

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The United States of America, the world's oldest and most esteemed democracy, is experiencing serious and pervasive problems in its politics and government. For the last half-century, Americans have become more disgusted with elected officials, less trusting of political institutions, and increasingly indifferent toward democratic participation. This disaffection is particularly surprising given that the economy is booming, educational levels are high and rising, and the nation has enjoyed nearly uninterrupted peace for more than a quarter century.

Despite the harmony and prosperity, levels of civic engagement and trust in government are at post-War lows. Voting, attending public meetings, writing letters to the editor, contacting elected representatives, paying attention to current affairs, working on campaigns, going to protests or rallies – all of these activities, upon which successful democracy depends, have dropped precipitously over the past two generations. Large numbers of citizens believe that politicians lie and pander to suit their own ambitions, that rich “special interests” get their way at the expense of everyday working families, that partisan elected officials refuse to work together or lead on important matters, and that government is too big and remote to solve problems. Meanwhile, serious discussion of the big issues – race relations, the gap between the rich and poor, the health-insurance crisis, even declining civic participation itself – seems to have gotten lost in the cacophony of partisan sniping and interest-group alarmism.

Whether wholly or only partly true, these perceptions are widespread, reflected in a decade's worth of book titles from some of the nation's leading political commentators – book titles such as *Democracy's Discontent*, *Demosclerosis*, *Why Americans Hate Politics*, *The End of Politics*, *Why Americans Don't Vote*, *The Corruption of American Politics*, and *Democracy Derailed*, to name just a few.

And yet, for all their distance and disenchantment, Americans are not ready to walk away for good. They are nearly unanimous in believing that democracy is the best form of government, even if it does need a tune-up at the hands of a good civic mechanic. And recent experience shows that Americans eagerly respond to straight-talking, energetic, non-conventional leaders with new ideas for making democracy work again. For example:

- In 1992, to the shock of political pundits, nearly 20 million voters supported the third-party candidacy of the iconoclastic Texas billionaire Ross Perot after he used television infomercials (replete with his now-famous graphs and charts) to call attention to issues, such as the then-staggering budget deficit, that the major party candidates were keeping off the agenda.
- In 1998, a no-nonsense former professional wrestler named Jesse Ventura stunned the political world by capturing the Minnesota governorship, the highest office ever won by a Reform Party candidate. With his charisma and bare-knuckled populist appeals – one of his television ads had a Jesse Ventura action figure battling “Special Interest Man” – the political novice managed to excite young people and non-voters, who gave him the margin of victory over two respected major party candidates.

- In the 2000 presidential primaries, the Republican John McCain galvanized disaffected Americans, including many young people, with his “Straight Talk Express” bus campaign to clean up politics. Despite having virtually no backing from his own party, Senator McCain defeated the presumptive nominee in several key primary states and dramatized Americans’ deep longing for a new way of politics.
- Even the veteran consumer activist Ralph Nader, who is not distinguished either by novelty or charisma, has developed a substantial following with his Green Party calls to redress the imbalance between the economically powerful interests, on the one hand, and the public interest, on the other.

The lesson is clear. Whether from the right, the center, or the left, appeals to reform and reinvigorate democracy are not falling on deaf ears. People are listening for answers.

As reform-minded leaders have noted, we cannot fix America’s civic malaise without transforming the way politicians politick and way government governs. There is a role both on the “input” (politics) side and on the “output” (government) side for increasing civic engagement and social capital. There is much work to be done.

Politics & Political Participation at New Lows

Modern politics – by which we mean the election of representatives and the debates over how to use government to solve social problems – seems increasingly polarized, nasty, and undemocratic. In recent years, Congress, once known for its bipartisan comity and ability to reach consensus, has had to hold civility camps so members can get basic lessons in how to get along. The political scientists Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter have wisely observed that political elites no longer seek to exert influence the democratic way – by mobilizing citizens – but instead seek to win by smearing and investigating and prosecuting the opponent. In this “politics by other means,” the average citizen becomes an irrelevant bystander as leaders wage nasty wars through distant institutions – the courts, Congressional committees, the big Washington bureaucracies, the national media, and so forth. It is no wonder citizens tune out.

What is more, modern political campaigns often seek to depress participation, rather than increase it. The method of choice: attack ads on television and radio designed to alienate the opponent’s voters. While these candidates often win by driving voters away, our society pays a hefty price. When candidates do try to mobilize citizens, the campaigns usually target the most likely voters: people who are educated, married-with-children, white, well-off, and middle-aged or older. These are the folks toward whom countless polls, focus groups, television ads, direct-mail appeals, and campaign stops are oriented. The millions of other Americans – many of them young people, singles, non-whites who might vote if somebody asked or truly cared – are simply written off. In the misguided world of modern politics, voter apathy is not an urgent, *unanticipated* problem, but rather the *intended* consequence of campaigners’ cynical choices.

The campaign finance system is a big part of the problem. Changes in the technology of campaigning have placed new demands on candidates either to have or to raise lots and lots of money. Not surprisingly, a system that is heavily reliant on major contributions is tilted toward

individuals and organizations that can give big. Access to money plays a key role in what kinds of candidates run and what kinds of candidates win. Indeed, the nonpartisan National Voting Rights Institute has labeled our candidate-selection system the “wealth primary” because it is nearly impossible for qualified candidates of middling means to mount a competitive campaign. The electoral system’s excessive reliance on financial capital also determines what kinds of interests get heard, and what kinds of policies get passed. Seeing politics as hopelessly skewed toward the well-off and the organized, middle America has come to see individual acts of political participation as pointless. And so, a vicious circle emerges. As money appears to control politics more and more, fewer people seek to influence politics by voting or contacting their legislators, which in turn amplifies the influence of those who give money.

For that reason, the system of campaign finance, perhaps more than any other facet of government, is most in need of radical repair. Common Cause reports that, in the first 18 months of the 2000 Presidential campaign season, the two major parties used legal loopholes to raise a staggering \$256-million in “soft money” contributions from corporations, political action committees, and individuals to promote candidates’ campaigns. That figure represents an astonishing 82% increase over the soft money contributions raised during the comparable period of the 1996 campaign, leading Common Cause President Scott Harshbarger to observe that, “While average citizens sit at home, disconnected from politics, wealthy special interests will have access and influence at the national party conventions due to their huge soft money contributions.”¹ Or, as political scientist Robert Putnam notes: “The bottom line in the political industry is this: financial capital—the wherewithal for mass marketing—has steadily replaced social capital—that is, grassroots citizen networks—as the coin of the realm.”² And as long as money is in greater demand than volunteer time, politics will be biased toward the elite.

Trends in Political and Civic Participation

From attack ads to the “wealth primary” efforts to limit participation have had impressive results. One need only take a brief statistical tour of the past half-century to see how far we have sunk. In the late 1950s, a landmark study of political participation in five democracies found America’s to be the quintessential “civic culture” probably unparalleled anywhere else in the world.³ While the United States still stands out by international standards both for its opportunities to participate and for the willingness of everyday citizens to do so, the nation is at a post-World War II civic nadir. By virtually every measure of political participation, Americans today lag far behind their forebears.

That general statement itself contains two even more ominous facts. First, the participation deficit is most pronounced among young and middle-aged citizens. Second, the forms of participation that have declined the most are collective in nature.⁴ That is, forms of political participation most conducive to building social capital have withered faster than those that contribute *less* to norms and networks of trust, reciprocity, and the public good. We summarize some of the facts.

Voting. In 1996, with three viable candidates in the race, fewer than half of all voting-age Americans decided who would lead the nation into the next millennium. The turnout in the 1996 Presidential election represented a decline of nearly 14 percentage points from the 1960 election. Participation in off-year Congressional and local elections has declined by roughly the same proportion. In sum, out of every 100 voters who went to the polls in 1960, only 75 do so today.⁵

The decline is especially puzzling given that, since the 1960s, barriers to voting have been razed and factors associated with higher voting rates, such as college education and wealth, have become more widespread. An analysis by political scientists Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks⁶ found that nearly all the decline in voting is attributable to generational replacement. Simply put, the young adults of today do not vote in anywhere near the same numbers as the young adults of yesteryear.

Political Attention. Survey data going back to 1974 has tracked a steady decline in Americans' interest in politics and current affairs.⁷ Cutting through the natural ebbs and flows that correspond to news events, the fraction of Americans who care about public affairs has dropped by roughly 20% over the past 25 years. As with voting, the decline in attention to public affairs is largely generational and likely linked to the parallel decline in newspaper readership.

Political Expression. Reflecting this general psychic disengagement, Americans are considerably less likely to render their opinions on important matters of the day. There has been a decline of more than 20% in the fraction of Americans who write their member of Congress or Senator in any given year, and a similar decline in the fraction of Americans who sign petitions. There has been a smaller but still marked drop in the propensity to write letters to the editor or newspaper articles.

Some political theorists claim that increasing the *quantity* of political expression, whether voting or speaking out, would not aid our democracy. Their argument dates to Aristotle's time, when governance was considered the rightful province of a small group of especially knowledgeable and virtuous people. While we agree that knowledge and virtue are important foundations for self-governance, we nonetheless believe pragmatically that more expression is better, irrespective of whether we become more virtuous individuals first. The decline in voter turnout and other forms of political communication is a problem precisely because it leads to confusion over what the American people want. If voters do not register their preferences, those elected cannot claim a "mandate" to do the people's bidding – whether it be expanding the government safety net or reducing government regulation. If we don't speak, they can't lead.

These indicators of civic health – voting, speaking out, paying attention – are largely individual pursuits, which don't require interaction with other citizens. The declines are even starker when we look at the forms of participation that depend on regular interaction with others.

Campaign Work. The fraction of Americans who volunteer for a political party – never high to begin with – has dropped by more than half since the early 1970s. This has accompanied, and may ironically be the product of, the growing wealth and professionalization of the major political parties. Where once the parties relied on grassroots volunteers and face-to-face persuasion to recruit locals to the party cause, the Democrats and Republicans now rely primarily on "air war" strategies – television advertisements, public opinion polling, mass mailings to people whose names and addresses are purchased from "list brokers," and phone banks staffed by professional solicitors. The political scientist John Aldrich aptly describes today's parties as service bureaus for free-lancing candidates, rather than as voluntary associations of like-minded individuals working to advance their policy interests.⁸

The decline in campaign involvement has been fueled at least in part by changes in the ways parties attempt to communicate with would-be supporters.⁹ The decline is significant across generational cohorts, suggesting that the explanation lies at least in part with the political system. But it is also true that the decline in party involvement has been far more pronounced among younger than older age groups. For example, seniors aged 60 and above were 36% less likely to participate in the late 1990s relative to the early 1970s, but the comparable figure for people 18-29 was fully 64%.¹⁰ The difference in drop-off rates suggests that a generational factor may be at work. The story is familiar: The long civic generation that came of age during the Depression and second World War is far more inclined to participate in politics than are the generations that followed. If the younger generations are less inclined to take the initiative to get involved, this makes it all the more imperative that political institutions find ways to reach and persuade them.

Attendance at Political Events. Americans have become less likely to express their collective will or to deliberate about civic affairs. The fraction of people who attended a political rally or speech has fallen by more than a third, as has the fraction of citizens who attended a public meeting at which town or school affairs were discussed. Likewise, membership in good-government groups and service on local committees has dropped significantly since the early 1970s. Again, these trends are most pronounced among younger generations.

To summarize: American politics has become shriller, more craven, and more elite-oriented. Millions of middle Americans, understandably, have tuned out. The decline in participation is troublesome for the simple reason that civic engagement is a necessary condition for wise, responsible, and effective government. Social capital makes democracy work. Not surprisingly, then, government performance seems to be sagging.

A Loss of Faith in Government

Government, the “output” side of democracy, is composed of the institutions that are supposed to carry out our collective wishes. For as long as America has been a republic, there have been lively debates at all levels of society over whether government harms or helps community. Some conservative critics have argued that government can, and routinely does, undermine patterns of mutual assistance and reciprocity. Thus, they maintain, less government would stimulate more civic-mindedness and stronger social bonds. Liberal commentators, conversely, have argued that government powerfully spurs voluntary activity, both by helping to spark and sustain associations and by creating the background conditions, such as health and income security, that allow individuals the luxury of contributing to the wider society.

There is truth to both the liberal and conservative positions. We agree that government, with its vast resources and coercive powers, at times can threaten social capital. The 1950s “slum clearing” projects are a regrettable memorial to the damage that government can inflict on our stocks of social capital. On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that government provides real incentives for social capital formation: examples range from the government’s funding of the Cooperative Extension Service (which spawned 4-H clubs and spurred rural social capital building) to the government’s support for national and community service programs nationwide. Because government has the potential both to deplete and to build our stock of social

capital, the challenge for government in this new century is to increase the ratio of building to depleting.

Americans have always been ambivalent about their government. On the one hand, we tend to agree with Winston Churchill's famous quip "democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."¹¹ That is, we express high levels of confidence in our *system* of government. And we are surprisingly satisfied with specific components of the system. The vast majority of us like our member of Congress and solid majorities express confidence in the military and the police.¹² As long as the economy is strong, we usually approve of our President. What's more, in a recent "customer satisfaction" survey, Americans gave high ratings to the service they received from scores of government offices, ranging from the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) food program to the Social Security Administration to the National Park Service. Indeed, the headline-grabbing study found that customer satisfaction with the federal government was nearly as high as with the private sector.¹³

On the other hand, generalized trust in government has plunged to previously unimaginable lows. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, about three-quarters of Americans agreed that you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right always or most of the time, but by the 1990s, that fraction had dropped to less than a third.¹⁴ The fraction agreeing that "quite a few officials are crooked" increased from about 25% in the late 1950s to about 45% in the mid-1990s.¹⁵ The fraction of Americans who have confidence in Congress has never exceeded 41% since 1975, and the confidence score since 1991 has averaged 22%, irrespective of which party was in control.¹⁶ While trust in government ebbs and flows with economic conditions, after the mid-1980s government trust continued to fall amid a soaring economy, and even our recent unprecedented boom has failed to reverse the decline of the previous two decades.

Scholars have offered various explanations. One set of explanations centers on an increasingly shrill and unyielding politics dominated by what the political scientist Morris Fiorina calls "extreme voices" and what the political journalist E.J. Dionne Jr. refers to as "a series of false choices" that preclude consensus.¹⁷ Naturally, domination by extremists leads to a vicious circle, in which the louder they get, the more the "moderate middle" drops out, thereby producing an even more extreme politics that is ever more resistant to consensus building. A related explanation centers on the distancing of candidates from the electorate through polling, televised appeals, and direct mail, and the concomitant alienation of the citizenry from elected officials. As the political scientist Hugh Heclo has observed, politics has become a "permanent campaign" in which the public feels cynically manipulated by spin-masters, talked *at* rather than *with*.¹⁸ A third explanation is the "expectations gap": As government tackles ever-more-complex social problems, it has created public expectations that it cannot conceivably meet.¹⁹ Fourth, as good-government reforms have opened up policy making to public view and unleashed a press ever more aggressive in its watchdog role, the American people for the first time have laid eyes on the necessarily messy inner-workings of their democracy.²⁰ It is no wonder we are appalled.

We disagree with those critics who state that growing distrust of government and politics is not worrisome. They argue that democracy depends on healthy skepticism and note that, according to some accounts, distrusters participate almost as much as trusters. We are sympathetic to these points. However, as people interested in bolstering civic life, we believe that government distrust

is a problem in two ways. First, if everyday citizens are distanced and alienated from their elected leaders, leaders have trouble mobilizing people for courageous acts of public good. Some of the nation's greatest triumphs – from the near elimination of elderly poverty, to the victory over Nazi fascism, to the huge strides toward ending racial discrimination – have involved a partnership between an optimistic, mobilized public and trusted, visionary leaders. Second, it is difficult to build strong, trusting relationships with one another – social capital – if we can't count on public institutions to punish people who don't play by the rules. Our willingness to pay taxes, for example, hinges largely on our assumption that others will pay as well; but that assumption depends on trusting the Internal Revenue Service to catch tax cheats. Similar logic applies to everything from reporting for jury duty to abiding by watering restrictions.

Democracy, Heal Thyself?

The question facing those of us concerned about social capital and citizen participation is this: How quickly and how effectively can we reverse the erosion of civic life? After all, American history is replete with good-government reforms that have unintentionally driven down participation, or at least cheapened it. Primary elections and ballot reforms in the Progressive Era sought to root out corruption but had the curious effect of enfeebling party machines, which had played a valuable role in getting new citizens, poor people, and blue-collar workers to the polls. Post-Watergate campaign finance reforms sought to reduce the influence of private money in politics but instead may have exacerbated the problem through attractive loopholes that “special interests” now exploit. Similarly, as the political journalist David Broder has recently argued, ballot initiatives – a Progressive era innovation aimed at increasing direct citizen control over policy making – are now “derailing democracy” by allowing millionaires and special-interest groups to take divisive issues “to the people” without giving them enough information or time to deliberate about the complex decisions that have been forced on them.

Besides noting the problem of unintended consequences, some scholars have questioned whether government can or should seek to bolster social capital. Some conservatives have argued that, if only government would back away, virtuous volunteerism would flourish. For their part, some liberals have argued that citizen groups need to keep their distance from government lest these groups be co-opted and their causes undermined. We recognize that there are powerful reasons to maintain a healthy separation between government and the non-governmental instruments of democratic participation. Excessive entanglement, whether financial or programmatic, in some cases may crowd out voluntary action or inhibit civic expression. Yet, even though the relationship between government and civil society may sometimes be tense or adversarial, we nonetheless believe that each has a role in strengthening the other. Our recommendations are designed to create synergy between governmental and non-governmental organizations to the benefit of both.

Principles for Building Social Capital Through Politics and Government

Reforming politics and government to rebuild civic America should follow three general principles. Each of these principles recognizes that democratic institutions can either bolster or weaken civil society. Which way the balance tips depends in large part on how closely the principles are followed.

Principle 1: View Government and Civil Society as Complements. There has been a lively debate over the past two decades about the proper roles of politics and government, on the one hand, and voluntary action (“civil society”), on the other. Often these two have been portrayed as locked in a zero-sum game: As one gets bigger, the other gets smaller. We believe it is erroneous to see politics/government and civil society as pure substitutes for each other, or to see public action as a choice between these two venues. Politics, the collective deliberation over how to allocate resources for the public good, may rely on social capital, but social networks and groups lack the authority that is sometimes necessary to achieve publicly desirable ends. Likewise, social capital and government are complementary. Social-capital-rich communities may accomplish more than can social-capital-poor communities, but there are certain functions (law enforcement, for example) that only government should fulfill. Government and civil society must take advantage of their respective comparative advantages and find synergy wherever possible.

Principle 2: Do No Harm. Just as doctors are obliged by the Hippocratic oath to “do no harm” so government agencies, to the fullest extent possible, should aspire to avoid actions that hurt neighborhood networks, community norms, and voluntary organizations. The City of Indianapolis is guided by such a pledge. Before devising or acting on policy proposals, city officials are asked to consider: Does the policy help citizens to know more neighbors? Does the policy strengthen family ties? Does the policy help people know more people unlike themselves? Does the policy strengthen institutions that promote family and community bonds?

Principle 3: Foster Greater Democratic Deliberation. Especially in light of technological changes that allow political communication and civic activities to take place without face-to-face contact, we are concerned that Americans are at risk of losing their ability to deliberate together, to compromise, and to reach consensus. Any efforts to reform government or politics to enhance trust and citizen participation must themselves be guided by, and emphasize, deliberative democracy.

Recommendations for Building Social Capital Through Government and Politics

We believe that government and political institutions have a role to play in rebuilding social capital. This will require transforming the incentives facing political actors – government officials, candidates, and citizens. Toward that end, we offer eight broad recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen Organizations Connecting Individuals and Government. We share the concerns of political scientists, commentators, and everyday citizens that our politics has become too fractious. We support efforts to revive local and national organizations, once prevalent in the United States, that unite people across class and identity in coalitions of

democratic deliberation and civic activity. Such organizations include state and local arms of the major political parties, federated voluntary associations such as the PTA and the Lions Clubs, neighborhood governing councils, and even temporary structures such as community meetings and civic forums.

In recent years, there is some evidence that the local political parties have begun reviving the grassroots efforts of old. We must take care to provide continuing incentives to bolster the locals' work in the field. And we must find ways to tip the balance away from capital-intensive "air war" strategies that dominate our national politics and toward the volunteer-reliant grassroots strategies that characterize election activity in early primary states such as New Hampshire.

We further endorse using public policy, whether tinkering with the tax code or changing the lobbying rules, to encourage the revival of cross-class federated voluntary organizations, which represent the moderate middle Americans who have lately been AWOL from American political activism.²¹ These organizations represent an important forum for furthering our "Bridging" principle.

Finally, we wholeheartedly support the efforts of cities such as Portland, Ore., and St. Paul, Minn., to create neighborhood councils with *real* decision-making power. Government officials have long won political points by creating advisory groups and espousing neighborhood input, but too often these efforts have amounted to little more than half-hearted political gesture. Where local governments have made good-faith efforts to create neighborhood councils with real control over zoning changes, planning decisions, and financial resources, and where local governments mandate consultation with those councils, the results have been impressive. According to an important study by political scientists Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney, and Ken Thomson, citizen participation in such neighborhood councils had a raft of good results. It enhanced the participants' sense of community, knowledge of local affairs, and tolerance toward difference; brought important issues to the fore; and redressed power imbalances that had worked to the detriment of everyday citizens.²² Such neighborhood councils also provide forums for training leaders who otherwise would never have realized their potential for civic contributions.

Grassroots involvement can work on a national scale, as well. In Canada during the 1970s, Minister of Health Marjorie Begin secured massive health insurance reform even though the debate was just as polarized as it has been recently in the United States. Begin believed that Canadian citizens would favor health care reform if they understood the proposals and the stakes involved, and she knew that, without broad public deliberation, special interests (insurance companies, hospitals, doctors' associations, etc.) would hijack the debate. Begin secured public funds to rent halls for public meetings, hire facilitators, and notify the public about the events. The press and Parliament immediately heard from the grassroots. From the perspective of broadening civic engagement, the United States would clearly benefit by following Canada's example, regardless of what substantive policy proposals emerged from the citizen deliberations. Suppose, for example, we sought solutions to the Social Security dilemma through broad-based, carefully prepared public deliberation, rather than merely "blue-ribbon" commissions of professional politicians.

A revival of mediating institutions, whether at the local, state, or national level, will mitigate the deleterious and alienating effects of modern, technology-based politicking. They also have the potential to improve the functioning of government itself. But this will only happen if government officials dare to share their power, and everyday citizens dare to care about their own civic obligations.

Recommendation 2: Reform Political Campaigns to Encourage Broader Participation. Polling, advertising, focus groups, direct mail – all of these methods of political communication are here to stay, as are the legions of professional campaign generals who deploy them. We therefore urge civic-minded politicians, and perhaps private donors, to turn these campaign practices to good use. Instead of exploiting voter psychology to keep people from participating, campaigns must dare to find methods and messages that excite people about democratic engagement. Visionary campaigners from John F. Kennedy to John McCain have shown that there is no downside to awakening dormant voters – there are only benefits.

Just as modern campaign technology is a permanent fixture of politics, so too is money. Campaigns and political parties cannot function without the bucks to pay the bills. Clearly, however, financial capital is playing far too great a role, and social capital far too small a role, in determining who gets heard. Most Americans believe that only the wealthy interests count, and that money has hopelessly corrupted and warped policy making. We therefore endorse efforts, such as those being led by the National Voting Rights Institute and Public Campaign, to limit the role of money in politics. For example, we support constitutional challenges to the “wealth primary,” the system by which only those with access to big money are able to prevail in primary campaigns. We also urge all states to pass “clean elections” laws, such as those in Maine and Vermont, that provide public funds to state candidates who reject special-interest money and agree to campaign spending limits. At the national level, we advocate expanding the current public financing system, which only covers Presidential candidates, to candidates for Congress, as well. Finally, we recommend closing the legal loophole that allows unlimited “soft money” donations to political parties. We recommend that contributions to parties – both the source of the funds and the amount – be limited just as the law already limits contributions to candidates.

While not every one of us would give the same enthusiastic support to every one of these initiatives, collectively we believe that these recommendations will increase participation for three reasons. First, by reducing the influence of wealthy interests, Americans might again believe that participation is worth their while and decide to get involved as campaign volunteers and letter writers and voters. Second, by making it harder for parties to rely on a relatively small cadre of wealthy donors, these reforms will force parties to reconnect with everyday citizens by soliciting small donations. Third, by making television advertising and other costly technologies harder to afford, these reforms would, ideally, provide incentives for the parties to revive good, old-fashioned, inexpensive shoe-leather organizing.

Recommendation 3: Offer Civil Society Support Without Coercion. We endorse a broad range of efforts, many already in place, that use the comparative advantages of government to strengthen voluntary institutions. Such efforts include government agency liaisons to voluntary groups; Mayor’s, Governor’s and President’s awards for social capital building initiatives; and Internet access to government information and decision-making bodies. We also urge that government

agencies and non-profit organizations seek innovative ways to develop “civic spaces” where deliberation can occur. This might mean opening school cafeterias after hours to accommodate community meetings or building parks where dog walkers can congregate while their pets exercise. Although some liberals have criticized such inexpensive government programs as mere window dressing, we believe that “little things” can reap large returns. We believe that government can play a key role, at little cost, both in facilitating local engagement and in enlarging its scope and psychic rewards.

Recommendation 4: Broaden the Role of Citizens in Restructuring Government. Most political debate revolves around questions of government spending and regulation. Should the government provide more money for K-12 education? Subsidize prescription drugs for senior citizens? Require that all gun owners be licensed? We spend far less time mulling an equally important set of questions: How government should be constituted (i.e., highly centralized, or highly decentralized), what the responsibilities of different levels of government should be, and what processes should govern political decision-making. Because these questions receive inadequate attention, we endorse formal and regular re-evaluations of local, state, and national government structures along the lines of the charter-review commissions recently empowered to rethink the governing structures of the City and County of Los Angeles.

As happened in Los Angeles, such reviews should tackle a fundamental question: Which level of government should fulfill which functions? While some programs can be effectively provided only by the national government, as proponents of community involvement, we are concerned about the concentration of power in larger and larger entities. When policy decisions and delivery take place on a plane far above local capacities, then ordinary people tune out, figuring they can't make a difference. From the vantage point of increasing social capital, smaller is better than larger, and local is better than national. To the extent possible given the imperatives of equal treatment and program effectiveness, governmental decision-making authority should be pushed downward so that citizens believe they can have an influence over the policies that affect their lives.

Recommendation 5: Rein in Suburban Sprawl. Increasingly, government and civic leaders are recognizing that the pace and design of new construction pose a threat to the quality of community life. Therefore, more state governments should follow the lead of Maryland and Georgia by devising comprehensive “smart growth” strategies. And more local governments should follow the lead of Memphis and surrounding Shelby County, Tenn., to enact regional planning principles and procedures. These and other pioneering development strategies are wide ranging, but most have several features in common: restoring existing buildings rather than constructing new ones ever farther away; coordinating zoning and development decisions across city and county boundaries; and reducing traffic flows and commuting times. As the Partnership for Livable Communities has observed, “achieving a regional identity depends upon the combined efforts of three once-disparate sectors of society: business, the government, and nonprofits.” Although the “new regionalism” requires collaboration, only government has the authority to steer development in such a way that encourages casual interactions among pedestrians and stronger neighborhood cohesion.

Recommendation 6: Develop Participatory Citizens. Government agencies and elected officials can create the background conditions that allow everyday citizens to take part in community affairs. Readily accessible childcare, mandatory civics courses in public schools, and government internship programs make civic participation easier and more habit-forming. Consistent with our “Recycling” principle, non-political community service, required by more and more schools, has been shown to create greater political awareness, and perhaps even to spur political participation in many young people. We believe it is time for political leaders to stop fearing the broadening of political participation and start encouraging it.

Recommendation 7: Enact a “Cyber Morrill Act” to create a market for community-friendly cyber-innovations. Just as government played an important role in encouraging public innovation during the Industrial Revolution, so too in today’s Information Revolution public policy needs to supplement private commercial demand for technological innovation. In 1862 and 1890 Congress passed the Morrill Acts, giving the states millions of acres of federal frontier land and other federal grants, the proceeds of which were used to create institutions of higher education. Most state agricultural and engineering schools were established under the Morrill Acts. These so-called “land grant colleges” represented one of the most productive investments in American economic history, for they radically expanded both educational opportunities and locally relevant applied industrial and agricultural research and development. We propose a modern-day “Cyber Morrill Act” under which the federal government would auction off the analog broadcast spectrum (which commercial television stations are abandoning for the digital spectrum) and use the proceeds to foster community-friendly cyber-innovations.²³ Rather than direct government subsidies for R & D, we propose that these funds be distributed to local governments and civic associations for the purchase of innovative information technology. In effect, these funds would create a market for community-friendly cyber-innovations, thus providing a market-based incentive to lure innovative researchers and information technology firms into this area.

Recommendation 8: Learn from Our Mistakes. In keeping with the “Hippocratic” and “Social Capital Impact” principles, we urge government agencies, elected officials, non-profit groups, and other public institutions to study their past activities and programs to assess how they helped or hurt community social capital. In addition, we urge government and non-profit leaders to put pending decisions under the social-capital lens. Such analyses should attempt to understand the decisions and processes that drive the creation and destruction of social capital.

Concluding Thoughts

In making our recommendations, we are cognizant of the fact that not all of them will be easy to implement successfully. Policy recommendations always have hidden costs and unanticipated consequences. Therefore, the goal becomes to craft recommendations whose benefits outweigh the costs and to anticipate as best as is humanly possible the perverse effects that might flow from well-meaning reforms.

It is an especially fruitful time for political and governmental reforms, but it is a challenging time, as well. The major challenge facing reformers stems from the lightning-fast evolution of communications technology. The Internet, a seldom-used curiosity when Bill Clinton was elected President, has become in less than a decade a powerful resource for conveying information about

politics and government, and, perhaps, for deliberating and debating public issues. Already, fascinating cyber-experiments are exploring the potential of computer-mediated politics. Although their long-term impact is by no means clear, these experiments deserve broad public support.

For example, we endorse initiatives such as Grassroots.com (www.grassroots.com), which provides information about issues, including schedules of events, links to interest groups, and position statements by candidates and elected officials. We also support the League of Women Voters' DemocracyNet (www.democracynet.com), which provides state-by-state information about candidates, election dates, and voter registration. DemocracyNet's "issue grids" empower citizens and third-party candidates to raise important issues for debate, and pressure candidates to post in-depth policy. We hope that every state will follow California and Minnesota, which have pioneered the use of Web sites to convey information about state and local politics and issues. For example, the California Voter Foundation publishes an online voter guide to state candidate races and provides behind-the-scenes information on the sponsorship and financing of state ballot propositions. The foundation's Web site even broadcasts "The Proposition Song," a whimsical summary of the state's 20 ballot initiatives and referenda (www.calvoter.org). The Minnesota Electronic Democracy Project (www.e-democracy.org) provides links to candidate web sites, runs online "issues forums" in which citizens can discuss policy concerns, and sponsors online debates in which candidates for major offices respond to questions, with the answers posted on the Internet and emailed to interested citizens.

While these experiments have almost certainly made it easier to find information about issues and politicians, the Internet is by no means a panacea. Like any other innovation, it may exacerbate existing problems or create new ones. We must be aware of this potential and try to blunt any negative effects. For example, we are concerned that democracy-by-modem may deepen problems such as the disproportionate representation of the "haves" among the participating public (at least until the "digital divide" has been bridged); the loss of real deliberation and persuasion; and the tendency of like-minded people to talk exclusively among themselves. Until these problems are mitigated, the Internet should be considered a complement, not a substitute, for direct face-to-face political communication.

Americans are ready for top-to-bottom reform of their democracy. They want government they can influence and elected officials who respect them. Citizens are looking for visionary leaders who will inspire the many, not pander to the few. Fixing democracy will require that we create new, meaningful opportunities for participation and that we give citizens reason to believe, once again, that their participation counts.

NOTES:

¹ Common Cause, “National Parties Raise Record \$256 Million In Soft Money During First 18 Months Of 1999-2000 Election Cycle” (at <http://www.commoncause.org/publications/july00/072500.htm>).

² Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pp. 39-40.

³ Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963).

⁴ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, section II.

⁵ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, pp. 31-32.

⁶ Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, *The New American Voter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 69.

⁷ Roper Social and Political Trends surveys, 1973-1998 ("Have you recently been taking a good deal of interest in current events and what's happening in the world today, some interest, or not very much interest?"); and DDB Needham Life Style data, 1975-1999 ("I am interested in politics"; agree/disagree).

⁸ John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁹ Examining data from the 1960s through the 1980s, political scientists Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen estimate that a drop in party recruitment efforts explains more than half the drop in voting and in campaign work.

¹⁰ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

¹¹ James C. Humes, ed., *The Wit and Wisdom of Winston Churchill* (New York: Harper & Row, 1995).

¹² Gallup Organization polls.

¹³ “American Customer Satisfaction Index, 1999,” National Quality Research Center of the University of Michigan Business School, ASQ/American Society for Quality, and Arthur Andersen. (Summary results available at <http://www.bus.umich.edu/research/nqrc/govt-key.html>)

¹⁴ American National Election Studies.

¹⁵ American National Election Studies.

¹⁶ Gallup Organization polls. Percentages refer to fraction of Americans expressing "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in Congress.

¹⁷ Morris P. Fiorina, “Extreme Voices: A Dark Side of Civic Engagement,” *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, ed. Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), pp. 395-425. E.J. Dionne Jr. *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone, 1991), p. 11.

¹⁸ Hugh Heclo, "Presidential Power and Public Prestige: '...a snarly sort of politics...'" Paper prepared for the "*Presidential Power Revisited*" conference, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, June 1996.

¹⁹ This "expectations gap" was at the root of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's assessment of the failings of the "maximum feasible participation" components of the War on Poverty. Quoting the political scientist Aaron Wildavsky, Moynihan included the following epigraph in his book *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* (New York: Free Press, 1969): "A recipe for violence: Promise a lot; deliver a little. Lead people to believe they will be much better off, but let there be no dramatic improvement." This line is cited in Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney, and Ken Thomson, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1993), p. 24.

²⁰ For a discussion of this argument, see Morris P. Fiorina, "Extreme Voices" in Skocpol and Fiorina (1999). This view parallels the maxim that sausage and law are two things one should never see being made.

²¹ See Theda Skocpol, *The Missing Middle: Working Families and the Future of American Social Policy* (New York: Norton, 2000); and Morris P. Fiorina, "Extreme Voices" in Skocpol and Fiorina (1999).

²² Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993).

²³ For this recommendation, we have modified an idea forwarded by Lawrence Grossman and Newton Minow, who urge that the auction proceeds be used to create "a Millennium Education Trust Fund" whose purpose would be to "enhance learning, broaden knowledge, support the arts and culture, and teach the skills that are necessary for the emerging Information Age." Their ideas are contained in "The Minow-Grossman Report: A Digital Gift to the Nation," which is part of the "Digital Promise" program sponsored by the Century Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. We are indebted to Mr. Grossman and Mr. Minow for inspiring us to think about how to use the auction proceeds.