

Introduction

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What is the common good? The Latin root of “common,” *communis*, is the same as the root of “community”; it evokes “shared,” “ordinary,” and “public” all at the same time. In civic terms, the common good is the shared welfare of ordinary people – ordinary citizens working together for public ends.

Individual citizens have responsibilities to the community, and the community in turn protects, defends, and uplifts its citizens. What enables this exchange of responsibility and cooperation are our civic institutions – those that are part of the fabric of governance and those that are part of civil society.

The essays in this volume focus primarily on contemporary institutions and their relationship to the common good. They were written at a time of considerable stress in the American polity. Some of that stress flows from the anti-institutional, anti-leadership populism that often emerges during times of economic hardship. At the moment, no institution in America is held in high regard by Americans, with the exception of the military (and even the military, in the midst of individual miscreance and allegations of scandal, is in a less secure position). This distrust for institutions and leaders has been amplified by the sharp levels of ideological and partisan polarization that characterize American politics, especially but not exclusively at the national level.

Polarization itself is not new in America, but the divisions with which we now contend have become almost tribal in nature. And a new media dynamic,

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with its own tribal divisions, only accentuates the problems – including a coarsened political and social culture. It seems we are moving further every day from the ideal of a public square, where citizens share a common set of values and facts and can debate and deliberate to find the common good.

How well do our institutions advance, or at least protect, the common good? What are their appropriate roles? Where do institutions fit in historical context? What can be done within or outside the institutions to ameliorate the problems and restore a better balance?

This volume is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on public institutions, beginning with William Galston's look at the Preamble and the Constitution itself. He dissects these founding documents' relationship to the theory and practice of the common good. The section then moves on to examine the larger problem of dysfunctional governance. Tom Mann and I describe the erosion of our political system, which was built around debate and deliberation, divided powers competing with one another, regular order, and avenues to punish and curtail corruption. Jeffrey Rosen and Geoffrey Stone next focus on manifestations of these problems in the American judiciary. Rosen examines the tensions caused by a Court striving for legitimacy in an era of polarized politics – when the Court itself is becoming more overtly polarized on key decisions. Stone takes an even more critical look at the Roberts Court and its key decisions, including *Citizens United*.

A somewhat more sanguine view follows on the military. Andrew Hill, Leonard Wong, and Stephen Gerras write about the continuing high regard Americans feel toward their military, as reverence for the military and its mission has superseded fear of military abuses in the domestic

arena. Still, the authors note that the current balance is not guaranteed to last. Kathleen Hall Jamieson then tackles the challenges of civic education – an obvious means of advancing the well-being of our democratic society, and an obvious area of concern in an era of low voter turnout and high rates of civic ignorance.

The final two essays in the section focus on the lifeblood of the American democratic system: political parties, elections, and the campaign finance system. Mickey Edwards canvasses America's political landscape, including primaries that pull lawmakers toward ideological poles, re-districting that distorts incentives and heightens partisan divisions, poisoned discourse, and a disastrous system of campaign financing. He highlights how all these aspects together have elevated partisanship and have diminished prospects for compromise and concern about the common good. Edwards's former colleague in the House of Representatives, Jim Leach, then examines the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision on campaign financing, filleting its reasoning and decrying its results.

The second part of the volume considers nonpublic institutions, including corporations, unions, the nonprofit and philanthropic sector, and journalism. Ralph Gomory and Richard Sylla trace the history of the corporation in America and argue that more recent changes in incentives have led corporations to pursue the singular goal of enhancing shareholder value – at the expense of their role as stewards of the common good. Andy Stern, the former head of a major union, then offers a full-throated defense of unions as protectors and enhancers of the public good, even as he acknowledges decreased union membership and instances of corruption and scandal that have challenged labor's image.

Noting that the framers of the Constitution discouraged the intervention of pri-

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The title of Michael Schudson's essay on journalism is itself instructive: "Reluctant Stewards." Schudson reminds us that journalists are ambivalent about their role in society, and he proposes three general principles for the modern journalistic enterprise: it requires loose oversight; it needs to be decentralized and multiform; and journalists need to acknowledge their unresolved position between norms of "social trustee professionalism" and "expert professionalism."

The final set of essays looks more broadly at the context for our discussion of the "common good," including the larger public culture of argument and the framers' desired culture of compromise to benefit the public good. Revisiting her important 1998 book, *The Argument Culture*, Deborah Tannen focuses on the concept of "agonism" – taking a warlike stance to accomplish something that is not literally a war – and wonders if the more appropriate term for contemporary American civic life would be "combat culture." Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, in turn, amplify the argument they make in their new book, *The Spirit of Compromise*. They distinguish between compromise and finding common ground; the former, requiring negotiation and sacrifice, is more difficult to achieve, yet it remains a linchpin to American democracy.

The volume concludes with essays by Howard Gardner and Kwame Anthony Appiah. Gardner considers our current challenges by reflecting on his long-standing efforts with the GoodWork

Project, which nurtures ethical behavior and cultivates a broader sense of the value and reward of acting in the common good. Appiah examines the underpinnings of the democratic spirit, including the obligations of individual citizens; this foundation, he argues, is key to the American experiment.

Each essay analyzes a particular section of our social fabric. Taken together, they provide a strong overview of the entire tapestry. Our civic life may be fraying at the edges, the essayists suggest, but it is possible to reverse the damage and restore our sense of common purpose. Indeed, it is necessary and urgent that we get to the work of doing so.