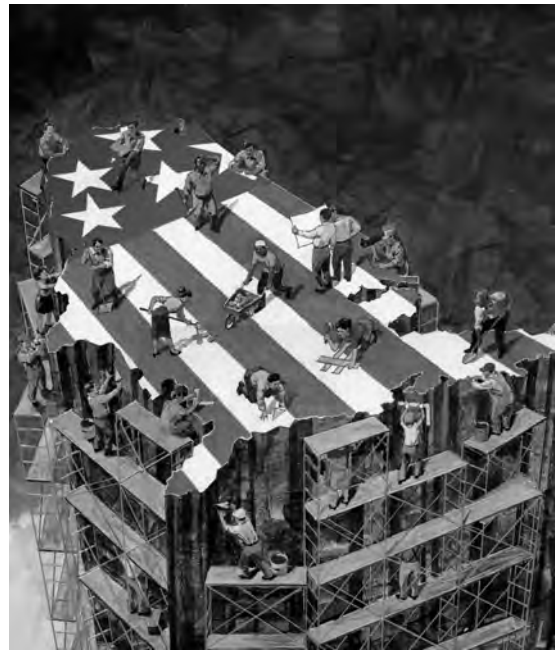




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Fed up with politics and a widening partisan divide, many Americans are turning away from public life. We are, most of us, spectators rather than participants in a political process that seems to have little to do with citizens. What has gone wrong, and what should we do about it?



>> Democracy's Challenge

Reclaiming the public's role

THERE'S A FEELING of dissatisfaction in the country. People are fed up with politics turned into blood sport and frustrated that we can't seem to make progress on our problems. Many feel besieged by a coarsening culture and find that they are less inclined to trust each other. As a result, Americans by the millions are turning away from the public places, the town square if you will, where we come together to solve problems.

Democracy presumes that citizens play an active role. Yet many Americans have retreated from the activities that make a democracy work—not just voting or getting involved in politics, but turning out for rallies, working in civic groups, even writing letters to the newspaper or to public officials. People are less willing to learn how the system works, more inclined to throw up their hands in disgust.

Turning away from the public square hasn't left most Americans feeling any better. The bonds that knit us together are frayed. Whether it's in Washington, D.C. or on Main Street, we're pulling apart from each other. Politics has hardened into a partisan divide that few people are willing to cross. "The essence of what used to

be called 'the American way' was citizen involvement: town meetings, barn-raising, volunteer associations of all sorts," says columnist William Raspberry. "Today, the image of everybody pulling on his oar has given way to the idea of a society on automatic pilot."

Something fundamental has gone wrong. It is not sufficient to blame our current situation on elected officials or conclude that government itself is the problem. As the late John W. Gardner, founder of Common Cause, said, "It is clear that government alone cannot bring our communities—or our nation—back to health. The sad, hard truth is that the American people themselves are a part of the problem. We need a powerful thrust of energy to move this nation through a rough patch, and much of that energy will have to come from the citizens themselves..."

Tuning out

Many people have "tuned out" politics because its shrill tone has turned them off. Unable to hear moderate or civil voices, the public concludes that all politicians are the same, and none are to be trusted. Surveys in recent years have shown a

steady decline of confidence in government and, for that matter, all major institutions of society. Many Americans conclude that elected officials are more interested in attacking each other than in solving problems. They also fear that money has become the most influential factor in politics. All of this has driven Americans away from participation.

The withdrawal from politics by citizens has aggravated the problem of finding broadly acceptable legislative solutions to public problems. The voice of the moderate middle has become muted and is more often overlooked in the legislative process.

Added to this concern about national politics are citizens' misgivings about how decisions are made about community issues. Across the country, citizens feel shut out of schools and local government by professional planners, administrators, and engineers. The role of citizens in making decisions and shaping priorities about the direction of their communities has been usurped by professionals with special training and expertise. Although citizens are routinely invited to comment in public hearings, few communities involve citizens in the day-to-day process of setting priorities or solving problems.

Tackling common concerns

Most people haven't given up. They want to make a difference and they are tired of public life, which seems to be an endless squabble. "If the American public square is far less vibrant

than it should be, if the quality of participation is disappointing, if the tone of national politics is nasty, and if the distribution of political activity and influence favors the socially and economically advantaged, the responsibility in substantial measure is our own," writes Stephen Macedo in *Democracy at Risk*. "We must act collectively to improve our institutions and thereby foster a richer civic life for all citizens."

But what, exactly, should we do? It is a complex problem encompassing politics, the civic life of local communities, families, campaign finance, the role of experts, and personal values. As we consider what has gone wrong and discuss what should be done, the discussion needs to go beyond what government should or should not do. We need to rethink some basic terms: *citizen*, *public*, and *politics*. These contested words are at the center of a conversation that is a crucial first step in rebuilding the kind of democratic public life that Americans can be part of.

At the heart of the conversation are different views about how we got off track and differing ideas about how to restore democracy to full, robust health. This issue-in-brief consists of three distinctive perspectives, which reflect differences about the nature of the problem and how to fix it. Each leads to an agenda for public action that would make new demands on us individually and would reshape community life. If they are taken seriously, each of these approaches would change us as a nation.

Kettering Foundation

Founded in 1927, the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio (with offices in Washington, D.C. and New York City), is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute that studies the public's role in democracy. It has provided issue books and other research for the National Issues Forums which will celebrate its 25th anniversary this year. For information about the Kettering Foundation, please visit www.kettering.org or contact us at 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. Phone: 800-221-3657.

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As a nation, we have become self-indulgent and self-absorbed, inclined to accept neither hard choices nor sacrifice. The emphasis on individual rights and personal freedom has undermined democracy. In recent decades, the moral curriculum has been neglected; this is a key element in our public troubles.



>> Democratic Values

Rebuilding democracy's moral foundation

WORK. FAITH. COMPASSION. Responsibility. Sacrifice. These are some of the values Americans have traditionally honored, values that are essential to a robust democracy. They provide the moral foundation that gives America its strength. For most of the nation's first two centuries, these moral qualities were an integral part of the cultural curriculum. They were taught in the family and the schools and reinforced in places of worship.

But, as advocates of Approach One see it, that foundation has weakened because the moral curriculum has been neglected. Families, schools, and places of worship no longer instill or reinforce the values that are essential to democratic life and self-government. The erosion of our moral foundation is a key cause of our public troubles.

As a nation, we have become self-indulgent and self-absorbed, inclined to accept neither hard choices nor sacrifice in the interest of future generations and their welfare. Civic obligations such as voting, jury duty, and military service are routinely avoided. As individuals,

and as a society, we use natural resources with little regard for the future.

"The more serious problems of American democracy," writes Don Eberly in *The Soul of Civil Society*, "have to do with the erosion of democratic character and habit. A society in which men and women are morally adrift and intent chiefly on gratifying their appetites will be a disordered society no matter how many people vote."

In a democratic nation, the connection between moral foundations and civic health is immediate and inescapable. "America's civic institutions are declining," the nonpartisan Council on Civil Society pointed out in a recent report entitled *A Call to Civil Society: Why America Needs Moral Truths*. That is "because the moral ideas that fueled and formed them are losing their power—the power to shape our behavior, to unite us as one people in pursuit of common ideals. Too many Americans view morality as a threat to freedom, rather than its essential guarantor."

Rebuilding the moral curriculum

In the name of personal freedom and respect for diversity, the family—which has long been the first and most important place where values are learned—is under assault. “The family is the cradle of citizenship,” as the report *A Call to Civil Society* puts it. “It is in the family that a child first learns, or fails to learn, the essential qualities necessary for governing the self: honesty, trust, loyalty, cooperation, self-restraint, civility, compassion, personal responsibility, and respect for others. . . . Families can teach standards of personal conduct that cannot be enforced by law, but which are indispensable traits for democratic civil society.”

Along with families, schools have traditionally played a crucial role in teaching and reinforcing our shared moral heritage. For all the attention devoted to teaching children about respecting individual rights and honoring diversity, one report after another has noted the neglect of civic education that teaches the values of democratic life and its corresponding obligations and responsibilities.

Just as the erosion of family life and neglect of civic values in the schools have undermined the moral foundation, so too, say advocates of this choice, has the marginalization of religious institutions. The repeated message, in the words of the Council on Civil Society, is that we should be “a society sanitized of public religious influence.” The virtues promulgated by religious institutions—tolerance, compassion, and the importance of conscience, to name a few—are essential to democratic society.

A final indication of moral decline, say advocates of this approach, is that the value of sacrifice is conspicuous by its absence. Self-restraint, once considered an honorable character trait, is widely considered quaint and unnecessary. The dominant cultural lesson—reinforced by an endless stream of media messages—seems to be: Grab all you can. Why wait? Make your own rules. Don’t worry about the next generation.

To advocates of this first perspective on what has gone wrong with America’s public life, these developments are different facets of a single, fundamental problem: the erosion of the moral foundation on which public life in a democratic

society depends. Many have begun looking for ways to restore these foundational values to the place they deserve. Choosing to take seriously the values on which democracies depend will require a series of changes in family life, in the schools, in the messages featured in American culture, in our preference for favoring individual rights over collective responsibilities.

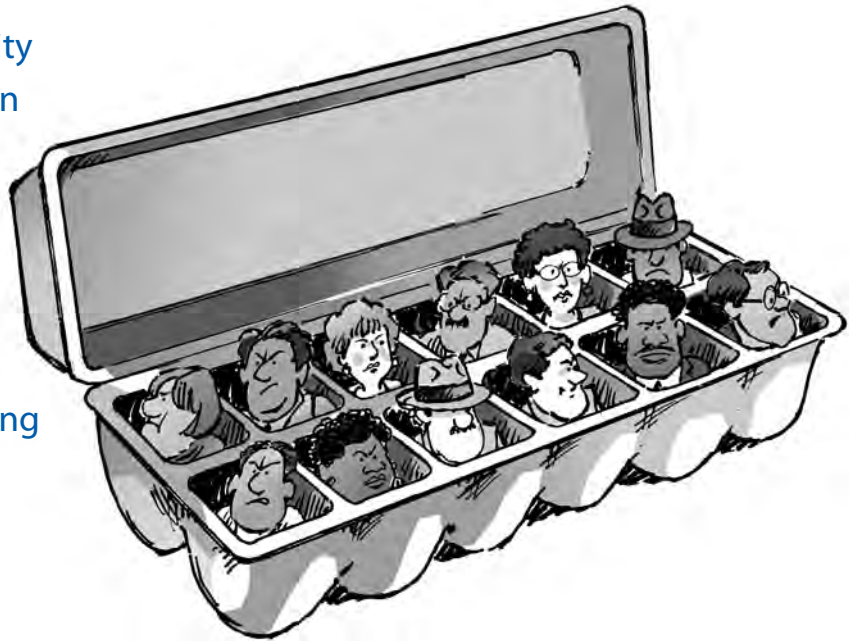
Public actions favored by Approach One

- Schools should integrate character education into the curriculum.
- Various measures should be taken to reinforce the message that marriage is not something easily entered into or quickly dissolved. Divorce laws should be tightened and pre-marital counseling should be readily available.
- Reward marriage and discourage childbirth outside of marriage by ending the “marriage penalty” in the tax code and taking other measures.
- Television networks should agree to a code of content that reinforces social responsibility rather than undermining it. The Federal Communications Commission should use its power to regulate use of the airways in the public interest by minimizing toxic messages and reinforcing socially responsible values.
- To underline the importance of public responsibility, public service should be required of all young people.

>> What others say

- The sky is not falling. Americans are no less moral today than in the past. The erosion of public life has many causes.
- Most Americans don’t want to legislate morality. They reject black-and-white depictions of how people should behave, and they reject the view that America is morally bankrupt.
- Separation of church and state is a fundamental American principle, not to be abandoned lightly. Moreover, some of the values taught in religious institutions are incompatible with democratic life.
- The United States continues to be one of the most religiously observant countries in the world.
- The real source of our public troubles lies elsewhere. Among the root causes is the erosion of civic associations.

Democracy requires the ability to work together on common concerns—civic skills that most people learn in clubs, church groups, and local associations. The public square is emptying because many Americans aren't making the civic connections that form the habits and sharpen the skills of citizenship.



>> Web of Connections

Reinventing citizenship

THE UNDERLYING PROBLEM isn't erosion of the values on which democracy relies, but rather the loss of civic habits and skills. As advocates of this approach see it, democracy consists primarily of common experiences and civic practices, which take place most of the time in local groups and associations—the YMCA, the Rotary Club, Boy Scouts, church groups, charity organizations, and groups that form spontaneously to address community problems.

It's essential, say advocates of this second approach, to recognize the key role played by these small, less formal organizations and associations that are closer to home. By participating in these local associations, most Americans gained an apprenticeship in public life.

Citizenship refers not to abstract membership in some group but to practical, repeated involvement in public problem solving. It is not something that we are, or that we have, but something that we *do*. It presumes a set of common experiences, the recognition of common interests, and the willingness to search for common ground. It

refers, most of all, to certain skills that are essential in identifying public problems and deciding what to do about them.

From the perspective of this second approach, the most troubling symptom of our public problems and the main reason we are unable to solve pressing problems is that the fabric of local associations has been unraveling and citizenship itself has lost its meaning. As Frances Moore Lappe and Paul Martin DuBois, founders of the Center for Living Democracy, observe, "When we chisel through to the single largest barrier blocking solutions to the multitude of issues facing us, what we find is the impoverished problem-solving capacity of our people. None of our society's most daunting problems—from poverty to the environment, from racism to crime—can be addressed from the top down." The public square has emptied, in other words, because many Americans aren't making the civic connections that form the habits and sharpen the skills of citizenship.

The way we were

Throughout the first two centuries of our history as a nation, most Americans shared common experiences and almost instinctively came together when necessary to take common action. They formed a wide variety of organizations and associations—clubs, churches, associations, neighborhood groups, unions, secret societies, and more.

Through such experiences, Harry Boyte and Sara Evans write in their book *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change*, “People learned civic skills and developed a civic identity. People encountered an intergenerational mix of ages, interests, and points of view. They learned to argue artfully, to think strategically about public work, and to work together across lines of difference.” In these places, in other words, people learned the art of citizenship.

The problem is that there are fewer public spaces today and far less engagement with one’s local community. “We do not communicate, relate or connect as a people,” writes Roberta Brendes Gratz, of the Project for Public Spaces. “And we have few public places left. Without the variety of common grounds on which a diverse people mix and mingle in an unplanned manner, the health of the commonweal is undermined.”

Across the nation, says sociologist Robert Putnam, people have disengaged from churches, unions, associations of all kinds. “We have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.” Most people no longer have the time nor, it seems, the inclination to do what citizenship requires. Politics and public life have become, for many Americans, a spectator sport. As a result, our civic muscles have atrophied and democracy itself has weakened.

In 1995, Putnam focused the nation’s attention on its civic habits in his book *Bowling Alone*, which argued that America has changed from a society in which people form and join bowling leagues to a society of people who bowl alone. He pointed out that not only has voter turnout declined, but people report going to fewer public meetings, serving on fewer volunteer groups, and working less often in political campaigns. Across the nation, Putnam said people have dis-

engaged from churches, unions, and associations of all kinds.

What is needed to rebuild the web of civic connections? And what needs to happen to revive an active sense of citizenship? Reviving civil society will be no easy task. In an era in which many adults struggle to balance the demands on their time, carving out time and energy to devote to civic associations is by itself no small task. But it is clear that efforts to revive civil society have to start with a conviction that the role of citizen is both demanding and rewarding, and indispensable in the life of a democratic nation.

Public actions favored by Approach Two

- Schools must teach the habit and skills of citizenship. One way would be to offer high-school students civics for the 21st century, an “owner’s manual” for active participation in a democratic society.
- Young people should be required to perform community service as part of their high-school experience.
- Citizenship requires common space and common experiences. All neighborhoods should be designed to make it easier for citizens to connect with one another.
- Americans need to devote more time and energy to local organizations and associations, which are the lifeblood of a democratic society.
- Businesses should offer the flexibility people need to take an active part in community activities. And the government should offer tax incentives to businesses and industries who do so.

>>What others say

- This approach has a mistaken sense of the problem. In a society in which elected officials listen to well-heeled special interests far more than to average citizens, greater public engagement in local communities isn’t likely to reverse a pervasive sense of disengagement.
- Spending more time in civic associations isn’t practical in today’s society. Most Americans don’t have time to do much more than read the newspaper and vote regularly.
- The underlying problem is that elected officials, policy experts, and the news media all regard the public as consumers, not citizens. The solution is to reform government, rather than trying to reform citizens.

Government is no longer “of, by, and for the people.” Governance is something politicians do, not something that involves us. In a democratic nation where the people are supposed to be sovereign, citizens have lost control of the government. The political system has to be fixed so citizens once again have a central place in it.



>> By the People

Bringing the public back into politics

THE CHIEF PROBLEM, from this third perspective, is neither the erosion of the nation’s moral foundation, nor its neglect of civic habits and skills. It is, rather, a serious flaw in a nation dedicated to government by the people. At a time when the country seems to be run by an oligarchy of insiders, there is a growing sense that politics is something *they* do—not something that involves us, and not something we the people can control.

Consequently, most Americans no longer see a role in politics for themselves. We are political consumers, not active citizens. Growing distrust of politics and politicians, and a widespread sense that the country is going in the wrong direction are symptoms of what has gone wrong.

In a nation where the people are supposed to be sovereign, citizens have lost control of the government. As John W. Gardner remarks, “a prime ingredient in the citizen’s negative mood is a sense of disconnection. ‘We the people’ feel a long way from the centers of decision. It doesn’t seem like our venture any more.”

As this approach sees it, Americans did not retreat from civic life. They were shut out by

elected officials more interested in poll numbers and lobbyists’ positions than in the genuine, complex thinking of citizens. There are few remaining occasions for most Americans to do what only citizens can do, which is to make judgments about what direction we should be headed and help set priorities for public action. As advocates of this perspective see it, until we fix the political system so citizens once again have a central place in it, none of the other efforts to bring the public back into the public square is likely to make a difference.

What needs to change

Three principles should guide our efforts to restore the public’s place in politics, as advocates of this approach see it. Starting in their own communities, citizens need to work together to solve problems. In the words of Vaughan Grisham, author of *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community*, “Communities that work are good at making decisions that lead to effective action. In such communities, citizens accept a level of responsibility that goes beyond basic civic duties to obey the law, pay taxes, and vote.”

Second, citizens need to become a “board of trustees” for the government. Democracy, properly understood, requires that the public—at least a large, representative portion of it—not only weighs in at elections but also oversees the institutions of government. Citizens have an obligation to be informed about what is happening and to participate in regular deliberations about public priorities and the direction of public action, at both local and national levels.

Third, government officials need to be responsive to the public and recognize their responsibility to shape policies that reflect the public’s priorities. Citizens’ growing sense that government is not focusing on the concerns of most Americans is a strong indication that the nation’s leaders are out of step with the public they are supposed to serve.

The influence of money in politics goes a long way toward explaining that disconnect. In today’s political system, candidates need increasingly large war chests to finance political campaigns. The huge sums of money required to get elected, and re-elected, have distorted politics and disconnected political leaders from the public.

The public’s voice

The largest task in developing a new partnership between the people and their elected officials involves the public directly. Public deliberation needs to become a regular part of community life, a routine part of what citizens do, and an integral part of public decision making. When diverse groups of citizens come together to talk about public problems, discuss their differences, and see where they can agree, and when the public judgment that arises from deliberative events is taken seriously by elected officials, a more robust civic life emerges.

Spelling out the terms of a new partnership between the people and the nation’s elected officials will involve far-reaching changes, and not just in the way political campaigns are financed. Citizens need to accept an active role and the demands and responsibilities that go with it. To advocates of this approach, the only realistic way to reverse the retreat from the public square is to take the capacities of ordinary citizens seriously, and make government “of, by, and for the people” a reality.

Public actions favored by Approach Three

- Create new occasions for public deliberation, ranging from citizen juries to neighborhood councils and advisory boards.
- Cut back on the use of officially appointed study groups, commissions, and blue-ribbon panels composed of experts and people representing special interests.
- Take new measures to close the “revolving door” through which many people move from elective office to well-paid positions in corporations and lobbying groups.
- Reduce the length of campaigns and their cost, and expand public financing of campaigns.

>> What others say

- Our system is a representative democracy, not a direct democracy.
- Most Americans have neither time nor interest in taking part in public forums or neighborhood councils.
- Most people are ill-informed, self interested, and shortsighted. They are ill-suited to make prudent judgments about the public good.
- Money is part of politics. It’s how different agendas are advanced.



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A note about this issue book

Each book in this series for the National Issues Forums outlines a public issue and several choices or approaches to addressing the issue. Rather than conforming to any single public proposal, each choice reflects widely held concerns and principles. Panels of experts review manuscripts to make sure the choices are presented accurately and fairly.

By intention, issue books do not identify individuals or organizations with partisan labels, such as Democrat, Republican, conservative, or liberal. The goal is to present ideas in a fresh way that encourages readers to judge them on their merit. Issue books include quotations from experts and public officials when their views appear consistent with the principles of a given approach. But these quoted individuals might not endorse every aspect of the approach as it is described here.