A Frequently Overlooked Precondition of Democracy:

Citizens Knowledgeable about and Engaged in Collective Action

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> The state is a two-edge sword: The existence of a state is essential for economic growth; the state, however, is the source of man-made decline. (North 1981: 20)

Contemporary discussions of democracy tend to focus on "The State" and what this poorly defined entity can do (or should not do) to enhance transitions to democracy (Przeworski et al. 2000, Barzel 2001, Bates 2005). Much controversy exists, however, about the role of the state in creating democracy as well as the meaning of the term (Levi 2002). Scholars, who have had extensive on-the-ground experience in trying to achieve democracy in developing countries, have provided a vivid picture of the role of the national government in plundering the citizens and organizations they supposedly serve (Sawyer 2005). The "failure of the state" is a frequent theme in the media, in our journals, and in the publications of international donors (Herbst 1996/1997, Collier et al. 2003). Colleagues at the University of Maryland have taken on the responsibility to set up a "State Failure Task Force" and related website (http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/project.asp?id=19).

What do we mean, however, when we refer to "the" state? If we merely mean the unit of national government that is recognized by other national governments as the official government unit for participating in the negotiation of international treaties and in international bodies, such as the United Nations, that is a relatively clear-cut concept. Other countries determine when a government is a legitimate participant in international affairs. Why then blame a unit of government recognized at an international level for not achieving democracy at home? Autocratic regimes are frequent participants at the negotiating table related to international affairs.

While not clearly stating their definition, many scholars are using the Weberian concept of the sovereign state when they use this term. Weber adopted a monocratic principle of government organization that implies a "monopolization of legitimate violence by the political organization which finds its culmination in the modern concept of the state as the ultimate source of every kind of legitimacy of the use of physical force" (Rheinstein 1954, 347). Too frequently, this notion of sovereignty as "the supreme authority" is contradictory to the concept of democracy.

The notion of an ideal bureaucratic form brought to the social sciences by Weber has led to oversimplified and dangerous views of how to improve governmental performance. Reforms recommended by international development assistance agencies have all too frequently stressed the importance of clear lines of authority from one central authority to lower officials who would then be commanded by superiors in all of their activities (Gibson et al. 2005). The dominance of this monocratic view of governance is indeed a threat both to democratic transitions in developing countries as well as the sustenance of democracies in already established Western democracies (V. Ostrom 1997, 2006). No democratic system can be sustained for long without educated citizens who are able to solve many of their own collective-action problems. Most important, informed citizens need to be able to challenge efforts to take over their democratic system by powerful autocrats. Tocqueville long ago recognized the threat:

> If education enables men at all times to defend their independence, this is most especially true in democratic times. When all men are alike, it is easy to found a sole and all-powerful government by the aid of mere instinct. But men require much intelligence, knowledge, and art to organize and to maintain secondary powers under similar circumstances and to create, amid the independence and individual weaknesses of the citizens, such free associations as may be able to struggle against tyranny without destroying public order.

> Hence the concentration of power and the subjection of individuals will increase among democratic nations, not only in the same proportion as their equality, but in the same proportion as their ignorance [...] Hence among a nation which is ignorant as well as democratic an amazing difference cannot fail speedily to arise between the intellectual capacity of the ruler and that of each of his subjects. This completes the easy concentration of power in his hands: the administrative function of the state is perpetually extended because the state alone is competent to administer the affairs of the country. (Tocqueville, [1840] 1966: pp. 299-300)

The concluding section of Weber's own work has, unfortunately, been ignored by too many scholars (exceptions are Crozier 1964, Diamant

1962). Weber presented a devastating critique of the consequences of achieving perfection of bureaucratic organization. V. Ostrom (1989) stressed the paradigmatic problem for scholars of public administration who have tried to "perfect" bureaucracy and then find the results of bureaucratization all too frequently counterproductive. Mancur Olson (1993) made us recognize that a stationary bandit may be somewhat preferable to a set of roving bandits, but most of us who are interested in the furtherance of democratic systems do not want any kind of bandits dominating our governments.

While markets do fail in regard to the provision of public goods and the solving of many collective-action problems, the alternative to market organization is not just a single, large-scale bureaucratic apparatus. When Buchanan and Tullock (1962) wrote their seminal book on *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy*, they did not focus on the problems of establishing a single unit of sovereign authority for an entire country. Their examples of constitutional processes focused on solving local collective-action problems. They examine the logic of constitutional choice that citizens face who live in rural or urban communities and confront problems such as local zoning, building and repairing local roads, and the maintenance of peaceful neighborhoods. The citizens they model have the sovereignty to constitute their own governments to solve these problems.

Bruno Frey has documented how federal systems of government involving high levels of autonomy for organized citizens at many scales – he calls them FOCJ – generate more efficient and fair policies than top-down bureaucratic systems (Frey and Eichenberger 1999). "These *functional, overlapping, and competing jurisdictions* form a federal system of government that is not to be dictated by some high place, but emerge from below as a response to citizens' preferences" (Frey 2005, 3). Citizen engagement is also crowded out when external authorities take charge and try to solve local problems largely by paying citizens off (Frey 1994). Work of colleagues associated with the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis has also shown that local public economies that have multiple government organizations at diverse scales – e. g., are polycentric – tend to perform at a much high level than strictly monocentric systems (Oakerson 1999, McGinnis 1999a, 1999b).

Focusing on the state narrowly understood is important to address some questions. In many developing countries, for example, international aid has urged and supported the creation of national governments that are close to having a monopoly on the legitimate uses of force (Gibson et

al. 2005). The real problem here may be to *reduce* the powers of national governments rather than to *strengthen* them. This is a bit ambiguous: reducing the powers of national governments could refer to what we might call – using Fukuyama's (State Building) terminology – their scope, or to their strength. As far as I see, reducing the scope of central governments is what you have in mind, and not a weakening of their capacities to do what is their legitimate business. Citizens in these countries do need support in their efforts to create forms of non-market organizations that provide a real voice for development rather than further investments in bureaucratic apparatus. Further, democracy is hard to establish in settings with considerable inequality (Zimmerling 2005). It is dangerous for the residents of developing countries, however, when scholars and policymakers presume that *they* have the needed assets for solving the problems of developing countries, and that the citizens of these countries have "needs" but not any capabilities (Sawyer 2005, Gellar 2005, Shivakumar 2005). While substantial sums of money and technical expertise are indeed assets, they are not sufficient by themselves to solve long term problems associated with the creation of monopoly authorities that can only be toppled by groups who organize military protests rather than democratic challenges (McGinnis 2005).

Democracy emerges more successfully when governance is not concentrated in a top-down, bureaucratic structure furthering high levels of rent-seeking and corruption and low levels of education, health services, and problem-solving capabilities for situations (Gellar 2005, Shivakumar 2005). For those of us living in Western democracies, we need to take care that the basic conditions leading to our own democratic institutions may be eroding through the reforms that have been undertaken as a result of dominant theories of how to create an efficient public sector and through the education (or, rather, lack of education) provided in our high schools and colleges about the essential role of citizens in multiple kinds of collective action (Allen 2005).

In the remainder of this article, I plan to discuss two major themes. First, I will provide rapid overview of the destructive reforms that have been undertaken in the United States and elsewhere by officials trained to think that Weberian bureaucratic models are the ideal. Given these views, the presence of large numbers of local governments that had substantial autonomy was seen as evidence of inefficient and inequitable provision or services. This led to proposals to massively reduce the number of local governments in the United States (as well as in parts of Europe) that were strongly opposed by the citizens being served. Em-

pirical research has not found support for the propositions underlying the reform proposals.

Second, I will turn to the need for much more emphasis on how citizens can engage in collective action in the curriculum offered in our universities. In earlier times, citizens learned how to engage in collective action in their daily lives by engaging directly in solving community problems. They did not need to read about it in books. Given that these lessons are not "learned by doing" in as many households as earlier, a strong need exists for building a better curriculum to offset the lack of day-to-day knowledge creation.

I. The History of Counterproductive Local Government Reforms in Western Democracies

The Weberian concept of an ideal bureaucratic organization dominated the urban reform literature during much of the twentieth century. Scholars working within the traditional disciplines of political science and public administration have long been perplexed by the sheer complexity of the delivery arrangements that existed in American metropolitan areas. The dominant view of metropolitan institutions was that they are chaotic and incomprehensible. Given that scholars studying metropolitan service delivery arrangements could find no order in them, the reaction has been to recommend that metropolitan institutions should be radically consolidated and streamlined. Many articles, books, monographs, and reports written by urban scholars recommend the elimination of smaller jurisdictions and the creation of a few, large, general-purpose governments to produce all local services in any given metropolitan area (see literature cited in Bish and Ostrom 1973).

This literature has been the basis for many consolidation referenda placed before voters who repeatedly reject the proposed reforms. In 1970, Amos Hawley and Basil G. Zimmer summarized the dominant academic view of the day:

> A diagnosis of the metropolitan malady is comparatively easy and its logic is too compelling to admit disagreement. Given the diagnosis the treatment seems just as apparent: consolidate the many political units under a single, over-arching municipal government. With one stroke the many conflicting jurisdictions could be eliminated and a fragmented tax base could be combined into an adequate source of revenue for an entire community. Nothing, it would seem, could be more obvious or more rational. For that reason governmental consolidation has had numerous advocates. It has also had numerous opponents. Indeed, opposition to such a proposal has been monumental. (Hawley and Zimmer 1970, 3)

This view has been reiterated continuously through the years.

   The reformers were largely successful in achieving a massive number of school district consolidations over the opposition of the citizens they served. In 1932, prior to major efforts to "improve" the efficiency of schools through consolidation, there were 128,548 school districts in the United States. Each of these school districts would have had an elected governing board consisting of at least five members. In 1932, therefore, in addition to families coping with a depressed economy, the trials and travails of governing and coping with problems in a local school district, would have been regularly discussed by close to 550,000 families where one member was serving on a local board. Including elected officials for other local governments, around 900,000 families living somewhere in the United States included someone with heavy responsibilities related to a city, county, or special district. With a population of 125 million and average household size of five persons, that meant that the issues facing local communities were a major daily topic of discussion at the dining room tables in 4 percent of all households in America.

   Given that elected officials tend to rotate on and off these local boards every 4 to 6 years, a much larger number of families would have had one adult member on a local board over a two-decade period of time. The number of "school houses" in the family kitchen was even greater considering the households where at least one member volunteered for the firefighters' association, served on local election boards, and participated in local church and civic associations. The issues of holding a public hearing, controversies in a local community about how best to provide essential services, the problem of collecting tax revenues, trying to hold officials and public employees responsible, providing social services, and building infrastructure were familiar to many high school students. Their official instruction about the structure of national, state, and local government complemented and filled in what they had already learned by the time they got to school. High school students also learned many civic lessons by their own participation in school governance as class presidents, captain of a sports team, member of a debate team, etc. These lessons were then easy to apply to an understanding of national and international political problems that were also a major topic in many homes.

   Fifty years later, the number of school districts had been trimmed down to 14,851, even though no rigorous research supported this colossal destruction of social capital. Rather, serious studies provided evidence contrary to the presumptions of the reformers. Summers and Wolfe (1977: 645-46),

in a large-scale study of factors affecting student performance, showed that school enrollment:

> [...] is shown in this study to have differential effects on black and non-black students. Smaller schools appeared to be better for all, but had a larger beneficial effect on achievement growth for black pupils [...] Equally interesting was the discovery that a number of inputs which we pay for did not accomplish this goal [...] The general physical facilities of schools did not seem to make much difference, one way or another, to students' learning. Whether the pupil had access to more or less playground space, a new or old building, or a building rated higher or lower in general physical condition, did not matter much when it came to achievement test scores.

Eric Hanushek (1981, 1986) provided several devastating studies regarding the effectiveness of "throwing money at schools."

Currently, the number of school boards in the United States is still around 15,000.[1] Thus, around 75,000 citizens are serving on school boards (instead of the 550,000 in 1932). Given the increased size of the population, issues related to local governance are on the agenda of many fewer family discussions and a much smaller percent of the households. And the kids may be watching television while one of their parents is off at a meeting and thus there may be little time to discuss what the parents are doing or how that affects the lives of families living in local communities across the land. Membership in many types of service associations has fallen as well. And, for the students, there are now many fewer opportunities to participate in school governance and various sport activities and more violence in the schools without effective programs to enhance student activities (Langbein and Bess 2002).[2]

A similar reform movement has overtaken many European countries. In Sweden, for example, there were two waves of amalgamation of villages with nearby towns – one during the 1950s and a second dur-

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1   In the *2002 Census of Governments, Volume 1, Number 1,* the number of school districts is listed as 15,014 (p. vii).

2   Swanson (2002) develops a conceptual model of student involvement as investment to characterize participation in high school curricular and extracurricular activities. He wanted to ascertain the returns from these investments and particularly how they affected college matriculation. He used data from a national sample of students and schools and multi-level statistical methods to test the model. His findings demonstrated that student activity involvement had similar properties to those characteristic of social exchange and investment. He found that involvement in both the formal curriculum and school extra-curricular activities yielded significant returns for college matriculation. See also Donovan (2005).

ing the 1970s. "In the end, nearly nine of ten villages and towns were amalgamated with a nearby city that became the center of the new 'block' municipality" (Pestoff 2005, 9). One consequence of this effort was the elimination of an overwhelming number of opportunities for regular citizens to engage in local problem-solving and politics. Similar amalgamations occurred in England and Germany.

Thus, prior to the massive consolidation efforts, students in high school and college learned about collective action outside the classroom. In rural households across the country, discussions at the kitchen table would have turned to a variety of local efforts to create local cooperatives so as to reduce the costs of purchasing key inputs or gain the advantages of marketing products together. Or, the question on how to start a rural electrification program, a local phone company, or even how to build a local school. Young people regularly participated in a wide diversity of community activities where neighbors helped neighbors and the values of being trustworthy and extending reciprocity were taught by example.

In urban areas, children of parents working in factories would have heard all of the problems of trying to start labor unions and trying to get enough workers to join together so as to get recognized and to be heard at the bargaining table. Efforts to extend the suffrage and to increase the safety of urban life were regularly discussed and children frequently attended meetings, stuffed envelopes, discussed problems, and learned how to be helpful to other people. In both rural and urban areas, students also heard about some of the more unsavory problems facing local communities including corruption and violence, and how diverse strategies were developed to try to cope with these pervasive problems.

Thus, a much more important role falls on the instruction given to students in high school and college about coping mechanisms for solving collective-action problems than in an earlier era. Many more young people do not have significant responsibilities and find life boring. Individuals who act "naturally" are likely to find themselves in conflict with one another and cope by organizing gangs and engaging in violent confrontations. They learn how to engage in a form of collective action but not one that generates productive lives for themselves and others.

My concern about reduced participation in the United States is shared by a group of very distinguished scholars who prepared a major report published in September of 2005. The report begins with the following statement:

> American democracy is at risk. The risk comes not from some external threat but from disturbing internal trends: an erosion of the activities and capacities of

citizenship. Americans have turned away from politics and the public sphere in large numbers, leaving our civic life impoverished. Citizens participate in public affairs less frequently, with less knowledge and enthusiasm, in fewer venues, and less equally than is healthy for a vibrant democratic polity. (Macedo et al. 2005, 1)

While education cannot make up for massive loss of political institutions, it is a very important step toward helping to preserve democracy.

II. Teaching about Collective Action in the Contemporary Classroom

As a consequence of the "reforms" that have changed the level of citizen participation in governing contemporary democracies, it is very important that faculty spend much more time focusing on collective-action theory and conditions under which participants have solved collective action problems. Why should we teach the theory of collective-action as a critical element in courses on governance, democracy, and social science more generally? My answer to this question is that the theory of collective action is a core explanatory theory related to almost every "political problem" addressed by citizens, elected officials, political action groups, courts, legislatures, and families. At any time that individuals may gain from the costly actions of others, without themselves contributing time and effort, they face collective-action dilemmas for which there are coping methods.

When de Tocqueville discussed the "art and science of association," he was referring to the crafts learned by those who had solved ways of engaging in collective action to achieve a joint benefit. Some aspects of the science of association are both counterintuitive and counterintentional, and thus must be taught to each generation as part of the culture of a democratic citizenry (see Oakerson 1998). Consequently, it is the key set of ideas about the art and science of association that citizens must understand to sustain a modern democracy. Future citizens must understand the multiple threats that exist to any group of individuals who wish to accomplish a joint objective. They must know how to face the tragedies of the commons and the dangers of an exchange of threats escalating into violent confrontations (Boulding 1963). Otherwise, they are not prepared to face the problems they will encounter in the normal exigencies of everyday life. Instead of working on ways to overcome these threats, they may get discouraged quickly upon meeting their first encounter with free riding and failure to adhere to an agreement. If all we

teach students about American government is the structure of the diverse branches of national government and what government officials do, they will wrongly assume that all democratic citizens have to do is to vote at every election. A democratic citizenry who do no more than vote in national elections cannot sustain a democracy over the long term.

The introductory course to political science used to be a full year in length with an extensive discussion of the theory of a federal system and the principles of constitutional choice applied to national, as well as state and local, government. Most introductory courses are now only one semester. Most textbooks have dropped major chapters discussing state and local affairs. Many fewer academic departments across campuses require their students to take any courses on American government. So, if political scientists are lucky enough to see any college students for one semester, they have a lot to teach them. And, unfortunately, they frequently only teach them about elections, political parties, and what politicians and public officials do and very little about what citizens in an effective democracy should and must do in order to ensure that they retain a democratic system of governance (V. Ostrom 1997). Consequently, in addition to teaching students about basic organizing principles and the structure and processes of American government at all levels, we have an obligation to provide students with effective theory about (1) how individuals overcome the many facets of social dilemmas that pervade all aspects of public life, (2) how to avoid the tragedy of the commons, and (3) how to learn to take advantages of the opportunities that arise from conflict to better understand problems and use their imagination to achieve conflict resolution.

The theory of collective action is itself undergoing considerable rethinking over recent decades. A naive group-theory of politics presumed during the first half of this century that whenever there were benefits of importance to all members of a group, that individuals would join together in order to achieve these benefits. This theory was based entirely at a group level and saw groups as the basic unit of analysis and decision within a society. Fortunately, not too much harm was done by these theories as many students had already witnessed the challenge of how to organize effectively. The lesson derived from this approach – that one *should* participate – was complementary to the lessons of everyday life.

One of Mancur Olson's major contributions to the social sciences was to challenge this naive theory and begin the process of building a theory of collective action on the foundation of individual choices rather than a reified conception of the group (Olson 1965). Olson pointed out that

because any member of a group would receive benefits regardless of their level of contribution to the costs, short-run incentives exist to free-ride on the efforts of others. While his theory has sometimes been interpreted as predicting that individuals will not organize themselves to provide any collective action, a considerable focus of his initial undertaking was to identify the conditions under which various types of collective-action would be undertaken and how close or far this level was from an optimal level of provision.

Unfortunately, some of the paradoxes of formal theory – including the Prisoners' Dilemma as well as Arrow's Impossibility Theorem – have so fascinated theorists that when work on the theory of collective-action has been taught at the undergraduate level, a particular model of that theory has been presented as if it were a general theory. In that model, individuals examine only their own immediate material payoffs and are forced to act without prior discussion with others. Consequently, they are modeled as facing a dominant strategy not to cooperate with others. The model is logically true. When more than two individuals are placed in settings where they literally cannot see or communicate with others – such as the prisoners in the classic dilemma – behavior approaches that predicted in this model. But when citizens engage in civic activities, they are hardly kept in a cell without the capacity to communicate with others.

Extensive research in experimental laboratories where theoretical models can be tested precisely has demonstrated that simply allowing individuals to communicate with one another on a face-to-face basis makes a dramatic difference in what can be achieved (see E. Ostrom 1998, E. Ostrom, Gardner, and Walker 1994, Camerer 2003). Field research provides consistent findings as well. Consequently, instead of the narrow model of individual rationality that is useful in explaining behavior in highly competitive markets, we need to base our instruction on a theory of human behavior that sees all humans (including government officials) as fallible, having the capacity to learn, and as using heuristics and norms to cope with the immense complexity of interactive life (E. Ostrom 2005). Instead of being totally myopic and hedonistic, individuals do have the capacity to reflect on longer-term consequences of actions and on the importance of finding ways of increasing trust, allowing individuals to build reputations for their integrity, and using reciprocity to build social capital. Esteem is an important value for most individuals, and a major way of gaining esteem is through civic engagement (Brennan and Pettit 2004).

With such a theory of human behavior, one can then explore the burgeoning research findings related to factors that enhance or detract

from the capabilities of individuals to solve collective-action problems. We are beginning to understand relatively well how individuals craft institutional arrangements that build shared communities of understanding, trust, and reciprocity. An important element of vibrant local public economies is *public* entrepreneurship (Kuhnert 2001). A key aspect is finding ways of allowing relatively free entry and exit into various forms of association so that those who are unwilling to extend reciprocity are left behind and not allowed to threaten the viability of groups needing high levels of commitment. Another key aspect is devising rules related to the distribution of benefits and of responsibility so that participants can understand their long-term interests in continuing to contribute time and resources to a collective endeavor. A third important factor is the development of rules that relate to specific time and place circumstances so that they make sense to participants rather than having been issued by a central authority to cover diverse environments in a large region. This is obviously not the place where this entire research agenda can be summarized, but there is a growing synthesis of research findings regarding the factors that enhance the probability of successful collective action. This synthesis can be built into a regular curriculum at the undergraduate level along with various opportunities for experiential learning (Battistoni 1998). Not only is it possible to construct such a curriculum, we must do so or face the consequences of a future generation of passive voters who elect "great leaders" but find themselves faced with nothing but self-serving politicians.

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