IMAGINING THE ROBUST DELIBERATIVE CITY:

Elevating the Conversations We Need to Support Democracy

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A Sounder Public Judgment Working Paper

PREFACE

The Public Judgment Working Paper Series from Public Agenda

In our age of endemic mistrust, fake news, extreme rhetoric and technology-enhanced manipulation of public opinion, it is increasingly difficult for the public to come to terms with issues in meaningful ways. Public Agenda's Sounder Public Judgment Initiative brings fresh thinking to this profound challenge facing our democracy.

The concept of "public judgment," in contrast to raw, reactive and unstable "opinion," derives from the work of Public Agenda co-founder Dan Yankelovich, a pioneer of public opinion research in America. Rather than a particular point of view or ideology, the term is meant to connote that people have thought and felt their way forward on an issue in a reasonably well-rounded, fair-minded way. It is a stage of public thinking at which people having moved beyond simplistic magic answers and developed relatively responsible, stable positions that take into account the tradeoffs inevitably embedded in thorny public problems.

The conditions that support the formation of public judgment have to change with the way information, communications and persuasion change. They do not appear magically, they must be created and, at times, fought for and defended. These papers, by leading thinkers and practitioners across a variety of relevant fields, are intended to help us do precisely that. The current paper, "Imagining the Robust Deliberative City: Elevating the Conversations We Need to Support Democracy," offers a forceful argument that our best shot at fostering public judgment and reinvigorating democracy today is to focus on creating strong systems of public deliberation, engagement and participation in the towns and cities where people live their lives and learn to become citizens.

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Elevating the Conversations We Need to Support Democracy

At this point in the ongoing democratic experiments in the United States and around the world, two things have become exceedingly clear: democracy requires high-quality communication, and we do not get close to the necessary quality naturally. We must be able to have tough conversations across perspectives that recognize and engage the inherent tensions and tradeoffs of difficult issues, and we must get beyond the unfortunate limitations of human nature that work against those sorts of conversations. Developing research in brain science and social psychology, as well as a growing understanding of how the Internet, political parties and the media exacerbate many of our worst impulses, has helped us understand better the crippling polarization and hyperpartisanship that is undermining our political conversations and further eroding already precarious trust in the institutions on which democracies rely, such as the free press, civic culture, legislative bodies, experts and fellow citizens.[1] The question we face is, how do we rethink democracy based on this developing knowledge?

In this essay, I argue that our best shot at reinvigorating democracy will be to focus on our cities and counties, particularly because we have genuine opportunities at the local level to develop viable deliberative systems that can support the necessary quality of communication and engagement. This argument is motivated both by pessimism about our national democracy—the adversarial and expensive two-party system is, unfortunately, significantly engrained and clearly brings out the worst in us, constantly undermining the conversations that need to occur and rewarding those we should avoid—as well as substantial optimism about the potential of local democracy, based both on research and experience. The essay will proceed in three sections. I first explain why the quality of communication is so essential to democratic functioning and lay out the ideal of healthy deliberative conversation. Second, to gain an understanding of why most of our political conversations are so problematic and counterproductive, I briefly summarize the relevant psychological research and explain how our national system triggers the worst in us. Third, I make a case for why cities and counties are well situated to become exemplars of the kind of democratic engagement we need and lay out some steps they can take to build that capacity.

The bottom line here is that we know better ways to think about, talk about and engage with difficult problems. We do it well in many different contexts. When these tried and true practices are applied, diverse groups can be inclusive and work together in highly productive ways. The problem is that few, if any, of these theories and practices are regularly used within our political systems, especially at the national level. Our political systems use a completely different set of theories and practices that bring out the worst in us as human beings and distract from the vital tasks of working together to address shared problems. The good news is it does not have to be this way.

A brief aside before I continue: the focus of this essay is primarily on the broader public conversations about the issues that affect us, in which all of us participate to varying degrees. I recognize the U.S. political system is largely a representative democracy, and some may argue the public should not be expected to deliberate and make decisions, since that is the role of

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[1] Lee Rainie, Scott Keeter and Andrew Perrin, *Trust and Distrust in America*, Pew Research Center, July 2019, https://www.people-press.org/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/

our elected officials. I cannot dive deeply into this issue here, but I would like to provide a brief response to situate my thinking. In some ways, things have oddly flipped from the early days of our republic. While the authors of the Federalist Papers were pessimistic about the public's ability to deliberate, particularly because they were sure factions would form, they were more optimistic that communities had the potential to elect their best and brightest to represent them. The authors hoped that—with the many checks and balances they put in place—the institutions they developed would serve as high-quality deliberative bodies. Fast forward to 2019, and few would describe Congress or any part of our government as a high-functioning "deliberative body." Indeed, I would argue that the general public is actually more likely than most of our elected officials to deliberate well, for reasons I will explore in part 2 below. That being said, the ideal I lay out for the conversations we need for democracy to thrive should be considered relevant both for engagement within government institutions (Congress, state houses, city councils, school boards, and so forth) and the broader public.

PART 1: THE CONVERSATIONS WE SHOULD BE STRIVING FOR

In this first section, I make an argument regarding the kind of conversations we need for democracy to flourish (or at least muddle through adequately). My answer is influenced by work and interdisciplinary theories connected to "wicked problems," deliberative democracy, public participation, public policy and argumentation, facilitation, conflict management, collaboration, systems thinking and social psychology. Over the past twenty years, these theories have led me to an overall viewpoint that centralizes the importance of a particular way of thinking called a wicked problems mindset and a particular form of communication called deliberative engagement. The task ahead of us is taking the knowledge of practitioners about how to design productive small group discussions and collaborative processes and applying it to the broader community. The shift from the deliberative forum to a deliberative system is a necessary one and, although difficult, is feasible.

To begin, "wicked problems" are best understood as problems primarily defined by competing underlying values or tensions that cannot be resolved by science. They have no clear solutions, because actions that support certain values tend inherently to work against others. Consider, for example, the inherent tensions among key American values, such as freedom, equality, justice and security, as well as the tensions among alternative definitions and applications of each value on its own. Those who adopt a wicked problems mindset tend to see most problems through a lens that places into the foreground the underlying values and the natural tensions among them. Addressing wicked problems calls for difficult conversations centered on the quintessential civic question of "what should we do?" (with an emphasis on the "we"). High-quality deliberative engagement requires a broad and inclusive range of stakeholders who work to identify the underlying values clearly, work through the tough choices, and ultimately strive for public judgment regarding collaborative actions.[2] Such conversations may result in prioritizing certain values, seeking a productive balance among them or, ideally, finding innovative ways to transcend the tensions and create win-wins.

Because of the inherent tensions among the many values we hold dear and our inability to solve these dilemmas, the best we can ask for is a robust, ongoing conversation that helps communities manage the tensions as best they can. Such an ongoing conversation would involve a constant process of identifying underlying values and tensions and putting them on the table to work through them, often making tweaks and shifts as conditions change and certain values are found to be over- or underemphasized. Overall, deliberative engagement represents a process of inquiry and learning that harkens back to John Dewey's argument that democracy is "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."[3] This process is also connected to Peter Senge's argument in *Fifth Discipline*, though Senge's work was more on the organizational level. He argued that the quality of organizations is often a direct function of the quality of the ongoing conversation they support. Organizations—and communities— cannot simply focus on solving individual technical problems one by one, particularly because such problem solving often works by narrowing the discussion to specific values and avoiding the tensions. Solutions to one problem often simply lead to new problems. Senge argued

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[2] See Daniel Yankelovich and Will Friedman, *Toward Wiser Public Judgment* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010), and Martín Carcasson and Leah Sprain, "Beyond Problem Solving: Re-conceptualizing the Work of Public Deliberation as Deliberative Inquiry," *Communication Theory* 26 (2016): 41–63.

[3] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 87.

that organizations must, therefore, function as learning organizations by being open to new information and constantly communicating within themselves and adapting. We should look at our communities similarly: as learning communities that are constantly in process. And since the quality of the ongoing conversation is so essential, communities must invest in building capacity to support that conversation.

So what does a robust deliberative system require? Many factors are important, but I focus on three here: support from leadership, high-quality interactions and high-quality information management. When community leaders adopt a wicked problems mindset and work in more of a deliberative capacity, they can make a huge impact on the overall political culture, shifting it from adversarial toward collaborative. By "leaders," I mean both governmental leaders—executives, elected officials and bureaucrats—and community leaders from the private and civic sectors. Generally, deliberative leaders must see at least part of their role as elevating the conversation rather than simply having a strong opinion and working to convince people of and mobilize them around their point of view.[4] Senge called this type of leader a "systems leader."[5] Systems leaders help provide and sustain a critical sense of nuance to tough issues. When they adopt such a mindset, they are also more likely to recognize the importance of necessary infrastructure and skillsets to support the ongoing conversation.

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The second and third factors focus on the fact that high-quality conversations about tough issues often need help. Deliberative facilitators in particular work to address two typical deficiencies in such conversations: the quality of the interactions and how information and decision making are managed. John Gastil captured these concerns in terms of the social and analytical processes embedded within deliberative discussions.[6] The social processes involve things such as who is speaking and whether people are listening to and understanding each other, treating each other with respect and considering each other's ideas and experiences. The analytical processes involve the information base, how people engage with facts and values and consider alternatives and, ultimately, what decisions are made and how.

Deliberative conversations have been occurring for years in organizations and local communities, and, in most cases, they do rely on impartial or third-party organizers, process designers and/ or facilitators utilizing expertise from the many fields I noted earlier. In earlier essays, I have discussed the essential resource of "passionate impartiality."[7] The concept is purposefully an oxymoron and points to the necessary but rare ingredient of people or organizations who are passionate about the community, passionate about democracy and its commitments to equality and inclusion and passionate about high-quality information and properly utilized expertise, but they nonetheless primarily choose to take impartial, process-focused roles in the community.

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[4] Indeed, I would argue that perhaps the most significantly negative aspect of our national system is that the office of the president is always occupied by a partisan, the leader of one of our two adversarial political parties. This almost guarantees a low-quality national discussion. Even if the president attempted to work as a facilitative leader, the opposing party would still likely respond in an adversarial manner.

[5] Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton and John Kania, "The Dawn of System Leadership," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2015), https://ssir.org/pdf/Winter_2015_The_Dawn_of_System_Leadership.pdf.

[6] John Gastil, *Political Communication and Deliberation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008).

[7] Passionate impartiality was originally explored in Leah Sprain and Martín Carcasson, "Democratic Engagement through the Ethic of Passionate Impartiality," *Tamara: Journal for Critical Organization Inquiry* 11, no. 4 (2013): 13–26, and then further developed in Martín Carcasson, "Engaging Students in Our Democracy: Lessons from the CSU Center for Public Deliberation and Its Student Associate Program," in *Beyond Politics as Usual: Paths for Engaging College Students in Politics*, ed. Ileana Marin and Ray Minor (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2017).

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They help frame issues in more nuanced ways, work to involve a broad range of voices (particularly those that have historically been excluded or marginalized), support high-quality engagement processes and, ultimately, help inspire and support collaborative actions to address community issues better. *They focus, in other words, on elevating the conversation rather than winning the argument.* The Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation plays this role in northern Colorado, but we have found we need more individuals and institutions taking it on, as well. The more key people and organizations in the community that do, the stronger the community conversation will be.

At the most concrete level of actual political discussions, facilitators are often vital precisely because these conversations are difficult and, in many ways, unnatural. Our brains are simply not wired for wicked problems. Deliberative processes are thus designed to avoid typical pitfalls of engagement and accentuate the potential for positive interaction. Deliberative engagement relies on ground rules, high-quality issue framings and processes and active facilitation to guide groups through these social and analytical tasks. As people involved with facilitation will attest, groups do not perform these functions well on their own.

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The importance of high-quality information management warrants further discussion. One of the most problematic aspects of our hyperpartisanship is its inherent assault on information. The RAND Corporation captured this phenomenon well in its report, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*. When we shift from adversarial to collaborative processes—a key goal of deliberative engagement—we also tend to manage information much better. Collaborative groups seek out high-quality information to help them make decisions, while recognizing that information is never quite clear enough to make any tough decision self-evident. Overall, the point here is that tough conversations become less tough and decision-making processes clearly improve when supported by high-quality information. Ideally, people work to find the right balance between relying too much or too little on facts and expertise, or between being overwhelmed by data or avoiding them. Because wicked problems are inherently value laden, no technical solutions are to be discovered and applied. We cannot simply defer to experts to decide for us. That being said, high-quality information used well can certainly help us make better decisions. Finding productive ways to incorporate experts and high-quality information into political discussions is difficult but essential work that, unfortunately, the Internet has made exceedingly more problematic. Deliberative practitioners often work to develop the reputation and skills to serve as honest brokers of information so they may play the critical role of managing these tensions well.

When these components are in place, our political conversations look very different. They do not merely involve elites engaging each other in adversarial contexts, at times either seeking "input" from constituents or working to mobilize them to their point of view. Public engagement shifts to a learning process, an ongoing collaborative conversation focused on what sort of community people want to build together.

To address one likely concern before we move on: I recognize this is an ideal picture that seems overly optimistic, if not Pollyannaish. The goal of a deliberative community is an ideal—we are

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working toward a "more perfect" union, recognizing we will never reach perfection. It remains, nonetheless, an ideal worth striving for. The closer communities come to this ideal, the stronger they will be. The important move here is redefining the ideal and inspiring communities and their institutions to experiment in pursuing it.

PART 2: THE CURRENT REALITY

Whereas in part 1 I laid out the ideal form we need our political conversations to take, in part 2 I examine the sober reality of our actual political conversations. As much has already been written about the current state of our politics, this review will focus on the extremely low quality of communication and conversation the system supports. My overall argument is that our current political system motivates very poor conversations, basically by rewarding bad arguments and manipulative tactics and often punishing good arguments. As a result, our conversations are not focused on addressing shared problems together, but rather on some alternative goal, such as winning elections, defending our identities and our teams, mobilizing likeminded choirs, gaining or protecting power or appeasing donors. At times, addressing problems happens to line up with these goals, but not nearly often enough.

That the goals of much political communication are not focused on addressing shared problems is simply the catalyst that unfortunately leads us into a negative cycle of dysfunction, polarization and hyperpartisanship. Simply put, the types of communication strategies that succeed politically have majorly problematic side effects.

To set the stage for my analysis, I will briefly review insights from brain science and social psychology.[8] That research highlights how human nature has both positive and negative aspects that public processes can spark and tap into, with, unfortunately, the negative aspects being much more basic and easier to trigger.

FIVE KEY THEMES CAPTURE THE NEGATIVE QUIRKS OF HUMAN NATURE THAT BAD PROCESS CAN BRING OUT:

- We crave certainty and consistency.
- We are suckers for the good versus evil narrative.
- We strongly prefer to gather with the likeminded.
- We filter and cherry pick evidence to support our views.
- We avoid values dilemmas, tensions and tough choices.

Regrettably, our dominant political conversations almost seem designed in many ways to take these natural quirks and unleash them on our communities.

The trouble begins simply with a two-party system and winner-take-all elections. Having this

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[8] In this I draw on Martín Carcasson, "Process Matters: Human Nature, Democracy, and a Call for Rediscovering Wisdom," a research report prepared for the Kettering Foundation, completed in July 2016. A brief summary is available as "Why Process Matters: Democracy and Human Nature," *Kettering Review* (2017): 6–22, https://www.kettering.org/sites/default/files/periodical-article/Carcasson%20KFReview_Fall_2017.pdf.

system at the base of our political conversations provides incentive for communication either to the likeminded choir or to so-called "wedge" voters in the middle. Just as important, it almost completely removes incentive for messages designed to persuade or connect to the "other side" (meaning, in addition, there is little incentive to try to listen to or understand the other side). As a result, messages that link directly to the negative quirks of human nature—confident, simplistic, good versus evil narratives that avoid any sense of nuance and tensions—are rewarded. One side is lifted up as pure and correct; the other as misinformed and corrupt. As George W. Bush captured so succinctly in his eulogy to Dallas police officers who were ambushed in 2016, "Too often we judge other groups by their worst examples, while judging ourselves by our best intentions."[9] Rather than pushing back on these natural impulses, our current system encourages them. Such messages can easily either cherry pick evidence (that is, selectively utilizing information that fits your narrative) or "nutpick" specific examples[10] (selectively promoting a problematic argument from the "other side"—regardless of how minor or random a source—as a representative illustration of that side's deepest beliefs and motives).

> **"** Too often we judge other groups by their worst examples, while judging ourselves by our best intentions."

This basic model of only needing to appeal to those on your side and, at times, some in the middle also leads to discussions with very little productive interaction. This system primarily supports the expression of individual opinions, following the simple one-way communication model. Even our political "debates" are often simply joint press conferences, with each side working to get its talking points expressed and perhaps score a nice, short zinger that will make the news or go viral on social media. The panels on news shows that try to have some sense of balance across perspectives often simply devolve into shouting matches, with arguments flying past each other with negligible clash and, certainly, minimal learning. Those watching likely accept the argument that fits their prior beliefs and dismiss the others, and all are further assured of their individual brilliance.

Another key aspect undermining the quality of our political conversations is whose voices are heard. The report *Hidden Tribes*, by More In Common, argued our conversations are dominated by the far political wings, while the "exhausted majority" is often silent.[11] More and more, the loudest and most frequently heard voices are simply pundits and partisans. These are often professional communicators seeking to send specific, predetermined strategic messages. In other words, they are not susceptible to persuasion or learning and will stay on message regardless of the arc of the conversation. Such communicators treat political ideas as if they are selling boxes of cereal or used cars. The purpose of the communication is mobilizing the likeminded, manipulating the undecided and/or ridiculing, undermining or triggering the other side. The result is the problems we face get harder to address.

A negative feedback loop and spiral of cynicism and partisanship typically follows. When the messages designed to mobilize or manipulate are heard by the other side, they tend to cause anger and frustration and, thus, help solidify negative assumptions and justify meanspirited responses. Of course, those responses, when heard by the other side, do the same, and away

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9 Quoted in Jena McGregor, "The Most Memorable Passage in George W. Bush's Speech Rebuking Trumpism," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2017.

10 Ben Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How to Heal* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), 106.

11 Stephen Hawkins, Daniel Yudkin, Miriam Juan-Torres and Tim Dixon, *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape*, report by More in Common, 2018, https://hiddentribes.us/pdf/hidden_tribes_report.pdf.

12 Arthur C. Brooks, "Our Culture of Contempt," New York Times, March 2, 2019; Sally Kohn, The Opposite of Hate: A Field Guide to Repairing our Humanity (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2018); Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public," June 2014, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2014/06/6-12-2014-Political-Polarization-Release.pdf.

we go. As shown by commentators as politically diverse as Arthur Brooks and Sally Kohn, as well as survey research from the Pew Research Center, the animosity between political parties has reached excessive levels. The conflict is not merely one of political views or value differences; contempt is growing across the aisle. Defined by Brooks as "a noxious brew of anger and disgust,"[12] such contempt has significant repercussions, primarily because it further reinforces the simple narratives and narrows the thinking. Once people assume negative motives on the part of their adversaries, the possibility of productive communication breaks down. They may see any argument or action through those biased lenses and interpret it with ill will. In the end, they become more and more convinced that the problem is wicked people, not wicked problems. And, with that assumption, concerns about vanquishing the enemy far outweigh any sense of addressing shared problems.

One prominent consequence of all this animosity and hyperpartisanship is its impact on the role of experts and facts. We know from social psychology research that facts struggle to prevail in the hyperpartisan environment. Facts are unlikely to change minds when people are emotionally invested in their narratives, and in some cases we are seeing evidence that the stronger the facts presented to show people they are wrong, the more likely the impact will backfire and they will simply dig in further.[13] Humans are quite adept at fitting new information into their existing narratives rather than allowing the new information to challenge them. In a state of hyperpartisanship, everything is interpreted through a lens that assumes corrupt motives for the other side, easily leading to the dismissal of any strong counterarguments as manipulation or outright lies. When facts and expertise are undermined in this way, we lose an essential basis for problem solving, as well as valuable common ground on which to build. If facts are merely ammunition when they fit your perspective and fake news when they do not, productive political communication is hopeless, and any solutions or actions derived from such processes are likely highly flawed.

Lastly, growing hyperpartisanship is having a clear negative impact on our institutions. From the beginning, the Founders explicitly recognized the need for balance between unity and difference in the United States, captured in the motto *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one). That tension can never be resolved but must be an ongoing concern. It is clear there have always been centripetal forces that bring Americans together and, as expected in a diverse nation of immigrants that has never lived up to its lofty ideals, centrifugal forces that drive us apart.[14] Unfortunately, the centrifugal forces seem to be strengthening as the centripetal forces weaken; or, in some cases, traditionally centripetal forces have been transformed into centrifugal ones, further knocking us off balance. Typically, for example, foreign affairs and particularly wars have brought Americans together, but, since Vietnam and certainly with Mr. Trump in the White House, the notion that politics stops at the water's edge no longer seems to serve. The media used to be a common source of information but now have become politicized themselves and, more often than not, a source of partisanship and division. Our educational institutions are also more and more seen through the lens of partisanship, both at the K–12 and higher education levels. Even down to the local level, as Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol have argued, the community organizations that used to bring people from different perspectives together and build bridging social capital have withered, while national organizations focused on particular viewpoints have grown—another shift from forces that bring us together to those that divide us. All this division further undermines the conversations that need to occur.

In summary, as seen through the lens of considering the quality of our political conversations and

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[13] See B. Nyhan and J. Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (2010): 303–30.
[14] Jonathan Haidt, "The Age of Outrage," speech delivered at the Manhattan Institute, December 17, 2017,
  https://www.city-journal.org/html/age-outrage-15608.html

the sort of engagement our political systems spark, the outlook is dreary. Returning to the keys to a high-quality conversation denoted in part 1, our current model fails every test. Our leaders and dominant voices are often the most partisan; there is no clear presence of passionately impartial facilitators focused on elevating the conversation; and the information management is exceedingly poor. If my task were the opposite of what it is right now, and my goal were to design processes to ensure horrible, unproductive conversations that keep us from addressing shared problems well, I would essentially design our national system. A two-party system with winner-take-all elections and politicized media that constantly broadcast and reward the loudest and most partisan voices is guaranteed to undermine any robust efforts at genuine engagement. The bad news is I do not foresee a clear path to change at the national level. The good news, however, is that as more and more people shift to focusing on the local level, opportunities will clearly arise. I turn to that argument now.

PART 3: THE HOPE OF THE LOCAL DELIBERATIVE SYSTEM

When we shift our focus from our national system to local communities, we can find some hope. Indeed, I would argue our best long-term hope of improving our national system is having more and more local communities build up robust and productive deliberative systems, to the point that people see the viability and positive impacts of the deliberative alternative, build up their skills to engage each other and reestablish their trust in each other and key institutions. Ideally, a new generation of leaders will develop in these deliberative communities and then champion deliberative engagement as they move up to the state and national levels.

Looking at the local level, thankfully, we see numerous ways to shift away from, or simply avoid, the dysfunction at the national level and work toward building a robust deliberative system. Earlier, I reviewed the negative aspects of human nature uncovered by my social psychology research and argued that our dominant political systems overwhelmingly trigger them. That research also revealed some positive aspects of human nature that, although harder to tap into, provide significant potential for improved engagement. The task, therefore, is to find ways to avoid triggering the bad stuff and get more of the good stuff. While doing just that at the national level is unlikely, the local level does hold some promise.

AMONG THE KEY POSITIVE ASPECTS OF HUMAN NATURE ARE THESE:

- We are inherently social and seek purpose and community.
- We are inherently empathetic.
- We are inherently pragmatic and creative.
- We can overcome our bad tendencies and build better habits.

A thoughtful local deliberative system can tap into these features to transform and elevate our conversations. Numerous aspects of local community already either inherently work to elevate our conversations or have an underlying potential that could be realized.

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Perhaps the most important distinction between the national and local levels is that our two-party system is typically less powerful at the latter. Many local elections officially do not allow party labels, and while people still may know the affiliations unofficially, the lack of direct party participation does lessen the simplistic narrative. Without the polarization-ready R or D, other narratives have a chance. Whereas at the national level political involvement inherently gets shoehorned into the red or blue tribe, at the local level, alternative tribes can arise. Rather than tapping directly into the prepackaged need for certainty and a simplistic good versus evil narrative, local narratives can form that are more unifying and based on the sense of place. The tribe may be Fort Collins, or Dayton, or Harris County, and thus may tap into the positive energy of people being inherently social and wanting community and connection.

Local leaders also tend to be more inherently pragmatic than many of our national leaders. This likely is also connected to the lack of party influence, but—primarily, I believe—it is simply tied to the reality that local leaders have to get things done and so must typically work with a broad coalition of people. The many previously mentioned alternative goals that people pursue at the national level instead of addressing shared problems are not nearly as powerful at the local level. Local leaders cannot play the political game and get reelected by their bases in the way national leaders often can. While our national elections tend strongly to favor partisans, our local elections can often favor pragmatic, facilitative leaders who know how to bring people together.

> **High-quality face to face communication—facilitated and designed to address conflict well—can be particularly rehumanizing, and our politics needs several healthy doses of rehumanization."**

A key advantage to the development of a local deliberative system is the simple fact that people interact more face to face and often know each other, or at least they engage in multiple ways. Many have lamented that changes in how congresspeople interact have been a significant cause of the increased polarization in Washington. When people do not know each other in roles other than as political adversaries, hyperpartisanship can easily take root. Face to face interaction also taps into natural human empathy. When you hear each other's stories and can see facial reactions, it is much more difficult to support simple narratives and assume evil motives. High-quality face to face communication—facilitated and designed to address conflict well—can be particularly rehumanizing, and our politics needs several healthy doses of rehumanization.

A rather specific but important manifestation of local government I have come to see as particularly valuable is the council-manager form, which is pretty typical for small and medium-sized cities and counties. It was initially developed during the Progressive Era, partly as a response to the too powerful machine politics that had arisen in many cities. City managers are experts trained to run cities. The combination of the city manager with a popularly elected city council—which actually has most of the broad decision-making power, with the city manager working with city staff to accomplish what the city council asks them to do—provides a potentially strong structure for managing information and negotiating the inherent tension between democracy and expertise. When informed by a wicked problems mindset and utilized well, I believe the council-manager form of government could be one of the most important factors in developing a robust local deliberative system. An ongoing collaboration among the Kettering Foundation, the International City/County Managers Association, the National Association of Counties, the National Civic League, and the International Association of Public Participation is actively exploring this issue, focusing on equipping city managers with the skills to elevate conversations in their communities.

Another attribute of local communities that provides a huge advantage over state or national politics is that the scale allows institutions to function much more productively, especially when a system is in place to build their capacity and support their collaborative efforts. When a community sees itself as a deliberative system, it can better survey and support its current assets, as well as work to develop new organizations to fill necessary gaps. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, relies on the metaphor of the ecology of democracy to lay out what a robust deliberative system should look like. Although a local government that supports deliberative engagement is certainly essential, it is clearly not sufficient. Addressing wicked problems well requires a broad range of actors across public, private and nonprofit lines, in addition to the necessary supports and resources for them to work together well.

Many local actors favor collaboration and community engagement in theory, but few realize the difficulty of doing those well without resources and expertise. For communities to thrive, they not only need mediating institutions that bring people together across perspectives and generate bridging social capital; they also need passionately impartial resources, or "backbone organizations," to use the term developed within the so-called world of collective impact.[15] Such organizations provide the logistics and process support to spark and sustain ongoing and productive public conversations. Developing and sustaining them locally is possible, and more and more communities are providing workable examples of such institutions.[16] For the past decade, I have worked with the Kettering Foundation's Centers for Public Life program to help launch such organizations, primarily tied to colleges and universities. Many currently have very little capacity or support, but as we learn more about the importance of building deliberative systems, I believe they will become key elements of their communities and earn much greater support. As we continue to learn from each other and build vibrant communities of practice, the bar for additional cities to recognize the importance of such an infrastructure will be lower and lower.

Two institutions particularly important to a robust deliberative system, especially in terms of information management, are the media and educational institutions. When they also adopt a deliberative mindset and focus on elevating the conversation, they can significantly increase the capacity of a community. Both work not only to educate the community over the long term, potentially instilling the mindsets and skillsets essential to deliberative engagement;[17] they can also be active participants in and vital supports to ongoing conversations about particular issues. In many ways, both should inherently be passionately impartial. When they engage well, they can complicate simple narratives in a positive way, help uncover underlying values across perspectives, highlight key tensions that need to be worked through, assist in managing the role of information and support the creation and sustainability of ongoing collaborative actions. They can serve as catalysts, hosts, facilitators, analysts and reporters that elevate and bring attention to good conversations. They can be critical to ensuring the conversation is broad and inclusive, particularly engaging audiences that have not traditionally been involved and heard.[18]

Ultimately, the media and our schools are essential to equipping citizens as deliberative resources. When citizens are ideally developed as collaborative problem solvers (rather than

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[15] See John Kania and Mark Kramer, "Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2011), https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact#

[16] Martín Carcasson, "The Critical Role of Local Centers and Institutes in Advancing Deliberative Democracy," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 10, no. 1 (2014): 1–4, http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol10/iss1/art11.

[17] Martín Carcasson, "Deliberative Pedagogy as Critical Connective: Building Democratic Mindsets and Skillsets for Addressing Wicked Problems," in *Deliberative Pedagogy and Democratic Engagement*, ed. Timothy Shaffer, Nicholas Longo, Idit Manosevitch and Maxine S. Thomas (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2017).

[18] In a broader argument for another essay, I would maintain that our media and educational institutions are struggling in many ways, and adopting a wicked problems mindset and serving as deliberative resources could revitalize them in a way that is particularly needed in our hyperpartisan times. See Martín Carcasson, "From Crisis to Opportunity: Rethinking the Civic Role of Universities in the Face of Wicked Problems, Hyper-Partisanship, and Truth Decay," in *Democracy, Civic Engagement and Citizenship in Higher Education* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2019).

merely advocates, partisans, customers, taxpayers or voters), the community's deliberative capacity skyrockets. Collaborative problem solvers are not necessarily neutral or impartial—they can clearly have their own values and opinions and hold them strongly—but their mindset is to engage others collaboratively, knowing that the best path to supporting their interests is to work together with their neighbors, considering their interests and holding a healthy sense of the common good.

> **"** The most exciting aspect of the work to build a robust local deliberative system is, as the research and the experience in many communities show, that a positive feedback loop develops."

The most exciting aspect of the work to build a robust local deliberative system is, as the research and the experience in many communities show, that a positive feedback loop develops. Particularly in comparison to the negative feedback loop exhibited by our national political system, the long-term implications are immense. As I argued earlier, deliberative democracy is an ideal that is exceedingly difficult to reach, but it is clear that once a community commits to elevating its conversations, numerous aspects begin to build upon each other. Once a significant cadre of citizens adopts the mindset and begins building the skillsets, transforming conversations and taking additional residents onboard becomes easier and easier. Relationships and trust form across perspectives, closing the gaps that undermine genuine conversations. Capacity is developed for a particular project and then remains for the next project to build upon. With less and less hyperpartisanship and more authentic engagement, the incentives shift. Weak arguments based on simplistic good versus evil narratives are dismissed, and nuance is rewarded. Public processes are not dominated by those who already hold strong opinions, as they are now, but rather by people eager to engage others, learn and co-create collaborative actions to improve their communities. And, most importantly for the health of our communities, rather than tapping into the worst in human nature, we begin to tap into the best.

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