

Civic Populism

By Harry C. Boyte

Daniel Patrick Moynihan once argued, “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society.”¹ Today, politics, as conventionally understood, illustrates the unspoken danger in Moynihan’s point. Politics itself reflects larger trends that point not toward success but toward social failure. Superficial sloganeering, domination by marketplace modes of thought, and bitter sectarian divisions—cultural patterns also evident in politics—made “being political” an accusation of choice in the 2002 elections. These patterns are creating a civic illness that seems both all-pervasive and ineluctable.

Moynihan also offered a redemptive alternative: “The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself.”² I propose that politics holds resources to reverse the negative directions of our society and renew democracy. The question is what a redemptive politics might look like.

For all the travails of the formal political culture, America in the last generation has also been a laboratory for creative civic experiments. These have generated an everyday politics of negotiation and collaboration that is more concerned with solving problems than with apportioning blame or posturing along ideological lines. Under the surface of mainstream attention, this different kind of politics has grown across lines of partisan difference around significant public problems, from housing shortages to environmental hazards.

I argue that bringing everyday politics together with electoral politics to improve democracy requires civic populism. This approach conceptualizes citizens as cocreators of a democratic way of life, developing their power and skills to engage a world of mounting problems. It melds interest-group bargaining with larger civic ideals. The key to such political alchemy is a concept missing from theories of participatory democracy: work.

Citizenship against Politics

In contemporary America, there is enormous ferment over how to improve *citizenship* and *civic engagement*. Civic engagement

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efforts have increasingly been shaped by communitarian theory and its practice, community service. Communitarians stress what Amitai Etzioni calls the social dimension of human existence. They express alarm about the fraying of the moral fabric, arguing that America suffers from excessive individualism, overemphasis on rights, and underemphasis on responsibilities.³

Communitarians strike a chord by decrying a decline in America’s community spirit and social trust in an increasingly depersonalized world. For instance, *A Call to Civil Society*—with signatories ranging from Cornel West on the left to Dan Coats (former Republican senator of Indiana) on the right—asserts that Americans are “deeply troubled by the character and values exhibited by young people today.”⁴

In response, communitarians aim to promote civic values. More than 40 organizations, such as the American Association for Higher Education and the Council of Chief State School Officers, have formed an alliance known as the Partnering Initiative on Education and Civil Society, to “integrate civic values into virtually every aspect of the educational experience.”⁵ Community service has spread widely. By 1998–1999, 32 percent of all public schools, including 46 percent of high schools, had service courses.⁶

Yet as a theory of citizenship, communitarianism has major flaws. The focus on individual moral values and helping distorts the relationship between civic engagement and real-world effects. It neglects root causes and cultural dynamics at work in the formation of values. The goals of community service typically include self-esteem, a sense of personal worth, and consciousness of personal values, but they omit attention to power, politics, and community impact.⁷

The way citizens actually think about “values” shows greater understanding of underlying social and structural forces. In 1996 the Kettering Foundation commissioned the Harwood Group, a public issues research firm, to conduct focus groups across the country in order to better grasp the “nature and extent of the disconnect between what people see as important concerns and their sense that they can address them.” The focus groups revealed a nation of citizens who were deeply troubled about the direction of society as a whole, even if optimistic about their personal economic prospects after several years of economic expansion. Citizens tied moral concerns to larger dynamics. They saw large institutions, from government to business, as remote and focused on narrow gain. They worried that people are divided by race, ideology, religion, and class. People also felt powerless to address these trends; as a result, they said, they pulled back into smaller

circles of private life where they had some control, even if they thought that retreat spelled trouble. “If you look at the whole picture of everything that is wrong, it is so overwhelming,” said one woman from Richmond. “You just retreat back and take care of what you know you can take care of—and you make it smaller, make it even down to just you and your unit. You know you can take care of that.”⁸

Communitarian citizenship, eclipsing power and politics with a language of care, masks interests. Enron, after all, was known as a model corporate citizen for its service activities. George W. Bush has taken up communitarian themes: throughout his 2000 presidential campaign, he touted altruistic service. After September 11, 2001, President Bush described “American civilization,” at war with an evil enemy, as “a nation awakened to service and citizenship and compassion.” He called for “all of us [to] become a September 11 volunteer, by making a commitment to service in our communities.”⁹

Liberal theorists criticize communitarianism for this type of conceptual language. Thus, Michael Schudson proposes that Bush’s brand of citizenship substitutes “service” for “justice.” Schudson argues: “There is no acknowledgement that democracy has been enlarged in our lifetimes when individuals have been driven not by a desire to serve but by an effort to overcome indignities they themselves have suffered.”¹⁰

In fact, a contrast of communitarian themes with a conflict-filled world of clashing interests and power relationships is the mainstay of liberal theory. Seyla Benhabib, for example, criticizes communitarians for viewing societies as being “without conflict and contention.”¹¹ Rogers Smith, challenging idealized conceptions of American identity, calls for an unromantic liberalism attentive to exclusions and inequalities in the name of American citizenship: “We need an . . . account that gives full weight to America’s pervasive ideologies of ascriptive inequality.”¹²

Liberal theorists contribute a focus on power and interests, yet they also have a state-centered, distributive view of politics as a bitter struggle over scarce resources—summed up nicely by the title of Harold Lasswell’s book *Who Gets What, When, How*.¹³ For Smith, “political decision-making is in reality almost always more a matter of elite bargaining than popular deliberation.”¹⁴ To Benhabib, society is “the sedimented repository of struggles for power, symbolization, and signification—in short, for cultural and political hegemony carried out among groups, classes, and genders.”¹⁵

Politics conceived as warlike conflict goes beyond theory; it is reflected in widespread practices of citizen participation. The citizenry is drawn into such politics not only in elections but also through mobilization technologies. For instance, since the mid-1980s, the door-to-door issue canvass—practiced by progressive organizations like Ralph Nader’s Public Interest Research Group—has reached at least 12 million households a year. It

frames issues to unite “the majority” against an “enemy.” Mobilization technologies have spread across the political spectrum, metastasizing into new forms, such as Internet-organized protests. They contribute to a highly polarized public discourse. Whole groups are judged as “good” or “bad” based on issue stance.¹⁶

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The Growth of Everyday Politics

After the 1960s, far more refined citizen efforts developed beneath the mainstream radar screen. In the 1980s and 1990s, I traced the increasing sophistication of citizen organizing in neighborhoods, religious congregations, health care settings, schools, and other venues that bring people together across partisan lines to address complex problems.¹⁷ Since then, Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland have examined civic innovations in community development, health, journalism, civic environmentalism, youth development, and higher education.¹⁸ Others have researched public humanities work and family practice. Civic

populism represents a growing empirical trend. It can be seen in unlikely alliances between cattle ranchers and environmentalists in Montana; in the community health movement’s recognition of citizens as “coproducers” of health; and in the best community policing efforts, which create sustained partnerships between police

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and minority or low-income communities to address problems such as racial or ethnic profiling and to enhance neighborhood safety.¹⁹

Implicitly or explicitly, all such endeavors entail a conception of politics as the interactions among citizens who have roughly equal, horizontal relationships with one another in many settings, not simply in vertical relation with the state. Some years ago, I discovered that such an everyday politics was being taught in the most effective citizen organizing networks, based largely in low-income, working-class, and minority religious congregations.²⁰ This marked a revival of an older concept of politics, from the Greek root *politikos*, meaning “of the citizen.” Today’s broadly based citizen organizations, growing from a populist focus on building the power of citizens, see politics as about negotiating plurality. They draw upon Bernard Crick’s 1962 book *In Defence of Politics*, which described politics as “a great and civilizing activity” that negotiates among diverse interests. Using Aristotle, Crick argued that politics is about plurality, not similarity. He defended politics against “enemies,” including nationalism, technology, and mass democracy, as well as overzealous partisans of ideologies.²¹

These citizen groups are therefore highly diverse. Their members range from conservative Baptists to liberal Unitarians; they may come from mosques, synagogues, trade unions, schools, or

neighborhood groups. They organize based on a philosophical orientation to politics, grounded in democratic and religious values like respect for minorities' rights, participation, justice, or sacredness of human life. "These are normal and commonsensical people . . . not activists, for the most part, not ideologues," says Mike Gecan, organizing director of Metro Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in the New York City region. "They spend untold hours mastering and using the full range of public arts and skills. They learn how to argue, act, negotiate, and compromise"—all of which he calls "the phonics of the larger language of politics."²² Their philosophical rather than ideological approach sees democratic potential in different religious and partisan positions. It involves building relationships among citizens of diverse backgrounds, as well as developing sustained public relationships—full of tension but also productive results—with "establishment" leaders once seen as simply the enemy.

The scale, effectiveness, and accumulated learning of citizen organizing networks (IAF, Gamaliel Foundation, and others) have recently sparked increasing attention from scholars such as Mark Warren, Richard Wood, Paul Osterman, and Dennis Shirley. These networks include 133 local organizations, made up of approximately 4,000 member institutions, in almost every major metropolitan area. Wood estimates that more than two million families participate, addressing issues of concern to low-income and lower-middle-class populations, such as education, policing, working-class wages, and medical coverage. In San Antonio, Texas, Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) brought hundreds of millions of dollars of infrastructure improvements to the Mexican American barrios. Across Texas, the "Alliance schools" have dramatically improved poor children's academic performance, becoming what Shirley calls "laboratories of democracy" in which students and parents learn the art of civic engagement. In Maryland, Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD) won living-wage legislation that raised city workers' salaries. In New York City, after the shooting of Amadou Diallo, Metro IAF spurred former mayor Rudolph Giuliani to be more responsive to minority community concerns.²³

In the last few years, citizen group leaders have articulated a larger politics in what Gecan calls "an inductive approach," based on local experiences. Thus, the IAF sought to meet with both George W. Bush and Al Gore, and shape the issue agendas of their presidential campaigns in 2000. But the limits of such organizing become vivid. Citizen organizing continues to work from an old-fashioned populist analysis. "Power . . . still comes in two basic forms, organized people and organized money," argues Gecan.²⁴ By putting "organized people" in touch with political leaders and "organized money," citizen groups develop highly interactive patterns of power. Yet this framework neglects to acknowledge power based on control over the flow of information, communications, and professional practices—what might be summarized as "organized knowledge."

Sometimes this omission is obvious, even dramatic. Gecan's analysis of people and money, for instance, is confounded by his own examples from New York, where coverage in the *New York Times* or on local network television has often proved crucial to

success. Thus, Gecan does not attend to an evident variable in these cases.

Sometimes, however, the omission is subtle. Gecan touts "relational workers"—service providers such as teachers and health professionals—as the heart of a democratic society. But he sees these workers as "pre-political," because they are concerned with helping; he thus ignores the often highly unequal power relationships between professionals and their clients or customers.²⁵

Public Work

Citizen organizing tends to describe politics as the activity of bargaining, negotiation, and recognition. These are indeed key elements. But so is work, a theme left out of conventional theory and not made explicit in most citizen politics.

The concept of work does not naturally conjure up democratic politics. The tradition to which we are heirs conceives of public life as the democratization of the aristocratic ideal. As Benjamin Barber has observed, "To the Greeks, labor by itself defined only mere animal existence, while leisure was the condition for freedom, politics, and truly 'human' forms of being."²⁶ Hannah Arendt distinguished between work, which she saw as having a public aspect, and "herdlike" labor. But the public dimension of work existed in the marketplace, "not the political realm." As Arendt put it, "*Homo faber* can find his proper relationship to other people only by exchanging his products with theirs because these products themselves *are always produced in isolation* [italics added]."²⁷

It is understandable, perhaps, that theorists—whose own conditions of work, in conventional academic settings, are privatized—would continue to see work as cut off from the politics of public life. Yet the populist tradition in America, in its democratic expressions, confounds this bifurcation (as well as that of politics and market). Especially in the information age, where knowledge work is an increasingly central power source, civic populism offers new democratic possibilities. It points to the strategic importance of organizing for change in arenas such as education, health care, or law, where today citizens are largely rendered as passive recipients, not active creators.

In partnerships and theory building over the past 15 years, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Humphrey Institute has found that public work is best defined as the sustained effort (paid or unpaid) by a mix of citizens to create goods (material or cultural) of lasting civic value. This definition highlights the public impacts and products of such effort; it also suggests the collective, power-generating dimensions of work that accomplish things people cannot achieve in isolation. It is a way to conceptualize practices of effective citizen organizations, which do not simply fight for a redistribution of the pie. Groups such as COPS or BUILD or Metro IAF do not only demand that government reallocate scarce resources; they also add to public wealth by activating citizen energy to solve problems and produce goods like low-income housing or better schools.

The idea of public work illuminates populism's democratic side. In a history of movements that used populist rhetoric, Michael Kazin demonstrates that populist politics with a tie to work and productive citizenship were relatively open and

democratic. Conversely, those framed in moral terms, defending “traditional values,” were likely to be reactionary.²⁸ Before the 1940s, democracy’s power grew from people’s sense that they helped to make it, as Lizabeth Cohen explains in *Making a New Deal*. Workers saw themselves building the New Deal in a variety of ways, from union organizing to participation in the Civilian Conservation Corps.²⁹ Work with public overtones, expressed in the populist vision of a commonwealth created by people’s labors, embeds at the heart of politics the citizen as cocreator of democracy. The concept of citizen as cocreator adds to Arendt’s common table (around which citizens gather) attention to making the table itself.

We have seen many democratic realizations of this concept. For instance, in the Jane Addams School for Democracy, a partnership with new immigrants, the idea of citizen as cocreator helps to make immigrants’ contributions to American democracy visible. Immigrants are involved in different public work projects through the Jane Addams School, from school reform to public arts to farming. In another case, conceiving young people as cocreators of democracy in their schools, their communities, and society shifts their role from “citizen in preparation” to “citizen today.” In Public Achievement—a youth civic engagement initiative sponsored by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, with partners in schools and communities, and colleagues in several countries—young people work in teams on issues of concern that they have identified, coached by adults. These issues range from prevention of teen pregnancy or teen suicide or drug use to reforms in curricula or school lunch programs. Evaluations find that young people and adult coaches alike develop many public skills and habits in such work. Civic learning (chairing meetings, interviewing, deliberating, negotiating, speaking, mapping power, holding one another accountable) is as important as the products of that learning. Additionally, youths develop a favorable view of politics.³⁰

Public work illuminates the democratic potential of knowledge power. In broadly based citizen organizing, a power framework holds that problems besetting poor or working-class communities are not a result of callous leaders or bad values. Each “crisis,” whether housing or jobs, is about power, Gecan argues: “Without power there’s not real recognition. They don’t even see you. . . . You can only be a supplicant, a serf, a victim, or a wishful thinker who begins to whine.”³¹

This is arresting language, but it still misses dynamics in information-based systems, where professionals can increase the public impact and quality of their work by sharing knowledge and learning from ordinary citizens. Professionals in conventional graduate education learn to “see” ordinary citizens, but in a particular fashion—as needy, victimized, and requiring professional rescue. Traditionally, clergy members have been similarly trained. But a hidden dimension of faith-based organizing efforts has been to re-educate clergy to see citizens as full of creative talents and public potential. For instance, since the late 1970s, in innovations pioneered by Gerald Taylor and the IAF Black Caucus, the IAF has given sustained attention to adding public dimensions to the work of the clergy. IAF organizers are taught to “agitate clergy” about what brought them into ministry, what

makes them angry, and what larger public purposes they want to accomplish. Many IAF affiliates have a Clergy Caucus, which provides regular space for philosophical, theological, and practical reflections on faith, scripture, and theology, all tied to clerics’ own public roles.

The Center for Democracy and Citizenship and its colleagues have translated lessons from IAF, Gamaliel, and elsewhere, to environments such as nursing homes, family medical practices, cooperative extensions, settlement houses, schools, and institutions of higher education. Professionals who incorporate public dimensions into their work—both a heightened sense of public purpose and more collective, interactive conditions of labor—often develop a deepened sense of civic identity as well as new hope and motivation to effect broad changes. For instance, the efforts of our colleague William Doherty, a professor of family social science who works with families on issues like overscheduling and consumer pressures, have generated large catalytic effects by reconceiving family practice as “on tap, not on top.” His work also points toward possibilities for the civic refashioning of family professions. In the main family practice journal, *Family Process*, Doherty has helped to create a section on public, community-building practice.³²

Finally, public work provides a way to bridge the gap between citizens and government. It reframes an article of faith in organizing: that government agencies should stay out of the business of organizing citizens. A focus on the public outcomes of work illuminates citizen-government *partnerships* in which government workers “put the civil back in civil service,” as one federal employee put it, for the sake of solving problems.³³ In the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Energy, and other federal agencies, as well as in local government offices, many civil servants are developing considerable skill in “organizing citizens” in sustained partnerships to address tough, long-term problems.³⁴ To do this, they have to learn to act politically—negotiating diverse interests, framing issues broadly, and developing civic capacities. Making democracy flourish in the twenty-first century will require much more of the same.

Free elections remain the only credible way for whole societies to make choices. At their best, democratic elections are conversations about the future of a society in which political candidates call on citizens to think in large and long-range terms. An example was Nelson Mandela’s famous challenge to South African citizens in the 1994 election: building the new democracy would require them to work hard, and government alone could not solve their nation’s problems.³⁵ In new democracies and established ones, citizens and civic organizations must become bold, strong, intelligent, and independent partners in problem solving, far more than apolitical volunteers or angry protesters. Groups that have done so can teach much about improving politics to government officials, elected leaders, and scholars.

Civic populism, focusing on public dimensions of work, accents both the productive and the distributive sides of politics as crucial resources for citizen empowerment. If we are to address the interconnected challenges of a turbulent world, such an approach is not only “good politics”; it is also an urgently political matter.

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Notes

- 1 Quoted in Novak 2001, 170.
- 2 Ibid., 170.
- 3 Etzioni 1993.
- 4 Elshtain et al. 1998, 3.
- 5 Partnering Initiative 2003.
- 6 Galston 2001.
- 7 Conrad 1989.

- 8 Harwood 2000, 7–8.
- 9 Bush 2002, 4.
- 10 Schudson 2003, 270.
- 11 Benhabib 2002, 57.
- 12 Smith 1999, 30.
- 13 Lasswell 1936.
- 14 Smith 1999, 36.
- 15 Benhabib 2002, 60.
- 16 Boyte 2001.
- 17 See Boyte 1980; Boyte 1984; Boyte 1989; Evans and Boyte 1992; Boyte and Kari 1996.
- 18 Sirianni and Friedland 2001.
- 19 Doherty and Carroll 2002; Ellison 2003; Lyson 2000.
- 20 Boyte 1980.
- 21 Crick 1992 [1962], 15; see also Saxonhouse 1992; Boyte 2002.
- 22 Gecan 2002, 5, ix.
- 23 Wood 2002; Warren 2001; Osterman 2003; Shirley 2002.
- 24 Gecan 2002, 35.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 26 Barber 1998, 132.
- 27 Arendt 1958, 160–1; see also Boyte and Kari 1996, appendix, for a statement of this argument.
- 28 Kazin 1995.
- 29 Cohen 1992.
- 30 Hildreth 2000; on political attitudes, see Boyte 2001.
- 31 Gecan 2002, 36.
- 32 Doherty and Beaton 2000; Doherty and Carroll 2002.
- 33 Quoted in Boyte and Kari 1996, 196.
- 34 Sirianni and Friedland 2001.
- 35 Mandela 1994.