

Date Printed: 06/16/2009

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JTS Box Number: IFES\_78  
Tab Number: 122  
Document Title: Citizens and Politics: A View from Main  
Street America  
Document Date: 1991  
Document Country: United States -- General  
Document Language: English  
IFES ID: CE02864



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# CITIZENS AND POLITICS

A View from Main Street America

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Prepared for the Kettering Foundation by The Harwood Group

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**Prepared for the Kettering Foundation by  
Richard C. Harwood  
The Harwood Group  
June 1991**

**The Harwood Group is a small public issues research and consulting firm located in Bethesda, Maryland. It works with public and private sector organizations to define complex public issues, understand the attitudes and perspectives of those individuals and groups affected by the issues, and develop policies, programs, and strategies that promote sustainable change.**

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# Foreword

by David Mathews

**T**his Harwood study has done all of us a favor — though not everyone will find the conclusions favorable. In this investigation The Harwood Group looks deeply into the health of American democracy, uncovering evidence of serious cancers in the body politic.

Most of us are aware of the public's disquiet with politics. We have all seen ads to vote incumbents out of office — just because they are incumbents. We heard proposals to radically limit the terms of elected officials. Stories abound about public outrage at the disproportionate influence of the wealthy. Authentic American heroes have gone on trial merely for the appearance of selling their offices. And low turnouts for elections are so commonplace that we have rationalized away the absence of public participation: maybe people are asked to vote too often; maybe the small numbers at the ballot box mean citizens are just casting an unwritten ballot for the status quo. But as participation at the ballot box drops lower and lower, these rationalizations lose their power to placate us. Increasingly, citizens are putting issues on ballots so that they can make the decisions themselves, instead of trusting their representatives. (As it turns out, California's Proposition 13 became the symbol of a new age in politics.) While there is nothing wrong with such direct balloting per se, there is reason to be alarmed by the implicit message in recent campaigns — that representative government has failed.

What do all of these events tell us? According to Richard Harwood and his associates, they tell us that there is a widespread public reaction against the political system. This reaction is more than the familiar attacks on individual politicians, incumbents, big government, party politics, and corruption. It is a reaction against a political system that is perceived as so autonomous that the public is no longer able to control and direct it. People talk as

though our political system had been taken over by alien beings.

Americans take great pride in having the world's oldest continuous democracy. They are proud of their political heritage — the extension of suffrage, the battles to protect individual rights, the ability to speak their minds. They identify with the values of a democratic order — freedom and justice. Despite this heritage, many Americans do not believe they are living in a democracy now! They don't believe that "We, the people" actually rule. They don't believe that the average citizen even influences, much less rules. Americans interviewed for this report describe the present political system as impervious to public direction, a system run by a professional political class and controlled by money, not votes. What is more, people do not believe this system is able to solve the pressing problems they face. Instead, they turn to voluntary activities, which they call "public" activities, to distinguish them from political activities. Many people do not want to be associated in any way with "politics." Politics is like leprosy; people don't want to be around it. This study suggests that the legitimacy of our political institutions is more at issue than our leaders imagine.

One reaction to this study will be that it grossly overstates the problem and is based on an idealized view of democratic possibilities. (Haven't Americans always been distrustful of government and cynical about political leaders?) Yet, as we read what people are saying in these interviews, we sense how deeply people feel about the problems of the political system and how justified they believe their expectations to be. Other studies may have reached similar conclusions, but what is powerful and compelling in this study are the voices of real people. They let us hear the tone and texture of what the public is saying. We have seldom heard the words of average citizens so clearly. Their complaints are far more than the familiar diatribes against big government — and far too serious for electoral reforms or campaign finance laws to remedy. Still, despite how far-reaching the criticisms are, you will hear balance and reasonableness in the public voice.

There is no interpretation of the public less accurate than the often-repeated conclusion that the public is apathetic

and too consumed with private matters to care about politics. The people you will hear in this study are far from apathetic. In fact, they are just the opposite; they have a clear sense of their civic responsibilities. They worry about passing their cynicism on to their children. Yet they care so deeply that their frustration runs to anger and cynicism. They feel as though they have been locked out of their own homes — and they react the way people do when they have been evicted from their own property. What you will read is no vague malaise. People know exactly who dislodged them from their rightful place in American democracy. They point their fingers at politicians, at powerful lobbyists, and — this came as a surprise — at people in the media. They see these three groups as a political class, the rulers of an oligarchy that has replaced democracy. Like political scientists, citizens know that the political system is now designed to respond to interest groups rather than individual citizens. Unlike political scientists, however, citizens do not regard this as an “objective reality” and, inevitably, they are hopping mad about the situation!

People believe two forces have corrupted democracy. The first is that lobbyists have replaced representatives as the primary political actors. The other force, seen as more pernicious, is that campaign contributions seem to determine political outcomes more than voting. No accusation cuts deeper because when money and privilege replace votes, the social contract underlying the political system is abrogated. Influenced by this widespread perception, people decide that voting doesn't really count anymore — so why bother?

Most elected and appointed officials are dedicated to serving the public interest. Most journalists care deeply about democracy and believe the free press plays a crucial role in maintaining it. Both will be dismayed by these findings. It will be tempting to react defensively by pointing out how unreasonable and hypocritical the public can be. But look closely at what the people quoted in the study are saying. They believe that, while decent folks go into politics, they are inevitably captured by a system so powerful that everyone must “play the game.” People don't just blame politicians for the system; they know that the public itself is partially responsible. The public also plays the game. And the reaction against the media's treatment of



politics, though critical, is still mindful of the essential role the media play in providing news; what citizens question are the peculiar standards now in force for determining what is newsworthy. (Some distinguished leaders in the press have made similar complaints about sound bites and the elevation of the sensational over the profound.)

What is the answer to all these concerns? What do people want? Do they expect to have saints as representatives? Do they insist on perfect governments? Do they believe that democracy in the ideal should be in practice tomorrow? Do people expect the political system to correct itself? The Harwood study demonstrates that people don't have such unrealistic expectations. Instead, many focus on a simple but profound corrective: they want to restore the integrity, vitality, and scope of the public dialogue. People understand that the fundamental changes they want cannot occur until we change the basic conditions of political practice — beginning with the way the public joins in the discussion of major policy issues.

Why is the public dialogue so pivotal? The public dialogue is the natural home for democratic politics. That is the "home" people feel forced out of and want back. People depend on the dialogue to provide opportunities for the public to hold counsel with itself and give public definition to the public's interest. The most alarming finding of the study is an erosion of the political system's legitimacy. Reviving the political parties or increasing voter participation only get at the surface of the erosion. The only way to get at the base of the problem is through greater public definition of its own interests. That means the public has to be invested in deliberations over the difficult choices that are involved in delineating the public's interests. That definition is necessary to give direction to government. And public direction makes for public legitimacy.

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*David Mathews is president of the Kettering Foundation.*

## Preface

The Kettering Foundation commissioned this study because it has long been interested in the health of America's democracy. This interest has stood at the forefront of various Foundation endeavors over the years. Central to this concern is the relationship between citizens and public officials — in the very nature of “politics.” The Foundation comes to the debate over politics and the policy process with a conviction that the public — individual citizens — must actively consider the policy choices that are before society and help inform the course our public officials pursue. Only then is broad, lasting public support likely to sustain the ultimate policy choices we make.

The Kettering Foundation is now engaged in a multiyear initiative exploring the relationship between citizens and their government, consisting of a series of studies that seek to fulfill two goals: to offer insights into how the relationship between citizens, public officials, and the policy process can be made more constructive; and to develop tools — including, perhaps, alternative kinds of public meetings and materials — to promote enhanced interaction between citizens and public officials.

*Citizens and Politics* builds on two earlier studies, plus another now in progress, undertaken by The Harwood Group for the Kettering Foundation. The first, released in July 1989, is entitled, *The Public's Role in the Policy Process: A View from State and Local Policymakers*. The second report was completed in June 1990 and is entitled, *Citizens and Policymakers in Community Forums: Observations from the National Issues Forums*. Finally, the third research endeavor, an ongoing project, looks at the interaction between citizens and public officials in public meetings; that research will be completed in 1991.

This report, *Citizens and Politics*, is based on a series of focus group discussions with citizens from across the nation — from what we refer to as “Main Street America.” In the focus groups, we explored the following questions:

- How do citizens view politics today?
- What do citizens want out of politics?
- How, if at all, are citizens involved in politics — and why or why not?
- How and why do citizens participate in their community?
- What might be done to improve politics in America today?

Focus groups are particularly well suited for this type of study as they allow researchers to learn not only “what” citizens think about the topic of politics, but “why” they hold those views and “how” they think about them. This kind of information is often impossible to gather through public opinion surveys. In surveys, for instance, questions need to be predefined for respondents to answer; citizens are unable to discuss issues and then reconsider their own views; and limited amounts of new information can be entered into a discussion for respondents to consider. Still, of course, it must be pointed out that the observations that emerge from focus groups need to be viewed, strictly speaking, as hypotheses that should be verified by scientifically reliable methods in order to be considered definitive. More information about the methodology used to conduct this study is found in the “Appendix” and the “Epilogue.”

### **Acknowledgments**

A number of people played key roles in making this publication possible. Kettering Foundation President David Mathews was the driving force behind this project; it reflects his continuing desire to understand better the nature of politics in America today and to find ways to improve democratic practices. Robert J. Kingston, Senior Associate of the Kettering Foundation, provided keen insights and editorial comments on numerous drafts; reports of all kinds can only improve with his attention. Michael J. Perry, of The Harwood Group, was involved in every step of this project; his hard work, willingness to engage in long discussions, and thoughtful comments were invaluable. Other people who should be thanked include Robert E. Daley and George Cavanaugh for their efforts in designing and producing this publication; Betty Frecker, for her copy editing; and James C. Wilder for his active interest in this report.

# Introduction

## Rethinking Conventional Wisdom about Politics

Each day the chorus grows louder. The proclamations by political pundits, newscasters, pollsters, scholars, and others ring clear. Their soundings are unmistakable. They say that the health of politics in America is at risk — that perhaps it is even in rapid decline. Among the refrains are the following:

- Americans are apathetic about politics — they simply no longer care.
- Civic duty in America is dead, or is waning seriously — people do not participate in public life.

Certainly there is much to lament about politics today. Public participation in voting is low, and seems to be reaching lower levels at each election. People's frustration about politics is high. A sense of political efficacy among citizens is missing. And people seem to believe that the system often is incapable — as illustrated in the debacle over the federal budget deficit, late in 1990 — of resolving major issues. The sheer anger that citizens harbor about politics is seen at every turn on Main Street America. For instance, in the 1990 primary elections, incumbents were denied their party endorsement; political office-seekers who espoused populist rhetoric and positions were widely supported; and newcomers were sometimes chosen over establishment candidates. And in the general elections, California voters passed referenda that limited the number of terms that state legislators can serve and slashed their staff budgets. Make no mistake, at this juncture in history there should be little doubt that the general public believes much is wrong with politics.

Yet there are individuals who argue these problems should not become overblown. Some say Americans have always held a negative view of politicians and, more generally, politics; and apathy, on some level, has always been a part of American politics. Indeed there are those who suggest

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*We have discovered in this research an illness that is more pervasive and deeper than perhaps imagined, or at least suggested, by the current debate.*

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that many citizens may not be voting simply because they are basically *satisfied* with how things are going in the nation today; and, for those citizens who do want to be politically active, the political system has spawned more than enough organizations and groups of every description for them to join. In any event, all of this leads many individuals to conclude — even those who subscribe to other explanations for our ailments — that the course of action for now should be simply to make “adjustments” to the current political system. They propose that the cure for our political illnesses is a series of legislative and other measures — including the likes of campaign finance reform, new ethics codes, and limiting the terms of legislative members — that will help restore confidence in the political process and increase citizen participation.

Interestingly, all of these statements share two important things in common. First, they are part of this nation’s growing conventional wisdom about politics in America. Second, they are, each of them, either outright wrong or dangerously incomplete.

We have discovered in this research an illness that is more pervasive and deeper than perhaps imagined, or at least suggested, by the current debate. Of course, we are not alone in recognizing the nature of this problem; others have, too. Still, the voices of citizens we hear in this report depict serious and deeply ingrained problems within American politics.

Indeed much of the current conventional wisdom will not provide the insights needed to address the political challenges we face. This research finds that some of the basic assumptions made about our political dilemma today are, unfortunately, *misframed* — and so we persistently seek to meet the wrong set of challenges. In turn, our attempts and initiatives to improve the current state of affairs often are off the mark.

So each day we awake to find that our problems are compounded. The debate over politics is stale and stifled. It is flat. Endless talk and analyses based on the prevailing conventional wisdom have promoted a public discourse that remains cast within narrowly defined boundaries, where rhetoric can easily get out of hand and make the situation seem hopeless, and where the very nature of the

debate closes off independent thinking. For instance, we tend to think about politics and the public in terms of “voting” and how to make it easier to vote, rather than looking at why people increasingly choose to stay away from the polls. We seem to believe that merely removing the influence of money from electoral campaigns will lessen people’s frustration with politics per se. All the while we fail to consider that the public may be yearning for something more in politics than just clean campaigns. We wonder if people need more information in order to make political choices, when the issue may be that they need different kinds of information. It seems that we seldom make adequate time to look beneath the apparent *symptoms* of our problems to find out what drives them. We seek simple labels and equally simple solutions for our political ills.

All of this produces a troubling result: opportunities for thinking about and finding alternatives for action are not pursued. According to the research observations presented in this report, the limited boundaries of this debate, the inability to think anew about this dilemma, are problematic. We run the risk of committing ourselves, albeit unintentionally, to the folly of tinkering at the margins of politics when it is fundamental aspects of *how* we conduct our politics that must be changed.

## **A Redefined Set of Assumptions**

This study for the Kettering Foundation reveals that we must think anew about politics if we are to improve our political health. It lays out a “redefined” set of assumptions about how citizens view politics in America. No doubt, when taken alone, much of what is said will sound familiar. But, when taken together, these observations offer an alternative to our conventional thinking about politics; and, more importantly, perhaps, a fresh way of thinking about how we can move ahead.

Most important among the insights that emerge from this research are the following:

- *Today Americans are not apathetic — but they do feel impotent when it comes to politics.* Citizens argue that they have been “pushed out” of the

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*We run the risk of committing ourselves, albeit unintentionally, to the folly of tinkering at the margins of politics when it is fundamental aspects of how we conduct our politics that must be changed.*

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political process and left little room to understand, engage, and make a difference in the substance of politics.

- ***Citizens engage in specific areas of public life when they believe they can make a difference.*** It is as if they choose to participate *only when* they believe a political compact exists that suggests: “When I participate there will be at least the *possibility* to bring about and witness change.” By and large, citizens do not believe this compact is present in most areas relating to political action today.
- ***Reconnecting citizens and politics will take more than legislative changes that attempt to make the system and its “loyalists” more accountable.*** Citizens want to be more than bystanders, merely confident that the game of politics is being played cleanly and in their interests. Citizens want a way to understand and participate in politics ... *for themselves*.

***The Pervading Sense of Impotence*** — Americans are both frustrated and downright angry about the state of the current political system. They argue that politics has been taken away from them — that they have been *pushed out* of the political process. They want to participate, but they believe that there is no room for them in the political process they now know. This sense of impotence differs greatly from the so-called “citizen apathy” we read about in weekly magazines and hear on nightly news programs. Indeed this is a *key* finding of this research. Apathy suggests the making of a voluntary, intentional choice; most Americans feel, instead, that today’s political situation has been thrust upon them. It is not something that they have — nor would have — chosen for themselves.

This feeling of impotence appears widespread; and it seems to transcend sundry facets of how we conduct politics in this nation. It is revealed, for instance, in a fervent belief among Americans that individual citizens can no longer have their voice heard on important public issues; that many, if not most, public issues are talked about by policy and opinion leaders, the media, and others in ways that neither connect with the concerns of citizens nor make any sense to them — ostensibly making Ameri-

cans feel disconnected from political debate. It is revealed, also, in citizens' belief that they have been squeezed out of politics by a "system" dangerously spiraling beyond their control, a system made up of lobbyists, political action committees, special interest organizations, and the media. And they argue that their one long-standing, once reliable connection to politics — elected and appointed officials — has been severed. In the end, citizens do not believe they can make a difference in politics. This results in frustration, anger, and, most of all, a pervading sense of impotence.

***A Foundation for Improving Our Political Health —***

Some people might conclude that there is either little that can be done to ameliorate our political ailments or that the public is in need of some sort of shock therapy to resuscitate its political health. Fortunately, neither conclusion would be correct. We find that beneath this troubled view of politics is an American public that cares deeply about public life. On Main Street America we have discovered a strong — albeit often hard to find — foundation for building healthy democratic practices and new traditions of public participation in politics.

Thus with the avalanche of negative talk about politics in America there also should be optimism. We have found citizens participating in various facets of public life; but their actions are just not where we ordinarily look to gauge political activity. In this research we do not lay claim to pinpointing the level of such citizen action in America today; rather, our observations suggest more about its nature. We find that Americans are willing to, and do, engage in actions that have inherently political qualities: they define the problems before them; set common purposes for action; and make choices for moving ahead.

We find that their actions seem to rise when some simple but powerful conditions are present, all of which seem to revolve around the notion of *possibility*: the belief among citizens that there is the possibility of having a say; the possibility of creating and seeing change; the possibility of fostering a sense of belonging within their community; and the possibility of seeing and acting on their own stake in an issue. These conditions (along with perhaps others) form what seems to be a compact between citizens and public

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***We find that beneath this troubled view of politics is an American public that cares deeply about public life.***

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life that suggests: when citizens participate there must be at least the possibility to bring about and witness *change*.

Beyond this implicit compact lies another critical element that determines how Americans view politics and public life today: citizens assert that they must play a central role in any effort to reinvigorate politics; and they, therefore, disparage those who want to take the easy way out by pointing fingers at politicians, the media, special interest organizations, and others as the *sole* culprits of our problems. In fact, they see the problems of politics in a broader context. For instance, they recognize that they need better to understand policy issues in order to participate in political debate; they acknowledge that public officials face political constraints and pressures that are beyond their own control; and they realize that they must work to have their voice heard. These firmly held beliefs, together with the concrete actions citizens are taking, offer hope for encouraging a deeper public participation in politics. And they suggest — when taken with other observations made in this report — that when the right conditions exist citizens will not only act locally, but they also will become engaged in politics beyond their community.

*Finding Appropriate Responses* — Reconnecting citizens and politics will not be an easy task. But it must be done. The reasons are clear. Americans now believe that their government and its public officials have failed them; the system no longer can produce solutions to the problems that face us in the 1990s and beyond; and, for citizens, it is not clear where they fit into a political process that seems to be floundering. On Main Street America, one can hear citizens declaring their dismay. They are talking about the fact that schools are not adequately educating their children; that the environment is going unprotected; that year after year the federal budget deficit rears its ugly head to dominate the front pages of our newspapers; that the cost of health care endangers their economic security; that military expenditures are out of control; that unmanageable economic change threatens the quality of life of their communities.

On these and other issues, the ability to find effective and sustainable approaches eludes us. Increasingly our political process has become deadlocked; special interests fight

against one another; our public exchanges seem nothing more than a series of acrimonious statements and counter-statements; often trade-offs are not clearly considered or are conveniently pushed aside until tomorrow; in the end, political *discourse* seems absent from politics. And, more importantly, citizens believe that they themselves are shut out of the political discussion — however limited — that does take place. Clearly, we have learned in this research that the occasional “town meeting” and “public hearing” legislators and mayors and other public officials hold are not adequate to citizens’ ideas of the democratic process.

What can be done? First, our research does suggest that it is necessary to find ways to hold elected and appointed officials, special interest organizations, lobbyists, and others more accountable for their actions. But it also suggests that such measures *alone* are wholly insufficient. Rather, the research reveals that initiatives such as campaign finance reform, new ethics codes, drives for easier voter registration, or limiting the terms of legislative members will provide only marginal benefit in reconnecting citizens and politics. These measures will not address many of the core dilemmas in politics that we face. Instead we find that significantly more than these limited “adjustments” are needed to improve our political health.

Clear and persuasive reasons dictate this need. Americans want to play a constructive role in politics. It is apparent that they want changes made in the political environment — in the very ways in which we practice politics. For instance, citizens want to do more than register their “preferences” once every year or two at the voting booth; they want to know that their voice matters in politics on a more regular basis. They want places where they can learn and talk about issues facing them and their communities — places that are accessible to them in their busy lives, places that encourage and support free and open discussion. They want their representatives, media, and others to hear what they have to say on policy issues. And they need to know that if they make an effort, then there is at least the possibility that they will be able to help create change. These and other conditions, our research suggests, must be part of the political compact in our nation if we are to reconnect citizens and politics. And at the heart of this compact must be more constructive and dynamic relation-

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*Americans want to play a constructive role in politics. It is apparent that they want changes made in the political environment — in the very ways in which we practice politics.*

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ships among and between citizens, public officials, the media, and the sundry special interests that make up politics.

### **A Call for a National Discussion**

Our research leads us to the conclusion that creating new political conditions — *changing the political environment* — cannot be accomplished in a moment. It will take much discussion and deliberation and some experimenting. Our penchant to make quick legislative changes or technical adjustments (for example, in such areas as voter registration) will not solve the problems we face. We will not find a single magical answer to right these problems. They cannot be met overnight. Nor with the stroke of a pen. Nor by a vote of a legislature. They involve the political behaviors and attitudes of citizens and of public officials and of the communications media and of executives of various institutions in our society. In the end, they will require the restoring and the building anew of the relationships and processes that make up politics. And it will require the energy, insights, and ideas of people from all walks of life. Thus, above all else, we must recognize that it will take time to create the conditions of an improved politics.

Because there are no clear and certain answers to our political ills, then, this report calls for a national discussion to explore and find alternative ways for action. A six-point discussion agenda for the nation emerges from this research:

- **AGENDA ITEM #1:** find ways to refocus the political debate on policy issues and how those issues affect people's everyday lives.
- **AGENDA ITEM #2:** find ways for citizens to form a public voice on policy issues — as an alternative to the clamor of special interests — and for public officials to hear that public voice.
- **AGENDA ITEM #3:** find public places where citizens — and citizens and public officials — can consider and discuss policy issues.
- **AGENDA ITEM #4:** find ways to encourage the media to focus more on the public dimension of policy issues.

- **AGENDA ITEM #5:** find ways for citizens and public officials to interact more constructively in the political process.
- **AGENDA ITEM #6:** find ways to tap Americans' sense of civic duty in order to improve our political health.

As we pursue such a national discussion, its nature and tone should reflect the importance of its subject. The discussion must be one that is *inclusive*, made up of experts along with citizens, elected and appointed officials, scholars, the media, special interest representatives, and others; for, after all, the outcome of this discussion will fundamentally affect *every* American. We must also acknowledge that such a discussion will require our vigilance and tolerance in order to search for and talk about various alternatives for action; we must exhibit *patience*. Finally, such a discussion will demand the courage to undertake experiments; we must not fear failure because at stake today is more than an academic discussion about the theory of politics. At stake is the very nature of our political health; thus we must begin to *act* as if our political health is at stake. What is encouraging — this study has revealed — is that, to a surprising degree, American citizens appear ready for the discussion.



*Citizens feel cut off from political debate: they neither see their concerns reflected in the way current issues are discussed nor believe there are ways to participate in discussions on those issues.*

## **Chapter I**

### **Citizens Denied Access to Politics**

**F**undamental to participating in politics is having access to the political process. In our democracy, that is often taken for granted. So long as our airwaves and newspapers are overloaded with information on policy issues, town hall bulletin boards are overflowing with notices of public hearings and public officials are scurrying from one public event to another, we not only assume but loudly proclaim that citizens enjoy tremendous access to our political process. Yet citizens now believe that they are shut out of that process. They say that the very conditions necessary for them to participate are missing. The practice of politics today is such that citizens no longer feel just discouraged, they believe that they are actually denied access to politics.

#### **No Sense of Connection to Issues**

“Politics is so remote ... not involved with our daily lives,” a man from Seattle said. It was a common refrain. Virtually everyone in these group discussions expressed dismay over the issues that receive the greatest amount of attention today. Why? Because people seem to feel little connection to those issues; often they believe that they are irrelevant to their lives. Indeed our research points to three important areas where Americans feel that their relationship to the political process — specifically, the policy issues that are considered — has been severed. The points at which the political system seems to break down are in the way the political agenda is set, in the way policy issues are framed, and in the way these issues are debated.

*The Issues That Rise to the Top of the Political Agenda.*

"I think our priorities are wrong," exclaimed a Philadelphia woman. And another participant from the same group asked, "Do you feel that you have a say in where your federal tax dollars are going?" The answer was a resounding, no! These comments highlight a recurring theme in the group discussions. When people were asked to explain what they meant by such statements, they would say that the issues talked about today — those that receive the most attention by the media, political figures, pundits, and others — do not reflect the true concerns of most Americans. In one group after another, citizens said that they are most concerned about issues of education, health care, roads, the defense budget, among others. And yet they suggested that such issues often do not seem to rise to the top of the political agenda and receive the kind of attention and action that they believe the issues warrant.

Consider one example: A Dallas man talked angrily about the need for increased prison space when he said, "In the end, the things we really need — like more prisons — are not being done." He continued, with other respondents nodding in agreement, that Americans desperately want criminals put behind bars and that taking such action, at least in Texas, is a top priority among citizens. But he suggested that every time government officials raise taxes, the priorities they set for how to spend those public dollars seldom reflect the views and needs of citizens — like building more prisons; rather, the officials spend the increased revenues elsewhere, on their own set of perceived priorities. He added, this occurs even when public officials "sell" the tax increases to the public as a way to pay for those priorities "pushed" by citizens.

A Des Moines man echoed this concern, if only in a slightly different way. "It's hard for me to comprehend why they make big issues out of certain things, and other issues they don't care about." And a woman from Dallas said, "The issues that policymakers jump on the bandwagon and carry on about aren't really the issues that deal with mainstream people." Today Americans feel that they have lost control over the political agenda — their concerns simply do not make it onto the docket of debate or, at other times, rise to the forefront of public discussion. At issue is not whether citizens, and only citizens, know what issues are important,

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*The issues that policymakers jump on the bandwagon and carry on about aren't really the issues that deal with mainstream people.*

*— Dallas woman*

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but that citizens in city after city, state after state, *feel* this way. What is important is that citizens do not sense that their concerns are adequately reflected in current political debate. *That* is inimical to a healthy politics.

***How Public Issues Are Framed.*** Group participants consistently complained that current discussions on policy issues do not resonate with their deeply held concerns. They say they are unable to see themselves — their perspectives and desired choices for action — reflected in the way in which issues are discussed. People appear to be searching for a clearer sense of where they fit into various policy issues — their connection to them. As one Philadelphia woman put it when referring to public meetings, “If bigger issues were localized — homelessness, education — then people would come out.” A Richmond man put it succinctly when he said, “A lot of people don’t see how they are affected.” Indeed citizens *want* to know how they are affected by issues, and why particular issues should be important to them. No one, meanwhile, seems to be helping citizens make these connections.

Instead, citizens suggest that policy issues are framed in ways that actually prevent them from participating in political debate. In many of the group discussions, this concern was reflected in an exchange among respondents. In Des Moines, when talking specifically about the federal budget deficit, one man stated that he wanted to know fundamental things about the issue before he could think about why action should be taken and what needs to be done. “How does it affect me — my life?” he asked. A woman responded, “How is the pie divided up?” A Des Moines man demanded, “What are the trade-offs?” And another Des Moines participant suggested that the deficit issue needs to be framed with the following questions in mind: “How much debt are we in? Where does the money go? What trade-offs are there?” And he added, “What questions do we [citizens] have?” that *we* want answered. People were quick to define such parameters of debate. This raises a critical point: an issue such as the federal budget deficit, or a local school bond issue for that matter, may be of cardinal importance to the nation or a community. But it may not be perceived to be politically important, in its true sense, as long as the public itself remains less than engaged with it. Indeed, it is often the case that,



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*Attending a public meeting is seen largely as a useless endeavor: "I have been to too many public meetings wondering if I'm wasting my time."*

— *Des Moines woman*

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unless the public perceives the importance of an issue to themselves personally, it can be difficult to develop viable and sustainable public policy.

***How Issues Are Talked About.*** Many Americans complained that all the jargon, statistics, and other forms of "professional speak" used by public officials, the media, scholars, and others can make discussions of policy issues difficult, at best, to sort out and comprehend. "There is so much the public doesn't understand," lamented a Des Moines man. Citizens feel that without understanding the issues before them, they have little to offer to the public debate. When talking about issues and her ability and willingness to think about them, a Seattle woman stated, "I need immediate accessibility." And the views of many of the Americans in our group discussions were captured when a Des Moines woman, referring to elected officials and the media, exclaimed, "If only they would speak our language! You don't want to say that you don't understand, but people *don't* understand." The result of this problem, respondents say, is to push citizens away from participating in the political process.

### **A Shaken Faith in Mechanisms for Public Expression**

Historians tell us that democracy is built on conversations — people talking to one another. So today, many members of Congress, state legislators, executives from state and local government, among others, provide numerous opportunities for citizens to participate in politics and the policy process. Yet even when people know about these opportunities they often believe no one is listening to what they say. Today, according to group participants, most Americans' faith in finding ways to express their views on policy issues is severely shaken.

People's dismay over this situation is captured by their feelings on the various mechanisms for expressing their views, with public meetings being a central one. Attending a public meeting is seen largely as a useless endeavor: "I have been to too many public meetings wondering if I'm wasting my time," said a Des Moines woman. A Dallas man remarked, "When I come home from work I think, 'Why should I attend a public meeting since it won't

change anything?” And a Philadelphia woman commented, “If people don’t think they can have an effect, then why go?” Comments just like these were heard consistently in each discussion.

Group participants point out that elected and appointed officials who hold public meetings seldom want to listen to those citizens who attend — perhaps an ironic twist of events, given the purported purpose of the meetings. Instead, citizens report that little, if any, two-way discussion occurs; little, if any, difference can be made by citizens at those meetings. “On some issues it’s just whistling in the wind to think that public officials will listen to a group of citizens who have had a discussion on an issue,” a Richmond man stated. And a Des Moines man observed, “People in a public meeting may be listening to each other, but it won’t make any difference to [public officials] sitting at the table. They’ll still do what they intended to do.”

Citizens also see other inherent problems with public meetings beyond their perception that neither their representatives listen to their concerns nor that citizens can make a difference in politics by attending such meetings. Some citizens remarked that public meetings often are too large and unwieldy, thus inhibiting people’s ability to express their views and engage in discussion. “If you have too many people in a public meeting you end up with less control. It’s harder to have a good discussion,” noted a Richmond man. And a Philadelphia woman said that the size of a public meeting can cause people to shy away from participating. “People are sometimes intimidated going to a large town meeting... They fear that they will say something stupid.” Finally, a Richmond man reflected many people’s comments when he said, “The smaller the group, the closer you are able to come to exchanging your views.”

Yet, despite these and other problems, if our citizen conversations are representative of broader sentiment in the nation, Americans seem to be yearning for open, public discussions among themselves and between themselves and public officials. “When you hear what others have to say, your views tend to broaden,” said a Richmond man about the virtue of public discussions. A participant from Philadelphia remarked, “It’s absolutely important that

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— *Richmond  
man*

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politicians hold discussions.” He continued, “It’s hard to ignore someone who is sitting right in front of you. You have to hear them.” And a Seattle man, who described himself as being loathe to attend public meetings, said he would attend if public officials were more likely to listen to the views of citizens: “It would be nice to have a politician come in and ask *us* what we want as opposed to coming in and telling us, ‘This is what I want to offer you.’” Indeed a Philadelphia woman exclaimed, “It would be ideal just to have a forum that is a discussion.”

Beyond public meetings, the Americans with whom we talked hold out little hope for using other means of communication currently available to them to register their views in our democracy — means that, according to group participants, *diminish* rather than enlarge the individual’s voice. For instance, citizens lament the shortcomings of public opinion surveys. They say that surveys are impersonal: there is no room for the individual; respondents have no identity. And, relatively speaking, very few Americans are ever asked to answer a poll. By their very nature, public opinion surveys are designed to segment Americans automatically and anonymously into easily identifiable groups. One Los Angeles man talked about his reaction to participating in a survey:

I did once fill out a questionnaire that [my congressman] sent out.... But now I figure, what good will my response do since it will be merged with 5,000 others?

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*It would be nice to have a politician come in and ask us what we want as opposed to coming in and telling us “This is what I want to offer you.”*

— *Seattle man*

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Another woman, this one from Seattle, argued strenuously against the pitfalls of public opinion surveys. She remarked that discussions with citizens are necessary to help understand how the public thinks about various policy issues. She said, “Surveys can be turned into any answer—and result—you want. Discussions help to fill in the cracks that surveys can’t cover!”

Finally, letters to the editor of the newspaper and to public officials fare no better in the eyes of citizens who want to have their voices heard. While perhaps in the past people were glad to receive responses from public officials and others to whom they had written, they are no longer convinced now that *their* letters can make any difference. “Individual letters on issues won’t matter,” a man from

Seattle declared. Participants in this discussion, and in others across the country, believe that only vast, organized letter drives on a single, particular issue can have an impact. As one Richmond man stated, “No one is going to listen to us [as individuals].”

### **Citizens Often Don't Know How to Participate**

I'm never aware of an opportunity to go somewhere and express my opinion and have someone hear what I have to say. I don't have the time to sit down and write a letter. I don't even know where I would send it. I could write to the editorial page, but ... I wonder if anyone who is in a position to make changes would read my editorial.

This woman from Dallas was confused and bewildered about how she could participate in politics today. She is not alone. Many Americans in our group discussions expressed concern, and even outrage at times, about their inability to find ways to have their voices heard. As one woman from Richmond asserted, “Sometimes you're unsure how to initiate action on something.” And a woman from Des Moines said, “Some of us don't know how to bring about change, and unless someone we trust could guide us, then we won't get involved.” Even those people who might feel compelled to become involved are often at a loss about what to do: “I think there are a lot of people who are ignorant about how they would be heard. If I were really upset about something, I'm not sure that I would know how to do something about it,” noted a woman from Seattle.

The dilemma over how to become involved in politics lies at the core of why many Americans feel disconnected from the process of politics. They don't see ways to gain access to the system; and, even beyond being aware of the various mechanisms (e.g., public meetings) through which they might participate in politics, many citizens report that they know little about when and where they actually can become involved. These concerns were raised from one discussion to the next. A woman from Dallas lamented, “There should be a whole array of ways for people to get involved ... and there just aren't.” And, initially, a woman from Los Angeles commented, “There is an absence of any way for people to know what's going on ... [in terms of

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*The lack of access to the political process that many Americans describe strikes at the heart of how politics is conducted in this nation.*

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public meetings and similar activities].” After some reflection, she continued, “We need something like a *TV Guide* to inform people about what is going on in their community.” Other participants in her discussion agreed.

It seems, then, that the lack of access to the political process that many Americans describe strikes at the heart of *how* politics is conducted in this nation. Citizens argue that the policy issues that elected and appointed officials, the media, and others discuss are not *their* issues. Typically, these issues fail to capture or even remotely reflect what stands at the core of citizen concerns — thus making citizens feel disconnected from the political debate. Many Americans now say that current methods for expressing their views, like hearings and public opinion surveys, provide them with neither the opportunity to learn about issues nor the forum to voice their concerns. Such methods merely diminish rather than enlarge the public voice, they say. Further, many citizens now suggest that they are at a loss about *how* to participate in the political process — beyond merely pulling a voting booth lever every year or so. Without access to the political process, Americans will continue to feel disconnected from politics — they will continue to feel politically impotent.

*Citizens say that politics has evolved into a “system” made up of various institutions and political forces that have seized control of the political process and driven a wedge between citizens and politics.*

## **Chapter II**

### **A System Spiraling beyond Citizens’ Control**

Americans believe that the problem with politics today is not just that citizens do not have access to the political process, but that politics has been taken away from them. The signs of this hostile takeover — seen today, perhaps, more than ever before — include legislative chambers overrun by lobbyists, airwaves filled with negative advertising, and news stories comprised of personal scandals about our leaders and their families. People believe that the substance and style of politics no longer speak to the concerns of Americans. Indeed, citizens argue that politics has become a behemoth system, spiraling dangerously beyond their control. They say that neither they nor anyone else can grab hold of it. Instead politics is now a game for the “big guns,” including special interest organizations, lobbyists, the media, and others. In this game, citizens are relegated to the sidelines where they stand unable to control either the players or the rules of engagement.

#### **The Power Brokers: PACS, Special Interests, and Lobbyists**

When Americans talk about who drives politics today, their views are easy to discern: a select group of power brokers is the ultimate decision maker on policy issues — and not citizens. Included among this elite club are lobbyists, political action committees (PACS), and special interest organizations. The citizen is rendered obsolete. As one man from Seattle said, “Citizens don’t have a voice; lobbyists, special interests — *they* have a voice.” In today’s political system, citizens suggest that they need not waste their time applying for membership to this exclusive club:

they will not be accepted. They don't meet the qualifications of power and influence and, above all else, money — which, from the perspective of citizens, seems to drive so much in politics today.

The current situation is not one that readily fits within the notion of politics that Americans hold. “The original concept was for elected representatives to represent your interests,” one woman from Des Moines started to say. “That is no longer true.” She continued, “It is now whoever has the most money can hire the most lobbyists to influence representatives.” That influence, according to a Philadelphia man, sets the course of decision making.

There are too many “pork barrel” issues in Congress ... [Special interests] come to [members of Congress] saying, “We want money.” They can find the money for them but not for others. The country should come first before specific constituents.

And a Richmond man complained of powerful interests dictating decisions that affect, in his case, all Virginians. He remarked:

I know everyone in the state of Virginia is against drilling for oil in Chesapeake Bay. But just because every man, woman, and child doesn't want the drilling and Exxon does, you can bet your life there will be drilling. This makes me feel helpless.

Americans now feel powerless next to the mighty power brokers who, they say, govern politics. “How powerful is my one little vote if a PAC [political action committee] gave my representative \$300,000?” asked a woman from Des Moines. And a Philadelphia man added, “Do you think your congressman is going to listen to you or someone who puts \$10,000 to \$15,000 into his war chest?” A Seattle man suggested that the influence of these power brokers has skewed the political process. “The whole process is corrupt — it's not issue oriented.” And a man from Philadelphia remarked: “Everything is special interests.”

Faced with this situation, many Americans throw up their hands and ask, “What can I do?” They feel that special interest groups, political action committees, lobbyists, and others have taken over politics; that these groups pursue their own agendas relentlessly — at any cost; that they

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*The original concept was for elected representatives to represent your interests. That is no longer true. It is now whoever has the most money can hire the most lobbyists to influence representatives.*

— Des Moines woman

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cannot be controlled. In the end, citizens believe that they do not — *cannot* — have a say in this system. They do not have the raw power necessary to effect change; they do not have the necessary strength to have their voice heard. As one Seattle man put it, “Citizens are part of a quiet group that doesn’t seem to be noticed.”

## **Campaigns That Turn People Away**

All the hoopla, speeches, money, propaganda, and sundry other aspects of political campaigns lead Americans to one fundamental thought, which a Richmond man put this way: “Questions do come out of campaigns ... people begin to ask: ‘What’s wrong with our system?’” The answer, according to group participants, is virtually everything. On this score, Americans’ concerns about political campaigns are no secret: there is too much money and mudslinging, too few good people involved in politics today. “You always have negative images [today] of people running for office,” noted one Richmond man. All of this, group participants say, has helped to drive a wedge between citizens and politics.

People now find the skyrocketing costs of campaigns to be abhorrent. They wonder what it all achieves, other than to suggest that there is something inherently corrupt about the process, and that whatever benefits do exist accrue only to those who give or seek large contributions. One man from Richmond stated, “My concerns are financial. It costs so much to run.” He continued, “A candidate proves he’s financially irresponsible by being willing to squander millions of dollars to win a \$100,000-a-year-job.” And a Dallas woman said, “People spend one million dollars for a \$60,000 a year job — something is wrong!”

But uncontrollable campaign costs are not the only thing wrong with political campaigns, according to group participants. The negative aspects of campaigning — witnessed especially in recent elections — steer Americans away from politics. People find all the negative talk and advertising to be insulting. They want more substance. A Des Moines woman noted, “I want fair campaigns — no more mudslinging. I want to hear more about the issues.” And a Seattle woman added, “Let’s get back to the issues — less dishonesty.” Still, people do realize that this approach to

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— *Des Moines  
woman*

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politics often works, at least in the short run world of electoral politics. "Whoever slings the most mud wins," commented a Richmond man. And a Des Moines man reflecting back on the 1988 presidential campaign suggested, "You can get into and out of office on a single [negative] issue ... case in point: Willie Horton."

Perhaps the most devastating outcome of the current state of affairs is that Americans want no part of political campaigns. Many are questioning why they vote; others simply have stopped voting. Even more people would never entertain the notion of running for public office. "Sometimes they dig things up about candidates and it's just not right.... The result is that good people don't run for office anymore," a Dallas woman remarked. A Des Moines woman lamented, "I want a candidate I can trust. But who is that today?"

### **The Media: Beating the Drum of Negativism**

Those Americans who were interviewed for this study believe that media coverage of politics and policy issues leads to a sense of frustration and dismay among citizens. They say that this coverage pushes them farther away rather than bringing them closer to participating in politics. According to group participants, reporting on policy issues is now driven by sound bites and negativism. It often does not resonate with citizens' concerns and the realities of life they experience and see around them. And some citizens suggest the result of this coverage is that Americans have become "lazy" in their approach to learning about policy issues; they want the media to promote informed political debate more actively.

One Los Angeles man said, "The whole idea of sound bites — getting a message across in 20 seconds — is absurd. Unfortunately this is how most people learn about the events of the world." Group participants expressed regret not only about how this approach has affected their ability to learn about issues, but how it has forced public officials to interact with the public. "Politicians have to couch things in such a way that the media can understand them. Everything has to be brief and quotable," a man from Seattle observed. This emphasis on conveying short quick pieces of information appears to have disconnected Ameri-

cans from the substance of politics. One man from Richmond put it this way: "The technology of the media and communications controls [politics]. It's sound bites, it's fast, it's quick. It has distanced every one of us from what's really going on, and has distanced all our political leaders from what's really going on with us, to a tremendous degree."

Group participants also believe that all too often the coverage of politics and policy issues is hampered by the "negative spin" that the media give to it. Scouring the streets for personal scandals, badgering some people on aspects of their personal lives, playing up arguments over small points between campaigners and among officeholders — it is this kind of coverage that troubles the American people. As one Philadelphia man said, "So much negativism comes out in the media about politicians that some people figure, 'What's the use?'" And a Los Angeles man suggested, "We think the way that we do [about politics] because of all the negativism in the media and newspapers. We begin not to care."

Indeed many Americans feel that the issues that are covered in the media bear little resemblance to the reality that they know. "We are at the mercy of the press," began a woman from Philadelphia.

The [issues] which get trumped-up in the press, I don't care about. But I guess that's what sells newspapers. The health care problem, the homeless problem,.. all are diluted by this. These issues don't get the press.

A Richmond man complained, "[Politics] is steered by the media. We're not even asked in the media what's the public opinion, we're just told." He wondered, "Where do they get their public opinion?" And a Des Moines woman commented, "Things get so slanted by the media. What's reported is often different from what really happened. They sway people — locally and nationally." Finally, one Philadelphia woman, speaking on the issues she reads and hears about daily through the print and broadcast media, observed, "The issues covered by the press blow over so quickly. You hear a lot about things and then they blow over." And yet, at least from her perspective, the issues remain. There is a lack of trust among citizens concerning

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— *Richmond man*

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what the media put out into the marketplace of information — about the emphasis they choose to place on issues and the consistency of their reporting. People are no longer sure that the coverage they see, read, or hear rings of the truth.

All this leads many citizens to say that they want the media to play a more active role in promoting citizens' knowledge on policy issues. Part of the reason is that they believe citizens have become disengaged when it comes to learning about policy issues. "My concern about the media is that it has made us lazy. It's made people not read and study issues," noted a Richmond man. "It is not the media's intent, but it is certainly the result." And a man from Des Moines lamented that people have become accustomed to not fully exploring issues: "People base their opinions on sound bites. They see an ad and that's all they want to see; 30 seconds, 60 seconds." Instead of media coverage being dominated by sound bites and negativism, citizens seem to want a media that challenges them to think, that engages them in politics. As a Dallas man put it: "I think we need a public interest developed in order for people to participate. And maybe this is where our news media should come in."

### **The Sounds of Politics as Usual**

Politics as usual: What does it produce? The Americans with whom we talked believe this game all too often results in nothing more than a lot of expensive posturing and cheap talk by those at the center of politics, those who control — or who seek to control — the game. "You get discouraged. Nothing materializes; they talk about [issues] but nothing happens. You hear them talk about the homeless; but nothing is happening," lamented a woman from Richmond. People are turned off from politics by the inaction that they perceive. A man from Dallas observed, "People get impatient with the lack of progress."

All of the bantering, arguing, accusing, name-calling, and other antics that make up our politics have just become empty words to most Americans. Citizens believe that the major forces that give form to our politics today — including lobbyists, special interest organizations, expensive and negative campaigns, political action committees, the media,

and others — have created an environment where they each pursue *their own* interests and agendas with little regard for the *common* good. Sometimes each of them succeeds outright in meeting a desired end; other times they must compromise among themselves. Inevitably, citizens believe that larger needs — public needs — go unmet. Thus, for now, when it comes to politics, much of what citizens hear are the sounds of politics as usual.

*A deep sense of mistrust and neglect pervades citizen attitudes about public officials. They believe they are losing their connection to their public officials — and thus to the political process.*

## **Chapter III**

### **Citizens and Public Officials: A Severed Relationship**

**T**here is no doubt that citizens are angry that politics has evolved into a system that seems beyond their control — with lobbyists, special interest organizations, the media, political action committees, and others all setting their own rules for who can play politics, and how. But the anger that citizens express does not stop at the antics and actions of these influential groups; it extends to public officials, too. Indeed it *includes* public officials.

The relationship between citizen and public official has been at the foundation of our political process. The exchanging of views within this relationship, the discourse, has been a lifeline of representative government. It is a connection that citizens rely on for access to the policy process. Unfortunately, for now, that all-important relationship is perilously near to being severed. The causes of the trouble in this relationship could not be more clear. Nor could citizens express their discontent regarding these causes more strongly.

#### **A Lack of Straight Talk**

Policymakers are speaking a different language. It's one of avoidance; it's one of "it needs further study" — something that doesn't mean anything. They can have all of these debates on television, but when the policymaker is finished talking, you still don't know where he stands.

The comments in the group discussions, like this by a Richmond man, leave little doubt about how those Ameri-

cans interviewed feel concerning the way that public officials communicate with them. As one Des Moines woman said, you can ask a public official: "What's your stand on an issue?" And then she responded, "You ask them and you never get a straight answer." And another participant in the Des Moines group stated:

In a recent debate, I hoped that the candidates would say something that would be really clear. But it turned out to be mudslinging at the other candidate. I feel like *making* them answer the question.

Rather than answer questions, however, citizens point out that public officials talk around questions, will answer a question that was never asked, attack the individual who posed a question originally — all before they address the specific question directed to them. As one Dallas woman remarked, "Generally they give the public lip service and go their merry way."

The frustration that Americans feel concerning this dearth of "straight talk" runs deep. Not only do citizens believe that public officials avoid giving direct answers, a source of growing anger among citizens, they often wonder if public officials are even telling the truth. "[Public officials] have this 'blowing in the wind' attitude, saying whatever we want them to say," noted a Los Angeles man. And a Dallas woman remarked:

A lot of people have become jaded over the years. After all, how many campaign promises have been broken over the years? Bush wasn't going to raise taxes. This happens locally, too, from the mayor up to the President.

Indeed, a Seattle woman observed, "They are always making promises they can't keep." She continued, "I wish politicians were more honest." And finally, another Seattle participant noted:

People have lost faith in their policymakers because they always tell what they're going to do and they never follow through. Or they stand up there and tell blatant lies — at least it seems in recent years — and make statements that you know can't be true. [For instance] you know it's going to cost money to run a government and they tell you "no new taxes."

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*People have lost faith in their policymakers because they always tell what they're going to do and they never follow through. Or they stand up there and tell blatant lies.*

— Seattle woman

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All of this raises an interesting question: When it comes time to build a public consensus on an important issue, will Americans heed calls by their elected and appointed representatives for citizen action and, perhaps, even personal sacrifice? The answer from this research is not clear. But this, too, also raises another question that must be considered: When representatives do “tell the truth,” will the public then refuse to reelect or support them?

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*We just feel like we have no control over our politicians.*

— *Dallas woman*

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### **A Matter of Self-Interest and Corruption**

“Do politicians run for office to help people?” asked one Los Angeles man. “I don’t think so,” he responded. Then why do they run? Most people in the group discussions agreed with the view held by a Dallas man: “It’s to help themselves.” And another participant from the Dallas discussion surmised: “There’s got to be some return on investment that we don’t know about.” The long-cherished notion of performing public service now seems an endangered ideal in America: the citizens interviewed for this study believe that public officials seek office (elected or appointed) primarily to serve *their own* interests, not those of the public. They say that public officials often neglect the needs of their constituents and the public at large.

Of course, citizens do not believe that all officials are corrupt and misguided; indeed, citizens often express great confidence in their own representatives. But it is also clear from this research that citizens lack trust in representatives as a group or class; they have lost faith in them. That many politicians are corrupt has come to be a universally accepted perception among the public. A Seattle woman said, “You see someone go into politics and they never come out poor. Somebody is giving them money from somewhere.” Indeed, in the group discussions, one would hear comments like this by a Philadelphia woman, “So many politicians are crooked that you get discouraged.” And a Des Moines man suggested, “It’s hard to trust someone today.” Citizens believe that elected and appointed officials, once in office, begin to look for ways to benefit personally and to help their close friends and associates. “There’s too much cronyism of appointments,” noted a Seattle man. “[It’s] get my compadre, my friend, my so-and-so into office.” In turn, citizens argue, as did a

Dallas woman, “We just feel like we have no control over our politicians.”

### **Captives of Special Interests**

Who, then, has control over public officials? To whom do they listen? Group participants have a clear answer: public officials are captives of lobbyists, special interest organizations, political action committees, among others. “Fifteen to twenty people may have a say on a bill, that’s all. They don’t take into account everybody,” commented a Richmond woman. She continued, “They don’t take us seriously.” And a Philadelphia man asserted, with other group participants nodding in agreement, “The special interests and the lobbyists are in Washington 365 days of the year. They have no trouble getting the ear of the congressmen or senators.” Indeed a Seattle man suggested, “Unless a politician feels threatened by the voting public, he will go with the lobbyist.”

Money, according to citizens, plays an important role in the special access that special interests enjoy with public officials; and, ironically, that money is often sought in order for the representative to “communicate” with the public through expensive television commercials during electoral campaigns. “I think [public officials] are more steered by lobbyists who are donating more money [to them] than the average person takes home,” observed a Dallas man. And a Seattle man looked at it this way: “Lobbyists who have money can say, ‘Congressman come out to lunch with me to hear my point of view.’” The lunch table, then, becomes the forum for a “public” debate around which public officials and special interests sit — with the public nowhere to be found. This Seattle man continued, “A less active or more quiet group [of citizens] just doesn’t seem to get the attention.”

Citizens’ frustration stems, in part, from this belief that *their* point of view is often elbowed out — or perhaps not fully considered — by decision makers. Recall comments by a Richmond man, quoted in an earlier chapter, about a sensitive regional environmental issue:

I know everyone in the state of Virginia is against drilling for oil in Chesapeake Bay. But just because every man, woman, and child doesn’t want the drill-



ing and Exxon does, you can bet your life there will be drilling. This makes me feel helpless.

And a Seattle man said: "I think there has to be a way to make elected politicians responsible to us and not the lobbyists. That would make a big difference in politics."

Of course, there are citizens, albeit a small minority, who want to give public officials the benefit of the doubt — who argue that public officials do try to listen to citizens as part of the political process. For instance, a Seattle woman noted, "There are a few good ones." She continued, "Our local guy comes to town to hold meetings and he has never failed to respond to us." Still, even these individuals in the group discussions were quick to point out that lobbyists and other representatives of special interests sit closer to policymakers at the table of public debate than they do. "The lobbyists are there in Washington ... and we're not. We're at home," noted a Philadelphia woman. And a Seattle woman remarked: "Politicians are interested in how we feel about the issues. But they are more swayed by lobbyists."

### **Victims of Their Own Game**

Surprisingly, citizens believe that they are not the only victims of our troubled political system. Public officials are victims, too — not just perpetrators — of this very game of politics they helped create. Citizens argue that in order for the political system to move ahead — to produce action — backroom deals and under-the-table agreements must be made. "Policymakers have to play the game, scratch the next guy's back. There are certain things that have to happen to get things done," noted a man from Richmond. And a woman from Philadelphia said that public officials are left with few options about the choices they must often make between looking out for special interests versus those of the public: "They are surrounded and don't have the incentives to battle against lobbyists. They just get encircled."

Citizens feel that many public officials have become caught in the web of special interests, money, and deals. "I think a lot of congressmen, especially the newer ones, go with our best interests. But they get caught up in the system

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*I think a lot of congressmen, especially the newer ones, go with our best interests. But they get caught up in the system and eventually just blend in.*

— Philadelphia woman

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and eventually just blend in," remarked a Philadelphia woman. Even those who decide not to blend in, many citizens believe, are either pushed out themselves or leave on their own accord frustrated and disgusted. Said a Dallas man:

Many men have gone to Congress and then not sought re-election because they are disenchanted with the power brokers and the situation in Washington. It is not conducive to retaining the best people. They realize that they are totally ineffective if they don't play the game.

And those public officials who do choose to reach out to their constituents — in their own districts — find a mistrustful, skeptical, and accusatory public. Public officials, indeed, are caught in a Catch-22.

### **Out of Touch with Citizens**

In the end, those Americans interviewed for this study believe that public officials are out of touch with citizens and their concerns. Central to this problem, according to group participants, is that public officials are no longer accessible and responsive to them. Public officials, they say, have closeted themselves away from the public — a perception, whether true or not, that citizens lament.

"You can't talk to policymakers face-to-face," said one frustrated Philadelphia man. This was a concern that many group participants raised. One Richmond woman suggested a reason for the lack of contact today: "I think years ago politics was different. You could talk to your politician.... Today the population is so big that it has distanced him from you." But a Des Moines woman questioned the accuracy of similar comments made in her group. She wondered aloud about whether public officials even *want* to interact with citizens. She asked, "How accessible are public officials to the public? How many will come out to interact with the man on the street?" Participants in her group, as in other groups across the nation, believe that few public officials venture willingly into open discussions with citizens. One Des Moines man observed, "[Public officials] want to keep us away from them ... because they don't want to hear us." And, as noted in an earlier chapter, even many of those public officials who do try to hear the

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*[Public officials]  
are out of touch  
with the  
mainstream of  
this country.*

— Dallas man

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public's voice are accused of not actively listening to citizens' concerns — regardless of the sheer numbers of public meetings they may hold or constituent questionnaires they may send out.

Group participants hold a fervent belief that the reason public officials do not want to take the time to listen to citizens goes well beyond the fact that they are busy meeting the sundry demands of their work. Rather, citizens argue that it points to a deeper and more fundamental problem: public officials simply no longer care about the average American — they no longer seek to represent the interests of ordinary citizens.

I want representation. But they've stopped caring about us. They have nice homes and are content. They don't care about people anymore.

Comments like this one, made by a man from Des Moines, could be heard in each of the group discussions. Many participants asserted that once public officials are elected or appointed — once they assume their office — they fail to listen actively to the concerns of Americans. If they did, many group participants say, citizens would notice more changes around them. As one Dallas man said, "They don't listen. Otherwise they would do something." Another man from Dallas summed up a view expressed by many people in the group discussions about public officials when he stated, "They are out of touch with the mainstream of this country."

Group participants say that there is one time — *only one time* — when public officials listen to the public's concerns, think about what can be done, and make at least some attempt to respond. Said a Des Moines woman: "The only time we get close to having a public voice is around election time. Policymakers start caring a little more about constituents' concerns." And one Philadelphia woman noted, "The only time I see policymakers is around election time." At that time, citizens say, they can find public officials on street corners, in shopping malls, and at public picnics rubbing shoulders and talking with Americans. It is at this time, the participants said, that public officials know that they *need* the public; they depend on people's votes for their livelihood.

The problems endemic, then, to the citizen-public official relationship go well beyond merely the issue of responsiveness. They go, instead, directly to the core of this relationship: they involve trust. Citizens believe that public officials no longer talk straight to them about issues; that public officials regularly dodge tough questions when they know the answers; and that public officials say one thing, only to do another. Citizens *perceive* that many public officials are inherently dishonest: they often seem to break promises, lie, and even sometimes cheat. They pursue their own gains at the expense of their constituents. They sometimes fail to understand and pursue the common good. Even public officials have become victims of their own game — they find themselves having to blend in and play by the rules, or opt out. In the end, a bond of trust has been broken, a relationship perilously near to being severed. It is a relationship that many citizens believe lies at the heart of politics and the policy process.

*Americans say that current political conditions leave individual citizens without a voice in politics. They are impotent. And so they abstain from engaging in many facets of the political process — despite their desire to participate.*

## **Chapter IV**

### **Politics Is Larger than the Individual**

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln traveled from the halls of the White House to the Civil War battlefields of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania to proclaim that America was to be a nation whose government was “of the people, by the people, for the people.” Unfortunately today, more than 125 years later, Lincoln’s words would sound like empty rhetoric to many Americans.

Those citizens interviewed for this study now believe that individual Americans simply do not count in politics — they can no longer play a meaningful role. As previous chapters have illustrated, citizens say they are denied access to the political debate of policy issues. Their ability to affect politics is overshadowed — rather, overwhelmed — by a larger force they call the “political system,” a leviathan made up of media that seem to promote controversy over substance, expensive and negative campaigns, all-too-powerful special interests, and influence-peddling lobbyists. Even public officials, they argue, all too often disregard the interests of citizens. The combination of these factors, discussion participants assert, has rendered individual citizens unnecessary in politics.

#### **No Room for the Individual**

“I live in a city that I am very proud of, and there are many good things about it. I want it to be even better, so I go out and vote,” remarked a woman from Philadelphia. Virtually all the Americans we interviewed were fiercely proud of their community and of the nation. They *want* to see positive change come about, and they *want* to help. Yet in commenting on her involvement, this Philadelphia woman

continued, "But I know it doesn't make any difference."

For this woman, as for many people in our group discussions, voting as well as other facets of politics still holds some attraction. These individuals remain engaged in the political process, even if only marginally and reluctantly through voting, despite lingering suspicions that their input will go unheeded. The sentiments were echoed time and again in our discussions across the nation. As a man from Dallas put it, "Your involvement won't make a difference [even though] you hope that change will come." And a woman from Seattle observed, "People have gotten so disappointed that they don't want to get involved anymore. Yet, there are a lot of people who still want to act." And finally, a Richmond man noted, "I just feel that my vote doesn't make a difference." He continued, "But I'm still going to vote."

There are individuals, however, who have made a clear and clean break from politics. They foster no hope that their actions will have *any* effect on politics — so they don't act. They believe that they have been pushed *entirely* out of the political process. One woman from Philadelphia said, "How long can you keep trying [to be heard]? You [try and] you lose hard and then see that nothing will ever change." The frustration that people hold has been built over time. "People see history repeating itself," noted a Des Moines man. He added, "What good is it for us to get involved since nothing will change anyway?" And a woman from Seattle remarked, "People feel, 'Let someone else take care of it' because they don't think that they are going to be heard."

This fundamental sense of being pushed out of the political process cuts to the core of how Americans view politics. It is undeniable. It is consistent. And it is clear that many citizens believe that, as individuals, they cannot play a significant role in politics. The system simply will not allow it. As a Des Moines woman put it, "People are scared to become involved because they are afraid that nothing will happen if they do get involved."

### **A Limited Public Voice**

If the public has a voice in politics at all, then, it is a limited one. And it is heard, according to discussion participants, only when Americans band together to form organized

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*People have gotten so disappointed that they don't want to get involved anymore. Yet, there are a lot of people who still want to act.*

— *Seattle woman*

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groups — as do professional lobbies and associations — and then actively protest decisions that either have been or will be made. “Unless you have hundreds marching, I don’t think an individual’s opinion counts,” lamented a woman from Dallas. And a Richmond man noted, “I feel that one-on-one we are not going to have an effect. No one is going to listen to us. Collectively we *can* have a voice.”

People suggest that in order for the public voice to be counted, individual Americans have to adopt strategies and tactics that are akin to those employed by special interest organizations, lobbyists, and others that they believe dominate politics in America today. In fact, they must become an interest group in order for public officials and others to listen to them. They assert that to be effective in this game of politics — in politics as usual — requires a constant flurry of “protest” through the staging of political events and the manipulation of contemporary political tools (like hiring a public relations firm to create a political event that the media will cover, for example). A man from Los Angeles put it this way: “Change can happen, people can have a voice. But the effort has to be well orchestrated and organized.” Then a man from the same group said, “Those who protest are heard!” And another man, this one from Philadelphia, remarked, “For policymakers to hear you, you need a petition ... you need money. It’s discouraging.” Finally, a respondent from Richmond went so far as to say, “I don’t even *think* groups of people can have a voice in politics. *But* if you get the media involved and draw attention to the problem, then you’ll have a voice.”

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— *Dallas woman*

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Many participants in the group discussions seemed to suggest that politics has turned into a fight — an adversarial relationship between those who want something done and everyone else. Citizens now believe that *they* must play the game of adversarial politics if their voice is to be heard among the cacophony of political rhetoric and divisive debate. So often they talk about politics using language that connotes a conflict — a battle. “Why can’t we fight back with people? They have their lobbyists: we can gather people together until we cannot be ignored,” one Philadelphia woman said. And a Richmond man noted, “We can have a voice with our checkbooks ... buying magazines from special interests.” A fellow participant from that group argued, “Quickest way to express the

public voice is with our dollars — to not buy tunas because [of the] porpoises, or stop buying detergent.” And finally, a discussion participant said that citizens had to enter into a process of “intimidation and embarrassment and all the unpleasant things you’ve got to do” when trying to get policymakers to act. He said if citizens aren’t willing to engage in such battle, they should “stay the hell home.”

Just how far individuals have to go to be heard is a question left open to debate. One man in Des Moines stated flatly that he felt Americans had to threaten civil disobedience in order to register their views. He observed:

The human outcry when Congress wanted to vote themselves a break demonstrates that “The Voice” spoke, and so they backed off. The same thing happened with Social Security — “The Voice” spoke, and they backed off. It takes a threat of civil disobedience and a lot of phone calls and letters ... then they hear the voice. The other 98 percent of the time they don’t hear us.

Thus group participants suggest that when citizens believe they have no voice — or only a limited voice — in the political debate, they see their only alternative is to turn to a “politics of protest.” The notion of politics as public debate and reasoning together seems absent from the day-to-day practice of politics.

### **Beyond Apathy: Abstaining from Public Life**

We find that the current state of affairs has led to an unbridled cynicism among Americans concerning the political process. But this sense of cynicism does not mean that Americans have “turned their backs” on politics, that they do not want to participate. To the contrary, in order to understand just how Americans view their relationship to politics requires recognizing a central idea at play within the public mind: that Americans are *abstaining* from politics. Rather than permanently walking away from politics, they are refraining from participating until they believe that they can make a difference. “It’s not that people no longer have a sense of civic duty,” a Seattle man suggested. “But,” he said, “it’s that they don’t have a sense of *power*.” And recall a man from Des Moines who asked,



“People see history repeating itself. What good is it for us to get involved since nothing will change anyway?” Finally, a woman from Dallas suggested, “If people started seeing change, then others would get involved.”

Thus this research finds that recent analyses casting Americans as apathetic about politics — suggesting that they simply “don’t care” — are off the mark. “It’s more ‘frustration’ than ‘not caring’ about the system,” noted a man from Seattle. “People do care very much, but they can’t see how they can do anything about changing things.” This distinction between “not caring” and “frustration” was a common and clear theme throughout the discussion groups.

It is a critical distinction. People, like a woman from Los Angeles, were quick to draw the line on where Americans come down on this point: “I don’t think it’s a case of not caring. It’s just that people don’t have a sense of having valuable input to give.” And a Seattle woman, quoted earlier, said: “People have become so disappointed that they don’t want to get involved anymore. Yet there are a lot of people who want to act.”

When it comes to politics, then, Americans harbor feelings of being “impotent” and “obsolete.” But they still do care about politics. They still want to be involved. They just no longer know how. And until they can find ways to participate, it seems they will continue to refrain — *abstain* — from many facets of public life.

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— *Seattle man*

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### **A Larger Public Voice: It Takes Work**

While virtually all the Americans interviewed for this study point out and lament citizens’ limited voice in politics today, many of them seem to suggest that enlarging the public voice will take more than pointing fingers at the various culprits they decry for promoting our political ill health. It is not enough, they say, for citizens merely to lash out at public officials, the communications media, special interest organizations, lobbyists, and others and demand that they change the way they engage in politics. Rather, group participants suggest that for the public to have its voice heard will require hard work on the part of each and every citizen. As one Los Angeles woman noted, “The normal person on the street has to work hard to have

a voice." A Philadelphia woman put it this way:

I think people in our area who get the most done, work real hard to get it done. It's not the most gratifying thing and it's not going to be in the paper — but those are the people who get things done.

Indeed, a Richmond man said, "If we say we're frustrated and not going to do anything about it, then we won't. But if we keep trying, we might make a difference." And a Des Moines woman noted:

Generally speaking, the public is not very active in politics. It's like a snowball effect — you don't feel that you can have a voice; therefore, you don't participate, and you get farther and farther apart from your representative. Maybe if more people were active, our representatives would be better.

As each of the group discussions progressed, citizens would say with increasing frequency that they must uphold their end of the bargain in this experiment we call representative government. "If something is wrong, why does that give us the excuse not to vote? How can you rationalize not voting because politicians are corrupt? All it does is make it easy for them to remain corrupt." This comment came from a Philadelphia woman. A Seattle man, ruminating about his role in politics, said: "I have to realize that my opinion does count — and not have the attitude that my policymaker is hired to speak for me. I have to express my own opinion." And a Philadelphia woman remarked, "We have to bear some of the burden for getting things done."

One woman in the Seattle group discussion pointed out, "We don't take [politics] as seriously as we used to ... citizens aren't participating." Most of the people in these discussions believe that their failure to participate perpetuates — indeed foments — a certain cynicism about politics. A Los Angeles woman said:

I don't think you can divorce politics from the degree to which people do or don't participate in the process.... [When] people don't participate, it helps to create an atmosphere of cynicism.

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*Are we telling our children that we can't have a say? Are they already turned off before they are adults?*

— *Philadelphia woman*

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Finally, one last point must be made: one thought seemed particularly alarming to citizens in our group discussions. Many people worry about the values and beliefs that they as individuals, and we as a society as a whole, are instilling in America's youth concerning politics. Exasperated, one woman from Philadelphia exclaimed, "Are we telling our children that we can't have a say? Are they already turned off before they are adults?"

One young woman from Los Angeles may have provided an answer: "A lot of younger people don't vote.... I'm not registered to vote.... It just won't change anything."

So with a plethora of problems and issues facing the nation and its citizens, many Americans see little room for themselves within politics. Despite their deeply held desires to effect change, they believe they are powerless — that they have a limited voice, if one at all, in helping to shape responses to the demanding issues before us. They say that the only time citizens *might* be heard is when they decide to organize into groups — as "special interests" — and angrily protest policy decisions. Even then, however, citizens often feel that their views are disregarded. This sense of impotence seems to transcend regions and circumstance. It characterizes individuals from all walks of life. We find that it includes those who choose to participate in politics and those who do not; professionals and laborers; those who are relatively wealthy and those who are poorer. People's sense of political efficacy often seems lost and their discontent is real.

*There are places where citizens engage in public life: they are found where citizens believe that the possibility for making a difference exists.*

## Chapter V

### Where Citizens Participate in Public Life

Is there, then, a connection any longer between citizens and public life? Can we find citizens actively and willfully participating in the arena of public affairs? Is it possible that despite the pervasive sense of political impotence and frustration among Americans today, citizens still want to participate within the public arena? Surprisingly, perhaps, the answer to these questions is a resounding yes.

Research undertaken in this study reveals that today Americans *do* participate in public life in many ways, and with great intensity of purpose. Only their actions are not found in those places in which we ordinarily look to gauge “political action” in our nation. Their commitment is not expressed in ways we can measure merely on election day. And the reason citizens participate is eminently clear. It is as though a fundamental political compact exists that suggests: “When I participate there will be at least the *possibility* to bring about and witness change.”

When this implicit compact is present, we find Americans working diligently to effect change in their communities, in their states and regions, and in this nation — whether through a neighborhood association or a school organization or an ad hoc effort that addresses a timely issue. In this arena of *citizen action*, Americans work individually and hand in hand with others. They come together as concerned citizens seeking to solve a problem. Their associations are often informal; sometimes they form on an ad hoc basis and then disperse once action has been accomplished. At other times, citizens stay together as a loosely knit network. And at still other times, they may join existing groups or organizations that serve to bring citizens together to ad-

dress public problems over the long term. In many of these cases, citizens are pursuing broad, public agendas that reflect a range of citizen interests and concerns — such as seeking to improve education or reduce crime. These and other characteristics set apart these citizen actions from those typically associated with special interests — which are often driven by a narrow agenda without regard for the common good and where citizens themselves play a limited role.

The importance of the examples of citizen action we found should not be discounted merely as good-natured “volunteerism” or “community boosterism.” People are not seeking simply to enhance the image of their community, or solely to “feel good” about themselves in some therapeutic sense, or only to improve social conditions by writing a personal check. Of course, all these ends are laudable. But many of the actions revealed in these conversations (though certainly not all) encompass broader qualities. Typically they are the qualities that group participants seem to talk about in connection with “politics”: public challenges are being met. Citizens see a personal stake in the issues they are addressing. Taking action demands that citizens learn about issues and weigh their choices for action; and such action requires that citizens find ways to come together and talk among themselves. In the end, citizens find that they must take responsibility for acting. All of these elements of public action reflect a *polity* — the process of civil governing. Thus, beyond the dark, threatening clouds of politics as usual, we find citizens engaged on a daily basis in the solving of public problems.

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*Thus, beyond the dark, threatening clouds of politics as usual, we find citizens engaged on a daily basis in the solving of public problems.*

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Perhaps one of the most telling aspects of these actions is what they can suggest about the nature of politics today and the challenges we face. By looking at the ways in which citizens participate in their communities, it is possible to see why they choose to involve themselves in public life at all — what motivates them and what they hope to achieve. Their involvement also provides a window for exploring what citizens believe the nature of politics, in its broadest sense, ought to be.

### **The Closer to Home, the Stronger the Voice**

When Americans talk about politics, as they have throughout this report, they tend to do so, at least initially, in terms

of the Congress, the President, and other “national” (and often state and regional) figures and institutions. It is on these levels especially that Americans believe that they have little ability to have a say and to make a difference in politics.

But we have found that people’s perception of having a diminished voice in national politics does not hold as true on the local level. Many participants in the group discussions observed that they do feel a greater sense of being heard as public decisions get closer to home — certainly if not all of the time, then at least more of the time. “There is a public voice on the grass roots level,” commented a woman from Des Moines. Like many people, a man from Richmond agreed with that point of view, when he said,

In a smaller situation I think you can feel that you have some input because you can go down to the City Council and talk to a particular person and have a group of people behind you. You can ask a politician why he didn’t do something.

Another respondent from the same city talked about the difference between living in Richmond and in a small town in Virginia:

When I lived in Farmville, Virginia, and you were upset about something, you’d get six people together and go talk to someone and you’d feel that you’d get results. But here it’s not because we’re lazy; it’s because we feel we’re ineffective to change something unless we have tremendous support.

And a Philadelphia woman observed:

You have more of a say in local politics because the people are right there in front of you. They live there. They go to your committee meetings and you hear them say, “I don’t like what’s being done here.” You think he’s not listening to you? Well, he’s not going to get elected next year if he doesn’t.

This research suggests that Americans think about their political efficacy on three levels. Outside their immediate community, citizens believe that they are often powerless to bring about change unless they are part of an organized

group. And even when they are organized, citizens believe that they have only a limited voice. Closer to home, however, citizens feel that they can have at least some effect on politics — even as individuals. Finally, it appears from these conversations, as described below, that there are actions citizens take within public life where citizens do feel that they can make a difference — but they see these as existing outside of politics entirely.

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*It became apparent that those very individuals who had said that they participate in politics in only a limited way, if at all, in fact participate in numerous facets of public life in their communities.*

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### **Seeking Answers to Public Problems**

Throughout much of this report — indeed throughout all of it thus far — the voices of Americans have sketched in a predominantly negative view of politics. And yet it takes just one simple question to engage citizens in a positive discussion about public life: “How are you involved in your community?” Initially, in the group discussions, people were often stunned by this question. “Who me? My community? How am I involved?” you could hear group participants ask. The question is not one that people ordinarily think about in connection with politics.

Eventually, someone would come forth. A man from Des Moines said that he helped organize a neighborhood watch program; another participant from Dallas, like other participants, talked about being active in his local block association. A Des Moines man remarked, “I’ve been involved in schools — on parent advisory boards.” Someone from Seattle noted that people there are “working on getting the city to preserve open space.” And another Seattle resident said that citizens are “organizing to take care of public parks.” In each of the groups, people noted their work with low-income children, environmental groups, community-improvement organizations, and many other efforts. Once started, citizens talked openly and forcefully about their community involvement. Most significant, perhaps — at least within the context of this research — is that it became apparent that those very individuals who had said that they participate in politics in only a limited way, *if at all*, in fact participate in numerous facets of public life in their communities.

As discussions ensued, inevitably citizens would turn, on their own, to the importance of citizens thinking about and discussing policy issues. One participant from Richmond

said, "I stay educated on issues." Others remarked that they "talk to other people about issues." Another person, this one from Philadelphia, stated, "We hold afternoon 'coffees' for ten or fifteen people in our homes to talk about issues." And a participant from the same group added, "We have town meetings on local issues." Someone from Los Angeles said that she organizes monthly breakfasts with speakers on policy issues. In each of the groups, comments like these emerged spontaneously. It is worth noting that these comments were discussed as though they were entirely unrelated and unconnected to earlier discussions on "politics." Indeed, when people were asked earlier how they participate in "politics," such comments were seldom heard.

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*Citizens need to know that there is the possibility to create change from their efforts.*

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### **Why Citizens Are Involved**

Across the nation group participants provided clear and consistent reasons for being involved in their communities. Underlying many of these reasons is a simple factor: people believe that they can have some control over events around them. As a Seattle woman said, "We have some sort of control over it — we're involved in it." This should not be construed to mean that people believe they can — or even want to — "direct all the action and call all the shots." Rather, this research suggests that, before they will act, citizens need to know that there is the *possibility* to create change from their efforts. They know that such change will not always come about; the results, in the end, may not even be positive. As one Philadelphia woman put it, "You just keep trying. That doesn't mean that you will win all the time." And a Los Angeles woman remarked about being involved in her community: "It's doing something, even if it may not make a difference." But the potential for change must always exist. This is a precondition for citizen involvement in public life.

We have identified four themes that perhaps undergird this compact. They are:

*Citizens Believing They Can Have a Say.* Many citizens noted that they choose to become involved in their community because they are working in areas where their input can be heard and valued. As a Des Moines man noted, when comparing "community involvement" to "politics,"



“You can have more input.” And a Des Moines woman remarked, “You can get feedback.” There are two important elements to consider here. People see not only that they have an avenue open to them to have a say — a public forum of sorts — but that someone is listening to them.

***Citizens Believing They Can Create and See Change.*** In each discussion group participants talked, sometimes quite emotionally, about their desire to bring about change in a particular area of community life. When a Dallas man was asked why he is involved in his community, he stated firmly, “I want to change things.” Still, it is essential to understand that most citizens do not seem to be on a quixotic journey in their desire and efforts to bring about change. Rather, what often lies beneath citizens’ willingness to take a stab at community action is a belief that they eventually *might* help create change. A Los Angeles man said he is involved because, “You can make a difference — see an impact.” And people say that through their proximity to the problem they will be able to monitor and track that change. As one Des Moines woman stated, “It’s closer to our daily environment. You can see the results.” And a Seattle woman noted, “We see the effectiveness of [our action] as we’re doing it — the result.” This cause and effect relationship is at the heart of this matter.

***Citizens Believing They Have a Stake in Change.*** In response to the question, “Why are you involved?” a Seattle woman abruptly said, “Because it’s needed — so I do it.” And a Los Angeles man remarked, “Because it’s something close to you.” These and other citizens become involved because they believe that they have a stake in change, an inherent and persuasive self-interest. Two women from Seattle perhaps best summed up this belief when they remarked that they have become involved, “because these problems affect us” and “because we have a vested interest in them.” This “self-interest” in bringing about change seems different from a personal and individual selfishness; people’s self-interest seems to be based on a broader concept — they share a self-interest in producing a common good, in improving their community.

***Citizens Believing They Can Create a Sense of Community.*** People in the group discussions were quick

to point out, as did a man from Dallas, another important reason why they become involved in their communities: "I interact with people." A Seattle man who said he became active because "I was doing it with someone else." And a Seattle woman who said, "You feel a part of things." It seemed for many people that it was through their involvement that they created their own sense of community — a sense of belonging — even if the people with whom they were coming into contact did not live in their neighborhood or even in their immediate community. This makes people feel good about their community and themselves. "Participating in your community makes you feel good," remarked a woman from Des Moines. People in all the discussion groups across the country raised this point. It is an important one. For many people, it is the age-old adage: You receive more than you give. One Los Angeles woman went so far as to say: "You do it for yourself ... to feel good about yourself."

This point warrants, perhaps, some additional attention. It is no secret today that citizens feel a loss of community; and many citizens remarked that this loss undermined people's desire to participate in politics. Consider these comments by a Richmond woman: "We no longer have neighbors. You say 'hello' but you don't really know them. We lost that togetherness to share and reach out. We don't live like people should live in America." And a Los Angeles man, who said, "We lead such factious lives — our work, our homes — [and] technology makes it all so impersonal." A Philadelphia man also observed, "I know my neighbors, but I don't know the people on the next street." Now, according to group participants, neighbors change regularly, people do not answer their doors after dark, citizens increasingly take less of an interest in each other and in each others' concerns. "People move all the time. Six houses in a three-block area have been sold in the last month. It breeds a mentality of 'Why do I want to go to the City Council meeting?'" a Richmond man noted. One Los Angeles woman put it this way:

When the country was smaller, less crowded, the individual felt more important. Today, no one feels that there is a need for them to be individually involved in politics anymore because someone else will take care of it.

And another Richmond man observed, when reflecting on

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*We lost that togetherness to share and reach out. We don't live like people should live in America.*

— *Richmond woman*

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an earlier part of his group's discussion,

If we are saying that the way to get influence is to get a gang of people together, but that we lack a sense of community and that we're too busy to go out and develop a community, then we will never get a gang together — a community together — to form a group. We're in very big trouble.

But citizens are finding success in “getting gangs of people together” to act on public issues. That much is clear from the evidence above. They do it in spite of pervasive feelings about the loss of community in this nation and in *their own* community. Indeed, many of the same people who talked about a “loss of community” also talked about their community involvement.

Perhaps what is most interesting about all this is how citizens seem to view “community.” At first blush, they think of it in traditional terms: neighbors, town centers, city council meetings. Yet, through their community involvement, it appears that some citizens have been able to create alternative communities for themselves — some new, some not so new — around such things as an ad hoc issue group seeking to preserve open space, a local school committee, a crime watch group, or the traditional neighborhood association. The group discussions suggest it is important to foster new places and organizations that help citizens create a sense of belonging in their community; this is essential to providing an arena in which people can practice politics and can exert at least some control over events around them. Part of this process is to help citizens see that they can build — or already have — places where a community exists. Only it may not be where they ordinarily look for it.

### **Is This Politics?**

The ways in which Americans talk about being involved in their communities often sound like what one might expect to hear when people talk about politics. For instance, people are acting in areas that involve the common good — they are forming neighborhood watches to keep their streets safe, joining a school advisory committee to improve their children's education, organizing to help pre-

serve open space. These are all *public* challenges they seek to meet. Additionally, the characteristics people assign to their community involvement are the mirror image of those they long for in politics: for instance, that they have a sense of control, a voice; that they can learn and talk about policy issues; that someone is listening; that they can help bring about change; that they see a personal stake in the issues before them.

And yet, people do not consider their community involvement to be a part of politics. More to the point, they do not consider themselves either involved in politics or to be politically efficacious. A Des Moines woman noted, "Are political problems solvable? They're too big." The difference is this: community problems can be acted on by people working together; "political" problems, apparently, cannot. "Community involvement brings about change — politics doesn't," remarked a Dallas man. And a Dallas woman added, "We can see the changes we bring about locally."

Unlike community involvement, "politics," in this view, occurs in a place they do not see and is done by people whom they do not know. "When I think of politics, I think of Washington, not here," observed a Dallas woman. And a Des Moines woman said, "What we do locally isn't perceived as being part of politics. It's because we perceive a personal connection locally that we don't perceive when you move beyond this level." People associate *politicians* with politics, not *citizens*. As one Seattle woman put it: "We typically think of *politicians* when we think of politics — not community activities."

Finally, people separate their community involvement from politics on one more fundamental level: politics is dirty, messy, bureaucratic, and professional. It is, citizens say, the extreme opposite of what they seek through their involvement in the community. "Politics is rules, laws, policies. This has nothing to do with why I am involved in my community," noted a Los Angeles woman. Everything you do in politics is circumscribed and directed by someone else. There is little or nothing personal about it; there is no room for individual initiative and action; indeed there are great barriers to helping bring about change.

Perhaps there was a time when no distinctions were made

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*What we do locally isn't perceived as being part of politics. It's because we perceive a personal connection locally that we don't perceive when you move beyond this level.*

— *Des Moines woman*

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between what people call politics and what the group participants referred to as community involvement. But that time is not today. Americans have drawn a clear line between the two. They do not see — on their own — connections between politics and community action.

Nevertheless, the discussions on politics and community involvement sound similar. As citizens talked about their community involvement, they merely described in positive terms the characteristics they had assigned negatively to politics: that it is possible to be heard and valued in public debate; that it is possible to help bring about change; that it is possible to feel a sense of efficacy in managing, and improving, public affairs. Indeed one Dallas man commented, “[Community involvement] should be considered politics, but it’s not.” And a Los Angeles man even went so far as to say, when comparing community involvement to “politics,”

[It] is political in a truer way. It’s people organizing to make things better. That’s what politics really is.

Perhaps it is possible that something might be learned about how to improve our political health when we explore how and why citizens act in their communities.

*These citizen conversations suggest that we must rethink the ways that we seek to improve our political health.*

## Chapter VI

### Seeing the Problem of Politics Anew: Redefining the Challenge

It seems that we often hear that two sets of “obstacles” prevent citizens from participating in politics. One stems from the deep frustrations associated with the politics of impotence discussed earlier in this report; the other consists of “life-style” concerns. Among the latter, the litany of obstacles includes: citizens lead busy lives; they have too many “toys” (e.g., video games, cars, etc.) that occupy their free time; a crisis is required to motivate citizens to pay attention and become engaged in politics; self-interest — selfishness — seems to drive people’s actions; and finally, many Americans simply are afraid of participating in politics — they are inhibited about speaking in public and of having their neighbors or employers come to “know” their political views. Indeed these were the very obstacles that citizens described in the group discussions.

Conventional wisdom seems to suggest that even if citizens were to sense the opportunity of political power, they would still find themselves too busy, too self-absorbed — “too everything” — to participate in public life. In other words, citizens are not willing to make the time to participate. This is essentially the argument that citizens are apathetic. But we have found that this is not the case: Americans do overcome these life-style obstacles when the right conditions exist. For instance, those citizens who identified the list of obstacles described above are the *very same* citizens who talked, often in eloquent and moving ways, about their involvement in meeting sundry public challenges in their own communities. Upon reflection, there was only one difference in the conditions that determined whether or not they ultimately acted. They were

able to overcome the life-style obstacles before them when they believed that they *might* have an effect — that there was the possibility to create and witness change. It is this notion of *possibility* that is powerful in the realm of politics — and, especially, in reconnecting citizens and politics.

Thus, the observations in this study suggest that citizens see the problem of politics differently from what the conventional wisdom suggests. Two core questions help us to define these differences:

***“What is wrong with politics?”*** This report has described a politics that cannot be diagnosed and labeled as conventional wisdom would suggest — at least, when it comes to how citizens view politics. We do not face simply a problem of citizen apathy. Instead we find ourselves confronting a pervasive sense of *political impotence* among the American people. This impotence grows out of a politics of disconnection — where citizens find little access to the process of politics; where they feel overwhelmed by a political system that seems to be running beyond their control; where citizens believe their relationship with public officials is perilously near to being severed; where citizens believe there is only a muffled “public voice.” Further, the so-called “apathy argument” falls fully on its face when one discovers that there are pockets of public life in which citizens are acting to improve their communities. Indeed, from this research, we find that Americans hold a keen desire to act in the public arena.

***“What will it take to create the conditions necessary to reconnect citizens and politics?”*** Or, put another way, how can we reconcile people’s sense of political impotence with their desire to act? On this score, as before, the research suggests that conventional wisdom misses the mark. For instance, making those who seek and hold office more accountable by reforming the campaign and election process, or by enacting stronger ethics legislation — actions that may produce positive change in politics — by and large treat only the symptoms of our underlying problems. Many of the core, fundamental problems still will go untouched; and so, too, will our political troubles. Again we find that the debate is misframed.

The need to think about alternative approaches for improving our political health can be seen in comments by group participants that extended beyond those already noted in this report. In each discussion, citizens were asked directly about general approaches for addressing the political problems they identified. Consistently, Americans would say something very much like the following, from a Des Moines woman: "Campaign reform won't solve all of our problems." A Dallas woman put it this way: "Legislative reforms won't do any good if policymakers aren't hearing us." A Los Angeles man suggested, "If you legislate a solution, people will just get around it. They always have. It's more realistic to start with people, getting them more involved in the system." And a Seattle man observed, "If all the answers are supposed to come from the top down, why the heck am I so involved in my community? Obviously, there has to be more activity on the local level as well as some changes made at the top." Finally, a Dallas participant argued, "Nothing will change unless people act."

This research suggests that initiatives that emerge from conventional wisdom on the two core questions explored previously, either taken alone or together, are wholly inadequate to restore health to the nation's political life. By themselves, many of these actions will simply continue to relegate citizens to the role of spectators in politics. Yet citizens want to be more than mere bystanders — "watchers of politics" — even if they can be confident that the actions of elected officials are aboveboard. In the public's mind, honest and ethical behavior would be just the starting point for improving politics. Citizens want to be *engaged* in politics. They want to participate in politics — from having a say on the course our leaders pursue, to discussing issues with fellow citizens, to working with others to address problems themselves. In short, citizens want to be connected to every step in the process of politics. They want to have a sense of *possibility*.

Thus our conversations with citizens suggest that we, as individuals and as a society, must rethink the ways in which we seek to improve our political health. The challenge is to reconnect citizens and politics — *to change the political environment in which we find ourselves* — and not just to give our political system a skin-deep "face lift."

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*If you legislate a solution, people will just get around it. They always have. It's more realistic to start with people, getting them more involved in the system.*

— *Los Angeles man*

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The challenge now is to find again a place for citizens in the political process, to conceive of a broader, more inclusive notion of politics that reflects an ongoing dynamic and constructive role for citizens.

In our discussions with citizens from Main Street America, we identified at least six conditions important to promoting change in our political environment. Unlike campaign finance reform, however, these conditions cannot be created with the enactment of a piece of legislation, nor with the stroke of a pen. They cannot be developed in one day or one night, or even one year. Perhaps not in a generation! A single person cannot announce these changes by fiat; yet only individuals can bring about this change.

Nor is there a single approach to creating the kinds of political conditions that citizens seek. Instead, these conditions are shaped by the relationships and behaviors and attitudes of those involved in politics; that is, individuals from across America. If action is taken only in legislative chambers or in executive offices, we will fail. The political conditions for which citizens hold out hope can be created, in the end, only in one place: on Main Street America.

Just *how* these conditions are actually created, we believe, will be a matter of much discussion and experimenting. We do not presume to have those answers; and thus, to help us find our way, this report indicates clearly that the time has come for a national discussion on improving our politics. We suggest that the agenda for discussion begin with the six conditions outlined in this report. Yet we must add that it is not our intention to limit the debate to this agenda. Staking such a claim would be an attempt to create a new conventional wisdom that is as limited and as constrained as the current one. We offer this agenda, rather, as a starting point ... because it is the point at which citizens themselves begin the discussion on politics.

**AGENDA ITEM #1:**

**We must find ways to refocus the political debate on policy issues and how those issues affect people's everyday lives.**

According to those Americans interviewed for this report, today's political debate is suffering from a lack of sub-

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*The challenge is to reconnect citizens and politics — to change the political environment in which we find ourselves — and not just to give our political system a skin-deep “face lift.”*

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stance — and this causes them, in part, to abstain from politics. They say that we hear more about our leaders' personal lives, tragedies, and scandals than we do about how we might handle a major public challenge. Negative campaigns have become the norm; getting straight answers from public officials the exception. We talk more about the "horse race" aspects of elections and campaigns than we do about the candidates' positions on issues.

Citizens are tired and frustrated by the nature and tone of today's political debate. Recall comments by a Des Moines woman, who said: "I want to hear more about the issues, not mudslinging." And a Seattle woman who argued, "Let's get back to the issues." But is it possible to alter the nature of our political discourse? How can we focus more of our attention on the substance of the policy challenges that we face? Who is responsible for spurring this kind of refocus — public officials, the media, citizens themselves? Ultimately, how do we encourage action on this front?

And what if the tone of our political debate were to change? Would that be enough to engage citizens? The answer is clearly, no! Many citizens say that they are disconnected from politics because the very issues that are discussed do not seem relevant — *connected* — to their daily lives. All too often, they argue, the issues that receive the most attention are not the issues on their minds. Moreover, many of the issues that are being discussed are framed in ways that simply do not reflect their values and concerns. And to many Americans, the language used to talk about various issues often seems foreign. In short, many Americans feel alienated from the political debate.

If citizens are to engage in the political process, then the issues that are being discussed must resonate with them. They must make sense. This is not to say that public officials, the media, and others should pander to the public. Quite the contrary, citizens want to know basic things about issues so that they *can* participate: Why is an issue important? What are the risks of not acting? What are the trade-offs of various actions? Indeed people must be able to see themselves — their concerns — articulated as part of the public debate. As a Dallas man said when talking about the federal budget deficit, "How does it affect me — my life?"

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*If citizens are to engage in the political process, then the issues that are being discussed must resonate with them. They must make sense.*

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All of this raises some simple — albeit difficult to resolve — questions. Who is responsible for providing what might be termed the “context of issues” to citizens? Can an objective framework be developed in a society so dominated by special interests and organizations? Who would disseminate these analyses of issues? Is it possible to reshape the very ways in which we talk about issues as part of politics?

**AGENDA ITEM #2:**

**We must find ways for citizens to form a public voice on policy issues and for public officials to hear that public voice.**

Democracy is based on people talking to one another — what might be called “public talk.” When people talk, they learn about issues, exchange ideas, even change their perspectives. A Richmond man put it this way, “When you hear what others have to say, your views tend to broaden.” Thus through discussion it is possible for people to see beyond merely their private interests and begin to see that they hold common interests. And, through this process of discussion, citizens can begin to develop and express informed judgments on issues — judgments like those, for instance, that members of a jury reach after they, too, have deliberated together.

Importantly, informed judgment provides the basis for public officials and other decision makers to know what issues are a priority to citizens, why those issues are a priority, what concerns need to be addressed, and the trade-offs that people are willing to make. And informed judgment is essential because it serves as the foundation for creating a common purpose for *citizen* action.

The observations made in this report, however, suggest that there are few opportunities for citizens to talk with other citizens, or with public officials, about issues that are important to them. Rather, it seems that society has replaced probing public conversations with shallow instant analyses: opinion surveys that confine respondents to predetermined answers; “900” numbers where people can “register” their views by pressing a button on their telephone; mail questionnaires; and other means that, according to group respondents, diminish their individual voice.

In most of these cases, people neither learn more about, nor exchange ideas on, the issues at hand; instead, they are forced into simple “yes” or “no” responses.

All the information we gather from these efforts cannot tell any of us — citizens, public officials, the media — why people arrive at the decisions that they do: What motivates them? What fears and concerns and dreams and hopes come into play? What facts are understood, and what misperceptions or biases exist? What happens as new information and other points of view enter into a discussion? *This* information gives rise to understanding the “public voice” — a voice that reflects the full context, texture, and content that make up public judgment on issues. It is *this* information that is so often difficult to obtain from opinion polls and other mass opinion techniques; and yet, it is *this* information that is needed to create sustainable public policies.

Today it often seems that we have carefully removed the public talk that engenders this kind of discussion and understanding from our culture — that which helps to form the public voice; it appears that we have steered toward political mechanisms that close, rather than broaden, public debate. This research suggests that we must reopen the debate. But how do we build, or restore, an ethic of public talk in this nation? How do we create the necessary public forums and other mechanisms where citizens can learn about public issues and exchange views? How will public officials know when they have found and understood the public voice? And where do the communications media fit in; what is their responsibility in promoting informed and considered public debate? Who, if anyone, is responsible for promoting public debate? Finally, how do we achieve all of this in a nation of 250 million people?

### **AGENDA ITEM #3**

**We must find public places for citizens — and citizens and public officials — to discuss policy issues.**

Americans in these conversations talked about the fact that citizens are increasingly becoming disconnected from one another and from the larger community. Participants lamented rapid suburban sprawl; neighbors whom they no longer know; people who move from one coast to the other searching for work opportunities. “We no longer have

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*It appears that we have steered toward political mechanisms that close, rather than broaden, public debate. This research suggests that we must reopen the debate. But how do we build, or restore, an ethic of public talk in this nation?*

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*Today, people say that they are in search of a sense of belonging — a sense of community. This need for community has much to do with politics — about having places where citizens can interact and discuss policy issues.*

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neighbors. You say 'hello' but you don't really know them. We lost that togetherness to share and reach out," commented a Richmond woman. Today, people say that they are in search of a sense of belonging — a sense of community. This need for community has much to do with politics — about having places where citizens can interact and discuss policy issues.

Years ago, the town meeting sometimes served as such a place, a *public* space. In other times, such public places were provided by coffee houses or the local pub, a public association or, perhaps, a public forum on a particular issue. It was in these settings, among others, that citizens would come together and debate the issues of the day. Few communities continue to hold the old town hall meetings; overall, our society has changed. Our community roots seem much more shallow; and it is much more difficult for citizens to find public places in our modern society to come together. Instead, today it sometimes seems that America is now one vast forum (the Persian Gulf debate may have illustrated this) but, according to this research, we do not even use this forum all that often or very well.

Some group participants asserted that we must adapt to the 1990s, rather than "look back" and seek to re-create a bygone era. Many communities may no longer have a single place they consider their "town center"; and, even if they did, many citizens simply live too far from such places — and often feel little connection to their larger community. Instead, some group participants pointed out that the focal point of their lives is now their workplace, a child care center, a trade association, a neighborhood association, the local Parent-Teacher Association, an ad hoc group seeking to act on a timely issue. As one Seattle man suggested, who talked about the workplace as the center of his daily life, "Congressmen could send out their representatives to meet with us at our workplaces. It would take only 30 minutes and we could hear about important issues." It is these various places, and others, where new and perhaps smaller "public spaces" exist. But will society think about and accept these places as our *new public places*? For instance, will employers, social service organizations, and other groups that traditionally do not think of themselves as being responsible for providing public places for discussion take the lead? Can existing groups like neighborhood

associations, PTAs, and others expand to include even more people and more perspectives? How do we encourage various organizations and groups and citizens to find or create new public places?

***AGENDA ITEM #4:***

**We must find ways of encouraging the media to focus more on the public dimension of policy issues.**

Today the messages that people see and hear are often driven by the mass media — the television programs they watch and the newspapers they read. Indeed, much of the debate within our democracy is framed by, or at least filtered through, the media. Yet citizens argue that the messages that they see and hear concerning politics are neither informative nor educational. They say that the media too often focus their coverage on scandals, gossip, and “insiders’ talk” about politics; and, even when the media do address substantive issues, they force it into 20-second “sound bites.” As one man from Richmond lamented, “The technology of the media and communication controls [politics]. It’s sound bites ... it’s quick, it has distanced politicians from what’s really going on with us.”

Of course, many learned observers of mass communications would argue that the public receives what it wants from the media. After all, how many people watch “issue-related programs” on network or public television? Why do so many people want newspapers that have more colors, more features, and more “soft news” stories? Are Americans prepared to engage in “substantive reading and viewing”?

Our discussions suggest, overall, that they are ready. Recall comments of a Richmond man, “My concern about the media is that it has made us lazy. It’s made people not read and study issues. It’s not the media’s intent, but it is certainly the result.” Still, this report does not offer specific approaches for how the media can engage the public — only optimism that the public holds the desire, and is ready, to enter the debate. But will the media help citizens sort through the maze of issues they face? Will they provide a context for understanding those issues? Will they increase the emphasis they place on covering policy issues, even at the possible expense of covering political gossip, mud-

slinging, and scandals? Is now the time to expand what appears to be an emerging debate on the role of the media in the civic life of communities?

**AGENDA ITEM #5:**

**We must find ways for citizens and public officials to interact more constructively in the political process.**

At the core of politics stands the citizen-public official relationship. Citizens seek public officials who are *not only* responsive to their needs, but who *include* them in the policy process and *consult* with them so as to understand and pursue the common good. They want public officials who are honest and those whom they can trust. But citizens feel that they seldom interact with public officials — rather, they believe, public officials lecture them, talk around them, appease them, seek their blind support for initiatives, and sometimes even lie to them.

The observations from this research suggest that public officials must fundamentally change the way that they think about and interact with citizens if the citizen-public official relationship is to improve. Citizens want an ongoing, give-and-take *relationship* with their public officials. At times, this relationship may take the form of citizens seeking to gain information on issues. But, at other times, it will be to discuss those issues and to give their views. And at still other times it will be to hear why a public official adopted a particular position or pursued a specific action. A Dallas woman crystallized the comments of many group participants when she said, "Policymakers need more opportunities to talk with citizens." Citizens do not necessarily want to talk to public officials face-to-face, but they seek fundamentally a sense of interaction, an ongoing, open dialogue.

Earlier research undertaken for the Kettering Foundation by The Harwood Group has revealed that many public officials already believe that they are providing sufficient opportunities for such citizen-public official interaction. Public officials say that they hold numerous town hall and other public meetings to allow citizens to express their views. Moreover, they say that citizens typically approach public discussions and other encounters with public officials with a "lynch-mob mentality" that is abusive and

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*Public officials must fundamentally change the way that they think about and interact with citizens if the citizen-public official relationship is to improve.*

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counterproductive. And they say that many citizens do not take advantage of existing opportunities for citizen-public official interaction. Thus, the research suggests that this relationship is characterized in many ways (though certainly not all) by an “us” versus “them” perspective — on both sides.

Improving the relationship between citizens and public officials will require action in many areas, according to this research. A Seattle man noted, for instance, “If we could get citizens talking with policymakers without a lynch-mob mentality, that would be terrific.” But can we create public hearings and meetings and other “get-togethers” where citizens and public officials can talk constructively, where the public does not attempt to “lynch” public officials and public officials do not view the meetings merely as a matter of public relations? Further, are public officials ready to be candid and up-front with citizens on the tough issues and the conflicting choices — and even on the painful sacrifices — that must be considered as part of politics? Are they willing to listen to a “public voice” at the possible expense of their relationships with special interest organizations, campaign funders, and others who sit beside them at the table of public debate? Finally, are they prepared to test citizens’ apparent willingness to accept *their own* responsibility for helping to improve the citizen-public official relationship?

**AGENDA ITEM #6:**

**We must find ways to tap Americans’ sense of civic duty to improve our political health.**

The observations made in this report suggest that in order to reconnect citizens and politics the political environment must change. We must alter the very ways in which politics is practiced. Central to this challenge is finding ways to more fully engage citizens in politics.

We have found that Americans want to be involved in politics in the broader sense. This was a recurring theme in each discussion group. The problem is, however, that citizens now feel disconnected from politics; they feel politically impotent. All of this has led citizens to “abstain” from participating in politics. It seems that they feel absolved from fulfilling their civic duty because they believe



that they cannot effect change. Yet citizens stand at the core of our political process.

This research suggests that a reservoir of civic duty rests within the American public. It is waiting to flow. One woman from Des Moines remarked, "I feel that our sense of civic duty is just waiting to come out." Indeed, citizens say that they are an essential part of the political process and, for it to work effectively, they must participate. But Americans seem worried about the fact that an outward sense of civic duty does not abound. Moreover, they are even concerned that their children may be receiving the "wrong messages" about the importance of being involved in politics from their attitudes and actions. "We need to bring concepts of civic duty back into the classroom," noted one Philadelphia woman. And a Des Moines woman lamented:

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*I feel that our sense of civic duty is just waiting to come out.*

— *Des Moines woman*

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It has to start with your children — in school — when they are old enough to make decisions. The education system has to start generating the [civic] process; and, as parents, we should foster it. Issues, ideas, the Constitution ... things that I learned growing up, my kids aren't learning today.

Thus a number of questions arise. Is it possible to somehow tap citizens' dormant sense of civic duty to help fuel necessary changes in our political environment; is it possible for Americans across the nation to see that fulfilling their civic duty is a *necessary step* for changing politics? What will it take to tap this civic duty? Can citizens transfer the sense of power they often enjoy in their communities to the arena they call politics? Are there actions citizens can take to change the current political environment themselves — without waiting for public officials, the communications media, or special interest organizations to act first? Finally, how can the necessary principles and skills that make up civic life be brought back into the classroom?

This study reveals that Americans now yearn for a place in politics. It also suggests that citizens are ready and willing to accept responsibility for fully engaging in the political process ... but only if the right conditions exist. America now has the opportunity, amidst all the clamor and negative talk about citizen apathy, to move toward reconnecting

citizens and politics. Thus while this report indicates that citizens feel angry and frustrated — and impotent — when it comes to politics, the final note sounded should be one of optimism. Apathy is *not* rampant among citizens. A sense of civic duty is *not* dead. Americans are *not* indifferent to public debate and the challenges our nation faces. Americans simply want to participate in this process we call representative government. They only seek the possibility to help bring about change.

# Appendix

## A Note about Methodology

The Harwood Group used focus groups — or group discussions — to conduct this study. Focus groups are an ideal research method for this type of endeavor. They provide citizens with the opportunity to think about various issues and topics over the course of a discussion, to talk about their views and feelings in their own words, and to describe the underlying assumptions behind their views. Moreover, this research technique helps to identify the language that citizens use to talk about specific topics; and focus groups allow citizens to react to new information and proposals during the course of a discussion. Such interaction is difficult — often impossible — to obtain through public opinion surveys.

There are, of course, limitations to group discussions. The research is qualitative. Thus the observations detailed in this report should not be mistaken for findings from a random sample survey. They are, technically speaking, hypotheses, or insights, that would need to be validated by reliable quantitative methods before being considered definitive. Still, the insights are suggestive of how citizens view politics and their relationship to it.

Each of the group discussions conducted for this study comprised approximately 12 people, representing a cross section of ages, race, income, and education. The participants were recruited by a professional public opinion research firm in each location. Each group meeting lasted for about two hours and was led by a trained moderator and recorded. Participants were promised that their names would not appear in this report, in order to respect their privacy.

To ensure geographic diversity in this study, six focus groups were conducted across the nation in the following communities:

<b>Location</b>	<b>Date 1990</b>
Richmond, Virginia	April 16
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	April 19
Des Moines, Iowa	July 25
Dallas, Texas	July 26
Los Angeles, California	August 8
Seattle, Washington	August 9

Then, four additional focus groups were held to update the results. More information on these additional group discussions is found in the "Epilogue."

<b>Location</b>	<b>Date 1991</b>
Memphis, Tennessee	March 11
Denver, Colorado	March 12
Boston, Massachusetts	May 8
Indianapolis, Indiana	May 15

## Epilogue

### After the War

**A**s the Kettering Foundation prepared to release this report, it decided that The Harwood Group should conduct additional focus groups on politics before the report's publication. Two factors prompted the decision, both stemming from a desire to "check" responses from the earlier focus groups. First, although the initial set of group discussions had been held in mid-1990, the release of the report had been delayed, partly as a result of the Persian Gulf crisis; we wanted to ensure that our information had not become dated. Second, we wanted to know: "Did the war in any way change how Americans view politics?"

The Foundation committed itself to undertake at least four additional focus groups; it was prepared to conduct as many as necessary if the observations from these additional groups were in any manner ambiguous or served to raise new questions or insights when compared to the outcomes of the original six group discussions. Memphis and Denver were selected as the sites for the first two additional focus groups. The discussions were held there on March 11 and 12, a period of two days when the news media — print, radio, and television — were providing extensive coverage of returning American soldiers and prisoners of war from the Persian Gulf. Participants in the Memphis and Denver discussions represented a cross section of Americans by age, race, income, and education. Each discussion lasted about two hours and was led by a trained moderator.

We asked the same set of questions in Memphis and Denver as we had in the original six focus groups. Each group started with the questions, "What do you think of politics today?" In Memphis, the response was unmistakable — and immediate, as four people around the table reeled off one-word responses one after another: "Sorry" . . . "Crooked". . . "Political". . . "Unbelievable." The Denver discussion took a similar direction, with partici-

pants saying: "It's lost the interest of the people." "Gets really old." "A lot of special interests, too many special interests. . . . We don't have any say in it." From the time of this first question until near the end of the two-hour discussion, the responses we heard echoed those recorded in the initial six focus groups.

The Persian Gulf War was mentioned only in passing by participants in the Memphis and Denver groups. Not until the end of each session, when the moderator raised the war specifically as a topic of discussion, did participants talk at any length about recent events in the Persian Gulf. Their responses were clear: the war had absolutely no effect on their thinking about politics. These views emerged despite the suggestion from various public opinion surveys at the time of the group discussions that rising patriotism among Americans was increasing citizen confidence in government. The Memphis and Denver focus groups indicate that citizens in no way — at least on their own — connect the nation's war effort to the health of American politics. As one person in Memphis said, when asked about the war: "I thought we were here to talk about politics. That's the reason I didn't bring it up." And another participant remarked, as did many others, "Patriotism has gone up dramatically, but I don't think that has anything to do with political issues."

The second set of two focus groups was held in Boston and Indianapolis on May 8 and May 15, respectively. These discussions also echoed the observations made in the initial six group discussions as well as in the Memphis and Denver sessions.

These four focus groups, taken together, suggest that citizens continue to view politics with the same prevailing sense of frustration, anger, and impotence that we encountered in 1990. Their feelings run deep, as do the problems they associate with politics. Further, the discussions reflect, as did the original focus groups, a strong citizen desire for making fundamental changes in the way in which we practice politics; legislative initiatives, while important, will not address the underlying concerns that now trouble American citizens.

## At Issue

*"People have gotten so disappointed that they don't want to get involved anymore."* — Seattle Woman

*"Politics is so remote ... not involved with our daily lives."*  
— Seattle Man

*"There is so much the public doesn't understand (about policy issues)."* — Des Moines Man

*"I'm never aware of an opportunity to go somewhere and express my opinion and have someone hear what I have to say."*  
— Dallas Woman

*"Citizens don't have a voice; lobbyists, special interests — they have a voice."* — Seattle Man

*"Instead of telling (you) what they're for and what they're going to do, [politicians] tell you what the other guys are doing that's so bad. What's the point in that? I want to know what he's going to do."*  
— Memphis Woman

*"The technology of the media controls [politics]. It's sound bites, it's fast, it's quick. It has distanced everyone from what's really going on."*  
— Richmond Man

*"So many politicians are crooked that you get discouraged."*  
— Philadelphia Woman

*"The problem is government is not doing what we want [it] to be doing."* — Los Angeles Woman

*"Policymakers just completely ignore us, that's what bothers me."*  
— Denver Man

*"Nothing will change unless people act."*  
— Seattle Woman

*"We don't take politics as seriously as we used to."*  
— Seattle Woman

## ***Citizens and Politics Reports***

Americans do care about politics, but they no longer believe they can have an effect. They feel politically impotent.

Citizens feel cut off from most policy issues because of the way they are framed and talked about — they don't see their concerns reflected, their connection to them.

Americans say they do need to be better informed. But the problem isn't that they need *more* information, they need *different* information than is offered currently.

Citizens think many of the avenues for expressing their views are window dressings, not serious attempts to hear the public. Citizens feel they are heard only when they organize into large groups and angrily protest policy decisions.

Citizens believe there has been a hostile takeover of politics by special interests and lobbyists (along with negative campaigns and the media). Citizens say they've lost their place in politics.

Citizens believe things have gone too far. Negative campaigning, uncontrollable campaign costs, and too many broken promises are causing many Americans to turn away from elections and politics.

Citizens want the media to flesh out issues and give them a context to news reports. They want help in understanding what's going on.

Americans want more than just "clean" public officials. They want an ongoing relationship, especially in between elections, in which there is "straight talk" and give-and-take between public officials and citizens.

Citizens say they must share responsibility for our political troubles — and they must do their job by pushing the system to be heard, learning about issues, taking the time to participate.

Citizens don't expect public officials to blindly do what they want. But they do want to know their concerns are understood, represented and weighed in the decision-making process. Then, they want public officials to explain their decisions to them.

Americans are actively engaged in public life. They act when they believe there is the *possibility* to bring about change.

Civic duty is alive and well, but dormant. It is waiting to be tapped; only the right political conditions must first exist.



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*The challenge before us today is to reconnect citizens and politics — to find a place for citizens in the political process. This requires changing the conditions that shape our political environment. Merely making adjustments in campaign finance, ethics codes, term limits, and other laws will not address the underlying problems Main Street Americans find in politics.*

*Citizens and Politics*

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## Conventional Wisdom

Americans are apathetic about politics — they no longer care.

Thinking about policy issues is not a priority for citizens unless they are directly affected by those issues.

Americans just don't take the time to learn about issues. They simply need to avail themselves of all the information now before them.

Citizens have plenty of ways to have their views heard on important issues — public meetings, letter, surveys, and questionnaires. They just don't use them.

No doubt there are problems today with special interests. But many of these groups people complain about were created by and for citizens.

Americans get what they ask for when it comes to candidates and campaigns. Our elections reflect citizen desires to know more about personalities and conflict than issues.

Americans will pay attention only if it's news in quick, short sound bites. That's all they want.

Through such steps as campaign finance reform, term limits, and stronger ethics codes, we can hold public officials more accountable for their actions. Then, Americans will feel better about politics.

Americans always complain about politics and, when they do, they seem to blame everyone but themselves for our troubles.

Public officials spend a lot of time in their communities with citizens. But unless they give an absolute, knee-jerk response to citizen concerns, the public is never satisfied.

Americans are unlikely to help bring about change — they are too self-absorbed in their own lives to participate in politics.

Citizens seem to have lost their sense of civic duty when it comes to politics.

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