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Abstract

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Slow Democracy: Rediscovering community, bringing decision making back home provides an impassioned defense of local decision making through the revitalization of deliberative processes. The concept of “slow democracy” took its cue from the slow food movement’s principles of localism, community engagement, and sustainability. Susan Clark and Woden Teachout remark that it is an almost tongue-in-cheek reaction to what “fast” suggests today: “Slow democracy is not a call for longer meetings or more time between decisions. Instead it is a reminder of the care needed for full-blooded, empowered community decision making” (xxiii). The authors juxtapose how top-down forms of political decision making often replace citizen deliberations much in the same way that the fast food industry has replaced sustainable and local food systems.

Just as slow food proponents push for a more intimate knowledge of food production, slow democracy similarly pushes for more self-governing and local processes that are inclusive, deliberative, and citizen-powered. This lies in stark contrast to increasingly privatized and centralized decision making in U.S. national politics, which disempowers citizens and removes local control. Like fast food, “fast democracy” is intended to deliver a simple and easy-to-use product, but it also leaves citizens “unnourished and unsatisfied” (5).

Engaging the concept of slow democracy may require a “relearning of what democracy means” (xxvii). As the authors point out, many people have given up on the political process because of predominant ideas and myths about democracy that do not hold true at the local level. For example, too many people think that “democracy is about fighting and winning,” that “talking only makes things worse,” that “problems are becoming too complex for citizens to understand,” and that “public participation takes too long—government is too slow already” (xxvii). While overcoming these conceptions at the national level presents a nearly insurmountable task, doing so on the local level is “remarkably doable” (xxix).

Clark and Teachout point to two connected phenomena—efficiency as a “driving value” (24) and the “rise of the experts” (25)—as the primary factors that have contributed to the centralization of control and the “devaluation of local knowledge” (27). They point to communities such as Portsmouth, New Hampshire that are successfully reversing this trend and creating their own decision making processes. However, the authors are careful to clarify that slow democracy is not simply a push for local advocacy; advocacy relies on the adversarial political model, in which debate determines the winners and losers. Slow democracy has to be “more than the same old political system transposed to a community level” (57).

Deliberation, which ensures that citizens are actively involved in defining problems and solutions in their communities, is the key antidote to the “fast democracy” style of problem solving. Deliberation slows us down, inviting us to engage with each other at the value level and to step away from using shortcuts to form our opinions. Clark and Teachout paint a dreary depiction of “public hearings”—which are frequently neither public nor conducive to participants hearing each other. Instead of debating between

option A or B, participants in a deliberative process are encouraged to co-create option C—“inventing new solutions together” (146).

Although the authors note in the introduction that this book is not intended to be a “how-to” or a facilitator’s handbook, they offer several techniques that community members may use as a foundation: First, it is important for communities to establish a method of communicating information about relevant community issues, so that citizens are continually in “learning mode” (153), and are able to be informed participants in the deliberative process. Second, communities should come to understand their common key values; this lays the groundwork for all future deliberations. Third, skilled moderators must help participants develop solutions and wrestle with trade-offs. Finally, the group should “decide how to decide” by choosing a decision-making model (157).

The knowledge and strengths of the co-authors balance the tone of this book—Teachout is an historian and cultural critic, and Clark is an active community organizer. Together, these two perspectives complement each other and form a pragmatic yet heartfelt proposal for deliberative decision making. Although the authors admit in the introduction that they tend to lean left politically, the power of this book is in its transcendence of divisive party-politics. The book is an invitation to citizens across political boundaries to begin to form sustainable and trusting relationships locally. At the outset, Clark and Teachout clearly assert that slow democracy is an attempt to shift away from these left and right labels, and focus instead on finding “real-world solutions to real-world problems” (xxix). Moving beyond these ideological divisions on the local level allows citizens to frame their own issues and shape their own future.

Author Information

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