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The Next Form of Democracy

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Keywords

Matt Leighninger, *The Next Form of Democracy.* **Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006.**

This book is excellent, one of the best in a growing genre of studies on civic experimentation in American democracy (see also Briand, 1999; Gastil and Levine, 2005; Putnam and Feldstein, 2003; Sirianni and Friedland, 2001). What makes it so good, I think, is its sensitive but even-handed portrayal of the communities it profiles. Again and again, Leighninger places the reader on the scene, with citizens and policymakers as they confront difficult and complex public issues. He eloquently conveys their stories so that the reader is able to understand—even empathize—with their situation. At the same time, Leighninger doesn't pull punches. He doesn't shy away from describing the many problems these initiatives face. The result is about as balanced an analysis of recent civic organizing efforts as I have seen.

Leighninger's main thesis is that this civic experimentation amounts to a fundamental transition in the nature of American democracy. Unwieldy though it is—and disorganized and fragmented—Leighninger argues that collectively it amounts to a move away from an expert-driven model of politics to one of "democratic governance."

This argument is laid out in a series of short case studies. Some of the initiatives profiled are one-shot efforts and others represent on-going neighborhood institutions. Leighninger is careful to note differences between the two types (more on this in a moment). But Leighninger argues that both types tend to experience the same conceptual arc: they begin in response to a specific public problems, but over time confront deeper issues related to the way that public life is organized: "They may be focused on improving the schools, ending racism, or balancing the city budget," he writes. "but their work is about more than that: they are trying to transform the ways in which citizens and governments interact" (pp. 225-226). In this sense, both kinds of initiatives support the broad thesis of the book: in working through specific issues, communities around the country—often without realizing it—come to confront, and change, the basic terms of democratic practice.

What does this "next form of democracy," as Leighninger refers to it, look like? Combing tens of civic initiatives, Leighninger distills it in to four principles (p. 3):

- it recruits a "critical mass" (not a representative sample) of citizens
- it engages citizens in structured deliberative dialogue
- it allows citizens to ask questions and weigh the full range of options

- finally, it provides opportunities for citizens to act on what they have discovered

Over eight chapters, Leighninger shows how policymakers and citizens across the country have sometimes innovated, and sometimes stumbled across, these principles. He introduces us to Dr. Ray Daniels, a school superintendent in Kansas City, who comes to the realization that involving parents and family members in the schools will require him to rethink his own job (chapter 2). Where once he held public meetings, Daniels learned that success required him to become a fully-fledged community organizer. In another place (chapter 4), Leighninger takes us to Springfield, Illinois to watch as Sandy Robinson II, the Director of the Springfield, Illinois Community Relations Department, grapples with local racial issues. As an experienced community organizer, Robinson knows that he must attract a critical mass of people to his events. He realizes only later that the end of these events cannot be the end: participants need to find ways of acting on what they have learned.

After 250 pages of these stories, as example piles onto example, the reader cannot help but be impressed. Something new does seem to be taking place in communities all around the country. Of course, Leighninger's argument is anecdotal. The communities he describes may or may not be representative of communities everywhere. An academic with a more statistical bent might argue that the only way to know for sure is to draw a random, representative sample of American communities (and perhaps someone ought to do such a study). For the rest of us, the experiences of the people Leighninger introduces us to are so similar, and they reach such similar conclusions—and there are so many of them—that it is hard not to accept his argument: together, they amount to a dramatic change in the structure of democracy.

To his credit, Leighninger does not merely wish to celebrate this experimentation. Many of the initiatives he discusses run into serious dilemmas, and these dilemmas often remain unresolved. Perhaps the most important of these dilemmas relates to the central thesis of the book. As we know, Leighninger argues that deliberative participation may often begin as an add-on to politics-as-usual, but it ends up fundamentally reconfiguring that politics. "You can't just involve citizens in ways that supplement the political process," Leighninger writes, "you have to construct new arenas where citizens are at the center of the system" (p. 47). This argument implies that the project of civic change is structural, but also, in an important sense, conceptual. It requires new institutions, but also new categories of public life, new roles and responsibilities, new habits and habits of mind. It is, to put the point differently, as much a matter of culture and socialization as of skills and training.

The dilemma is how and whether communities can intentionally invent culture, and how to capture these inventions so that they persist over time. The

cases Leighninger profiles show that, at least in the short term, this kind of invention can happen. Some communities on some occasions in response to some issues can make it work. But how can communities translate this work into broader cultural shifts, and how can these shifts be sustained over time? Moving forward, these are key issues. To return to the differences between one-shot and persistent initiatives: it is somewhat ironic, and perhaps a little unsettling, that the persistent initiatives Leighninger discusses tend to become less inclusive and democratic over time. As they adopt more formal structures, and find more stable sources of funding, they appear to lose the democratic ethos that animated their activity in the first place. For instance, Lisa Giordano, the "super-citizen" Leighninger describes in the very first case study of the book, ends up quitting the West Broadway Neighborhood Association (WBNA)—an organization she herself founded (pp. 35-36). Giordano quit because as the WBNA became more durable, it became less democratic. "In fact," Leighninger writes, "most parent-teacher associations neighborhood watch groups, small business networks and other community groups…share the same flaws…Few of them are able to involve large numbers of people, represent the full diversity of their constituencies, or foster public happiness" (p. 36). To persist, cultural change of the kind promised by democratic governance requires institutions, but which kinds of institutions, and whether they can retain their democratic impulses as they persist, remains an open question.

The growth in the last decade of a "civic field" of deliberative and civic professionals is implicated in this issue. As Leighninger observes (pp. 65-67), practitioners in this field brandish a dizzying array of tools, guides, handbooks, and methods. In so doing, they imply to communities that application of the right tool will lead to success. If the task, however, before these communities is as much cultural as technical, as much a matter of implicit as explicit knowledge, then it is unclear that these tools will be especially helpful. Leighninger notes as much when he writes that it was the "professionalization of public management…[that in part] caused the alienation between citizens and government" in the first place (p. 67). Whether and how principles of cultural change can be codified, and the role of professional civic practitioners in this process, will be a central issue as this movement moves forward.

A related question has to do with the role average citizens might play in these exercises. I take Leighninger at his word when he says that a primary reason for the recent growth in civic experimentation is that citizens are "better at governing, and worse at being governed" than ever before (p. 2). When policymakers make unilateral decisions, citizens are quick to react—often in vehement ways. If only to avoid this reaction, policymakers have begun to seek out citizen input before decisions are made. At the same time, civic organizers have found citizen recruitment for their initiatives to be extremely difficult, and

difficult to sustain. Thus, the question: how is it that citizens are at once more knowledgeable and observant of government activities, and yet still resistant to consistent civic participation? Are these groups even composed of the same people? This is to say, is some subset of citizens "better at governing and worse at being governed" and another subset apathetic and uninterested? The issue is framed nicely in an academic debate currently under way. Some scholars argue that most citizens prefer to "monitor" rather than participate in government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Schudson, 1998). Others argue that the issue is more structural than individual: communities have not built citizen structures with the capacity to entice more civic participation (cf. Fung, 2004; Putnam, 2000). Citizens wish to participate, this argument goes, but the costs of doing so are still too high, and its benefits too indirect, for it to happen easily or routinely. Leighninger clearly favors the latter argument (p. 233). However, his work at least implies that both arguments may be right. It might be the case that a subset of the population—how large it is difficult to say—is better at governing and more difficult to govern—and that another subset is content to monitor the political process and resistant to more vigorous civic participation. More work clearly needs to be done in this area.

Leighninger has done a great service by raising these issues and illuminating them in vivid detail. I give his book my highest praise: it is truly an excellent book to think with.

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