Citizenship

The American Experience

BY VALERIE LEMMIE

Local governments in liberal western democracies across the globe are placing increasing emphasis on strategies and practices that engage the public in more democratic and complementary ways to address wicked community problems.[1] Many of these strategies are informed by research findings from the Kettering Foundation. This body of research recognizes that if our democracy is to work as it should, citizens and government must work together, each bringing their respective assets and resources to the table to coproduce solutions to shared community problems that neither can fix alone. Nobel Prize-winning economist Elinor Ostrom, who is noted for coining the term "coproduction," explained it as "a process through which inputs from individuals who are not 'in' the same organization are transformed into goods and services."[2] But there are two words in this description that require clarification: They are "democracy" and "citizen."

Many Americans learn about democracy's origin in the city-states of ancient Greece in their western civilization course in high school. As practiced during this era, democracy was representative government in which citizens served in the public interest, whether elected or chosen by sortition (lot). Greek democracy was citizen-centered. It was a political system in which the citizenry (the *demos*) had the power (*kratos*) of self-rule. Greek democracy required consent of the governed and the active participation of citizens in the governance process, including holding officials accountable and coproducing public goods and services with government.

OUR REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

America's Founding Fathers created a representative democracy in the spirit of the ancient Greek city-states. American democracy is representative government in which citizens vote for their political leaders, who serve with the consent of the governed. While citizenship is now often understood as voting, jury service, and following the law, the role of citizens in our democracy was not always so narrowly defined. Citizens routinely performed public work. Tocqueville, in his early 19th-century tour of the United States, commented in New England town hall meetings on the level of associational life and the active participation of citizens in the governance process.

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Other examples of the work citizens performed include founding and operating the first public schools. The first soldiers and public servants were also citizen volunteers. Citizens were practicing democracy and doing the work democracy requires.

Today's public officials often reinforce this narrow understanding of democratic citizenship by promoting an image of the Good Citizen as one who votes, without regard to other responsibilities of citizenship like being a contributor to the civic life and health of a community. For democracy to work as it should, citizens must be recognized as coproducers with government, not as customers, clients, or constituents—roles that are passive, provide no role for citizens to help fix shared community problems, require little of citizens, and absolve them from responsibility as democratic

actors. If we are to effectively address the myriad problems communities face, we need citizens who are capable of tackling the mounting challenges of our time. We must return to our traditional understanding of citizenship as public work.[3] Harry Boyte, head of the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College and Kettering Foundation Associate, describes public work as a largely self-directed, collaborative effort of a diverse mix of people who create things of common value determined by deliberation for public purposes, in public.[4]

Public officials need to recognize that the collective voice of citizens should inform public policies, not just the voices of elites or the privileged who represent wealth and power. Blacks, indigenous groups, and people of color have struggled since our founding as a nation to be considered citizens, with the rights, privileges, and responsibilities citizenship confers. They have fought for their voice to be heard in the halls of governance and to contribute to civic life as democratic citizens.

A challenge all democracies have faced is who is a citizen. In ancient Greece, citizenship was limited to male landowners, aristocrats, rulers, and the wealthy, though over time, citizenship expanded to include other groups. When the United States was founded, citizenship was also limited. The three million slaves toiling on plantations were not citizens, nor would their children be citizens. There were also citizens, like white women, who shared the rights, responsibilities, and privileges of citizenship without the right to vote until 1920. For the overwhelming majority of Black Americans, gaining full citizenship and the unfettered right to vote took nearly 177 years, from 1788, when the Constitution was ratified, until 1965, when the Voting Rights Act was passed.[5]

It is interesting to note that Black Americans and women gained citizenship rights before voting rights, affirming that citizenship is about more than voting. Knowing this history informs the work public officials must do to advance the role of citizens as coproducers of public goods and services, while concomitantly fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion. We continue as a nation to struggle with who is a citizen and what citizenship means in practice. The prudent approach is to view the people who live in our communities as coproducers of public goods and services with their neighbors and government in addressing shared community problems. More than customers, they are stakeholders and collaborators in promoting democratic practices and creating a culture of civic engagement.

ENGAGING WITH CITIZENS AS COPRODUCERS

As a city manager, I saw my role as promoting democracy and adding value to community life. I viewed good citizens as people who cooperated with and supported the public officials working on their behalf. My job was to create a high-performing organization that was efficient, effective, and economical. Public services were modeled along the lines of a business, and citizen customers could take advantage of government programs and services, evaluate our performance as service providers, and offer input into the design and delivery of the services we determined they needed. Their input was primarily provided through public hearings, design charettes, and advisory boards and commissions. Needless to say, this view was on a collision course with reality. It did not take me long to realize that the problems people care most about—crime, education, healthcare, housing, and jobs—require the entire community,

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including residents, to contribute toward solutions. City Hall could not fix these problems alone, no matter how well-intentioned.

Yet that's what we were promoting, and everyone was frustrated. Public officials complained that citizens didn't show up ready to help, and when they did show up, they had a laundry list of city-dos. Citizens felt that their views and interests were not reflected in public policies, programs, and services, and that their voice wasn't heard. We were talking and acting past one another. My epiphany came when a group of residents representing their neighborhood association invited the mayor, city council, and me to a meeting where they demanded that our redevelopment proposal for their neighborhood offer existing residents the same incentives as new homebuyers, and that the business attraction plan include the small business enterprises they wanted. The light bulb went off when I realized the city did not recognize their community assets and resources or value their input on investments the city was making in their neighborhood. Though none of the city team lived in their neighborhood, as professionals and experts, we believed we knew what was best for them.

That is when I realized my definition of democracy and citizenship lacked a role for the public—it was institution-centered. For democracy to work as it should, there needs to be an informed and engaged citizenry. John Dewey recognized the problems inherent in rule- or decision-making by experts alone. He cautioned that experts should inform the public and provide them the opportunity to evaluate and engage with public officials on common concerns and shared community problems.[6]

There were practices managers could employ that were consistent with the pillars of public administration efficiency, effectiveness, economy, and, more recently, equity, that were democratic and would align with the way citizens in communities work. In the book *Self Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy*, Robert Wiebe writes, "...democracy is invariably popular self-government and variably something else—something culturally specific that has adhered to it. In the United States, that something else has been individual self-determination." People care about their families, their communities, and their neighbors. Through public deliberation, they are able to wrestle with the tensions inherent in the different values and experiences people have, make tradeoffs, and find common ground upon which to act.

CONCLUSIONS

It was a tough lesson, but I gained important insights that informed my work over the rest of my city management career: namely, that people have a self-interest in what happens in their community, and given the opportunity, bring assets, resources, and experiences. They contribute work that only citizens can do. Some of my most important contributions to the communities I served were on projects where city hall worked in partnership with citizens—and coproduced public goods.

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[1] The term "wicked problems" was coined by Horst Rittel and Mel Webber in "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1973), Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company.

[2] Elinor Ostrom, *Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Production*, orld Development, Vol. 24, No. 6, 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd.

[3] Harry Boyte, *Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work: Citizen-Centered Democracy and the Empowerment Gap*, the Kettering Foundation, 2013.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Note: This excludes the period known as the Reconstruction, beginning immediately after the Civil War, when freed slaves were granted citizenship and the right to vote and was generally recognized to have ended with the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which established the separate but equal doctrine in 1896.

[6] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Henry Holt, 1927).