

Reviving the spirit of democracy

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Just as voting participation rates have fallen over the last 40 years, civic engagement is on the decline in the United States, too. But there is some hope for a turnaround, says Peter Levine in his new book, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America* (Oxford University Press), in which he offers explanations about why so few people are involved in their communities, provides examples where activism has worked and suggests some idealistic goals.

Levine, the Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Tisch College, says that our government is failing us, and what's needed is a renewed commitment to civic participation.

It won't be easy, he says. For starters, organizations that used to be easy conduits for civic participation have been weakened. In the mid-20th century, he writes, healthy political discussion and problem solving took place through an array of voluntary associations, such as religious congregations, labor unions, service clubs, civil rights organizations and political party organizations. All have experienced declining membership.

Years ago, for instance, people joined the local Republican Party or the Rotary Club, and through those groups became engaged in discussion and activities that contributed to their [communities](#).

"You joined a club because of your support for the organization's principles and your desire to meet like-minded people," Levine notes. "Or you joined a religious group because of your beliefs or a union because you took a job. But once you were in, the organizations had an incentive to engage you in political and civic affairs, because they all had agendas. They needed their members to vote, to raise money, to run for office, to interact with others."

Today such groups no longer play those traditional roles in society. People are more likely to make an annual contribution to Common Cause or the National Rifle Association, but not attend meetings or work on projects with members of an organization, says Levine, who also directs the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), based at Tisch College.

Although they are smaller in number, there are still groups of people who work together to create change and improve lives. In Chicago, for instance, crime has decreased in neighborhoods where residents met to discuss what to do and devised action plans. "They did concrete things like neighborhood watches and mentoring programs, and also set a norm that says violence is not acceptable," he says.

Levine cites another successful effort in Bridgeport, Conn. In the late 1990s, the city was struggling with unemployment, a shrinking tax base, crime and bad schools. A local nonprofit group convened residents in some 40 community conversations to talk about education. The result was a community summit involving hundreds of people who developed a plan to improve the schools. Everyone involved in the process, writes Levine, felt they shared responsibility with school officials to turn things around. In 2006 and 2007 the school system was one of five finalists for a national prize for urban education.

So how can activists encourage more debate on the issues and collaboration on solutions? Levine proposes the formation of what he calls civic renewal coalitions made up of people already involved in their communities. They would take the lead in fostering discussion, communicate with people who are already doing political work and help develop a shared sense of belonging and identity.

He also proposes a Civic Communications Corps, within Americorps, to enlist volunteers to help community organizations with communications needs, training people to use technology to get their messages out to a broader audience. Colleges and universities could be communications hubs for their neighboring communities in such an endeavor.

Other recommendations are politically unfeasible right now, but show the direction in which Levine would like to see the country go. In his ideal world, for example, Congress would promote a high-profile discussion on a divisive but important topic, such as immigration or gun control. Participants in the debate would return to Congress with a bill requiring an up or down vote. He would also encourage participatory budgeting, in which a portion of the capital budget of a community is turned over to a public meeting during which people would decide how to spend the money. Participatory budgeting is a 21st-century version of the New England town meeting, but often used in large cities.

While the odds of fulfilling these lofty ambitions for increased civic participation are not high, Levine does have more down-to-earth goals, such as requiring schools to make a commitment to civic education to help prepare a new generation of active and responsible citizens.

Ultimately, he says, there is a small core of people in the United States who are actively engaged in their communities, and he wants to encourage them. "I'm not that optimistic about the average person becoming an activist for civic renewal," he says. "This is in some ways a book born of hard experience. If you were looking for a book that said we'll get 50 million Americans involved in strengthening citizenship, I'd say that won't happen. But I say there are a million, and they are ready."

Provided by Tufts University

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