

Civil Society and Good Democratic Leadership

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On West 87th Street in Manhattan, a community flower garden is tucked between two apartment buildings. On the gate to the garden are two notices: a Constitution, and a list of the Administrative Committee for the program. The Administrative Committee makes decisions about the use of the garden and convenes the annual General Assembly of all the users.

The day after I first saw these postings I watched Barak Obama's second inauguration as president of the United States. Senator Charles Schumer (D, NY) introduced the ceremony by commenting on this long tradition of a peaceful transfer of power, some of the most momentous power in the world, without force or coups or insurrections. He described the purpose of the event as the "sacred but cautious entrusting of power."

These two anecdotes may seem to have little in common (beyond the fact that both involve New Yorkers). The purpose of this essay is to show how they are interconnected, and how these interconnections might help us recognize and foster good democratic leadership. The argument is largely cast in normative terms – thinking about what *should* be the case for leadership in a democracy. But I identify some potential obstacles to putting these ideas into practice. The essay, therefore, has something of the tenor of Rawls' concept of a "realistic utopia."²

The basic claim of this paper is that the practice of leadership in civil society is an important characteristic of an effective democracy. Even if few citizens can participate directly in making or executing laws, opportunities for leadership in a thriving civil society can enable citizens to engage in a version of what Aristotle called “ruling and being ruled in turn.” Such leadership teaches people democratic skills, so that they can gain both a sense of efficacy and a fuller appreciation of how large-scale politics works. Such experiences can also hone the faculty of judgment, which is essential both for leadership in civil society and for evaluating the performance of political leaders. Although valid objections can be offered to some aspects of these claims, the major point is that those who want to create or sustain a flourishing democracy should value and seek to promote leadership in civil society.

How do we define “good democratic leadership”?

None of the key words in this discussion has an obvious definition that all readers would immediately supply. As many writers about leadership have observed, there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are leaders or scholars of leadership. In *Thinking about Leadership*, I offer the following definition: “Leaders determine or clarify goals for a group of individuals and bring together the energies of members of that group to accomplish those goals.”³ This interpretation is deliberately broad in its scope, encompassing informal leadership as well as highly visible office-holders.

“Democracy” has a similarly protean character; it is one of the examples used by W. B. Gallie in developing the notion of “essentially contested concepts.”⁴ The term usually refers to a government in which sovereignty resides with the citizens as a whole. Other definitions emphasize popular participation in determining policies that affect the community. Yet holding ultimate authority and making policy decisions on a regular basis are obviously not the same things.

A “good leader” can be morally admirable, committed to doing beneficial work for his followers rather than advancing his own narrow self-interest. Or the term can refer to a leader who is effective and competent, whatever goals she is pursuing. Since these two meanings of “good” have different implications for the community it is important to be clear about our intentions in analyzing any specific instance of democratic leadership.⁵

Who “leads” in a democracy?

As we rediscovered in the 2012 presidential election in the US, the exercise of popular sovereignty through the electoral process is a very significant component of our form of government. The principle “one person, one vote” prevailed despite multiple concerns that it might be undermined in practice. But large groups of people rarely decide specific political issues. As Seymour Martin Lipset put it, “democracy in the sense of a system of decision-making in which all members or citizens play an active role in the continuous process is inherently impossible.”⁶ The public as a whole exercises ultimate

sovereignty in a democracy, and the participatory role of citizens can be quite important; but it does not make sense to describe what most citizens do as “leadership.” Some particular individuals, in each democracy, are engaged in this distinctive activity.

There are at least three reasons why “the people” cannot lead or govern on a daily basis. In the first place, there are too many of us, certainly in the modern nation states where we now live. E.E. Schattschneider noted that when you turn from monarchy to democracy, “the shift from the ‘one’ to the ‘many’ is not merely a change in the number of people participating in power but a *change in the way the power is exercised.*” The key to this transition, he points out, is in solving problems of “*leadership, organization, alternatives, and systems of responsibility and confidence.*”⁷ Thus he describes the citizens of a democracy as “the semi-sovereign people.” It is not surprising that (as John Kane and Haig Patapan point out), there is a persistent “tension or ambiguity in democracies as to who is truly sovereign, the people or the leader.”⁸

Modern technology has made it possible for millions of citizens to reach a decision through online voting; but they cannot by this method deliberate together and suggest alternatives to what is before them. The people can be organized for deliberation in small groups, an increasingly prominent feature of governments from Brazil or the Bronx to small villages in China.⁹ State, regional and city governments in many countries are turning to deliberative groups to test opinion and make some decisions, including the popular practice of deliberative budgeting. Neighborhood organizations in several cities

function as building-blocks of democracy with direct participation by citizens.¹⁰ But in order to make decisions or take action, deliberative assemblies and neighborhood groups need organization, options proposed, implementation of decisions, which are all aspects of leadership.

The second reason “the people” cannot govern directly is that everyone has other things beside political participation that they need and want to do. Citizens have their families, their work, culture, religion, art and other dimensions of a full human life. Most citizens spend most of their time in nonpolitical pursuits – growing food, engaging in trade or commerce, caring for their families, preaching, teaching, healing. Even in a democracy, participation in public affairs is only one part of human life, and a relatively minor one for most citizens.

Thus we need designated officers to do the daily business of governing as part of this overall division of labor. Setting public agendas, settling disputes, making and implementing decisions is for some individuals for some period their job, their assigned role. When these individuals are engaged in the business of governing, their fellow-citizens are not “ruling” except in the most abstract sense. Theorists have pointed out that citizens can nonetheless exercise effective control through what Philip Pettit calls the “editorial power” of the people in a representative democracy.¹¹ But however valuable this oversight may be both to the political system and the individuals involved, it is not the same as exercising leadership.

This leads to the third reason why “the people” as a whole cannot govern. Those citizens who spend time in leadership often develop distinctive skills through exercising their responsibilities. It is not that governing is an especially mysterious craft but that like any other specialized activity there are better and worse ways of doing it. Making good decisions depends, in part, on talent; it depends to some extent on luck. But training and experience are also crucial. Success in leadership is usually connected with knowing enough about the dimensions of a problem, the character of a political community, the costs and benefits of different decisions, to make a good decision rather than one that is flawed because of lack of such “expertise.”

Thus the factors that explain why “the people” as a whole cannot govern include the size of the populace, the pressure of other occupations, and the value of expertise based in experience of leadership. Therefore most democracies establish a constitutional framework that provides for the selection of a few citizens to carry on the daily work of governing while others go about their business. In practice, these officers are the citizens who actually lead.

An alternative way of thinking about the role of citizens in a democracy

Unlike other familiar forms of government, in a democracy there are no “subjects” – there are only citizens. At any given time, some of these citizens are (temporarily) leading and others – the majority – are not; but all of us are citizens. So the familiar trope of rulers and subjects doesn’t work in a democracy. How else can we think about this political relationship?

Since the eighteenth century, the most common solution is that the people govern through their representatives. In her classic work on *The Concept of Representation*, Hanna Pitkin discussed the practical difficulties with direct democracy and noted that “representation is introduced as the best approximation” of full citizen participation.¹² Proxy participation has several merits, and opponents of direct democracy have long argued that it is a superior mode of governing; but not the same as the individual having an opportunity to engage in “ruling.” If democracy is to be something more than a formal legitimating device for designating rulers, it requires a kind of *collaboration* among all citizens, an awareness of their shared responsibilities in the polity.

Another way to think about the relationship among democratic citizens was suggested by Aristotle in the *Politics*: ruling and being ruled in turn.¹³ None of us should be *only* a follower, never a leader; nor should any of us always lead. In Aristotle’s discussion, each of us takes a turn in office as adult citizens, knowing that we will before long give up this role of ruler and return to the ranks of those who are ruled. As young citizens we are aware that this is our political obligation and opportunity, and we learn how to rule in part from the experience of being a good follower.

I believe that our democracies would be healthier if more of us ran for office, served on commissions, or acted politically in some other capacity. But how can this goal be realized in contemporary democracies, given the difficulties we have already identified with popular rule? Even if such a system were technically feasible, there is little chance of our adopting such explicit

measures for “ruling and being ruled in turn.” Our habits and cultural attitudes are so firmly set toward what we call our “private lives” that it is unrealistic to think about requiring each of us to do our turn in some official role in the mayor’s office or the state capital or Washington DC.

In what other ways, then, can we exemplify Aristotle’s principle of “ruling and being ruled in turn?” This is where the community garden, with its constitution and its board of directors, becomes relevant to our discussion.

Civil and political associations

At least since the time of Tocqueville, social scientists have understood that associations within the state are important to the strength and resilience of a polity. This chapter will develop that idea in the direction suggested by Aristotle’s *Politics*.

Tocqueville’s amused astonishment at the proclivity of Americans for founding associations is a well-known aspect of *Democracy in America*. As he put it: “Americans of all ages, conditions and all dispositions constantly unite together. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations to which all belong but also a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very specialized.”¹⁴ Tocqueville notes that these associations do the same kind of work as the government in France and the noble lord in England, in a more resilient and democratic fashion. He explicitly remarks that these citizens exercise a kind of “power”: when individuals “have taken up an opinion or an idea they wish to promote in society, they seek each

other out and unite together once they have made contact. From that moment, they are no longer isolated but have *become a power* seen from afar whose activities serve as an example and whose words are heeded.”¹⁵

Almost two centuries later, another perceptive observer of American practices and mores, Robert Putnam, asserted that “the ingenuity of Americans in creating organizations knows no bounds.” Putnam listed 2,380 groups with some “national visibility,” including the Grand United Order of Antelopes and the Aaron Burr Society.¹⁶

“Civil society” is the name given to this aspect of a human community. Other possible labels include the “independent sector,” and the “third sector.”¹⁷ In most discussions, civil society is explicitly distinguished from politics (and the economy). As John Ehrenberg puts it, “the most productive use of the term is to describe the social relations and the structures that lie between the state and the market.”¹⁸

Many civic associations in our country have political dimensions; thus the distinction between politics (or economics) and civil society is not as clear-cut as some analysts would suggest. Conservatives see organizations in civil society as crucial alternatives to political involvement, a potential brake on the excesses of “big government,” a robust private alternative that keeps governments from misbehaving. Progressives often note the “dark sides” of such associations, with lobbies for everything from guns and casinos to charity

and education, distorting the work of governance in the direction of (sometimes noxious) private interests.

In their influential discussion of civic activism, Verba, Schlozman and Brady emphasize “the embeddedness of political activity in the non-political institutions of civil society,” and note that “participation in these spheres is in many ways a politicizing experience.”¹⁹ In some instances – the National Rifle Association (NRA) is a prime example – an association formed to advance the interests of enthusiasts of a particular sport or hobby becomes a major political interest group. In other cases – the Tea Party comes to mind – a specifically political organization draws its strength from the involvement of individuals who have honed their skills as leaders and activists in various kinds of civic associations.²⁰ Unions are based in the economic realm; their primary role is representing the interests of their members in negotiations with management. Their attempts at political influence are another important part of their *raison d’être*. Yet they also bring members together for social activities and take care of those who meet with bad luck.²¹

I suggest that we might think of the constituent elements of “civil society” in a democracy along a continuum ranging from the largest (some of which are deliberately involved in politics and often have economic dimensions) to those which involve only a few dozen people and rarely attempt to exercise any influence in politics. The specifics of this proposed spectrum can easily be contested; my point is to provide a working definition of the range of groups I have in mind.

In American society today, one end of the spectrum includes national professional associations such as those of lawyers or physicians who come together to share disciplinary interests and ideas, yet whose organizations – the American Bar Association or the American Medical Association – play active roles in the political process. There are also very large organizations such as the NRA, the unions, the American Association of Retired People or the Sierra Club, which provide significant non-political benefits for their members but are heavily engaged in lobbying. Next along the spectrum are formal institutions such as universities or foundations which have some economic role and may occasionally lobby representatives for their organizational interests, but are primarily dedicated to non-profit, non-political activities.

Then we find organizations like the Girl Scouts, the NAACP, Kiwanis or Rotary, designed primarily to provide benefits for their members and opportunities for fellowship. They often work in chapters or local groups but are linked through the larger organization. Churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship are primarily experienced as local organizations and gathering places, but are also brought together through modes of governance such as dioceses. The Junior League, Little League baseball and hundreds of other organizations fall somewhere in the next part of the spectrum. Finally there are local groups like the 87th Street community garden, with no specific connections to any larger organizational structure and almost no political activity. These groups exist for the small-scale enjoyment of their designated

activities by members of the group – with the side benefit that the flowers enhance the view for passersby.

None of us is likely to approve of the purposes and goals of every group that qualifies for inclusion on this list. As Ben Barber puts it, “We may not like the goals or autocratic structure of, say, a religious cult or the Ku Klux Klan or a Montana military unit, but as volunteer membership groups these must surely be included in a neutral conception of civil society – or so a consistent sociologist would argue.” For the purposes of his own argument, Barber opts for a “less than neutral” definition that brings in only organizations that are “at least nominally or potentially democratic and open.”²² It is indeed tempting to exclude from our discussion civic associations that do not accord with democratic values. However, Barber’s approach obscures the wide range of civic associations and precludes a full discussion of their costs and benefits to our society.

Tocqueville asserted that “civil associations... pave the way for political associations,” and in turn, “political associations develop and improve in some strange way civil associations.”²³ His interest was primarily the latter part of this assertion, the ways in which political associations teach men to unite and show them how to achieve their goals. He left unexplored a further avenue – how civil associations may stand in for political associations in vigorous participation. This dimension is the one I will explore.

Civic associations are neither solely a brake on government nor a potential obstacle to achieving the common good; civil society is also *a significant component of governance in a democracy*. The institutions of civil society, the various layers of government in a federal system, and the entrepreneurial energy of market-based activities – including specific firms and corporations as well as commercial and industrial associations – all help define what governance in a democracy means in practice. Against this background, my central claim will be that *leadership in civic associations – even in something as minor as a block-long community garden – embodies a form of the Aristotelian principle*.

Leadership in civil society

Observers of civic participation from Tocqueville to the present have been notably silent on the role of *leadership* in the organizations they describe. “Leadership” seldom appears in the indices of books on civic associations. Yet there are significant differences between being a card-carrying member of a group and occasionally attending meetings, on the one hand, and accepting a position of leadership in that organization. Taking this latter step means you now have larger responsibilities for the group.

In American civic associations, from community gardens through universities, religious synods, unions, national associations of stamp collectors or environmental activists, some members of the group make decisions, set priorities and provide leadership for others.²⁴ As officers and delegates, they

represent members of their organization in larger contexts, and communicate the lessons of their experience back to the other members of their local associations.²⁵ Through engaging in these several aspects of leadership, citizens learn valuable lessons about what it means to “rule” that prepare them to be better citizens in several ways.

Ideally, the activities of civic associations teach people designated as leaders of the group how to engage the participation of others, make the case for a good cause, work toward compromise, settle conflicts, overcome opposition and win allies. These experiences give citizen leaders a better sense of what their political representatives actually do, and what it means to govern. These citizens are therefore better prepared both to perform their own political duties, through voting for and influencing their representatives, and to assess and evaluate the performance of those officials.

Through these activities, citizen leaders gain not only a firmer knowledge of how politics works but also a sense of efficacy and increased self-confidence. They are more likely to respect other citizens whose leadership in the association has been important to its success. This increased self-confidence and respect for the contributions of others make them more effective members of the polity and helps strengthen the democracy. In all these ways, *leadership in civil society is a school for democratic leadership.*

Leadership in a civic association will motivate some of these citizens to run for public office, as a member of a school board or a city council. Through

addressing their chosen cause in a civil association, they have identified issues that they care about and seen that a successful resolution of these issues often depends on political measures. In the Industrial Areas Foundation, for example, underprivileged citizens are deliberately trained for leadership within the group. This experience is then transferred directly to the realm of politics through lobbying and sometimes running for office.²⁶

Leadership in civic associations can also provide a focus for the human desire to govern oneself. Contemporary protests in societies around the world (including those in the Middle East) provide evidence that many people want to participate in making decisions that affect their lives. Leading in a community garden association is not a full substitute for leadership in politics, by any means; but it can provide a channel for the partial satisfaction of this need. The *experience* of leading successfully in an association dedicated to something that you care about, in the company of your peers, can be exceptionally rewarding to an individual.

Finally, to develop Tocqueville's insight, these associations become a kind of "power" within the democracy. In an authoritarian or oligarchic government, such power centers are often regarded as potential centers of rebellion or dissent.²⁷ But as social scientists have long observed, having smaller power centers within a democratic government can strengthen the constitutional framework.

In France, as Tocqueville knew well, a flower garden in the midst of a major city would surely have been managed by the government. It is a mark of strength for American democracy that a community flower garden is governed by those who use it, with minimal involvement by the municipal authorities. This increases the stock of “public goods” that make society more vibrant, and frees municipal officers to concentrate on other things.

Leadership in civil society directly addresses each of the three factors listed in the first section of this essay that explain why “the people” cannot rule.

Establishing smaller-scale organizations that involve fewer individuals than the political units, and creating many such organizations, helps overcome the problem of the size of the populace. This makes it possible for more citizens to participate in governance.

Since the whole point of civic associations is to allow people to come together around shared interests, these organizations gather their energies and *raison d'être* from the goals that can draw citizens away from political activity. Thus these associations address the second problem I identified at the outset – that individuals have many personal and private interests and obligations that compete with political participation – by turning it into an advantage. These interests become the reason for participation rather than an obstacle thereto.

The lack of expertise that makes it inefficient for citizens to participate directly in governance on a daily basis is no problem here. We develop expertise by participation in a cause we already understand, through achieving

goals in a sphere we know enough about to have become involved in the first place. And this expertise, insofar as it includes learning how to lead, is also transferable back to the public realm.

Judgment as a mental faculty

One of the most important ways in which leadership in civil society prepares individuals to be better citizens, and potentially better public servants, is by honing the faculty of judgment. For both leaders and followers, as Beiner and Nedelsky point out, “the idea of a democracy presupposes an account of political judgment, for without an understanding of how human beings are capable of making reasoned judgment about a shared public world, it would remain mysterious how one could conceive the very notion of a democratic citizen.”²⁸ How does this distinctive capacity work, and why is leadership in civil society valuable in honing it?

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle distinguishes “practical wisdom [*phronesis*]” from “theoretical wisdom,” and links it directly with political acumen. He regards the exercise of this faculty as neither a science nor an art, but a way of approaching deliberation and action that is especially relevant for political leadership.²⁹ Here and in the *Politics*, Aristotle insists that this faculty is engaged only in practice, and cannot be developed by observation alone. As Ronald Beiner points out, “in judgments about political relationships, that is judgments relating to the form of association among men, a quality of *intensified responsibility* is at work that is not present” when we merely

observe the performance of others.³⁰ Judgment, in the understanding of Hannah Arendt and Immanuel Kant, also involves an “enlarged mentality,” being able to put yourself into someone else’s position, deliberately broadening your perspective.³¹

In *Thinking about Leadership*, drawing on insights offered by political theorists from Aristotle to Arendt and contemporary social scientists, I define judgment “as a distinctive mental capacity or skill, a way of approaching deliberation and decision making that combines experience, intuition, and intelligence.”³² The several dimensions of judgment – making decisions, practical problem-solving, learning how to adopt the standpoint of another individual, developing a degree of detachment from your own emotions and those of others – are clearly relevant to leadership in civic associations. These skills can be honed in a small organization just as they can in a demanding public office, and the lessons one learns are often transferable to more complex situations. As Leslie Paul Thiele points out in his analysis of the faculty of judgment, “Experience remains the fountainhead of judgment as a result of its implicit and affective components.”³³ There is no substitute for having learned to judge better through experience.

The specific problems one faces in leading one’s neighbors in a community flower garden do not map directly onto the demands of being a senator or cabinet secretary. But the skills one acquires – building coalitions, making compromises, articulating goals, developing the capacity to speculate shrewdly about the motives of other participants – are all surely relevant to

“higher office.” And the practice of developing and applying judgment in less demanding contexts is the most effective kind of preparation for judging successfully in higher office, often better than abstract training, as a way of honing native skill and talents. The *intensified responsibility* and *enlarged mentality* of a good leader in any context bring into play factors of judgment different from those involved when you follow another’s leadership.

These aspects of judgment are also relevant to citizens choosing their representatives and assessing their performance. If you have never led at a local level, you will not know what leadership involves. You may give priority to qualities in candidates that are unrelated to the work of leadership, qualities like celebrity or status, rather than looking for evidence of the capacity to make good decisions. Citizens without leadership experience may also expect a degree of perfection or transparency in their representatives that has little to do with governance in practice. If citizens have had to struggle with recalcitrant stakeholders, cajole others into action and accept compromises in leading a civil association, they can more readily empathize with the work of their representatives. They are more likely to understand, in Max Weber’s words, that “Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards.”³⁴

When Aristotle discusses “ruling and being ruled in turn,” he makes clear that the two kinds of skills are different, even though they are related as participatory roles in political association. “Ruler and ruled have indeed different excellences; but ... the good citizen must possess the knowledge and the capacity requisite for ruling and being ruled, and the *excellence of a citizen*

may be defined as consisting in 'a knowledge of rule over free men from both points of view'."³⁵

This quote from the *Politics* captures the essence of my argument: *citizens in a democracy should have the experience of ruling or leading as well as following.* Good followers need to develop a set of skills discussed by Aristotle and by Barbara Kellerman in her study of *Followership*.³⁶ But the skills citizens need in order to lead are different. The experience of leading makes it possible for them to understand *from the inside* what leadership involves. They will be better placed to choose and judge their leaders, and potentially become leaders themselves in more prominent positions.

Potential challenges to these claims

One of the less salutary aspects of civil society is that small groups can attract cranks or zealots. Morris Fiorina admits to being one of those “curmudgeons [who] have suggested that civic engagement may not necessarily be a good thing” and could even have negative consequences for social welfare.³⁷ He argues that “the transition to a more participatory democracy increasingly has put politics in the hands of unrepresentative participators.” Participatory processes can be hi-jacked by extremists who care enough about an issue to invest the time, money and energy it takes to sway decisions in the direction they prefer. Having passion for your cause can be a valuable spur to leadership; organizations cannot easily be sustained by lukewarm involvement.

But there must be moderation and perspective also, as Weber pointed out.³⁸ Zealotry is not easily compatible with good judgment or compromise.

It's not just that civic associations attract people who are zealous about their cause; the causes themselves may be antithetical to the principles on which our democracy is founded. John Ehrenberg cites the history of American segregation, including organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, as evidence for his claim that "civil society can just as easily impede democracy as advance it."³⁹

Another difficulty with my argument is that the types of civic associations that involve direct participation by individuals on a local level are less common today than in the past. Theda Skocpol points out that in the past few decades, traditional voluntary old-line associations have become less common, and the federated membership associations that previously dominated American civil society have been replaced by "massive social movements," thus fashioning "a very new civic universe" in our country." These associations are "relatively centralized and professionally led," and their purposes are primarily advocacy rather than participatory.⁴⁰ They rely on direct mail and marketing techniques rather than widespread involvement, and offer little scope for leadership by members.

Even in the membership associations that remain active, fewer of us appear to be interested in leadership. In *Bowling Alone* Bob Putnam shows that holding office in civil associations has been *declining* in recent decades,

along with other measures of civic participation and social capital. Measuring relative change in civil society in the US from 1973 to 1994, he asked respondents whether you have “served as an officer of some club or organization.” The percentage decline in this metric in those two decades is at the very top of his list: 42% fewer people held office in a club or organization in 1994 compared with 1972. This equals the decline in the number of those who have worked for a political party and is larger than any other indicator.⁴¹

Thus, at least based on Putnam’s findings from the late 20th century, people are generally not choosing to lead in civil associations despite the professed psychological rewards. This statistic supports the view that most people would rather let other folks do the heavy lifting of organizational leadership. If citizens don’t want to govern themselves, even as members of the board of a small garden next to their condo, this limited form of “ruling” will not contribute significantly to good democratic leadership.

Ken Thomson’s list of reasons members of neighborhood associations choose to reduce their participation is relevant here: they include “frustration from lack of progress, energy and effort involved”, and “interpersonal conflict.” On the other hand, the reasons Thomson’s respondents give for *increased* participation attest to the benefits of leadership for the individual as well as the community. These reasons include providing useful service, gaining an increased sense of responsibility and helpfulness, increased political influence, status or prestige.⁴²

Yet a distaste for controversy and conflict may mean that exposure to leadership in a small group causes some citizens to be *less* interested in leading than they were before. According to John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, there is significant distaste for politics in the US. Our citizens prefer what these authors call “stealth democracy” to any form of direct participation.⁴³ When ordinary folks see what making the sausage of political decisions involves – cajoling people, settling conflicts, reaching compromises, arguing vociferously for what you believe – they find such activities off-putting rather than bracing. And paradoxically, if their organizations do succeed in accomplishing local goals, this may make them feel less empathy with political leaders, as they ask “Look what we did! Why can’t those bozos in Washington do the same?”⁴⁴

When leaders feel that they are carrying a disproportionate responsibility for sustaining an organization, they may experience burnout and withdraw their involvement. On the other hand, if the same people continue in office indefinitely this frustrates the need for new, responsive and vigorous leadership to bring a fresh perspective to the organization, and makes it harder to achieve the goal of giving members a chance to engage in leadership.⁴⁵ More generally, Michels’ “law of oligarchy” applies to any kind of organization. Those who are chosen as leaders in civic associations may develop a sense of being an “elite” and lose touch with the needs and desires of other members. They may perpetuate themselves in power and find ways to make themselves indispensable. As Grant McConnell asked: “If private associations themselves

should be undemocratic, as the Michelian thesis would seem to assert, how can they be essential to democracy?”⁴⁶

This raises a key question: do organizations need to be internally democratic for their leaders to become better democratic citizens and potential leaders? I would argue that democracy in the strongest sense is not a necessary requirement. Our polity shows many oligarchical features in its leadership. It would be unreasonable to expect smaller associations to be more fully “democratic” than the polity itself in their selection of leaders and decision-making in order to train leaders for the country. But organizations that teach disdain for non-members and involve autocratic decision-making by a few will not provide a good climate for learning how to lead in a democracy.

Final objection: I have claimed that one of the most important aspects of leadership in civic associations is that it hones the faculty of judgment. Yet perhaps I overstate the scope and importance of judgment as a factor in good leadership. Contemporary behavioral psychology has shown how flawed most of our judgments are, by identifying the factors that lead to snap decisions, the importance of priming and the fundamental irrationality of our decisions, often shaped by totally irrelevant factors.⁴⁷ Kenneth R. Hammond has summed up this position by noting that “most students of judgment and decision making now regard the situation as ‘bleak’: human judgment, they believe, has been clearly demonstrated to be irrational, badly flawed, and generally not only wrong but overconfident; in a word, untrustworthy.”⁴⁸ Most of the research on which such conclusions are based has been conducted by psychologists and

behavioral economists, and little of it has concerned any arena of political decision making or leadership. But we cannot rule out the obvious implication: *perhaps our judgment as leaders in any context is equally flawed.*

These challenges remind us that we need to balance our normative claims about democracy with a dose of healthy realism. Yet there are also reasons why we should give full recognition to the contributions of civic associations to good democratic leadership, and work for public policies that support such leadership.

Where do we go from here?

One especially pressing reason for promoting leadership in civil society is this: the decline in the numbers of citizens engaged in such activities may well have contributed to the increasingly polarized, strident and uncompromising tone of our national politics these days. There are many reasons for this distressing development, of course; structural features of our electoral and legislative systems are clearly responsible for many of the problems we now face. But the decline in civic leadership could be part of the explanation also.

Leadership in a civic association requires us to engage in the same kinds of activities that are, on a larger scale, essential to good governance in Congress or the White House. Yet as Putnam demonstrates, fewer people in our polity are taking active leadership roles in local or membership associations these days. If political leaders have not had the opportunity to acquire skills of patience, trustworthiness and good judgment by leading any kind of civic

association, it stands to reason that they will be less comfortable with compromise, less tolerant of different views, and less able to lift their vision beyond their own principles and narrow goals, compared with citizens who have experienced this form of “ruling and being ruled in turn.”

This hypothesis, of course, needs empirical validation. It is possible that despite the overall decline in civic activity, those citizens who choose to run for public office remain as likely as in the past to have taken on leadership roles in civic associations. If so, this would undermine my contention that a decline in civic leadership helps to account for contemporary political deadlock. But the proposition that that too little experience in civic leadership has contributed to the deficiencies of political leadership at all levels is sufficiently plausible that it would be worth exploring.⁴⁹

In his thought-provoking comparison of the disparate fates of two similar cities facing de-industrialization in recent decades – Allentown, Pennsylvania and Youngstown, Ohio – Sean Safford makes amply clear that the factor that explains Allentown’s relative success is the character and behavior of its civic elites. He argues persuasively that “Allentown’s economic resilience owes much to the fact that the social structure of its civic interactions connected key constituencies who needed to cooperate in the face of the region’s crisis. These networks were absent in Youngstown... [which] led to a lack of dialogue and interaction across salient divisions in that community.”⁵⁰ He shows how local leaders of the large corporations in Allentown provide leadership within the city’s civic organizations and thus have “a forum in which to develop, enact,

and reproduce community-oriented identities and values,” even though their economic interests do not intersect. These forms of service, he notes, “provide opportunities for *engagement*, the ability to interact, to have one’s voice heard and one’s identity as a citizen of a given community confirmed.”⁵¹

How can we help ensure that leadership in civic associations will continue to contribute to the quality of our public life? As Fiorina notes in concluding his negative analysis, “the only possibility is to go forward and raise various forms of civic engagement to levels where extreme voices are diluted.”⁵² And, I would add, devise strategies to increase participation and leadership, encourage more young people to join and lead organizations, and foster habits of civility throughout our society. Some of these goals can be achieved by good public policy.

Experimentation is one of the best reasons to support civic associations. Such organizations “try out” policies and practices on community issues, and successful innovations can then be adopted by other associations and sometimes by the government as well.⁵³ This works like the argument for federalism, in which each of the several states provides a laboratory for political development. If we implement some eminently doable, practical suggestions, we may see movement in civil society closer to the ideal.

Federal, state and local governments should encourage civic associations, both as schools for citizenship and as partners in democratic governance. This means making provisions for the self-organization of such bodies, setting limits

on the legal liability of their officers, recognizing their contributions, and exercising self-denial with respect to interference.

As Ben Barber notes, strategic zoning and permitting can increase the number of appealing and accessible public spaces, which will also encourage association and involvement. Retrofitting suburban malls, for example, to make them more inviting sites for gatherings and activities, could add welcoming common spaces to areas designed primarily for shopping and dining.⁵⁴

All of us should encourage leadership in young people, giving them ample opportunities to lead in their own spheres. John Gardner argues persuasively that “If we could produce a very large number of elementary and high school children who had been well trained to accept responsibility in group activity (the first step toward leadership); if we could produce substantial numbers of late adolescents who had been helped to understand and experience leadership in their youth organizations, churches, and schools,” we would be in a much better position to anticipate leadership “in all segments and all levels of our society,” including politics.⁵⁵ Such leadership experiences prepare these citizens to be better followers, better judges of their leaders, and, potentially, better leaders themselves in the public sphere. And as more of us are engaged in such civic leadership, our democracy will benefit in multiple ways.

The distance from a civic meeting in a suburban mall, a high school student government, or the community garden on W. 87th St. to the Oval Office is, by most measures, enormous: in the weight of power, the dignity of office,

the impact of decisions, the scope of responsibility, the numbers of lives profoundly affected. But these disparities should not blind us to the ways in which leadership is the common theme and the shared need. In each case, leadership supports the living together in pursuit of shared goals that overcomes our differences and disagreements and makes it possible for us to achieve community.

Good democratic leadership involves not just the performance of men and women in positions of high office, but the work of all those individuals engaged in grass-roots decision-making about issues that are important in our lives. As we citizens participate in the periodic “sacred but cautious entrusting of power” to our high-level representatives, we can be prepared by our own experience to collaborate in this relationship of trust more effectively. Civil society and the polity at every level are connected through the crucial importance of leadership.

¹ I am glad to acknowledge several colleagues who made valuable suggestions for this essay: Robert Putnam, Robert Keohane, Rogers M. Smith, Stanley Katz, Ian Shapiro, Jane Mansbridge, Steven Macedo, James H. Read, Barbara Kellerman, Haig Patapan, John Kane, and other participants in the Yale seminar on “Good Democratic Leadership.”

² Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6-11. Marc Stears, *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) explicitly writes in this same vein.

³ Nannerl O. Keohane, *Thinking about Leadership* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 23.

⁴ W. B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1955-56): 167 n. 98.

⁵ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Powers to Lead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ch. 5, has a helpful discussion of “good” and “bad” leadership.

⁶ Lipset, introduction to Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 34.

⁷ E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (Fort Worth, TX: Dryden Press 1960), 137, 135; italics in the original.

⁸ John Kane and Haig Patapan, *The Democratic Leader: How Democracy Defines, Empowers, and Limits its Leaders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

⁹ Archon Fung and Eric Olin Wright, ed., *Deepening Democracy* (London and New York: Verso, 2003).

¹⁰ Ken Thomson, *From Neighborhood to Nation: The Democratic Foundations of Civil Society* (Hanover and London, Tufts University/University Press of New England, 2001).

¹¹ Pettit, “Republican Freedom and Contestatory Democratization,” in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón, *Democracy’s Values*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 163-190.

¹² Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 84, 191. See also Eric Beerbohm, *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 168-171.

¹³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1277a-b, III: 4; VII: 14, ed. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1962), 110-12, 315-17.

¹⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* volume 2, part 2, chapter 5. Ed. Isaac Kramnick (Penguin 2003), 596.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 599; italics added.

¹⁶ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000), 48. Putnam’s analysis of “the civic community” in Italy provides the template for all subsequent discussions of this concept. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press 1993).

¹⁷ Brian O’Connell, *Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy* (Lebanon, NH; Tufts University/University Press of New England, 1999). Jon Van Til, *Growing Civil Society* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea* (New York and London, New York University Press, 1999), 235.

¹⁹ Sidney Verba, Kay Lehmann Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 40.

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- ²⁰ Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 42, 198-201.
- ²¹ William Galston and Peter Levine, in E.J. Dionne, Jr., ed., *Community Works: The Revival of Civil Society in America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 33.
- ²² Benjamin Barber, *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 52-53.
- ²³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, chapter 7, 604.
- ²⁴ John Gardner's classic work *On Leadership* (New York, Free Press, 1990), emphasizes the distinctive importance of "dispersed leadership" in all segments of American society, including civic associations.
- ²⁵ Theda Skocpol, "How Americans Became Civic," in Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina, ed., *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 66.
- ²⁶ Paul Osterman, *Gathering Power: The Future of Progressive Politics in America*, (Boston: Beacon Press 2002), 24, 35-37, 52-55. Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), chapters 1, 4 and 8.
- ²⁷ The essays in *Civil Society Activism under Authoritarian Rule*, ed. Francesco Cavatorta (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), offer some thought-provoking perspectives on this complex question.
- ²⁸ Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky, ed., *Judgment, Imagination and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), vii.
- ²⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI: 5 trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), 153.
- ³⁰ Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 139 (italics added). See also Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- ³¹ Arendt, "Postscriptum to Thinking," from *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, included in *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 4).
- ³² Keohane, *Thinking about Leadership*, 91.
- ³³ Leslie Paul Thiele, *The Heart of Judgment: Practical Wisdom, Neuroscience, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), 15.
- ³⁴ Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, ed., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 128.
- ³⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1277a, III:4, 105 (italics added).
- ³⁶ Barbara Kellerman, *Followership* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2008),

³⁷ Morris P. Fiorina, “The Dark Side of Civic Engagement,” in Skocpol and Fiorina, *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, 396, 409.

³⁸ “Politics as a Vocation,” 115.

³⁹ Ehrenberg, 236.

⁴⁰ Skocpol, “Advocates without Members: The Recent Transformation of American Civic Life,” in Skocpol and Fiorina, 463. 471. In *Private Power and American Democracy* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966), 127-28, Grant McConnell discussed “associations” in Washington consisting of small rooms occupied by a few officials far removed from the thousands of “members” who are subscribers to a cause.

⁴¹ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 42-45.

⁴² Thomson, *From Neighborhood to Nation*, 87.

⁴³ John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans’ Beliefs About How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), introduction and ch. 8.

⁴⁴ Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 186.

⁴⁵ Thomson, *From Neighborhood to Nation*, 67-70.

⁴⁶ McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy*, 122-23.

⁴⁷ Thiele, *The Heart of Judgment*, ch. 4.

⁴⁸ Kenneth R. Hammond, “Coherence and Correspondence Theories in Judgment and Decision Making,” in Terry Connolly, Hal R. Arkes and Kenneth Hammond, ed., *Judgment and Decision Making: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 59. Hammond summarizes the well-known findings of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky.

⁴⁹ I am especially indebted to exchanges with Bob Putnam, Bob Keohane and Stan Katz for raising and clarifying these points.

⁵⁰ Sean Safford, *Why the Garden Club Couldn’t Save Youngstown: The Transformation of the Rust Belt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 94. 149; see also 143-47.

⁵² Fiorina, “A Dark Side of Civic Engagement,” in Skocpol and Fiorina, 414.

⁵³ Elisabeth S. Clemens also makes this point in her essay “Organizational Repertoires and Institutional Change: Women’s Groups and the Transformation of American Politics, 1890-1920,” in Skocpol and Fiorina, 82.

⁵⁴ Barber, 75, 205-108.

⁵⁵ John W. Gardner, *On Leadership*, 162, 168. Brian O'Connell, *Civil Society*, 111-12, builds on this argument.