Changes in the Political Landscape and their Implications for Civic Education

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Changes taking place in the political landscape of advanced democracies suggest that a second look at some aspects of civic education may be in order. It now is generally accepted that, at minimum, civic education ought to provide students with basic knowledge of government and its institutions and equip them with the cognitive and participatory skills needed to function effectively in a democratic society. In addition, civic education is expected to foster a reasoned commitment to democratic values and a willingness on the part of individuals and groups to engage in democratic behaviors that adhere to democratic norms.

Whether those traditional and accepted expectations of civic education are in need of rethinking given some fundamental changes taking place in advanced democracies, is subject to question in many circles. Some critics point to the fact that traditional institutions are being challenged and that new forms of representation and participation are emerging. They argue, therefore, that the body of political knowledge and the skills—particularly the participatory skills—taught to students ought to change in keeping with new political realities. One critic writes:

> Democracy, once again in favor, is in need of conceptual renewal. While the
> traditional concerns of democratic theory with state-centered institutions remain
> importantly crucial and ethically central, they are increasingly subject to the

limitations we should expect when nineteenth-century concepts meet twenty-first-century realities.[1]

This paper will focus on three twenty-first-century-realities which many observers find worrisome:

- Decreasing confidence in the institutions of representative government,

- Increasing clamor for direct democracy, using the initiative and the referendum as examples, and

- The expansion of advocacy democracy.

The paper will conclude by considering some of the possible implications of these three developments for civic education.

Decreasing Confidence in the Institutions of Representative Government

When former French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing proclaimed, "We are witnessing a crisis of representative democracy," he expressed a prime concern that is widely shared. A number of recent studies reveal that in advanced democracies citizens, public interest groups, and even political elites show decreasing confidence in the institutions and processes of representative government. One comparative study of 40 nations found that:

> At the end of the twentieth century citizens in many established democracies give poor marks to how their political system functions and in particular how institutions such as parliaments, the legal system and the civil service operate …. The erosion of support for core representative institutions has spread to many industrialized societies.[2]

A just completed survey of the public's attitudes toward the Congress of the United States reports similar findings. It reveals that a solid majority—57 percent—of the public disapproved of the way Congress is doing its job. Even more disquieting is the finding that only 49 percent of citizens think their congressional representatives have their constituents' interests in mind when

voting on policies, while over 63 percent of the public thinks their representatives have special

interests in mind when casting roll call votes.[3]

   Misgivings about representative institutions also were expressed in a report by The

Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom, an organization which originated at the University of

Leeds. The purpose of the periodic audits is to provide a comprehensive and systematic

assessment of a country's political life. The 2004 Audit was highly critical of British institutions.

It claimed:

> The principal democratic deficiencies in British governing arrangements are
> interconnected:
> - Parliamentary elections generally place a single party decisively in power,
>   on a minority of the popular vote.
> - The majority government and the permanent bureaucracy fuse into a
>   dominant executive, protected from proper scrutiny by secrecy and
>   operating in a context of informal guidelines and discretionary power.
> - The executive dominates Parliament and through Parliament is superior to
>   the judiciary, and neither they nor any other bodies provide effective
>   checks and balances on its conduct of public affairs.[4]

   The overall conclusion of the Audit is that although institutions in the United Kingdom

operate within democratic norms and procedures, "systemic features are at work which

substantially limit their reach and impact in practice."[5]

   To remedy that situation the Audit contends:

> British democracy requires a new constitution or constitutional framework which
> sets out the respective powers of the executive and organs of the state, defines the
> limits to those powers and establishes rules of conduct. Such a framework would
> also specify the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and substitute popular
> sovereignty for executive supremacy. Otherwise, citizens of this country will
> continue to be under a 'magically flexible constitution' which allows their
> political masters to make up the rules as they go along.[6]

Increasing Clamor for Direct Democracy

Along with expressions of dissatisfaction with representative institutions, many citizens in established democracies are calling for new types of direct democracy that bypass (or complement) the processes of representative democracy. They no longer accept the arguments advanced by James Madison in *Federalist 10*. He contended:

> … Representation refines and enlarges public views by passing them through the chosen body of citizens. The representatives' wisdom may discern the true interest of their country and their patriotism and love of justice will make it less likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations. Under this system, the public voice as pronounced by the representatives of the people may be more in line with the public good than if all the people gathered and spoke for themselves.

Instead of relying on their chosen representatives to deliberate in institutional settings and allow passions to cool before making decisions, individuals and groups today are making immediate demands. One scholar claims that "a plebiscitary quality has seeped into legislative life."[7] Another commentator alleges:

> The people are becoming the fourth branch of government, alongside the president, the Congress and the courts. No longer is any major step taken in Washington without first testing the public's opinion; a permanent electro-cardiograph seems hooked up to the body politic.[8]

The most common means of direct democracy are initiatives and referenda. These allow citizens to make government policy themselves, bypassing the mediating influence of representative institutions. The initiative, an electoral device by which interested citizens can propose legislation or constitutional amendments, is now used in approximately half of the states in the United States. About 20 states permit its use for ordinary laws and 17 for constitutional amendments. The referendum is a means whereby voters can "veto" a bill passed by their legislature. Governments may also use an optional or advisory referendum by which a legislative body may voluntarily refer a measure to voters for an expression of popular sentiment.

The Initiative and Referendum Institute reports that there were 118 statewide referenda in the United States during the 1950s. During the 1990s, the number of referenda more that tripled. The United States, however, is not alone in use of referenda. A number of other nations have amended laws and constitutions to provide greater opportunities for direct democracy at the national and local levels.[9]

The subject matter of referenda tends to fall into four categories: constitutional reform, territorial change, moral issues, and other policy matters. England put the question of its joining the European Union to the voters in its first national referendum in 1975. Moral issues like divorce and assisted fertility (Italy, 1974 and 2005) and abortion (Ireland, 1992) have also been left to popular decision.[10]

Today, there is increased clamor in the advanced democracies to "let the public decide" all contentious issues. But whether the initiative and referendum are wise means of direct democracy is subject to debate. Those who question their use argue that referenda and initiatives place even greater demands for information and understanding on voters. For example, Italy's multi-referendum ballot of 1997 asked voters to make many choices. Among them were television-ownership rules, television-broadcasting policy, the hours during which stores could remain open, the commercial activities which municipalities could pursue labor-union reform proposals, and regulations for administrative elections.

Another problem is that interest groups may find it easier to manipulate processes of direct democracy than those of representative democracy. As one critic notes:

> The discretion to place a policy initiative on the ballot can be appealing to interest groups, which then have unmediated access to voters during the subsequent referendum campaign. In addition, decisions made by way of direct democracy are less susceptible to bargaining or the checks and balances that occur within the normal legislative process. Some recent referenda in California may illustrate this style of direct democracy. Wealthy backers pay a consulting firm to collect

signatures so as to get a proposal on the ballot, and then bankroll a campaign to support their desired legislation. This is not grassroots democracy at work; it is the representation of wealthy interests by other means.[11]

Those who support the use of the initiative and referendum counter that those electoral devices shift the locus of agenda setting from elites toward the citizens. Citizens can bring issues into the political arena that elites tend not to want to address. Even when referenda fail to reach the ballot or fail to win a majority, they prompt elites to be more sensitive to the issues which the public thinks are important and ought to be addressed.

Italy offers two recent examples of issues which the public thought needed to be addressed directly, despite very formidable opposition. The first was a referendum on assisted fertility. Conservatives and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church mounted a well-organized campaign against the measure. Pope Benedict XVI spoke publicly against the referendum saying the Church, though reluctant to get into politics, was "willing to inject itself into politics where principle is concerned." The referendum went down to defeat in the summer of 2005.

A second issue concerning the question of granting equal rights to unmarried couples is currently being hotly debated. Italy does not recognize common-law unions even though the number of unmarried couples has tripled, by one estimate, in the last 25 years to over half a million people. A proposed initiative would give partners in common-law unions in Italy the rights of inheritance, the ability to make medical decisions, and the benefits of an extension of private medical insurance.

Critics of the proposed initiative argue that it would imply a de-facto recognition of homosexual unions—a sensitive topic with socially conservative voters and anathema to the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. They note with considerable misgiving that Spain, another overwhelmingly Catholic country, legalized gay marriage in the summer of 2005.

Those who support the proposed initiative tend to agree with one aspiring politician who recently said that homosexuality should not be a model, but it is not a crime. They insist that a secular state has the obligation to extend basic protections to all its citizens, regardless of the life-style choices they make.[12]

The Expansion of Advocacy Democracy

A dramatic change in the ways people associate for civic and political purposes is taking place not only in the United States but in Europe as well. Prior to the 1960s, the civic world centered in locally rooted and nationally active membership organizations. Today Americans, in particular, "affiliate" with causes and projects. They do not act as real members who regularly interface with one another. Instead, they send checks to an abundant assortment of public affairs and social service groups run by professionals. Their spokespersons regularly appear on television and haunt the halls of legislatures. These advocacy organizations also make maximum use of freedom-of-information laws to gather evidence for class-action suits on behalf of the environment, women's rights, and other public causes. While only a handful of nations had freedom-of-information laws in 1970, such laws are now almost universal in OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries.

On balance, is this civic transformation from membership to advocacy a healthy development? Opinion is divided. Optimists insist that public life has been and will continue to be rejuvenated by social movements and advocacy groups fighting for social rights and enlarged understandings of the public good. Public interest groups may be "a highly efficient use of civic energy." Those who join them "may get the same civic payoff for less personal hassle."[13] Public interest groups can give citizens new influence over the agenda-setting process, as well as unmediated involvement in the policy-formation process.

Those who are less sanguine about the transformation argue that voluntary, membership organizations undergird democracy. They are sites where citizens learn and practice skills essential to effective participation. Alexis de Tocqueville once wisely observed "for democratic societies knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge."[14] It is through voluntary, face-to-face membership organizations that citizens acquire "knowledge of how to combine."

A final concern about the rise of advocacy groups is that privileged and well-educated citizens have led the way in reshaping the associational universe. They have withdrawn from cross-class federations and yielded leadership to paid advocates and managers. Because advocacy groups are staff-heavy and focused on lobbying, research, and media projects, they are managed from the top with few opportunities for members to develop or to exercise their leadership potential. At the same time, advocacy groups are disproportionately used by relatively affluent and skilled citizens who already are participating in conventional forms of representative democracy, while the poor, unskilled, less well-educated or otherwise disadvantaged tend to get left behind.

Implications for Civic Education

One of the twenty-first-century realities addressed in this paper was decreasing confidence in representative institutions. That ought to be a matter of concern to civic educators. It is true that an excess of institutional trust can lead to a lack of vigilance and hence to lower participation on the part of citizens. The absence or low levels of trust in representative institutions, however, pose equally serious problems. As a recently completed study of trust among students in five nations concluded:

> … Trust is not a fuzzy emotion loosely connected to periodic bursts of political
> activity. It is a core aspect of civic-relatedness that underlies political participation

and civic engagement. Trust is not so much a product of the amount of associational or organizational experience as it is the floor or foundation on which productive membership can be based, as well as a part of the network of norms and beliefs that contributes to democratic governments' legitimacy. A threshold level of trust allows individual citizens to explore, experiment and innovate in their political and civic participation. A certain level of trust in governmental institutions makes a place in a young person's developing identity for political participation, for a sense of civic responsibility, and for a sense of political efficacy.[15]

Other studies of high-poverty neighborhoods in Europe have found lacks of trust in institutions as high as such lacks in new or unstable democracies.[16]

Research also confirms the fact that the idea of delegating authority to institutions that are intended to represent citizens' interests is a difficult one for some students to understand. They fail to understand the purposes and functions of institutions of representative government. They do not appreciate the importance of the fact-finding, deliberation, debate, and compromising which are hallmarks of representative institutions. They also are unaware of the ways citizens can participate in their own governance through representative institutions by monitoring them and exerting their influence.

The penchant for direct democracy expressed by many students today also merits the attention of civic educators. *The New Student Politics Curriculum Guide* issued by Campus Compact defines civic engagement as "exercising personal agency in a public domain." It goes on to explain:

Civic engagement means the practice of democratic values; more explicitly, it means the practice of direct liberatory democracy of the type described by John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Myles Horton and Jane Addams. That is, civic engagement as we understand the term places primary emphasis on personal, direct engagement in public issues, dialogue and decision-making.[17]

When a group of college and university student leaders met at Wingspread under the auspices of Campus Compact, they agreed on a statement on student civic engagement. It included the following "perspectives."

- While we are disillusioned with conventional politics (and therefore most forms of political activity) we are deeply involved in civic issues through non-traditional forms of engagement …. In fact, what many perceive as disengagement may actually be conscious choice.

- To us, local politics are more accessible than national politics and both local and global politics often involve issues that are of special concern to us.

- We see ourselves as misunderstood by those who measure student engagement by conventional standards that don't always fit our conception of democratic participation.

- Many students are inclined toward community service over conventional forms of political activity, because they see conventional politics as inherently tied to institutions that seem impersonal and unresponsive.[18]

Although the students preferred forms of direct democracy and strongly supported community service, they were critical of how it currently is being managed at the college and university level. They expressed three major complaints. First, community service is not connected to the curriculum, hence it does not allow students to realize interconnections between service work and larger systemic issues. Service, the students believe, should be integrated into curricula so that it fits within the courses they take and the majors they pursue. A second source of student dissatisfaction was that "colleges and universities do not teach us the community building/organizing skills that we need. They rarely provide models for healthy communities, either on the campus itself (where the hierarchical nature of the institution often overlooks student needs/input when making decisions) or through relationships with the surrounding community."[19] The third complaint was that traditional faculty are unable to help students make the connections between their work in the community and the knowledge and skill base that deepens students' understanding and their ability to profit from their community work.

Traditional faculty, the students allege, too often live exclusively within the disengaged and isolated culture of academia.

It is interesting to note that very similar attitudes and criticisms were found among youth in Great Britain. A study "A Generation Apart? Youth and Political Participation in Britain" concluded that:

> Although uninspired by, or even skeptical of, political parties and professional politicians, young people are sufficiently interested in political affairs to dispel the myth that they are apathetic and politically lazy. But they are also interested in a new style of politics. While they may eschew much of what could be characterized as formal or conventional politics, they are interested in a different type of politics that is more participative and which focuses on localized, immediate issues.[20]

Conclusion

Civic educators need to be attentive to the changes taking place in the political landscape of advanced democracies. Decreasing confidence in the institutions of representative government, increasing clamor for direct democracy, and the expansion of advocacy democracy have important implications for civic education. These developments may enlarge the avenues within which individuals can act upon their civic interests and identities and they can increase the number of citizens who participate in decision-making. Sheer numbers of participants, however, do not ensure the legitimacy, stability, or health of a democratic government. The quality of participation also matters. That is why civic education is needed which will enable citizens to acquire the knowledge and skills essential for informed, effective participation. Equally important is civic education which cultivates a deep understanding of democratic values and principles and fosters a willingness to act in accordance with those values and principles.

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Notes

1. Mark Warren. *Democracy and Association*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 226.

2. *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*, Pippa Norris, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 2.

3. "How the American Public Views Congress: A Report Based on the Center on Congress' 2004 Public Opinion Survey," Edward G. Carmines, Jessica C. Gerrity, and Michael W. Wagner, eds. (Bloomington: Center on Congress at Indiana University, August 2005), pp. 1 – 2.

4. "Democratic Findings No. 3," (Human Rights Centre: University of Essex Colchester, 2004), p. 7.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Roger H. Davidson and Walter J. Oleszek. *Congress and Its Members*, fifth edition, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1996), p. 431.

8. Lawrence Grossman. "Beware the Electronic Republic," (*USA Today*, August 29, 1995), p. 13A.

9. In a number of constitutions, notably the Swiss, referenda are specially authorized in certain instances so that the government can determine the opinion of the people before deciding how to proceed on an important national issue. See also David Butler and Austin Ranney, eds. *Referenda Around the World*, (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1994). Michael Gallagher and Pier Vincenzo Uleri, eds.; *The Referendum Experience in Europe*, (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1996).

10. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Democracy*, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2000), p. 318.

11. Russell J. Dalton, Susan E. Scarrow, and Bruce E. Cain. "Advanced Democracies and the New Politics," (*Journal of Democracy*, January 2004), pp. 133 – 134.

12. Ian Fisher. "An Uproar in Italy Derails Gay Union Hopes," (*International Herald Tribune*, September 17 – 18, 2005), p. 3.

13. *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), p. 498.

14. Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy In America*, Volume Two. Reprinted in *The Tocqueville Reader*, Oliver Zunz and Alan S. Kahan, eds. (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing), p. 190.

15. Judith Torney-Purta, Wendy Klandl Richardson, and Carolyn Henry Barber. "Trust in Government Related Institutions and Civic Engagement Among Adolescents: Analysis of Five Countries from the IEA Civic Education Study," (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement: University of Maryland. Circle Working Paper 17, August 2004), pp. 15 – 16.

16. See J. Bynner and S. Ashford. "Politics and Participation: Some Antecedents of Young Peoples' Attitudes to the Political System and Political Activity," (*European Journal of Social Psychology*, 24), pp. 223 – 226. A. France. "Why Should We Care? Young People, Citizenship and Questions of Social Responsibility," (*Journal of Youth Studies*) pp. 97 – 111.

17. Keith Morton, Sandra Enos, and Sarah E. Long. *The New Student Politics Curriculum*, second edition, (Brown University: Campus Compact, 2004), pp. 8 – 9.

18. *The Wingspread Statement on Student Civic Engagement*, second edition, (Brown University: Campus Compact, 2002), pp. I, V, 11.

19. *Ibid.* pp. 8 – 9.

20. Statement by Dietrich Baenziger, European Youth Forum at the Council of Europe Conference on Education for Democratic Citizenship, (Warsaw, Poland, April 2005). http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/education/E.D.C/NGOs_corner/Statement_Dietrich_Baenziger.asp