain broader, better, and more influential civic engagement in the United States. Before proposing a strategy that we (you and I) might use for that purpose, I will note the limitations of two strategies that are frequently proposed. They may be helpful, but neither is adequate on its own.

The first is to develop more potent messages about the need for active citizenship and then use those messages to motivate American citizens to participate and to demand reforms in institutions.

"If three Americans were dropped from an airplane at 10,000 feet, by the time they had reached the ground they would probably have formed an association and elected themselves president, vice president, and secretary-treasurer," wrote E. Digby Baltzell years ago.⁸ Today, the plummeting Americans would turn themselves into a communications committee and brainstorm "messages" to "get the word out" or "raise awareness" of their plight before they hit the ground.

Messaging is now second nature. If you ask students to pick an issue that concerns them and do something about it, very often they will choose a bad behavior and develop a communications plan against it. They have learned that style of engagement from their elders. In almost all meetings and conferences about civic engagement that I have attended since the 1980s, the participants advocate for better messages and communications.

Strategic communication (trying to get other people to do something by sending them some kind of message) has its own folklore. We assume that effective messages are short, simple, and memorable. They stress benefits and never complicate matters by mentioning any drawbacks. If a message mentions opponents, it disparages them. Ideally, the message comes from famous supporters. The more repetition, the better.

We borrow these techniques from commercial advertising, the medium in which we all swim. But commercial advertisers want people to do things that are (1) conceptually simple, (2) available, (3) free of organized enemies, and (4) of tangible value. Tropicana, for example, wants us to pay for an available good that affords some pleasure and health benefits and that may have competitors, but that no one is advertising against. The Tropicana brand costs more than generic orange juice of the same quality; the company appeals to emotions to generate demand for the brand.

Political campaigns face a similar situation and borrow most of the same techniques. Like buying orange juice, voting is conceptually simple and available. To be sure, most candidates are in zero-sum struggles for votes, a situation that encourages far more negative advertising than we see in the commercial world. Also, the benefits of voting are intangible, which is why candidates either resort to nebulous sentiments or try to make their impact appear more concrete than it is. But in general, the principles of commercial advertising apply.

These principles apply, too, if you want people to buckle their seatbelts or not to drink and drive. Those are concrete choices, available to all who have cars in the first place. But the normal forms of strategic communication *cannot* work if:

- What you want people to do is unavailable. Individuals cannot join labor unions if there aren't any, for example.
- What you want them to do is complex and requires experience to grasp and to value. For example: "Understand American history" means nothing unless one understands something about history already.
- What you want to communicate is complex, ambiguous, or sensitive to context, and a simple message is worse than none.

- People don't trust your motives and judgment.
- You can only afford to purchase a tiny slice of the public's attention and competing or even contrary messages occupy much more time.

Unfortunately, civic engagement, deliberation, reforming public institutions, and promoting social justice face all the challenges listed above, which is why I am generally skeptical about the advantages of a communications strategy, except as an element of a broader plan.

A second tempting idea is to take advantage of information technology to bypass organizations and create a loose, self-organized, completely voluntary *network* for civic renewal. "Crowdsourcing" means issuing an open call to collaborate on some common task, such as improving open-source software, contributing entries to Wikipedia, or detecting fraud and abuse in a government's budget. The question arises whether we could crowdsource civic renewal by asking anyone who wants to participate to join a movement online.

Clay Shirky's book *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* is a sophisticated statement of the crowdsourcing idea, albeit without a specific focus on civic renewal. Helpfully, Shirky invokes Ronald Coase's "theory of the firm," first proposed in 1937.⁹ Coase set out to explain why firms existed, since one might expect that in a market, individuals would simply come together to produce and sell goods. In fact, that occasionally happens: some independent movies are made by ad hoc teams that hold together only for the duration of the production. But independent films are unusual examples; much more important in the global marketplace are relatively durable companies that have administrative hierarchies, clear boundaries, fairly stable personnel, and offices that serve regular functions, such as payroll, legal counsel, and sales.

Coase explained that the transaction costs necessary to put together ad hoc teams were usually too high; firms were more efficient, even though their bureaucracies introduced costs. One could say the same thing about not-for-profit associations in Coase's era. Like firms, the NAACP, the Knights of Columbus, and the League of Women Voters saved transaction costs for individuals who were interested in working together.

However, as Shirky argues, information technology has now reduced transaction costs to the point that it is often no longer necessary to create firms or other organizations. He offers a compelling example: the "extravagant and weird" Mermaid Parade in Coney Island, New York. This annual event is evidently worth documenting and describing in detail. Decades ago, it wouldn't have been covered unless media companies had sent reporters or

someone had organized a newsletter just for the parade. They would have needed funding, personnel, and an audience. But now, anyone who takes a picture or writes a blog post about the Mermaid Parade can cheaply give it away online. Moreover, if people use common phrases to identify (tag) all descriptions of the parade, then anyone who searches for those tags will find a whole anthology of descriptions and photos. The most popular material will rise to the top in the search results. Thus many of the traditional functions of a magazine are rendered superfluous by technology.¹⁰

So we should consider whether we could avoid the challenges of creating or strengthening civic organizations by issuing an open call to crowdsource civic renewal. In past eras of reform, organizations were certainly essential. The League of Women Voters was founded by women's suffragists in 1920, on the eve of their winning the right to vote, as a durable mechanism for improving the quality of American democracy. In the same era, the great reform senator Robert M. La Follette tried to spark civic renewal with the People's Legislative Service, the Progressive Party, and the NAACP, all groups that he founded or played a role in starting. Almost 50 years later, Ralph Nader launched Public Citizen and John Gardner founded Common Cause with similar methods and motivations. In each of these cases, leaders recruited members to contribute dues that paid for professional staff and overhead.

But in January 2010, a documentary filmmaker and political theorist named Annabel Park simply wrote a short manifesto on her Facebook page against the Tea Party, the conservative grassroots movement that had sprung up soon before. She defined her opposition not to conservatism but to divisiveness and negativity. Many thousands of people joined her on Facebook and began to form the alternative network that she recommended, called the Coffee Party. In less than a month, Park also had a video on YouTube (Google's service for sharing free videos) that called for a movement, and within weeks, more than 400 face-to-face meetings of the Coffee Party had been held. By voting online, members of the free and open movement chose financial reform and campaign finance reform as their priorities and began to lobby Congress.¹¹

At the first national meeting of the Coffee Party, in Louisville, Kentucky, the legal scholar and activist Lawrence Lessig electrified the audience with a proposal to crowdsource campaign finance reform. In contrast (although not in opposition) to the traditional campaign finance reform organizations, such as Common Cause and the League of Women Voters, Lessig had created a loose, online network called Fix Congress First to lobby

for reform. Visitors to his website were asked to organize local house parties, "spread the word," pledge not to contribute financially to any federal candidates who refused to back reform, and contact members of Congress. Because of a combination of its goal (nonpartisan political reform) and its format (loose, voluntary, and viral) Fix Congress First was a perfect match for the Coffee Party.

By the winter of 2011–12, the energy and attention of democratic reformers seemed to have shifted, in large measure, from the Coffee Party to a series of protests known collectively as Occupy Wall Street. Although many of the occupiers defined their cause in egalitarian, economic terms, they were also eager to use deliberative democratic methods inside their occupations and avidly debated political reforms that would make formal institutions more deliberative. For example, some of them spun off a group called the Community Democracy Project that promoted participatory budgeting, but others opposed this strategy as too institutional.¹² Like the Coffee Party, the occupy movement is decentralized, without a formal leadership structure or even a membership list.

It would be risky to make any predictions about these developments so early in their history. I certainly hope they succeed and believe that they will contribute to the goals defended in this book. Yet I doubt it is fully possible to crowdsource civic renewal. Jay Rosen, a journalism professor who has a deep understanding of democratic theory and civic themes, has been experimenting with crowdsourced journalism projects: efforts to generate valuable news and information by issuing open calls to volunteers. He has observed three preconditions for success. First, in a crowdsourced project, because people no longer sit together to discuss assignments, you need "extreme clarity about tasks and goals."¹³ Lawrence Lessig, for example, asks volunteers to call specific members of Congress to ask them to support particular legislation. Rosen has had comparable success posting lists of people who need to be interviewed and asking volunteers to conduct the interviews and post their notes online. But asking people to construct a whole news article, design legislation, or govern a local asset would require too much discussion and deliberation to succeed by crowdsourcing.

Second, an open call for assistance must go to a preexisting group with a "shared background narrative." In Rosen's example, participants in the liberal blog *Talking Points Memo* were able to collaborate online very quickly to review a ream of leaked Justice Department documents to find embarrassing evidence about the attorney general. They were successful because they already agreed on that goal, its importance, and what would count

as relevant evidence. Most of the prominent examples of successful crowdsourcing come from domains such as software design, in which the goals are fairly self-evident. But politics is laden with values and is profoundly contentious, so that virtually no two people have exactly the same political objectives and beliefs. If they hold divergent values and ideas, they need to talk before they collaborate. They can certainly talk online instead of face-to-face, but their conversation needs structure and moderation. They can only crowdsource a problem once it has become a discrete element of some larger political project that they already share.

Finally, the example of *Talking Points Memo* points to a condition that is somewhat less explicit in Rosen's presentation. The people who receive an open call must know and trust the person who sent it. As Rosen says, "If people have been following you, then you can enlist them." For example, when the British newspaper the *Guardian* asked its readers to examine former Prime Minister Tony Blair's financial documents to determine the sources of his income, they did so because they had expertise to contribute, they had received a clear request, they shared distaste for Blair, and they trusted the *Guardian*. If I issued a call to help with some aspect of civic renewal, my friends might help. But my friends are not very numerous, and other people would have no reason to trust me or even to notice my call. The examples of successful viral messages, like Annabel Park's manifesto for the Coffee Party, are vastly outnumbered by messages that no one reads outside the authors' narrow circles of friends.

For civic renewal, these requirements create serious challenges. We do not have many people or organizations that are capable of issuing calls for help to large numbers of loyal followers. Instead, we have organizations and leaders that need subtle and complex assistance, such as developing legislation rather than simply calling members of Congress to vote for it. And even within the nascent civic renewal movement that I described in chapter 6, differences of values, priorities, and tactics are profound. Participants will need to debate before they act, and then deliberate to review their actions, and then act and talk some more.

In short, I think crowdsourcing techniques will be valuable once we have moved to the point where we agree that we need information, money, calls to Congress, or products to boycott. Those do not seem our most pressing needs at this point, except in areas like campaign finance reform where appropriate legislation is already before Congress. (But note that even a large number of phone calls will probably not get such legislation passed against the interests of major industries and incumbent politicians.)

A Base for Civic Renewal

Having argued that messaging and crowdsourcing strategies cannot work, I now propose a different approach. In chapter 5, I showed that millions of people used to belong to associations that developed civic skills, managed and created public goods, promoted discussions, and connected people to their government. Americans typically entered such associations *not* because they had strong, preexisting civic commitments, but because of economic needs, religious beliefs, social ties, and personal identities. The unions, fraternal associations, churches, and synagogues that they joined then turned them into active citizens.

These organizations have since shed most of their members and have also lost impact because of the corruption of our formal political institutions, which increasingly respond to narrow special interests, money, and expertise. Now we need a broad base of active citizens to promote the types of associations that recruit people into political life *and* demand political reforms that make government more responsive and fair. But since people are not organized into civic groups, we lack the scale of support we seem to need. This is a conundrum.

The solution begins with recognizing that a significant minority of Americans have recently participated in meaningful civic work that includes aspects of open-ended discussion, problem solving, education, and collaboration with diverse peers. We still have civic organizations, albeit smaller and less visible than their predecessors 50 years ago. As in the past, these groups do not rely solely on recruits who have remarkable civic motivations from the start. Instead, they offer various concrete and sometimes even materialistic benefits, such as jobs, educational credentials, or solutions to local problems. But often the people they recruit have rewarding experiences when they are invited to act as deliberative, constructive citizens. They enjoy themselves, they feel that they have solved problems, and they gain satisfaction. These Americans represent a base for civic renewal. We need them to develop a greater self-awareness as active citizens, stronger network ties, and an agenda for renewing democracy together.

How many Americans have participated recently in worthy democratic activities? One way to answer that question is to ask representative samples about their own experiences. Eighteen percent of survey respondents in 2007 said that they had participated within the past year in a meeting with people of diverse views "to determine ideas and solutions for problems in their community."¹⁴ That 18 percent was diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and educational background. A different source is Census data collected

annually from 2005–7, which suggest that 11.8 percent of adult Americans have either attended community meetings or worked on community problems. That group is somewhat skewed toward older, richer, better educated, native-born, white people.¹⁵

In 2003, a team of political scientists surveyed 1,001 Americans about various deliberative experiences and found that 25 percent had “attended a formal or informal meeting . . . to specifically discuss a local, national, or international issue—for example, neighborhood crime, housing, schools, social security, election reform, terrorism, global warming, or any other public issue that affects people.”¹⁶ In this study, African Americans and young people (ages 18–29) were as numerous or even slightly more numerous among the deliberators as in the whole sample.

It is no surprise that these estimates of the proportions of active citizens differ, given the diverse survey questions and sampling methods. But a fairly consistent pattern emerges: somewhere between 10 percent and 20 percent of adult Americans claim that they have engaged in deliberative politics, with the number falling as we add conditions. Although voting and volunteering are stratified by social class, talking and working together on local problems draw a more diverse and representative segment of the population. Talk alone is more common than talk combined with action, as might be expected. If the lower range of these estimates is correct, 10 percent of adult Americans participate annually. That is a base of 25 million people: plenty to build a movement.

The problem with surveys about obviously desirable activities (such as collaborating with one’s diverse neighbors) is the tendency for respondents to exaggerate their own participation. Less than 2 percent of adults seem to lie about their voting in the biannual Census survey.¹⁷ However, the problem of overreporting may be worse when we try to measure an activity less concrete and discrete than voting. For example, in some surveys of news consumption, some subsamples are *eight times* more likely to say that they regularly watch the news as actually watch the news.¹⁸ Similarly, if you are asked whether you talked with your neighbors about community issues within the last year, you can probably persuade yourself that you did so, even if a close observer would say that you did not.

Another way to build an estimate of the number of already engaged citizens is to aggregate counts of the actual participants in particular initiatives. For example:

- Public Allies is an AmeriCorps-funded program that recruits mostly disadvantaged young people and places them in leadership roles in nonprofits,

developing their ability to invent solutions in collaboration with peers. Public Allies has 2,800 alumni.

- The American Democracy Project (ADP) of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities is one of several national networks of campuses that enhance the civic engagement of their own students and build partnerships with local civil society. ADP is distinctive because its member campuses are mostly nonselective, local, state colleges and universities that serve demographically diverse students. I estimate that ADP directly involves at least 11,000 people.¹⁹
- The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) has more than 2,000 members and 27,000 email subscribers who are interested in organizing and facilitating public discussions, often linked to local action.
- Community Development Corporations (CDC) employ almost 200,000 people, but I estimate that about 13,800 CDC employees are directly involved with deliberation, community organizing, civic education, or public work.²⁰
- The River Network is a movement that empowers residents to understand, enjoy, and protect their local watersheds. Its focus is local collaboration and problem solving rather than centralized regulation. It has formal partnerships with 600 nonprofit organizations across the country. If we assume that each nonprofit involves an average of 30 people (staff and volunteers), that implies a movement of about 18,000 active participants.
- In 2008, the Case Foundation announced a grant competition called “Make It Your Own,” seeking projects that they defined as “citizen-centered.” The foundation expected all applicants to promote deliberation about goals, to move from talk to action, and to build capacity for future projects. I estimate that the competition drew about 1,840 applicants who truly understood and practiced citizen-centered work, representing roughly 36,800 people.²¹
- Everyday Democracy has been promoting study circles and other forms of deliberative community organizing since 1989. It has worked on more than 450 separate dialogue projects in 600 communities. Since each project by definition involves a substantial group, I cautiously estimate the number of alumni of study circles at 60,000.
- The Coffee Party, a movement for civility and political reform, has attracted almost 500,000 “likes” on Facebook, but a safer estimate of its active membership in March 2011 would be its e-mail list, which numbers 65,000 people.
- YouthBuild USA recruits young people who have dropped out of high school by offering them both hourly pay and training opportunities. Once in YouthBuild, participants find themselves governing their own work

sites through deliberative democracy, and some members progress through a set of civic education experiences to become highly effective leaders.²² YouthBuild USA claims 100,000 alumni.

- Community, Migrant, Homeless, and Public Housing Health Centers are not-for-profit corporations that provide health care, that are rooted in poor communities and unable to move, and that are governed in part by their own clients. Those that qualify as Federally Qualified Health Centers must have governing boards of which more than half are current clients of the center who demographically represent the population that the center serves. "The governing board ensures that the center is community based and responsive to the community's health care needs."²³ Overall, community health centers employ 123,000 full-time workers or the equivalent. There are 12,000 centers, and if the average board numbers ten, that implies 120,000 board members.²⁴
- More than 165,000 people are employed full-time in our public schools to teach social studies or civics.²⁵ Part of their job is to encourage and moderate informed, civil discussions of issues. Most say that they do so. Ninety-four percent of high school civics teachers say they use "controversies as teaching opportunities to get students engaged and to model civil debate and discussion."²⁶ That response suggests that about 150,000 adults promote deliberation with democratic goals and a developmental ethic.
- The League of Women Voters claims 150,000 members and active supporters, organized in chapters, states, and a national network.²⁷ Typical League activities include holding and facilitating local discussions, advocating for political reforms, and educating the public.
- *AmericaSpeaks* organizes large, day-long deliberations called Twenty-First Century Town Meetings, that are assigned significant influence over governmental decisions. At least 160,000 people have participated in these events since 1995.
- Members of the IAF are religious congregations and other institutions, not individual people. No census of participants is available, but there are 47 regional IAF organizations, each a hub for scores of local congregations. The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (by no means the largest or oldest IAF affiliate) drew 4,000 individuals to its founding assembly in 1998. If similar numbers of people are active participants at the average IAF site, then the total count would be almost 200,000 Americans.
- Between its launch in December 2011 and the spring of 2012, 450,000 Americans joined an organization called No Labels. One message of this

organization was centrism and opposition to ideological polarization. I have not endorsed that view in this book; on the contrary, I have argued that the national political debate is too narrow. However, No Labels also emphasizes political reform (including limiting the filibuster in the Senate), new deliberative forums (such as Question Time for both the president and Congress), and the active participation of its own members in their home districts. One of its founders, William Galston, says that members are drawn to it for a variety of reasons: some to resist polarization, but others "to enhance the efficacy of citizens' voices in national politics."²⁸ For that reason, I would count at least some of its members as supporters of civic renewal.

Aggregated, these organizations and professions number more than one million members, even if one presumes that they overlap a bit. (Some social studies teachers belong to the League of Women Voters; some CDC workers are active in IAF). The list is illustrative, not exhaustive, and it could easily be extended, even doubled. I anticipate that most readers already belong to some of these groups or similar ones. If you do not, an important first step is to join or create one and experience its concrete work.

Strengthening the Network

It is safe to say that the base for civic renewal numbers at least one million people. But how tight and effective a network do they form? My casual observations over 20 years in the domains of service learning, civic education, political reform, public journalism, and deliberative democracy suggest that frequently the leaders and the most committed activists know one another and have histories of collaboration. Many organizations involved in civic work have bilateral relationships: for example, CIRCLE (which I direct) has been a formal evaluator of YouthBuild USA. But to track all such relationships would be an ambitious undertaking, and it would reveal networks whose political power is latent, not actual.

A network gains political power when it forms coalitions that can advocate for reforms. In 2010, I identified seven activist coalitions whose goals are congruent with the argument of this book.²⁹ One hundred and seventeen organizations belonged to at least one of these seven coalitions. They were fairly diverse. A simple Left-Right spectrum seems crude for understanding how these groups differed, but it is interesting that the 117 member organizations included both ACORN (since defunct) and Teach for

America. I would classify both organizations as having a strategy for civic renewal—but each had a very different strategy. The demographic diversity of the organizations' leaders was not as impressive: almost all were college educated and most were white.

These 117 organizations and their coalitions formed a reasonably tight network. Any group could theoretically communicate with any other by going through a maximum of two intermediaries. But the robustness of the network depended heavily on the existence of a few bridging coalitions, notably the Campaign for a Stronger Democracy and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. Removing those two nodes from the network would cut its density by 60 percent, turning it into a set of scattered nodes.³⁰ Unfortunately, these two campaigns were very small organizations, each with one or two full-time workers and a very limited budget. Many of their member organizations could not reach their own grassroots participants and allies because they did not have the resources to maintain mailing lists. There was certainly nothing that resembled one list of all the citizens who had been touched by the 117 groups. This analysis points to the need for much stronger bridging organizations.³¹

It is tempting to propose the creation of one powerful, well-funded, broadly representative political organization for civic renewal. But studies of several successful political movements emphasize that they were not led by a single organization, which could have made poor strategic choices, alienated some potential supporters, or even become corrupt for lack of competition. Instead, the successful political movements were led by sets of fractious and competing organizations that collectively represented the whole field.

At its moment of greatest glory, the American civil rights movement was led by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the NAACP, the Congress on Racial Equality, and the Urban League, with the Nation of Islam operating somewhat to the side. These groups were strikingly different in ideology and theology, structure, demographics, strategy, and regional base. They sometimes competed for the same members and funds.³² Nevertheless, their network ties were dense and they were capable of highly effective collective action at moments of crisis and opportunity.

Similarly, the conservative legal movement that has succeeded in remaking the federal judiciary encompasses libertarians, social conservatives, constitutional originalists, neoconservatives, and others whose views are not mutually consistent. The donors who built this movement practiced "spread-betting," investing in a wide range of philosophies and strategies to maximize the

chance of success. They also invested in the Federalist Society, which has played several complementary roles. It helps young legal conservatives to form networks and support one another's careers. It takes formal positions on judicial nominations. And it organizes an annual conference that has been genuinely diverse ideologically, regularly drawing influential liberal and leftist thinkers along with all stripes of conservatives. The ideological diversity of the Federalist Society makes it interesting, keeps its participants sharp, and broadens the conservative coalition.³³

With these examples and others in mind, I would argue for the formation or strengthening of several partially overlapping civic renewal coalitions, each having a distinct philosophy and strategy. Our responsibility (yours and mine) is to join one or more of these coalitions, to advocate for other groups to join these coalitions, or—if necessary—to work with peers to create new coalitions.

In turn, the coalitions should have three major functions.

Debate: Civic renewal is not a fully elaborated theory. It incorporates difficult, unsettled questions. Its core commitments to deliberation, public work, relational politics and the other values defended in chapters 3–4 may conflict with one another in practice. Just as twentieth-century liberalism drew on diverse philosophical traditions, interest groups, and bodies of experimentation to produce a complex and balanced ideology—along with much heated debate and competition—so too should civic renewal encompass a range of ideals and strategies in fruitful dialogue.

I would expect one persistent debate within the movement to concern the relationship between civic renewal, on one hand, and partisanship, polarization, or ideological conflict, on the other. Some proponents of civic renewal regard it as ideologically neutral and scrupulously nonpartisan, an effort to improve our democratic processes that should be welcomed by well-meaning political activists across the spectrum. For instance, Martin Carcasson and his colleagues see "passionate impartiality" as one of the "Key Aspects of the Deliberative Democracy Movement" (which, while not identical to a civic renewal movement, bears a close resemblance to it).³⁴ Others view civic renewal as ideologically centrist, filling a gap between the hostile major political parties and appealing to moderate voters.³⁵ Yet another group holds that civic renewal is the heir to participatory democracy in the 1960s—the decentralizing and populist impulses of the New Left—and is thus the best strategy to revive the political Left, including Greens, democratic socialists, and left-liberals.³⁶ A few thinkers have argued that civic renewal is authentically conservative in its embrace of small, voluntary groups and local traditions.³⁷

These disagreements are by no means an embarrassment but represent an opportunity. Many different kinds of Americans can find a place in discussions of civic renewal and contribute their own insights. It would be a victory if the major political parties began to incorporate insights from their respective allies who are working on various flavors of civic renewal. We need to have a debate about what democracy means and how to promote it, much like the debates we already have about what prosperity means and how to attain that. The result is not consensus but appropriate competition. Within the democracy field itself, we should expect the internal ideological debates to be heated and divisive because the underlying disagreements are genuine and important. For instance, the Coffee Party—introduced earlier as an example of a civic renewal organization—split in 2011 when a faction committed to liberal economic and social reforms created Coffee Party Progressives as a left counterforce to the Tea Party.³⁸ On behalf of the original Coffee Party, Eric Byler responded that, although he welcomed “an energetic, populist left” to participate, his vision was a broader, more ideologically diverse movement that would reduce political polarization.³⁹ This kind of disagreement is to be expected, possibly even welcomed, but it will not always be pleasant.

A related question is the relationship between civic renewal and civility. Some proponents of deliberative democracy and civic education are motivated by a belief that public discourse has become far too harsh and uncivil, driving away ordinary people who expect conversations to be friendly and polite.⁴⁰ In May 2010, President Barack Obama told graduates at the University of Michigan, “The . . . way to keep our democracy healthy is to maintain a basic level of civility in our public debate.”⁴¹ He was responding to widespread public concern. According to a 2010 Allegheny College national survey, 95 percent of Americans believe that civility is important in politics. Most perceive that civility has declined, especially if they listen to the radio and/or pay close attention to politics, and 50 percent believe that there has been a decline in the tone of politics since Obama was elected.⁴²

On the other hand, some proponents of civic renewal are themselves angry about corruption and inequality and believe that stirring up anger (in themselves and others) is an appropriate response. Calls for civility can be efforts to silence marginalized and legitimately resentful citizens. For example, the civil rights historian William Chafe describes the situation in Greensboro, North Carolina, in the 1960s, “From a black point of view, of course, the ground rules, or ‘civilities,’ were often just a way of delaying action.”⁴³ Like the question of ideology, the issue of civility will provoke ongoing discussion that may be fruitful but may also be uncomfortable.

A third contested issue concerns the relationships among political reform, economic reform, and civic empowerment (i.e., building ordinary people’s skills, networks, and sense of confidence). Many alternative theories about these three factors are plausible. For example, one can assert that economic equality is a precondition for citizens to act effectively in their own political interests. I argued against this thesis in chapter 4, but reasonable people hold it. One can argue instead that political reform must precede civic empowerment, because individuals will be discouraged from acting as citizens until political institutions are fair and responsive. Or one can assert that the first step is civic empowerment, without which elites will never concede a fair political system. Each theory suggests a different starting point but looks naive from the perspective of the other two. Thus this debate will be as heated and divisive as the ones previously mentioned. Meanwhile, there will be many routine debates about which concrete strategies, reforms, and organizations to support. Readers of this book should develop positions on these issues and join or even provoke the debate.

Communications: If a first task for the coalitions and organizations involved in civic renewal is to debate unresolved issues, a second is to generate and disseminate public messages. But their messages should not be introductory slogans about the importance of civic engagement, directed at a mass public, with vague objectives, competing with countless other media campaigns in the public sphere.

Instead, the primary audience should be roughly one million Americans who have already had meaningful experiences doing civic work. They should not all receive the same message from the same source; instead, there should be much communication from various organizations to their own members and allies. Each communication should be tailored to its particular context. Still, these messages should share a common theme, which I would briefly paraphrase thus: “You have done important political work that improved the world and fulfilled you personally. (Specifics about the nature of the work would be helpful here.) Your work is deliberative, educational, experiential, loyal, hopeful, democratic, and open to a wide range of fellow citizens. Such work is very rare in our society. Please join with peers to evaluate why it is so rare and take action together to strengthen it.”

An important purpose of these communications is to help people feel part of a larger movement for civic renewal or stronger democracy. A hallmark of any successful movement is such a shared sense of belonging and identity. Today, people who define themselves as leaders of public deliberation, political reform, engaged scholarship, citizen journalism, community organizing,

or civic engagement have ways of interacting with peers within their own fields at the national level: journals, associations, meetings, and e-mail lists. But rarely do the organizers of one strand of civic renewal feel connected to the leaders of the other strands. For example, a professor who organizes local citizens to conduct health research is very unlikely to feel that she is part of the same movement as an entrepreneur who has started a website for civic journalism in a different city. Even less do ordinary citizens recruited into one form of civic engagement recognize a common cause with citizens involved in a different type of engagement in a different place.

Thus, if the elaborate public deliberations known as Clear Vision Eau Claire (under way in Eau Claire, Wisconsin) were suddenly canceled, it is very unlikely that the citizen-journalists involved in writing articles for the Honolulu *Civil Beat* would know what had happened, let alone feel that their own work had been attacked. Similarly, if the *Civil Beat* folded, the deliberating citizens in Eau Claire would have no way of knowing or any reason to care. In contrast, at the height of the civil rights movement, if peaceful protesters were arrested in Chicago, people from Atlanta might send bail money or even get on a bus to support them. We will have a real movement for civic renewal once the citizens involved in such disparate efforts as Clear Vision Eau Claire and the Honolulu *Civil Beat* are communicating about common issues and supporting one another's efforts.

Advocacy: The communications sent by organizations and coalitions in the field of civic renewal should certainly ask for resources—money and time—as well as ideas. Armed with these resources, organizations can conduct political advocacy at the local, state, national, and global levels. In short, they can lobby and litigate.

Exactly what to advocate will be controversial and will vary by location and year. Many factors enter into wise decisions about political priorities, including the potential impact of any given reform, its costs and trade-offs, its chance of passage, its popularity, its potential to divide a coalition, and its likelihood of surviving once originally passed. Some reforms begin helpful feedback loops. A funding stream for youth service, for example, might support organizations that then become advocates of further democratic reform while generating useful lessons about what works.⁴⁴ Other policies are dead ends. An annual \$30 million federal earmark for the Center for Civic Education during the 1990s and 2000s proved to be stable (because the Center developed a national network that lobbied for the annual congressional appropriation), but it failed to generate excellent civic education or to strengthen the broader movement.⁴⁵ Annual funding competitions might have worked better.

Considering all the factors that one must weigh to develop a policy agenda—and the rapidly changing political environment—I hesitate to use the static medium of a book to list policy priorities. However, as illustrative examples, I would suggest the following ten priorities for *national* efforts at the time of writing:

1. Choose one grave national issue and use federal policy to support participatory, deliberative solutions. The issue could be, for example, the high school dropout rate, constantly rising costs of medical care, the loss of jobs and population in our postindustrial cities, childhood obesity, or the failure of policing and sentencing to deter crime. Regardless of the issue, the response would involve a substantial amount of decentralized decision-making and direct work by empowered local bodies that are supported with funds and education and held accountable for results. Youth would be recruited, trained, and rewarded to play important roles in both the discussions and the work.

To be sure, each social or environmental issue connects to others; people do not live within particular institutions such as high schools or clinics. However, the momentum for civic renewal is too weak to permit the federal government to use civic strategies broadly right away. Too few citizens and leaders are now demanding such strategies and are equipped to help implement them. A deep investment in one issue area would provide a high-profile model. At the same time, it would train and empower hundreds of thousands of active citizens, some of whom would later create or demand civic opportunities in other issue domains. For example, if the US Department of Education (reversing 20 years of momentum in the opposite direction) were to delegate important decisions to empowered bodies of parents, teachers, students, and other residents, some members of those bodies would become active at the local level in related topics, such as crime and obesity. Many historical case studies indicate that the strongest impact of particular projects comes later, when participants start unanticipated initiatives of their own.⁴⁶

2. Pass the Fair Elections Now Act or a close equivalent. This legislation would provide clean public funding for candidates who were able to raise sufficient numbers of small private contributions to demonstrate a base of support. It would not only reduce corruption—in the broad (ethical, not legal) sense of that word—by making wealthy donors less influential; it would also articulate a public philosophy that money is problematic in politics. Money is not equivalent to speech and participation. What should count is the best argument, not the most cash.

3. Make voluntary national service a means to develop civic capacities. Early in the Obama administration, Congress voted on a bipartisan basis to authorize the tripling of federal voluntary service programs (AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, Peace Corps, and others). That was an important step that only became controversial after the Republican congressional victories of 2010. Maintaining or expanding the size of national and community service is valuable, but at least as important is to make service programs into opportunities for civic discussion and learning. Every participant should have opportunities to discuss and influence the strategies used in his or her service program and should be expected to obtain skills for deliberating, facilitating meetings, recruiting citizens, analyzing issues, and advocating publicly. To achieve that objective would require setting standards for learning across all the federal service programs.

4. Prepare a new generation of active and responsible citizens. People form attitudes and habits related to civil society when they are young and tend to keep them for the rest of their lives. But many school systems have reduced their commitment to civic education; state standards for civics emphasize factual knowledge rather than skills for collaboration and deliberation; and the federal government has withdrawn completely from the field. (In 2011, Congress eliminated the Learn & Serve America program that provided competitive grants for service learning and withdrew all funding for the Center for Civic Education. The federal Office of Civic Education is buried within the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools.) High priorities include new state standards that emphasize civic engagement, new curricula and tests that align with those standards, and federal investment in innovative civic education.⁴⁷ The federal government should also bring together a range of agencies, including the Department of Education, the Corporation for National and Community Service, the National Park Service, the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the Defense Department, to promote civic education in a coordinated way.

5. Put citizenship back in the civil service. Because of the looming retirement of baby boomers in public service, the federal and state governments face an enormous challenge in recruiting and hiring adequate numbers of highly skilled workers, even if they cut their payrolls because of budget cuts and efficiencies. The Partnership for National Service estimates that the federal government alone needs about 91,000 new employees every fiscal year for positions defined as "mission-critical."⁴⁸ Governments' need to attract and retain qualified civil servants creates an

opportunity for civic renewal. Public sector jobs would become more attractive if they were more creative, collaborative, and rewarding. Encouraging public employees to work in partnership with communities and civic groups would help. At the same time, the federal government should declare that it is looking for employees who have demonstrated experience and skills in deliberation, collaboration, and public work. By setting specific criteria for new employees that include civic skills, the government could change curricula in colleges and universities.

6. Support charter schools, Community Development Corporations, watershed councils, and Federally Qualified Health Centers: These are examples of public institutions that have expanded opportunities for civic engagement. Citizens may found such organizations or help guide them by serving on their boards. Their structures vary in ways that matter for civic renewal. For example, a charter school that has a board composed of parents and community members promotes active citizenship more than a charter school dominated by its charismatic founder. A school that must accept students from a lottery promotes equity better than one that can select its student body. Thus, the government should sustain or expand support for these innovative institutions while also moving them in maximally civic directions.

7. Give the public a voice in policymaking. When members of Congress meet the public in open sessions misleadingly called town meetings, they encounter polarized and mobilized members of advocacy groups, acting strategically.⁴⁹ But when citizens are convened to discuss complex and divisive issues, majorities usually choose reasonable policies and almost all the participants report satisfaction with the process. A model is the national deliberation called "AmericaSpeaks: Our Budget, Our Economy," which convened 3,500 participants to develop budget outlines for the federal government in 2010. Participants, although highly diverse, shifted toward a mixed package of revenue increases and budget cuts. Ninety-seven percent agreed, "People at this meeting listened to one another respectfully and courteously," and 81 percent thought, "Decision makers should incorporate the conclusions of this town meeting into federal budget policy."⁵⁰

To make such processes common and enhance their influence on policies and on the broader political culture, Congress should take two major steps. One would be to fund a high-profile deliberation on a divisive and important topic. The participants' favored policy would come back to Congress as a bill requiring an up-or-down vote. The other important step

would be to create an infrastructure that is ready to organize this and other public deliberations when needed. The infrastructure would consist of standards for fair and open public deliberations, a federal office that could coordinate many simultaneous forums and collect all their findings, and a list of vetted contractors that would be eligible to convene public deliberations with federal grants.

8. Use the Internet to make the regulatory process more deliberative. As shown in chapter 3, regulation by administrative agencies has become a dominant mode of lawmaking, but it is problematic. Appointed officials lack the legitimacy to make explicit value judgments, so rule making degenerates into a combination of bargaining and cost-benefit analysis that is not morally justifiable. Citizens' voices can help, and administrative agencies have long been required to receive and formally consider public comments. But the influential comments tend to come from well-placed experts and stakeholders. In October 2002, the federal government launched eRule-making, an initiative to allow the public to comment electronically on pending rules and to search and read others' comments. The resulting system has won awards for technical excellence and for making government more accessible and transparent, but it still does not favor deliberative norms. Each comment is a separate communication to the government; participants do not exchange reasons, judgments, and evidence with one another. One important exception is the Peer-to-Patent website of the US Patent and Trademark Office, which encourages a community of volunteer reviewers to assess pending patent applications collaboratively.⁵¹ Assessing the merits of a patent claim is a relatively technical and nonideological matter. The next step is to build similar websites that encourage users to discuss controversies that have come before federal agencies. The goal would not be consensus—which could suppress the right of individuals to petition the government in their own voice—but rather an illuminating public dialogue.

9. Launch a Civic Communications Corps: The metropolitan daily newspaper and its professional roster of reporters was a pillar of civil society for more than a century, complementing voluntary civic associations. Newspapers and traditional journalism are in dire condition. Without government's help, citizens are creating diverse and interactive new forms of media—mostly online—to counteract the decline of the commercial news and entertainment businesses. But many Americans cannot participate in or benefit from these new media because they lack equipment and broadband access or the necessary skills to be creative online. Meanwhile, thousands of young adults (including many without college educations)

have relevant skills, from highly technical expertise with computers and networks, to human relationships in their communities, to creativity with videos and music.

To take advantage of their potential, the government should launch a small new Civic Communications Corps within AmeriCorps.⁵² Full-time volunteers would be placed in community organizations to serve their communications needs and would also meet at the municipal level to work on citywide or countywide strategies for enhancing the flow of information and discussion. They would generate software, examples, training videos, and other resources for the rest of the national and community service world to use in serving public communications needs. College and universities would also be encouraged to use these tools to become communications hubs for their neighboring communities.

10. Incorporate immigrants into civic life. As a result of the great modern migration into the United States, more than one-quarter of young Americans could be classified broadly as "immigrants" (having at least one parent born abroad). Despite variation among immigrant groups—and changes over the course of most immigrants' lives—their levels of active civic engagement are lower than average, even once education and income are taken into consideration.⁵³ Our goal should not be to wash out the distinctive aspects of immigrants' political and civic cultures. On the contrary, communities that value immigrants' distinctive contributions see much higher levels of immigrant civic engagement.⁵⁴ But it will take investment and reform to raise their rates of civic participation. Two important steps would be to make the naturalization process a supportive education in civic engagement rather than a hurdle to be jumped and to pass the DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors), which would make undocumented young people eligible for financial aid.⁵⁵

The theory behind this Ten Point Plan is not that federal policy reforms can cause a renewal of civic life in America. Well-chosen reforms may provide some support for civic renewal in the form of financial incentives, legitimacy, publicity, relevant jobs, and training. Just as important, the successful pursuit of policy reforms may turn disparate and politically weak organizations into a movement.

The Voting Rights Act offers an analogy. Its passage did not (by itself) change the balance of political power in the United States. Separate from the law, the civil rights movement had to educate, motivate, and register voters; recruit and develop political candidates; change the consciousness of African

Americans and whites; reform the inner workings of the Democratic Party; and litigate for reforms in district maps, ballots, election dates, and many other areas of the electoral system: a struggle that continues today. Nevertheless, the Voting Rights Act was a powerful tool for activists, and the struggle to pass it was a unifying and inspiring goal for the civil rights movement. The same could be said today of policy reforms for civic renewal.

I have emphasized federal reforms here for the sake of brevity, but states and localities could be equally important if one or more jurisdictions became genuine laboratories for democracy. There should also be crucial struggles for civic engagement in universities, nonprofit service agencies, professional associations, unions, religious congregations, and newsrooms, to mention only some of the important venues outside government.

Some of the most promising steps may seem rather far removed from you and from me. For example, the first item on the Ten Point Plan was to drive civic renewal strategies deep into the work of at least one federal agency. That would take a committed, skillful, and experienced cabinet-level official. Unless you are the president of the United States, you cannot nominate individuals for the cabinet. Unless you are nominated (and confirmed by the Senate), you cannot lead a federal agency. Few of us will ever play either of those roles.

Nevertheless, if you work at the local level on a particular issue—say, education—in ways that combine deliberation and work and that develop your own and others' civic capacities, you are building the foundations for strategies at the federal level. A successful federal initiative would not be possible without persuasive examples and evidence, local organizations and individuals capable of handling grants and power, and active supporters who defend civic strategies. By working at the local level, you can help provide those conditions for success at the federal level. You can do more if you recruit new people to such work, build networks connecting your projects to other similar ones, view yourself as part of a nascent movement for civic renewal, encourage peers to think of themselves in similar ways, and provoke conversations about the broad topic of civic engagement.

Those conversations should encompass facts, values, and strategies. The factual questions to pose (regardless of the scale of one's civic work) include: Who is engaging, and who is left out? What are the consequences of our civic activities, both positive and negative?

The values questions include: Are our goals consistent with justice? Are our discussions and processes ethical and fair? What are the consequences of our work for the virtues and dispositions of the people involved?

The strategic questions include: What resources and opportunities (including funds, skilled people, legal rights, and responsive institutions) do we possess for our civic work? What resources and opportunities do we lack? What would it take to get what we need? That last question moves us to consider reforms in institutions and policies as well as changes in our own behavior.

Overall, the goal is to replace a vicious cycle of citizens' disempowerment and public corruption with a virtuous cycle of reengagement and reform. The obstacles to changing our national direction in such a profound way are serious. They include a disempowered and divided citizenry, a shattered civic infrastructure, and a set of interest groups that will fight to defend the status quo. But the opportunities are also significant: they include a substantial base of skillful, motivated, and increasingly experienced and interconnected civic reformers.

Cynicism and pessimism are obstacles to reform that we (you and I) should strive to counter. After all, cynicism and pessimism are belied every day by the many organizations already working on civic renewal in America. Although success is hardly guaranteed, the consequences of failure are dire. In the words of the Port Huron Statement, "If we appear to seek the unattainable, it has been said, then let it be known that we do so to avoid the unimaginable."⁵⁶