
ONLINE APRIL 12, 2012

Toward Participatory Democracy

Danielle Allen

*This article is part of **The Port Huron Statement at 50**, a forum on the document that sparked a generation of activism.*

For most people, political equality today means formal political rights, such as the right to vote. This is a regrettably limited view. The right to vote is not an end but a means. It is, in fact, only one means, if a critical one, by which to enable each “individual to share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life,” as the Port Huron Statement describes the end of politics.

Fifty years ago the Port Huron Statement emphatically underscored the importance of the civil rights movement’s agitation for voting rights. But the Statement rightly advocated for voting rights within the context of a rich and holistic account of political equality. We would do well to revive its broad egalitarian vision to reform our political institutions today.

Politics, the Statement argued, should “be seen positively, as the art of collectively creating an acceptable pattern of social relations.” Through this art of co-creation, citizens might achieve social relations with one another that are free of domination and offer an equal opportunity for self-cultivation.

When seen as an art, politics is demanding, and citizens must master its techniques. Politics as the art of co-creation requires two forms of egalitarian action: (1) citizens need the opportunity and ability to work together to clarify grievances and aspirations, to analyze the nature and meaning of their present shared experience, and to judge the value of alternative paths into the future; and (2) citizens must be able to ask for, and to provide, redress to one another in cases of encroachment on rights and liberties, to take turns accepting losses in the public sphere, and to acknowledge and honor the losses that others have accepted.

The ultimate result of pursuing this kind of politics—participatory democracy—is not just equality but also, importantly, *freedom*. Or in the language of the Port Huron Statement: “The goal of man and society should be human independence.”

We cannot be free without being equal.

Why does it matter to point this out? In my view, the Statement’s most profound contribution to American political thought and democratic theory is its case for why freedom is best understood as grounded in equality. The Statement celebrates the “kind of independence [that] does not mean egoistic individualism—the object is not to have one’s way so much as it is to have a way that is one’s own.” According to this vision, we cannot be truly free without equal spheres for independent action and equal chances for self-cultivation. We cannot be free without being equal.

This ideal of political freedom contrasts markedly with that of libertarians, who are presently making a significant impact on American politics. While their actual policy victories may still be

few, the libertarian influence on our values is immense, as demonstrated by the surprising durability of Ron Paul's presidential campaigns and the rise of the Tea Party. Liberty—untethered—guides many among us these days.

Too many among us. We are overdue for rediscovering the necessary link between freedom and equality. We are equally in need of a richer understanding of political equality.

The vote is just one of many institutional techniques for realizing true participatory democracy. Revitalized and reconfigured labor organizations would be another. So, too, are single issue-oriented movements and organizations that focus on rights and hold politicians accountable for their failures to pursue needed reforms.

The political institution presently facing the greatest crisis of legitimacy is Congress, where approval ratings are mired in the teens. What democracy can be sanguine about its future when fewer than 20 percent of citizens approve of its legislature?

Where would we be today if the signers of the Port Huron Statement had directed their attention toward Congress, as the Tea Party has done? The challenge now is how to use the Statement's rich picture of participatory democracy to make Congress a better instrument of such a democracy. For example, how should we rethink the problem of redistricting? How can we find ways of building sources of electoral power to counterbalance the excessive power wielded by financial interests? How can we rekindle in alienated citizens a sense of ownership over Congress?

Young people who are presently consumed with questions of social justice and institutional and cultural change nonetheless say that they are not involved in politics, according to the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Youth Participatory Politics. (I am a participant.) For them, politics means elections, politicians, and Congress—that is, things that they think don't concern them.

To ignore our role in shaping Congress is to give up on politics altogether. Though the Port Huron Statement itself did not pursue reform of our legislative bodies, its spirit points us in the right direction. The question of how to turn Congress into an instrument of participatory democracy is one of the most important political questions we face.

Post this page to: 

Comments

Name

E-mail (Will not appear online)

Title

Comment