

Building Institutions to Improve Civic Culture

Peter Levine

Americans must disagree better to sustain a healthier civic culture. This is not only a matter of individual behavior and values but also a question of institutional design. An example of an institution that generally supported disagreement, conversation, and collaboration in the twentieth century was the metropolitan daily newspaper, but its business model has collapsed. To recover civic culture, we need business models (defined broadly) for new institutions that can enable discussion and self-governance.

In “Learning to Disagree: Why We Need a Refresh of Our Civic Culture,” David Campbell argues that a “healthy civic culture” is a “necessary condition for democracy.”¹ The good news, Campbell says, is that civic culture can change for the better. He finds that the main aspect of our civic culture that requires attention today is *conversation*: speaking and listening to people with whom we disagree. Conversations across differences have become too rare in an era of polarization and often go badly when they occur. However, we can teach people to disagree better in schools, colleges, and voluntary associations, including religious congregations.

I agree with all of this and recommend it as a departure point. And I would add a second dimension of civic culture that also requires attention: creating and preserving common-pool resources; that is, things of value that are fragile and consumable and that benefit everyone in their community while they last.² Such resources range from the safety of a public street to the vitality of a marsh, from the educational environment of a school to a community’s historical memory.

Disagreeing well can be helpful when managing common-pool resources because participants may not agree about values, goals, or approaches, and conversation can help them resolve their differences constructively. Also, when people are responsible for a common good – whether a church building or a public website – the task of managing their resource can prompt worthy conversations about values.

However, managing the commons is not only about good conversations. Sometimes everyone agrees about a problem such as crime or litter, yet individuals don’t do their part to address it. Along with the deliberative skills that Campbell emphasizes, we also need organizational acumen, leadership, and a widespread willingness

to contribute. These are components of the “art of association” that Alexis de Tocqueville identified as the basis of American democracy.³

Many of the important organizational principles are counterintuitive. For example, people with little associational experience sometimes assume that when members of a group fail to contribute their fair share, any penalties should be flexible, personalized, and subject to discussion. In fact, groups usually work better when penalties are automatic and immediate, yet mild for first offenders.⁴ When civic culture is strong, many people learn such principles from experience; but when effective organizations are scarce, we may have to teach the art of association in schools.⁵

I think the main challenge of our moment is to develop civic organizations that can flourish and grow, teach civic skills and values, and serve as venues for constructive disagreement. The “upswing” that furnishes the title of the book by Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, which Campbell cites, was an impressive period of innovation and expansion in U.S. civil society from 1900 to 1960.⁶ If we saw a similar civic renaissance today, not only would more people participate in familiar groups that discuss issues and manage common-pool resources (such as congregations and other traditional associations) but new forms would emerge to meet the needs of our time.

For example, during the period that Putnam and Romney Garrett label “the upswing,” reliable daily newspapers became prevalent in the United States. By 1972, 69 percent of Americans told the General Social Survey (GSS) that they read a newspaper “every day.”⁷ It is easy enough to envision a daily publication about serious matters, written by professionals to inform a whole community. The hard part is the business model. Why would many people *pay* for such a product? The recipe that sustained metropolitan daily newspapers during the 1900s included hard news plus human-interest stories, comics, sports, gossip, and other features aimed at various members of each household, all funded by a combination of revenue from subscribers and occasional readers and advertisers. Once the internet captured advertising revenue, this model disintegrated. By 2014, just one-quarter of respondents told the GSS that they read a newspaper daily; the GSS subsequently retired the question, as it ceased to be a useful measure of news consumption.

Also during the upswing, many colleges and universities offered some measure of civic education while contributing knowledge and culture to their communities and serving as significant venues for public debate. Universities collected state subsidies, tuition, philanthropy, and clinical fees, and they offered economic mobility, access to licensed professions, ambitious research prized by industry and the military, vigorous social life, and quasi-professional sports, along with civic benefits. This model is now under considerable stress, though it has not fully collapsed, as with the daily newspaper.⁸

Similarly, Putnam and Romney Garrett show that after 1910, high schools rapidly spread across the United States and became another pillar of civic culture, not

only preparing students to be more capable citizens but also serving as foci for adult community life.⁹ No national policy made this happen. Instead, most communities found that they needed at least one high school to be economically competitive, and they taxed themselves to build and maintain their own schools. This model worked in many localities, although spending was never adequate in poor communities or for students of color. This model survives, notwithstanding consolidations that have removed high schools from some smaller towns and growing state subsidies for private schools.

Today, it is not hard to envision a social media platform that serves as an excellent venue for disagreeing well. Any platform must use an algorithm to decide what material each user sees, and a good algorithm would favor substantive content from a deliberately diverse range of views. The question is how to capitalize such a platform so it can expand to rival the huge for-profit social media outlets of the present, which do the opposite for billions of users, favoring material that induces outrage and reinforces users' prior assumptions. In other words, the problem is the same as the one that confronted proponents of professional journalism circa 1900, but we haven't yet found a workable business model for our time.

Likewise, we know – in part thanks to Campbell's work – how to teach deliberative skills and values in classrooms.¹⁰ The question is why parents or taxpayers and policymakers would pay for such education for most students. The economic rationale for building and maintaining high schools has not convinced many voters to demand adequate *civic* education.

Civic education advocates have suggested persuading the public about the importance of civic culture before asking them to pay for it through taxes. I am all for that! But the strategy that produced the twentieth-century upswing was more diversified and therefore more realistic. Government paid for some aspects of civic culture. A strong example is the massive expansion of higher education that followed the *Truman Report*, whose rationale was explicitly to strengthen democracy.¹¹ Even so, colleges have always looked beyond the state and federal governments for revenue. Another inspiring example is public broadcasting, a complex and variegated system that certainly got a boost from the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act but started by linking preexisting nonprofit broadcasters (including college radio and TV stations) and has always obtained private revenue.

Civic culture needs "business models," defined broadly to include public-sector innovations that can disseminate widely, like public high schools after 1910. Designing good experiences and venues is relatively easy; bringing them to scale is the hard part. Civic organizations should aspire to deliberation, collaboration, and inclusiveness. But the pillars of civic life in America have been sturdier when they have also offered other benefits, from personal salvation to economic mobility,

from comic strips to Friday night football games. Even today, many of the examples cited in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' report *Habits of Heart and Mind* use ingenious business models. For example, Atlanta's Pollinator Network coordinates volunteer hours, financial contributions, and organizations' behavior to support the common-pool resource of adequate pollination across a major metropolitan area.¹² A new upswing will require much more of this kind of entrepreneurship and innovation.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ David E. Campbell, "Learning to Disagree: Why We Need a Refresh of Our Civic Culture," *Daedalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 179, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/learning-disagree-why-we-need-refresh-our-civic-culture>.
- ² Elinor Ostrom, "Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems," *American Economic Review* 100 (3) (2010): 641–672.
- ³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of De la démocratie en Amérique, Volume 3*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Liberty Fund, 2010).
- ⁴ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 90.
- ⁵ Elinor Ostrom, "The Need for Civic Education: A Collective Action Perspective," Working Paper W98-26 (Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, Indiana University, 1998), <https://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/items/7be8e448-bc47-4669-96e1-40cb634d1e93/full>.
- ⁶ Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Simon and Schuster, 2020).
- ⁷ NORC at the University of Chicago, General Social Survey, 1972–2014 [machine-readable data file]. Tabulation by the author.
- ⁸ Ronald J. Daniels with Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).
- ⁹ Putnam and Romney Garrett, *The Upswing*, 29–30.

- ¹⁰ David E. Campbell, "Voice in the Classroom : How an Open Classroom Climate Fosters Political Engagement among Adolescents," *Political Behavior* 30 (4) (2008): 437–454; and David E. Campbell, "What Social Scientists Have Learned about Civic Education: A Review of the Literature," *Peabody Journal of Education* 94 (1) (2019): 32–47.
- ¹¹ President's Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education for American Democracy* (Harper & Brothers, 1947).
- ¹² American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Habits of Heart and Mind: How to Fortify Civic Culture* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2024), 34, https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2025_civic-culture.pdf.