

Acts of Democracy: Reconceptualizing Politics, Participation, and Competence

by Richard P. Hiskes

Since Lincoln stood at Gettysburg, democracy has often been characterized in terms of prepositions—government “of, by and for” the people. Lincoln’s legendary eloquence can be misleading however, since at its heart democracy’s specialness can only be captured by honoring its verbs. What both citizens and their governments actually do—or refrain from doing—is what sets democratic politics apart from all other forms. Lincoln of course knew this, and so in his short, most famous speech, he makes it clear that what the world will “note and long remember,” indeed, what “consecrates” the killing field on which he stood, are not the words uttered in remembrance, but rather, the “unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.”

The Work of Democracy

In the United States today, democracy is full of talk. On television and radio, over the internet, even occasionally in the streets, political discussions spew out volumes of words, most of them far more forgettable than the few spoken by Lincoln. What of democracy’s talk today—are the words uttered in 1990s’ democratic discourse worth remembering? Do they capture the meaning of democracy in an even remotely similar fashion as those spoken in 1863? Or was Lincoln’s true eloquence embodied in his recognition, partially hidden by his modesty, that words and talk are not the essence of democracy?

The latter is an important question in any evaluation of the state of democracy in our time. Its significance presses in on us even as the talk increases. Indeed, the vast expansion of communications technologies such as the Internet and satellites makes the question ever more salient. Never before have the possibilities for democratic discussion existed to the degree they do now. And never before has democracy emerged

seemingly victorious in so many societies as in recent years. One cannot help but presume some correlation between democracy’s advance and that of communications technologies. And yet, Lincoln’s admonition still echoes—amidst all the shouting, faxing, e-mailing, and chatting—is anyone here doing the work of democracy?

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A growth industry of commentary, both academic and popular, is mushrooming around the general topic of the present state of democracy. Titles such as *Democracy’s Discontent*, *Democracy On Trial*, and *Making Democracy Work*, bespeak an unease with the present condition of democratic forms in the United States and elsewhere.¹ While acknowledging the dramatic democratic changes occurring in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, these books explore the present state of democratic discourse and action, judging it to be disconcertingly “anxious,” “disempowered,” “faltering,” even a “frayed fabric.”² Perhaps in light of the cold war’s end, democracy’s malaise can partly be chalked up to the spoilage of victory; still, Fukuyama’s “end of history” was not supposed to be this depressing. Liberal democracy’s apparent triumph over communism seems diminished by its gloomy inward gaze.

Sandel, Elshtain, and Putnam agree that the source of democracy’s morale problem does not lie in its formal political institutions; nor, therefore, do its solutions, a point of particular interest for Putnam in his evaluation of emerging democratic systems. Rather, the work of democracy is languishing within the civic life of society upon which political institutions are constructed. Elshtain mourns (p. 5) the “evacuation of civic spaces;” Putnam (1995, p. 667) wonders “why are more Americans bowling alone?” Sandel (p. 6) observes that liberalism “lacks the civic resources to sustain self-government.”

What all three authors focus on is the level of civil society that democracy requires for its politics and institutions to thrive. All three revert to Tocqueville for their characterizations of what civil society represents. Tocqueville perhaps was most economical in his characterization of civic life as encompassing “the habits of the heart.” Elshtain (p.5) elaborates by referring to the “many forms of community and association that dot the landscape of a democratic culture, from families to churches to neighborhood groups to trade unions to self-help movements to volunteer assistance to the needy.” Though admitting that political parties once also “were a robust part of this picture,” Elshtain finds no other political institutions in sight. Civil society is not in the Constitution; it is however, behind it, and from it all other democratic institutions find their impetus and justification.

In both Tocqueville’s and Elshtain’s characterizations of democratic civil life, notice what is lacking in their images of citizen interaction. First, the behavior is conceived of as habitual—that is, instinctual rather than rationally goal-directed or pursuant to well defined and reflected upon interests. These are people simply “being” with other people, in families, churches, and on the street. Second, these habits are of “the heart,” not of the pocketbook or even necessarily of the mind. They call attention to commitments—for Sandel, to “encumbrances”—of a sort mostly entered into

gay populations or lung cancer among smokers, the risks of modern life help to make "identity politics" the order of the day.³ Within what Elshtain calls the resulting "politics of displacement," talk and rights are both everywhere and cheap.

When democratic politics, with its concepts of rights, liberty and equality, crosses into the private realm of civil association, what results may be a boon to lawyers, but to few others. When family life, club membership, work relationships, even entertainment options excessively become matters of litigation, legislation, and campaign rhetoric, something necessary to the healthy functioning of democracy has been lost. Democracy, as Tocqueville insisted, requires associations that are not political but yet still function as sources of meaning and social engagement. Such social organisms are not within the public realm; the relationships upon which they are constructed are not based upon rights but on shared conviction and interest. Yet, they undergird the public realm and keep the power of governmental coercion at bay; they are therefore essential for the protection of individual liberty and the overall well-being of democracy.

In our lifetime, the public realm and its dialect of "rights talk" has overwhelmed all other human relationships, while the realm of civil discourse and association has shriveled. Blame is difficult to assign for such an emergent and pervasive phenomenon that conflates the public and private, but there is sufficient responsibility to cover all points on the ideological spectrum. On the right is President Reagan opining before a joint session of Congress that "private values must be at the heart of public policies."⁴ On the left are the myriad defenders of individual rights and their formal organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union. As a less obviously political example, Elshtain echoes Putnam in faulting the blight of exhibitionism known as television talk shows that exploit the loss of the private space within democratic politics. When the

willingly, out of a sense of need rather than of calculation or gain. Finally, none of the associations that emerge from such motivations are predominantly characterized by talking or being heard, but by acting, by being engaged in common work or play (Putnam's bowling leagues) that requires communication surely, but is not primarily about communicating.

If these theorists are correct—and I believe they are—in their belief that the explanation behind democracy's presently sorry state is the loss of our civic culture, many issues arise that need to be considered by political scientists and other professionals which they have long since stopped addressing. These questions go to the heart of how we conceptualize the realm of behavior that we claim to study, theorize about, conduct opinion polls on, etc. Indeed the very definition of politics is at issue, as is the perhaps broader concept of the "public realm," and its relationship to (and distinction from) private or civil life. Beyond questioning the definition of the realm of politics, exploring the present state of democratic civil life also leads us to review the present meanings of two other concepts of democratic politics: what passes for or counts as political participation—that is, the "work" of democracy; and secondly, within that definition, how do we measure citizen competency in performing that work?

**"The Personal is Political,"
but Uncivil**

The feminist rallying cry of the sixties is heard today on a score of political

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fronts, some of which have little or no relationship with that earlier movement. But even before the phrase "the personal is political," was first uttered, it had signified an area of public negotiation within the democratic politics of the United States. As a nation made up of immigrant groups, US citizens have throughout its history felt the opposing tugs of identification coming from their ethnic or cultural associations on the one hand, and their nation as a whole on the other. Neighborhoods with singular identities turned cities into mosaics of diversity, while politics became the art of distilling common areas of agreement and compromise about issues that transcended or were otherwise outside one's literal and figurative "neighborhood."

Today, the boundaries separating identity from politics are virtually erased, and the consequences for democracy have been dire. Though the possible causes of this loss of distinction are numerous, a few likely culprits are worth noting. Robert Putnam lays the blame for what he calls the loss of "social capital" that facilitates civil association largely at television's door, noting that the period of its inculcation into most American homes corresponds with the period when citizens increasingly became strangers to each other. His accusation sounds a bit pat, but if broadened a bit to include communications technology generally, the impact on the "trust, norms, and networks" that constitute social capital is easier to identify. (I will return to communications technologies in the next section)

From a still broader perspective, modern technologies of many types and the risks they embody feed into present tendencies within the public realm to politicize identity and make presumptive claims on the polity on that basis. Foreexample, consider medical risks now identifiable through advances in modern medicine that are limited to specific groups of potential victims. Whether we consider "acceptable" diseases such as Tay Sachs disease among eastern European Jewish populations or sickle cell anemia among blacks, or vaguely "blameworthy" illnesses like AIDS in

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private realm disappears, what becomes of individual self-identity is found only in whatever gains "publicity," regardless of its level of venality.

There are many ways to construe what losing the public/private distinction means for democratic life, but one that is particularly evocative focuses on the status of rights as the currency of contemporary discourse. It is a commonplace today to note that many of the so-called rights declaimed in public speech are nowhere to be found in the Constitution. Such is the distinction between true rights and "rights talk." Real rights have as their focus whatever is necessary for the treatment of all individuals as equals, though not in the sense of guaranteeing every person the same outcomes, wealth, etc. Rights, as Ronald Dworkin famously concluded, ensure each person not "equal treatment," but a level of respect that comes from "being treated as an equal." Such treatment and respect are public acts, and are limited in their scope.

"Rights talk," on the other hand, as identified by legal scholar Mary Ann Glendon, denotes the (lazy) wish that private needs should be granted as a matter of political obligation and public policy. Claiming equal treatment in the family, at work, in church life, in entertainment opportunities is certainly an essential part of the democratic life, but not of democratic government. These are areas of the private domain, to be negotiated as a matter of what is considered "good" by the participants, and are not properly guaranteed by government action. Why not? Because government is incapable of providing such goods. They are nevertheless essential to the meaning of democracy. They represent the work, not the talk of democracy; and as such, they belong to the civil realm. This realm is only partially described as that within which the power of government is circumscribed; it is more accurate to say that this is the realm where citizens jointly, freely, and through their relations with each other, lay the foundations for democracy as a way of life, not merely as a set of institutions and

processes. In this realm is where the hard work of democracy is done, and it requires more than talk and more than our disengaged viewing of the carnivals of celebrity known as contemporary democratic politics.

Civil Politics and Participatory Democratic Acts

What then should count as a democratic act, or, to put the question specifically to political scientists like myself: what should be noted, measured, or theo-

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rized about as evidence of participation in democratic politics? Clearly, if we follow Tocqueville and his contemporary interlocutors, the definition of participation expands far beyond the usual elements of running for office, voting, or supporting candidates.

Democracy construed as a way of life presumes that all interactions between citizens, whether at home, in their associations, at work, or at play, take on a political significance that either broadens or diminishes the prospects for democratic life. Those interactions, as such, are neither fully public nor private. They are clearly not private in the sense of solitary since they involve others; yet they do not necessarily—or in some cases easily—invoke the language of the public sphere with its emphasis upon rights. Yet they represent the discourse

of a culture and a society, and because they do they are constitutive of both public and private realms. These interactions of our life invoke and rely upon the elements of our public discourse, as political theorist Sheldon Wolin summarizes them, our "vocabulary, ideologies, symbols, images, memories, and myths that have come to form the ways we think and talk" about our life together.⁵

The quasi-public character of such interactions, which should form such a large part of our contemporary life, does not entitle or require them to become the focus of either government or law. To the contrary, since neither government nor law has the capacity ever fully to bring democracy to this realm of life, attempts to do so most often, as Elstain enumerates and Tocqueville foresaw, result in a loss rather than a gain to democratic liberty and equality. Democratic negotiations of civil relations are the duty of citizens alone, and the tools they bring to the table, ranging from love or mutual respect to shame or moral censure, are examples of how real democratic discourse differs from rights talk or chat on the internet.

For some democratic theorists, democracy is defined by the idea of communication, or, as in the case of Benjamin Barber, by the model of a conversation.⁶ For many of these theorists, the opportunities for communication offered by the new technologies of the internet and cable communications, or by the resuscitation of older techniques like talk radio, represent brave new worlds of democratic possibility. I do not share their enthusiasms; nor, I contend, would Tocqueville or other classic apostles of free democratic discourse such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau or John Stuart Mill.

Communicative interactions that occur on the internet, talk radio, on televised talk shows, over fax lines, and the like, are unique products of this century—in some cases, of the past decade. They occupy a space between public life and

solitary disengagement, and because they do they appear as good examples of civil society. Though I might dispute even this, I will limit myself to the less sweeping claim that they are examples of democratic civil life. Such communications are certainly part of our contemporary discourse, as understood by Wolin, but they are not particularly democratic elements, for two reasons manifested by their essential features.

First, such interactions embrace a paradox of being both public yet isolating, interactive but untraceable, identity affirming (in Elshtain's sense) yet nevertheless in many cases anonymous. Electronic communication is not public in the sense of being face-to-face discourse, though it is often "in your face." It is never truly civic speech; and often—designedly so—not even civil. The lack of civility in much of what passes for contemporary discourse is a second element that marks it as non-democratic in nature.

As Rousseau, Mill, and Tocqueville understood, democracy requires that citizens engage each other as citizens—as sharers of a discourse—in each others' presence. For Rousseau this requirement included even—especially—the most public act of legislation, since he believed the democratic right to give laws to oneself could never be delegated away. Mill, Tocqueville, the authors of *The Federalist Papers*, and most eighteenth and nineteenth-century believers in democracy were somewhat less demanding, since they allowed for representation in the matter of making laws. But they all agreed with Rousseau that delegation has its limits; specifically, it cannot extend to the normal interactions of everyday democratic life. Citizens must face each other; anonymity is not allowable in a democracy—for either public officials or citizens. Their reasoning is simple really: democracy is work that requires open accountability and public responsibility from all those who partake of it. On these grounds Mill went so far as to deny the efficacy of the secret ballot, and insisted that all votes be publicly recorded. Excessive secrecy

in government or in citizenship, he reasoned, is a danger that threatens democracy as a whole. As evidence, they noted that the chief threats to democracy—corruption, tyranny, bigotry, the loss of equal respect that constitutes discrimination of all kinds—all of these thrive best in secret; the light of open scrutiny and public discussion threatens them as much as it secures democracy's future.

Chat on the internet, calls on the radio, appearances on television talk shows under fake names, none of these presume the openness and therefore the accountability of democratic citizenship. Thus, it is no wonder that they also so often depart the norms of democratic civility or even common courtesy. The technologies make anonymity possible, and in so doing push discourse to the extreme ends of the ideological spectrum and to extremist stands on particular issues.

Perhaps it is too much to blame the technologies themselves for the often demeaning and unenlightening nature of much political discussion today, since they are only the "messengers." Nevertheless, in their possibilities for abuse, new communications technologies are not, at the very least, the great hopes for democracy's future development, and the proof of this is the sheer amount of abusive extremism they enable. Tocqueville noted, albeit somewhat ambivalently, that in democracies, "extremes are softened or blunted." For Tocqueville, that moderation is a cause both of democracy's weakness in achieving "greatness" in matters of culture, and of its greatest strength—its superior ability in delivering justice. For good or ill, in other words, democracy thrives when its discourse seeks the commonality and civility of the middle range. One needs only to "log on" to the chat lines or "channel surf" across the talk shows to realize that this mid-range is not the preferred option to either the providers or users of the new technologies.

This is not to say, however, that the new technologies are incapable of serving the true cause of democracy. They

are, as mere instruments, themselves neutral. They can be put into democracy's service, but only to the extent that they incorporate the requisites of human interaction within the civil realm of a truly democratic common life. That is, to the extent that new communication technologies manifest the openness, connectedness, face-to-face character and accountability of authentic democratic discourse, they can serve democracy's interest. Judging by current uses, this appears more difficult than one might think or hope.

Still, some instances of the new technologies' use provide reasons for hope. Specifically, the 1996 National Issues Convention in Austin, Texas, employed television and other communications technologies in ways meant to emulate the face-to-face discussions required for democracy to thrive.⁸ In the final analysis of course, democracy's fate never was or will be a matter of this or that technology. Its future is always a matter of its citizens' ability and willingness to assume the responsibility and accountability of the democratic civil realm. Technology itself can only at best augment that degree of "competence;" it can never replace it, and at technology's worst, citizens' competence can diminish through its use.

Competency, Civility, Democracy

If what I have said so far has merit concerning the importance of the civil spaces between the private and public realms of a democratic society, the question of how competent citizens are in handling the responsibilities of democracy leads us to considerations most traditional literature on the subject tends either to ignore or miss. If the real work of democracy takes place in the associative engagement of civil society, as Tocqueville, Rousseau, and Mill insisted, then the competence of citizens to perform cannot be measured solely in terms of how they vote, if they vote, if they understand political issues, if their preferences are rational, transitive, and so on. These are questions for the strictly public realm, and as important as they

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might (or might not) be, the evaluation of democracy's present condition does not depend on their answers.

In their appreciation of how important a healthy civil realm is for democracy, Putnam, Elshstain, and Sandel effectively reopen the question of citizen competency on different grounds. Competent citizens are not those who merely vote often and wisely, or who know who to call to further their interests. Rather, truly competent citizens appreciate the need for healthy "habits of the heart," and pursue the civility and engaged discourse that democracy makes available to all citizens. Under this definition the criteria of citizen competency are different indeed, but, as these works make clear, are no easier to satisfy.

Competent citizens are scarcer today than previously, Elshstain, Putnam, and Sandel fear, but this is proven not by observing citizens' apparent inability to measure up to rational models of decision making or by totaling the votes on election day. Today, citizens are failing to meet the standards of the democratic civil realm—they are disengaged, homebound, absent on bowling night. They are talking to each other perhaps across the wires, cables, and radio waves, but they are not "acting" in the sense of performing in each others' presence the essential roles of democratic participants. These roles are not necessarily those that political scientists, pollsters and

pundits are likely to observe, honor, or measure. They are roles that require no special expertise, but a willingness to speak and act as joint participants in the play of democracy. This is the work *not* getting done; it is the work of democracy that is being shirked.

Communication and other modern technologies are not really to blame for this as much as are our expectations for them and our growing reliance upon them. In the United States especially, there exists a long, mostly dishonorable history of waiting for the "technological fix" to eradicate whatever problems we encounter. But democracy is not the product of technological inventiveness, nor is it automatically enhanced when innovations make it easier to live one's life more in the presence of glowing screens than of other people.

Democracy need not engender Luddism either; it simply demands, as it always has and will regardless of whatever technological turns we take, that citizens remain engaged in each others' lives. In a very real, though somewhat ironic sense, that is a more difficult task today *because* of our new, "helpful" devices of communication rather than in spite of them. In a democracy, computer literacy is not related to political literacy in any essential way, and competent, engaged, participating citizens need, perhaps more than anything else, simply to get out more, taking an evening to per-

form in democracy's civic theater.

Endnotes:

¹ Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1996); Jean Bethke Elshstain, *Democracy On Trial*, (New York: Basic, 1995); Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

² See in addition to the above, Robert D. Putnam, "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America," *PS: Political Science & Politics* XXVIII:664-83; December 1995.

³ For a broad discussion of the impact of modern risk on the philosophy and practice of liberal politics, see my *Democracy, Risk, and Community: Technology and the Evolution of Liberal Meanings*, forthcoming.

⁴ Quoted in *New York Times*, 5 February 1986, p. A-20.

⁵ Sheldon Wolin, *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 9.

⁶ Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); especially part II.

⁷ For an excellent treatment of both the limitations and possibilities of this new experiment in democratic discourse, see Catherine Flavin and Regina Dougherty (1996), "Science and Citizenship at the NIC," *The Public Perspective* 7:46-49; April/May.



Richard P. Hiskes is associate professor of Political Science at the University of Connecticut

"Bowling Alone" or "A Nation of Joiners?" Two Views of Civic Life in the Information Age

by Stephen K. Carter

Examining the health of our democracy requires the daunting tasks of theoretically defining "healthy democracy" and determining whether or not we pass the test. Though the definitions are wide-ranging, most would agree that a democracy cannot work unless its citizens are involved to some significant extent. "The despot" wrote Tocqueville, "does not ask them [the people] to assist him in governing the state; it is enough that they do not aspire to govern it themselves."¹ Tocqueville worried that excessive individualism could lead to a general indifference in which citizens, often individually powerless, would fail to solve problems cooperatively. Where people do not voluntarily coalesce to confront difficulties, the government will—and this

is dangerous. Tocqueville saw this tendency combated in mid-19th century America by a vibrant civic life characterized by numerous associations.

In a healthy democracy, people must, in part, govern themselves. Following Tocqueville, many observers have examined our civic life. Some have determined that it is currently deficient, placing group life at the center of the debate over the health of our democracy. Ironically, when we compare Tocqueville's understanding of associa-