

## Americans Aren't Practicing Democracy Anymore

As participation in civic life has dwindled, so has public faith in the country's system of government.

[Yoni Appelbaum](#), The Atlantic Magazine

*Editor's Note: This article is part of a [series](#) that attempts to answer the question: Is democracy dying?*

Democracy is a most unnatural act. People have no innate democratic instinct; we are not born yearning to set aside our own desires in favor of the majority's. Democracy is, instead, an acquired habit.

Like most habits, democratic behavior develops slowly over time, through constant repetition. For two centuries, the United States was distinguished by its mania for democracy: from early childhood, Americans learned to be citizens by creating, joining, and participating in democratic organizations. But in recent decades, Americans have fallen out of practice, or even failed to acquire the habit of democracy in the first place.

The results have been catastrophic. As the procedures that once conferred legitimacy on organizations have grown alien to many Americans, contempt for democratic institutions has risen. In 2016, a presidential candidate who scorned established norms rode that contempt to the Republican nomination, drawing his core support from Americans who seldom participate in the rituals of democracy.

American government's most obvious problems—from its dysfunctional legislature to Donald Trump himself—are merely signs of this underlying decay. The political system's previous strength and resilience flowed from Americans' anomalously high rates of participation in democratically governed organizations, most of them apolitical. There is no easy fix for our current predicament; simply voting Trump out of office won't suffice. To stop the rot afflicting American government, Americans are going to have to get back in the habit of democracy.

*[In an edited section, the author reviews the history of civic participation in voluntary organizations in the United States, noting that by the 1900s, "Democracy had become the shared civic religion of a people who otherwise had little in common."]*

Voluntary associations have "provided the people with their greatest school of self-government," the historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. wrote in 1944. "Rubbing minds as well as elbows, they have been trained from youth to take common counsel, choose leaders, harmonize differences, and obey the expressed will of the majority. In mastering the associative way they have mastered the democratic way."

But the United States is no longer a nation of joiners. As the political scientist Robert Putnam [famously demonstrated](#) in *Bowling Alone*, participation in civic groups and organizations of all kinds declined precipitously in the last decades of the 20th century. The trend has, if anything, accelerated since then; one study found that from 1994 to 2004, membership in such groups fell

by 21 percent. And even that likely understates the real decline, as a slight uptick in passive memberships has masked a steeper fall in attendance and participation. The United States is no longer a nation of presidents, either. In a 2010 census survey, just 11 percent of respondents said that they had served as an officer or been on a committee of any group or organization in the previous year.

Putnam was concerned about the effects of this decline on “social capital,” which he defined as the “norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement.” His financial metaphor values civic life primarily for the assets it provides individuals. This perspective lends itself to a certain optimism. Not every measure of social capital is in decline: Americans still volunteer and attend religious services at relatively high rates. They can also use social media to connect with one another in new ways, forging communities of interest across vast geographic distances. In these ways, individuals can still accrue substantial social capital. The metaphor has its limits, however: In focusing on the importance of ties between individuals, it neglects the *intrinsic* benefits of participating in civic life.

Volunteerism, church attendance, and social-media participation are not schools for self-government; they do not inculcate the habits and rituals of democracy. And as young people participate less in democratically run organizations, they show less faith in democracy itself. In 2011, about a quarter of American Millennials said that democracy was a “bad” or “very bad” way to run a country, and that it was “unimportant” to choose leaders in free and fair elections. By the time Donald Trump launched his presidential campaign, Gallup polling showed that Americans’ faith in most of the nation’s major institutions—the criminal-justice system, the press, public schools, all three branches of government—was below the historical average.

Trump turned the long-standing veneration of civic procedure [on its head](#). He proclaimed that America is “rigged”; that “the insiders wrote the rules of the game to keep themselves in power and in the money.” The norms and practices of democratic governance, he insisted, had allowed elites to entrench themselves.

Trump secured the Republican nomination by speaking directly to those voters who had the least experience with democratic institutions. In April 2016, when the Republican field had narrowed from 17 candidates to three, a [PRRI/The Atlantic survey](#) found Trump enjoying a narrow lead over second-place Ted Cruz among Republican-leaning voters, 37 to 31 percent. But among those who seldom or never participated in community activities such as sports teams, book clubs, parent-teacher associations, or neighborhood associations, Trump led 50 to 24 percent. In fact, such civically disengaged voters accounted for a majority of his support.

Trump’s coalition in the general election was more varied, fusing disengaged voters with stalwart Republicans who reluctantly backed him over Hillary Clinton. He didn’t alter his message, though. “This election will decide whether we’re ruled by a corrupt political class or whether we are ruled by yourselves, the people,” Trump said on the eve of the election. In office, he has run roughshod over established protocols, displaying a disdain for democratic procedures that Henry Robert would have found incomprehensible.

This disdain has not, however, cost him much political support. “Democratic government, being government by discussion and majority vote, works best when there is nothing of profound importance to discuss,” the historian Carl Becker wrote in 1941. But in the polarized political

environment of 2018, the stakes seem incomprehensibly high. For Democrats and Republicans alike, abiding by the old rules can seem a sucker's game, an act of unilateral disarmament. Norms are difficult to enshrine but easy to discard. Every time Trump does something that just isn't done, he all but guarantees it will be done again in the future.

The relative stability of the American government, even when led by a proudly disruptive president, is a perverse testament to just how integral democracy has been to American culture. But this is changing. Trump insists on prioritizing outcomes over processes, spurring many of his opponents to respond in kind. Willingness to adhere to settled rules, even when in the short term doing so ensures your opponent's triumph and your own defeat, is the hardest of all democratic habits to acquire—and increasing numbers of Americans never did.

The golden age of the voluntary association is over, thanks to the automobile, the television, and the two-income household, among other culprits. The historical circumstances that produced it, moreover, seem unlikely to recur; Americans are no longer inclined to leave the comforts and amusements of home for the lodge hall or meeting room. Which means that any revival of participatory democracy won't be built on fraternal orders and clubs.

Such a revival will need to begin where the erosion of the democratic impulse has been most pronounced—among the youngest generations. Happily, youth is when new things are most easily learned. The best place to locate new schools of self-government, then, is schools. That does not mean adding civics classes to the already onerous requirements imposed on students; habits like these cannot be picked up from textbooks.

It means carving out the time, space, and resources for students to govern themselves. One recent study found that, holding all else equal, greater knowledge of civics among high-school seniors correlated with a 2 percent greater likelihood of voting in a presidential election eight years later. Active participation in extracurricular activities, however, correlated with a 141 percent increase.

Unfortunately, the privileges of student government are unequally distributed. Take one essential element of democratic practice: the existence of written rules. As a school's percentage of minority students increases, the likelihood of its student council having a charter declines; student councils in public schools with a high concentration of poor students are only half as likely as their more affluent counterparts to have a written charter. And in poorer public schools that do have a chartered student council, the decisions it makes matter less—such schools are more likely than wealthier ones to allow faculty and administrators to constrain the council's decisions.

Young Americans of all backgrounds deserve the chance to write charters, elect officers, and work through the messy and frustrating process of self-governance. They need the opportunity to make mistakes, and resolve them, without advisers intervening. Such activities shouldn't be seen as extracurricular, but as the basic curriculum of democracy. In that respect, what students are doing—club sports, student council, the robotics team—matters less than how they're doing it and what they're gaining in the process: an appreciation for the role of rules and procedures in managing disputes.

The next step is to translate that activity into other realms. It's no coincidence that the peak decades of associational activity, in the 19th century, also brought the peak turnout of eligible voters. "A vast body of evidence now suggests that habits form when people vote," a review of the research [concluded in 2016](#). Persuading potential voters to cast a ballot in one election raises the odds of their voting in the next one. When Americans turn 18, they should be automatically registered to vote.

But that's just the start. Over the past half century, the cult of efficiency has driven democratic governance into retreat. As the sociologist Theda Skocpol has noted, more and more American organizations—from charities to trade associations—are run by salaried professionals and supported by dues-paying members who seldom if ever attend a meeting. Some 95 percent of AARP members are uninvolved in their local chapters; the AAA card in your wallet will secure you roadside assistance, but no longer is it a passport to monthly gatherings at a clubhouse or weekend "sociability" rides. Labor unions are [shrinking](#) as the [protections](#) they once enjoyed are chipped away. A relatively small number of enormous corporations exercise increasing control over the economy and public life. (Meanwhile, the shareholders of those corporations have discovered, to their dismay, how little power they hold over the boards of directors they nominally elect.)

This is where the truly hard work begins. Democratic governance is never the most efficient means of running an organization, as anyone who's attended a local zoning hearing can attest. Its value lies instead in harmonizing discordant interests and empowering constituents. A nation of passive observers watching others make decisions is a nation that will succumb to anger and resentment—witness the United States.

It is worth reengaging all Americans in the governance of daily life, even if that means sacrificing some degree of efficiency, and displacing expert administrators with elected amateurs. The American system of government functions properly only when embedded in a culture deeply committed to democracy; that culture sustains the Constitution, not the other way around.

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