

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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A Citizens’ Democracy

Rest assured, Living Democracy isn’t a new fixedism, 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.

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.



Photo courtesy David Ploenzke.

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Proactive Government

Living Democracy depends on citizens shaping and trusting government as their tool. And that starts with exposing the misleading big-versus-small government frame and recognizing that what really matters is whether government is accountable to citizens. Accountable government, setting fair standards and rules, actually reduces the need for “big” government to clean up after human and environmental damage. From this frame, we can see with new eyes the cost of government action to end poverty or to clean up our environment. We can see that the real cost is government, not acting.

For example, look to the 1960s War on Poverty. With it launched hugely successful programs like Head Start, food stamps, work study, Medicare and Medicaid, which still exist today, as well as numerous other efforts. And during that decade, Americans cut the poverty rate almost in half.²

Now, as the threats of global climate change and world poverty become increasingly acute, more and more people realize that restoring our planet and its people depends on citizens reclaiming government from private interests. The challenge is to leave behind knee-jerk contempt for government and learn how to make government our essential and powerful tool for creating the world we want.

Engaging Citizens in Strengthening Democracy

The public’s engagement in democracy is more than voting and shopping. A Living Democracy encourages ordinary citizens to be involved in identifying, discussing and deciding upon public policy and budgets. One way to engage citizens is through participatory budgeting where citizens have a direct say in the local budget. This process of democratic decision-making has been in place in many Brazilian cities since 1989. Ten years later, Chicago’s 49th Ward launched the first participatory budgeting project in the US. In a series of public

meetings over a six-month period, community members decided which community projects would be funded with the ward’s \$1.3 million capital infrastructure discretionary budget.³ A study of Brazil found that, with more citizens’ eyes on the budgeting process, there is less graft, greater government transparency and more equitable public spending, along with increased public participation.



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Citizens participate in an AmericaSpeaks meeting in Philadelphia.



Photos courtesy Erin & Joe Ficker

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 health-care 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.



Photo courtesy Robert Eddy

Organic Valley was started in Wisconsin in the 1980s and is now owned by over a thousand farmers in 32 states.

CO-OPS

100
MILLION

MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS

80
MILLION

Number of Jobs Worldwide

Cooperatives provide more than 100 million jobs worldwide. That’s about 1/5 more jobs than multinational corporations offer.

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.

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.

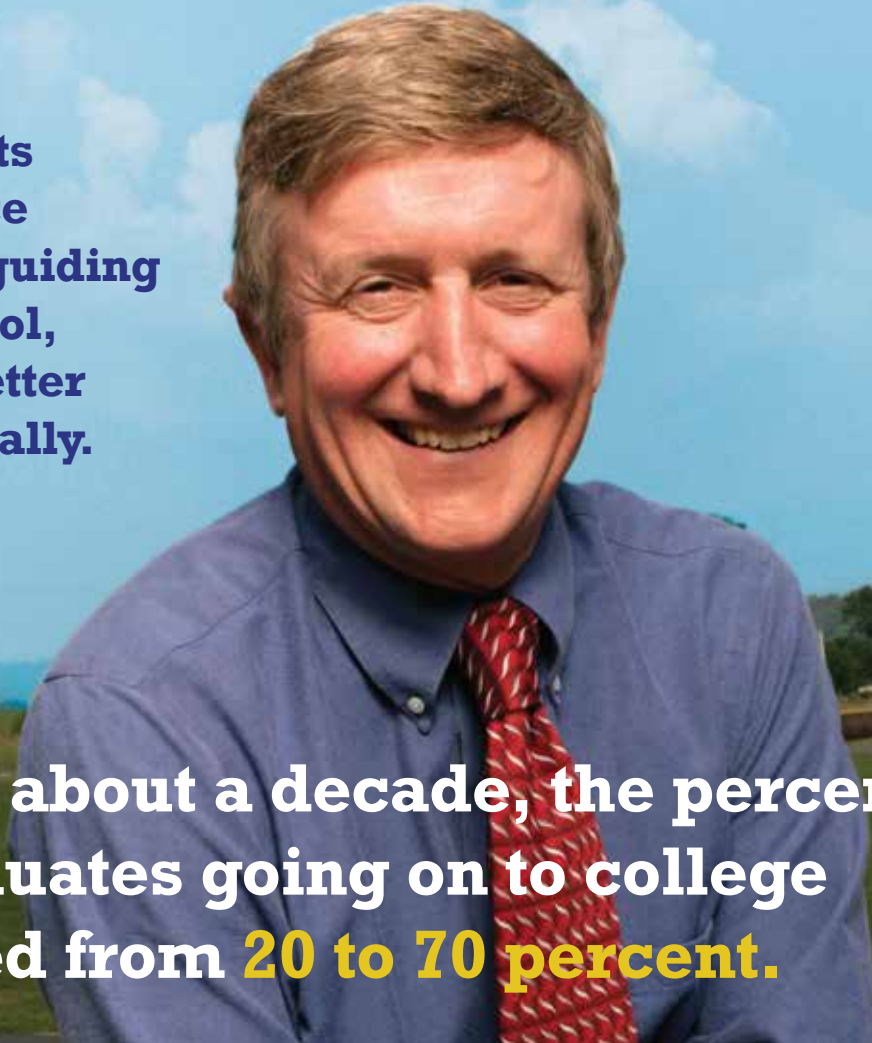


Photo credit: Chris Cone Photography

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,⁴ the green home-supplies company Seventh Generation caps its CEO total compensation at 14 times that of its average worker.⁵

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

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administration may soon be giving companies with living wage policies an advantage when seeking government contracts.⁶

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.⁷

From political life to economic life to education, Living Democracy is taking shape, not as a set system, finished once and for all, but as a set of system values that evolve with us: values of inclusion, mutual accountability

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Citizens' Councils: An Idea to Strengthen Democracy

Participating in democracy could become akin to jury duty and voting. The notion of a "national citizens' council" would be the pinnacle of citizen engagement in democracy. Similar to jury duty, members of the public would be randomly selected and financially compensated for their time to evaluate current issues and legislation. The general public could then be invited to review the votes and analysis of the citizen's council. Free from influence by special interests, the need to stay in office or pressure from legislators, citizens' councils would represent the public's best interest.

from the editor

and fairness, among others. On this journey, our expectations of the capacities and essential roles of regular citizens change. In contrast to thin democracy's reductive view of human beings, Living Democracy reflects and builds on what philosopher Erich Fromm described as the deep human drive to make an "imprint on the world, to transform and to change, and not only to be transformed and changed."⁸

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