Toward a Living Democracy

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Most Americans grow up absorbing the notion that democracy boils down to just two things—elected government and a market economy. So, all that seems expected of us is to vote and to shop. This stripped-down duo I call “thin democracy.”

While thin democracy proves itself unable to meet today’s challenges, another understanding of democracy is emerging: Democracy that is practiced as a way of life, no longer something done to us or for us but what we ourselves create. I call it “Living Democracy.” In it, democracy is no longer merely a formal government construct, but something embedded in a wide range of human relationships. So its values apply just as much in economic life or in cultural life as in political life. Put very practically, Living Democracy means infusing the power of citizens’ voices and values throughout our public relationships.

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Rest assured, Living Democracy isn’t a new fixed ism, blueprint or utopian end-state. Rather, democracy “becomes us” in both meanings of the phrase. It requires a shift in our focus from democracy as a thing we “have”—elections, parties and a market—to democracy as intricate relationships of mutuality that we create daily.

This shift in goals and expectations of both our government’s role and of our role as citizens is already perceptible, if we look beyond our existing thin democracy to see the many facets of Living Democracy that are living, growing and changing lives. Examples are diverse and far-reaching; grassroots groups, individuals, conscious corporations, schools and local governments are creating Living Democracy in their communities.

A Citizens’ Democracy

Grassroots-led reforms for voluntary public financing, called Clean Elections,1 have significantly purged private wealth from elections in Maine, Arizona and Connecticut. Removing money from politics suddenly feels a lot more urgent to many Americans as they work through the worst economic collapse since the Great Depression, and they realize the root of crisis: the financial industry’s political clout, via political contributions and lobbying, which got the rules changed to allow the dangerous risk-taking. Now, a national effort, with bipartisan-supported “Fair Elections” legislation pending in both houses of Congress, would take us a long way to truly publicly held government.

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The non-profit AmericaSpeaks has been working to increase citizen participation in democracy. The organization aims to develop a national infrastructure for democratic deliberation that links decision-makers and citizens in determining public policy. Its work has engaged more than 147,000 people in all 50 states in large-scale citizen participation on issues such as the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site, the rebuilding of post-Katrina New Orleans, statewide healthcare reform in California and the national childhood obesity epidemic.

Another example is the Citizens’ Jury, pioneered by the Jefferson Center in Minnesota. This approach to collaborative problem-solving brings one to two dozen randomly selected citizens together over several days to weigh a critical issue and come to agreement on a direction. Hundreds of Citizens’ Juries have been convened around the world to work toward solutions to challenges from sewage treatment to climate change.

Democracy Where Many Benefit As Opposed to Just a Few

Democracy is grounded in the notion of a “common good”—an understanding that our individual well being depends on the well being of the whole society. Businesses that close the gap between owners and workers for the common good are growing fast. Cooperatives are one example of a democratic business organization, where owners are also the business’ workers or users of its services. In all their varieties—from finance to housing, farming, manufacturing and more—equitable sharing of responsibilities and benefits is a key value. Co-op membership jumped ten-fold in the last half century, now providing 100 million jobs worldwide. That’s one-fifth more jobs than multinational corporations offer, according to the International Co-operative Alliance.

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One example is Organic Valley, a dairy cooperative formed in the late 1980s by a handful of Wisconsin dairy farmers distressed that their neighbors’ farms were folding while profits were going everywhere but to farmers. I would never have predicted that in two decades their determination would birth a half-billion-dollar company owned by over a thousand family farmers in 32 states. Organic Valley still lives by its democratic values, with profits returning to farmers and rural communities.

And some companies are proving that sky-high CEO pay isn’t necessary for business success. While the average US CEO-to-worker pay ratio has been greater than 200-to-1 since the mid-90s, the green home-supplies company Seventh Generation caps its CEO total compensation at 14 times that of its average worker.

Policies that benefit many are increasing as well, such as living wage ordinances that require businesses with public contracts to pay employees enough to live in dignity. Not only do such policies benefit the employees and their families; they also benefit the entire community since individuals have more disposable income to invest in their community. More than 120 cities and counties have adopted living wage ordinances, and the Obama administration may soon be giving companies with living wage policies an advantage when seeking government contracts.

Empowering the Next Generation

Students are moving from “community service,” in which adults are in charge, to “apprentice citizenship,” in which young people take ownership in hands-on learning. Most importantly, they experience their own power to make real, lasting improvements in their communities. From environmental restoration to improving their school food service, grade schoolers in 40 school districts in New England are learning by becoming community problem solvers as part of a movement led by Maine’s KIDS Consortium.

In southern Ohio, Principal George Wood at Federal Hocking High School believes that young people learn democracy by doing it, so since the 1990s, he has gradually shared more and more authority with his students, ultimately including equal voice with teachers in hiring faculty. Students also serve on what is called the site-based committee, governing most aspects of school life. As students experience power in guiding their school, they do better academically. Within about a decade, the percentage of graduates going on to college climbed from 20 to 70 percent.

From political life to economic life to education, Living Democracy is taking shape as a set of system values that evolve with us.