A Historic Opportunity to Add the Public Voice That’s Missing

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At the end of the day, the American people are going to have to decide. No president can pursue a policy for very long without the support and the understanding of the Congress and the American people. That’s been demonstrated over and over again.

—Dean Rusk, Secretary of State

It is no secret that the American people have been unhappy with our political system for some time, and they doubt that the system can reform itself. The public’s loss of confidence in government as well as other major institutions is well documented and widely reported. Worse still, the distrust is mutual. Under these conditions, polarization flourishes. All of this is occurring despite numerous efforts by institutions to engage the public and demonstrate accountability. Many officials aren’t persuaded that what citizens have to say is useful. One officeholder wasn’t alone in complaining that he heard everything and nothing from the public.

In Washington, as well as in our statehouses, policymaking is usually dominated by three voices. Obviously, one is the voice of elected officials. Another is the voice of special interests, whose number has grown enormously in a relatively short time, as have the issues they represent. The third voice, also quite powerful, comes from professionals who staff our bureaucracies. They speak in an expert voice. There is value in all of these, yet there is little of what I think of as a public voice being heard.

The Voice We Need

What can be done about our dysfunctional system? I believe there is a new and rare opportunity to add a more public voice because, for the first time in our history, we have a
sizable number of nongovernmental groups that are willing to let citizens make up their own minds rather than insisting they accept a predetermined position. These organizations—the “talking tribes”—could provide our capitol's with useful insights into how the public sees issues and makes decisions about policies.

Political leaders aren’t lacking for information on public opinions or the results of focus group research. Certainly, interest groups have had no trouble in making their presence felt. And elected officeholders know a great deal about what appeals to the base of voters they need in order to be reelected.

But policymakers throughout our governments need to know much more about how citizens will respond to the difficult trade-offs that are inescapable in policymaking. Despite assurances that they have perfect plans, fail-proof reforms, and certain-success solutions, these leaders can’t do anything that is without costs and unpleasant consequences. Push always comes to shove in our statehouses, even if the political system balks at making hard choices.

Officeholders need to know not just what people want but what they are willing to live with, since there are no perfect solutions. Which of all the things people care deeply about are really most valuable in a given circumstance? What would people give up, however reluctantly? And who do citizens think should be responsible for doing what needs to be done? Only the government? Are there some things that citizens must do for themselves?

How do people go about making up their minds on such difficult matters? Do they move from first reactions to considered judgment in one big leap? If not, where are they along the path? We need a public voice that can speak to these questions.

What I have in mind isn’t the mythical “voice of the people” that politicians claim to hear expressing a clear and resolute consensus. The public voice that I am talking about, the voice that is often missing, doesn’t really exist until it is formed by the interaction of people as they attempt to solve common problems or decide on policies. It is the reverberations of struggles to make difficult decisions. Although seldom announcing a consensus, this voice can be quite coherent, with different threads combining in a rich choir of purposes. That is to say, a public voice is filled with nuances as varied as the citizens who create it. It is not the voice of any particular interest; it is the voice of all interests. And it is the sound of people engaging one another, not simply the unconnected aggregation of individual expressions. It is the voice of democracy in its most basic form.

The tone of a public voice is distinctive. It is more than the voice of logical reasoning, yet it is reasonable. It blends our analytical and instinctive minds as it captures the passions that surround the things we hold most dear in political life. But a public voice is not heavy with absolutes; it is more provisional and contextual: “If these conditions continue, the best course of action might be to...” The tone is pragmatic rather than ideological.

Does such a voice really exist? Scholars Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro have shown that a public voice has emerged over time and has been, on the whole, consistent, rational, and stable. However, on any given issue, this voice may take 50 years to develop. In an era of instant everything, we may not be able to wait a half-century. The question is, what does it take to jump-start a public voice?

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Conditions Encouraging a Public Voice

A public voice begins to emerge under certain conditions. And there are everyday opportunities to create these conditions. A public voice takes shape when people talk about what is happening and what they feel is at stake. They start to give issues names. You can hear that naming going on in almost any waiting room or bar. The voice takes on more definition when people talk about the various things that could be done to counter a problem—and who should do what. As citizens reflect on what their options might be, they begin to weigh the advantages of different courses of action. “If we put more security guards in the schools, will we turn a place of learning into an armed camp? If we don’t, will our children be safe?”

So why is it such a challenge to encourage a public voice when the opportunities for it to develop are in everyday conversations? The conditions that inhibit this voice are also present every day: blaming, complaining, stereotyping. There are also structural barriers that range from a lack of continuing focus (people leave waiting room conversations) to group processes so prescriptive that people’s natural give-and-take is regimented out or so casual that the hard work of making difficult choices never gets done.

Citizens need a setting where they can move from first opinions and hasty reactions to more considered and shared views. They need opportunities to exercise their human faculty for judgment, which is done by deliberating.

The Talking Tribes

A public voice is democratic self-expression, and so it can’t be created by anyone other than citizens. Still, the conditions that encourage this voice can be created by nongovernmental organizations like those that participate in the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD). Fortunately, there may be more of these talking tribes than ever before, as is suggested
by the membership in the Coalition and other organizations. These facilitative tribes can also extend their reach using social media.

The less-than-good news is that the talking tribes aren’t well connected to governments and other institutions. A recent report by the Transatlantic Academy lamented that civic organizations, even with “Internet-empowered activism,” have yet to significantly affect the formal structures for governing. For this to change, the talking tribes will have to give governments something they need from the public but aren’t getting.

**The Public Voice That Governments Need**

Working in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) in the mid-1970s, I soon realized how little we knew about what the public could live with when trade-offs had to be made. Although the Department’s budget was larger than all but the national budgets of the Soviet Union and the United States, the demand for assistance far exceeded the supply. The calls on the budget were legitimate and not, for the most part, the result of fraudulent claims or government wastefulness. Of course, HEW held a great many public hearings and was constantly negotiating with interest groups, yet the Department would have been well served by hearing the kind of public voice I have described. Here are some of the things we needed to know more about.

**What People Consider Deeply Valuable**

When people are faced with a difficult decision, they draw on what is deeply valuable to them, which is what they want to promote or protect. Facts are important, yet knowing whether people have the right information isn’t enough to understand how they go about making a decision. Well-intended efforts to “educate” the public seldom take into account the intangibles people hold dear.
The importance of taking into consideration the things people value is illustrated in Wendell Berry’s story of an economist who advised farmers to rent rather than own land. One farmer responded by telling the economist that his forebears didn’t come to America to be renters.\(^3\)

Something the farmer valued, in addition to profits, was at stake. It was the security of land ownership. My grandfather, who farmed, said of land, “They aren’t making any more of it, you know.”

Let me stop here to make an important distinction. The things we hold most dear aren’t the same as “values.” Hodding Carter Jr. once told me that he thought of values as “the parts of the Bible printed in red.” That isn’t what I am talking about. I mean basic human imperatives such as being secure from danger, having the freedom to do what we think best, and being treated fairly. Social psychologists have called these the ends or purposes of life and the means necessary to reach those ends.\(^4\) These political imperatives are similar to the individual needs that psychologist Abraham Maslow found common to all human beings: food, water, and shelter.

What is deeply valuable to us collectively is also different from the interests that grow out of our particular circumstances as well as distinct from abstract values or our personal beliefs. What people hold dear goes deeper than the things that can be measured or described with facts.

The things critically important to our collective well-being are dear to most everyone. Most everyone wants to be secure, to be free, to be treated fairly. These imperatives motivate us to become politically active. They are the fire deep in our political souls. A public voice resonates with these imperatives. For policymakers not to see them is to operate with blinders on.

\(^3\) Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986), viii.
Because a public voice resonates with what people hold dear, it has its own distinctive names for problems. These are different from the expert or partisan names typically used in policymaking. Even if officials and citizens use the exact same terminology, they may not mean the same thing. For instance, educators, politicians, and citizens all say they believe in setting “high standards” in schools. Educational and political leaders usually mean high academic standards as reflected in test scores. People, because of what they consider valuable, mean having high expectations for achievement on a number of fronts, many of which aren’t reflected in test scores.

Americans who appear uninterested in politics may simply fail to see much connection between what they consider valuable and the policy issues as they are named by interest groups, debated by politicians, and discussed in the media. So when officials have difficulty engaging citizens, the problem may be less a matter of arousing the indifferent than making connections with the things people already care about.

**All of the Options**

The various things people feel are valuable prompt them to come up with a range of options for acting on a problem or setting a policy direction. We want to raise our families in a livable community. We prize our security, so we might want greater street surveillance. We also value our freedom, so we might want fewer restrictive codes. The options differ because citizens hold many things valuable, and each of them leads to a different course of action for solving a problem. There are usually three or even four options that people want to consider, never just one or two. Encouraging a public voice requires getting beyond the predictable, bipolar options and

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dealing with all those that resonate with what people hold dear. Officeholders are often faced with deciding between options that are ideological opposites, which encourages further polarization.

Options are possible approaches to a problem and they identify who needs to act, which can implicate citizens. And officeholders need to know what people themselves are willing to do. That is especially the case when people have reservations about governments having too large a presence in their lives. Officials might ask citizens, “If you don’t want government to be involved, what are you willing to do to solve the problem?”

**The Tensions**

Since people hold many things dear, there will inevitably be conflicts or tensions when deciding what is most important in a given situation. With any issue, a course of action that favors one option will likely compromise another. For instance, we all value security and freedom, although we differ on how to balance the two. We differ because we live in different circumstances, not because we don’t share the same concerns. In a city threatened by terrorism, people may give priority to safety over personal freedom. The same people, if they lived in a distant rural village, might reverse the priorities. A public voice shows the extent to which people have or have not recognized the tensions among the things they hold dear.

**Working through Conflicts**

These tensions won’t go away because people will never stop caring about all of the things they consider valuable. The best that can be done is to work through the conflicts to the point that policymaking or civic action can move forward. This calls for carefully weighing possible options for action against the various things people hold dear, which is another way of describing deliberation. This careful weighing requires more than an informed discussion and something
other than an adversarial debate. Officeholders need to know whether this working through is going on. There has to be a fair trial, which means looking at even the most unpopular options.

Working through tensions is never finished after just one forum. Sound judgments are seldom instantaneous; they develop in stages. And officeholders need to know which stage people are in if they hope to communicate with them effectively.

Initially, citizens may not be sure there is an issue that they should be concerned about. That will often be the case if people don’t see anything they can do about a problem. Later on, people may become aware of a problem but simply gripe about it. The issue will be who to blame, and citizens won’t see the tensions. At this point, a hard-sell strategy promoting a particular policy or regulation can polarize the citizenry. If the tensions do become apparent, citizens will struggle as they weigh the advantages and disadvantages of various options. Officials can provide key facts, but the facts must be put in the context of the conflicts over what should be considered most valuable.

As they struggle to decide, people may become more open to considering the experiences of others. Despite our tendency to seek out the like-minded, when uncertain, we become curious about how others have been affected or what they have done to solve a problem. This opening leads to an “enlarged mentality.” That is, when citizens incorporate the experiences of others into theirs, they gain new insights about both the nature of the issue and themselves as a citizenry. Their understanding of a problem expands, becoming more comprehensive and nuanced. And this enhanced understanding leads people to identify political actors and resources that haven’t been recognized before, which can result in better decisions and more innovative ways of solving problems.
The Politically Permissible

While a public voice may seldom be an expression of full agreement, it can produce a reasonably shared direction for moving ahead on issues of policy and on problems requiring collective action. A public voice is the voice that explains what people are willing to do when they recognize that there will be costs and often-unpleasant consequences. It clarifies what trade-offs are and aren’t acceptable.

Officeholders, policymakers, and officials of all kinds and all levels need to know what people can and can’t live with. This is particularly true for policy questions. The decisions citizens make, however, are seldom as definite as those institutions make. They are more likely to be decisions that identify how much political latitude is available. It is like knowing how far apart the goalposts are. For example, during the 2008-2009 healthcare debates, the boundaries of political permission were not very wide; in fact, they were much narrower than the polls suggested.5 People wanted to keep the good care they were receiving, but they also wanted lower costs—affordable care. Unfortunately, the good care that results from taking advantage of new medical technologies tends to increase costs. Achieving one objective without defaulting on another doesn’t leave much room for maneuvering.

In other words, public deliberation can help delineate the area where action is permissible, which is called “common ground for action” in community problem solving. This is an area that is large enough for most everyone to stand in and maintain their differences without being estranged by them.

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When a citizenry does finally settle on a general direction to move, they don’t produce a set of instructions for officials to carry out, but they should give them a clearer sense of what the citizenry will or won’t support. In some cases, officials may think that the best course of action is outside the boundaries of what is politically permissible. In these situations, public deliberations need to tell officeholders how people went about making up their minds so officials can engage their thinking.

**What if the Audience Isn’t Washington?**

Not all the talking tribes are focused on the national government. Many concentrate on local issues and try to launch citizen-led problem solving in communities. Whether in Washington, DC, or Wausau, Wisconsin, it is important to know what people feel is valuable, what options they want to consider, what role they think citizens should play, what tensions have to be worked through, whether judgment is being exercised, and if people are ready to move forward in a direction they can “live with.” That enables citizens to work together and produce “public goods,” which range from parks so kids can play safely to campaigns to get drunk drivers off the roads.

The importance of what citizens produce by working with other citizens is reaffirmed in Elinor Ostrom’s Nobel Prize-winning research on what she called “coproduction.” Her argument is that major institutions, including governments, can’t do their jobs effectively without reinforcement from the work that citizens do. For example, law enforcement agencies can’t control crime unless people also take responsibility for their safety. Or in matters of health, large
institutions like hospitals can’t serve all those who need care unless communities help curb the behaviors (smoking, for example) that put people in the medical system.\textsuperscript{6}

Will the Talking Tribes Seize the Opportunity?

Addressing some of the talking tribes several years ago, a member of the US House of Representatives was frank in saying that if these organizations believed they had some special wisdom that could keep the government from making dumb mistakes, they were not only wrong but couldn’t be taken seriously. The public’s voice is just that, the public’s. It isn’t the voice of God. We can be wrong collectively, just as we can be wrong personally. However, the issues where a public voice are needed most are those that have no well-defined solutions and no demonstrably right answers that can be measured objectively. We have to depend on our best collective judgment. At the end of the day, we, the people, have to decide.

Making a public voice more audible in our capitols won’t cure all our political ills. However, if the political system doesn’t seem likely to reform itself, people reason that they have nowhere else to turn but to themselves as a public. While a public voice may not be totally sufficient, it is certainly necessary.

The questions are whether those in the best position to help this voice emerge realize the opportunity they have and what it will take to seize it. They are the only ones who can answer these questions. I fervently hope they will.

\textsuperscript{6} Elinor Ostrom, “Covenanting, Co-Producing, and the Good Society.” The newsletter of PEGS (Committee on the Political Economy of the Good Society) 3, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 7-9.