

An Idea in Need of Revival: The American City is a Democratic Community

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American cities are supposed to be democratic communities. It is increasingly evident, however, that our cities fail to approach this ideal adequately. What is particularly disturbing is that the enhancement of the goals of "community" and "democracy" is not among the major items on the agenda of those persons assigned the task of governing our cities. Most elected officials and administrators in our cities are concerned with solving numerous specific problems which affect their communities (e.g., retaining an adequate tax base, reducing crime, and managing economic growth). Nevertheless, it is questionable that the urban crisis can be solved unless city officials begin to combat the erosion of "a sense of community" and "democratic norms" in our cities.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to increase the awareness of urban administrators about the democratic nature of communities. The argument will be developed in three parts. First, the concepts of "community" and "democracy" will be discussed; here the argument will be made that the attainment of a democratic community requires that public officials be "responsive" to the preferences of all members of their community on a fairly equal basis. Second, the deficiencies of our cities in attaining the goals of a democratic community will be pointed out; moreover, some tentative explanations for these deficiencies will be developed. Third, some guidelines will be offered which suggest how city administrators might enhance the levels of democracy in their communities.

I

In his seminal book, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), John Rawls describes a democratic community as a cooperative venture for the mutual advantage of each and every individual within the community. In a democratic community, each citizen voluntarily joins and maintains allegiance to such a community because he or she receives greater satisfactions or rewards by belonging to the community than could be attained individually, without human cooperation. In a democratic community, cooperation does not exist for the benefits of certain privileged citizens while imposing disproportionate burdens on others.

The reason why community life can be mutually advantageous to all citizens is because certain *efficiencies* result from human cooperation. The term "efficiency" must be understood in its traditional and philosophical sense as referring to greater levels of satisfaction summed over all individuals (Rawls, 1971:22-27; Okun, 1975:2). According to Rawls, the reason for developing and maintaining communities is that the *total level* of satisfaction for all individuals within a community is greater than the total level of satisfaction when no cooperative venture exists. In short, communities are efficient because, through such devices as a division of labor, they enhance total human satisfaction. Through cooperation, people can achieve *more* of those things they value.

But in order for communities to be viable, the attainment of mere

efficiency is insufficient. A certain level of *equality* must also be attained. Equality refers to how the satisfactions derived from cooperation are distributed among individuals within the community. If these satisfactions are distributed on a highly unequal basis, then a mutually advantageous community may not be attained. When the satisfactions or rewards of cooperation are unequally distributed, those persons who receive the lesser amounts of satisfaction may be less well-off than they could be if the community did not exist. For these persons, membership in the community is not *mutually advantageous*, and Rawls' notion of a true democratic community remains unattained.

The lesson is clear. *Democratic communities strive for efficiencies (greater levels of citizen satisfaction), but they must also be concerned that these satisfactions be distributed on a sufficiently equal basis so that all members of the community enjoy the benefits of cooperation.*

The attainment of mutually advantageous communities appears to require certain standards of behavior by community leaders. Most fundamentally, the public officials who govern and administer communities must be responsive to the preferences of the members of the community in adopting and implementing public policy (Pitkin, 1967). The importance of responsiveness to citizen preferences as a standard for democratic communities stems from the close relationship between officials acting in a responsive fashion and the attainment of high

levels of citizen satisfaction. Citizen policy preferences must be understood as referring to the satisfactions or advantages which individuals seek to attain from membership in the community. When government officials are unresponsive to public preferences, citizens rightfully question whether they attain advantages from membership in the community which exceed the costs of that membership. In short, a lack of responsiveness by city officials to citizen policy preferences reduces the level of net satisfaction summed over all individuals and, for this reason, is *inefficient*. A lack of responsiveness thus reduces the advantages of forming and maintaining a political community.

But, as suggested by our earlier discussion of the inadequacy of simply attaining high levels of satisfaction, it should be recognized that the achievement of high levels of responsiveness is also insufficient for development of a democratic community. Within certain limits, policymakers must be *equally responsive* to various individuals and groups within their communities. Suppose, for example, that city officials in a community consistently adopt policies which reflect the preferences of the dominant majority in a community. Clearly, such actions are consistent with the democratic norm of responsiveness. Yet, if a minority group exists within the community which consistently prefers policies contrary to the preferences of the majority, a pattern of consistent responsiveness to the majority would lead to a breakdown of the true democratic community depicted by Rawls. Those individuals belonging to minority groups whose preferences are consistently ignored would, of course, achieve few advantages from belonging to the community. They would thus develop little attachment to the community. In short, for all citizens to believe that their membership in a community is mutually advantageous, public officials must enact and

implement policies which distribute the advantages of cooperation according to the principle of *unbiased responsiveness*. *Officials must distribute policy benefits in such a way that each and every member of the community perceives that he obtains more of what he prefers living within the community than he would attain if the community did not exist.*

It is important to stress a final point regarding democratic communities. The judgment as to whether an individual receives advantages from living in the community is not an objective one to be made by public officials but rather is a subjective one to be made by each citizen. For example, city officials may consider adoption of a policy (e.g., a remedial reading program for disadvantaged students) which the best evidence suggests will result in advantages for the consumers of the program. But if these consumers do not prefer this policy and if they derive no satisfaction from it (i.e., if their subjective evaluation is that they derive no advantages from the policy), they will continue to question the benefits of belonging to the community. In short, the advantages which individuals derive from belonging to a community must be defined by the individual consumers of public policy.

II

If the reasoning in the above section is correct, public officials in cities should be responsive to citizen policy preferences; in other words, officials should adopt policies which reflect the preferences of the members of the community. Moreover, public officials should respond fairly equally to the preferences of all citizens. Yet, current research indicates that American cities have relatively poor performance records in terms of achieving (a) high levels of responsiveness and (b) a pattern of unbiased responsiveness. For example, in an examination of how a random sample of 51 American cities

distributed revenue sharing funds, it was found that less than 20 per cent of the cities distributed these funds in a way which was even weakly related to the preferences of the majority of the citizens within their communities (Getter and Schumaker, 1976). Moreover, many communities distributed these funds in a significantly biased fashion. For example, approximately 37 per cent of the cities distributed these funds in ways which were more responsive to the preferences of "advantaged" citizens (white and middle-to-upper class citizens) than to the preferences of "disadvantaged citizens" (blacks and lower-to-working class citizens). Conversely, only eight per cent of the 51 cities distributed their funds in ways which were more responsive to the preferences of disadvantaged citizens than to advantaged citizens (Schumaker and Getter, 1977). In short, the evidence suggests that the democratic norms of responsiveness and equal treatment of the preferences of all citizens are poorly attained in our cities. These findings suggest why there is a high level of dissatisfaction among urban residents with the performance of municipal governments and agencies (Rossi, Berk, and Eidson, 1974). They also suggest why this dissatisfaction is disproportionately located within the black and lower-class subpopulation within cities. It appears that these citizens are not receiving a large enough share of their preferred benefits to develop a psychological attachment to their community. In short, disadvantaged citizens do not perceive that their membership in American communities is "mutually beneficial."

The reasons why the level and equality of responsiveness are relatively low in most American cities can perhaps be best understood by referring to Figure 1. Municipal government policies can reflect the preferences and priorities of three types of actors within communities: (1) the public officials, both elective and administrative, who directly make

public policy; (2) those organized interest groups within communities who articulate their preferences and demands to public officials and who bring a variety of pressures to bear on officials to be receptive to these demands; and (3) the public as a whole (this includes all members of the community, including those who fail to articulate their preferences and directly communicate their concerns to policymakers.)

When public officials adopt policies which reflect their own concerns and preferences and when these officials are not influenced by public opinion or interest group demands, there is little chance that the democratic goal of responsiveness will be attained. Political scientists have collected a substantial body of evidence suggesting that public officials have concerns and preferences which differ markedly from the average citizen in a community (Verba and Nie, 1972). When officials adopt policies reflecting their own values, the preferences of the public will be little reflected in those policies.

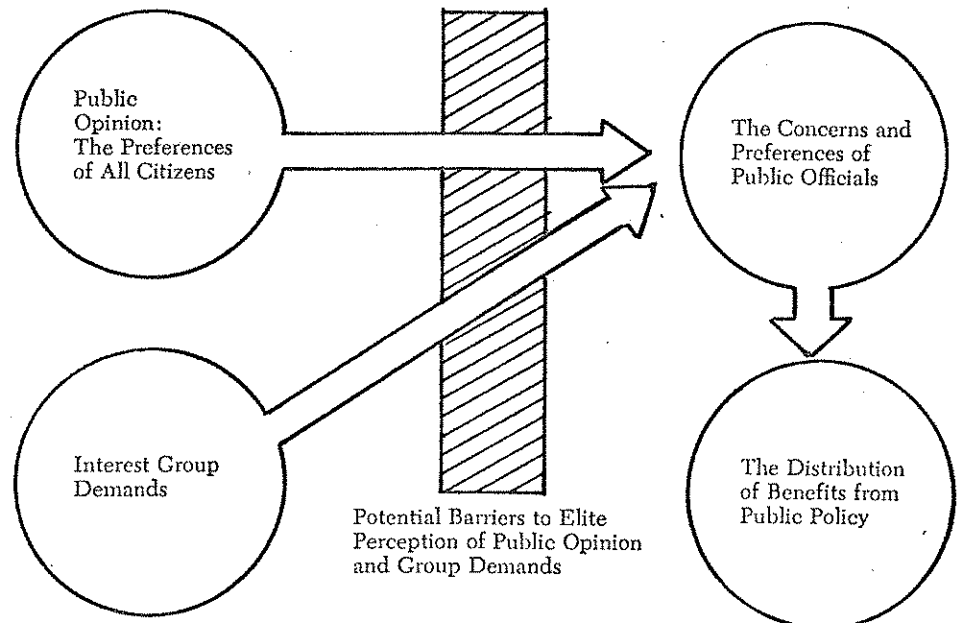
The tendency for public policy to reflect largely the unrepresentative concerns and preferences of public officials is enhanced in those communities which establish structural barriers that insulate city officials from the full range of public interests in communities. *Perhaps the most important structural barriers insulating city officials from the public are "reformed" political institutions: city manager government, nonpartisan elections, at-large representation, and civil service.* In a landmark article, Lineberry and Fowler (1967:701) maintain that city manager government was intended to produce "a no-nonsense efficient and business-like regime, where decisions could be implemented by professional administrators rather than by victors in the battle over the spoils." By removing a major chief administrator (the city manager) from direct accountability to the electorate, by eliminating from city politics the chief organizational vehicle, the

political party, by which citizen preferences are aggregated and effectively input into the political system, and by severing the direct communications between aldermen and their ward constituents, reformed institutions appear to have produced their intended effects. Numerous political scientists have engaged in studies which reinforce Lineberry and Fowler's conclusion that "the greater the reformism, the lower the responsiveness to citizen demands and preferences (Karnig, 1975).

Yet, the problem with reformed institutions is not simply that they reduce the over-all level of responsiveness to all citizen preferences. An additional problem arises because reformed institutions hinder the effective communication of certain types of citizen inputs—public opinion—while failing to hinder and perhaps facilitating the effective expression of a second type of citizen input—interest group demands. As we shall see, these effects of reformed institutions seem to result in *unequal responsiveness* to various subpopulations in communities.

Public opinion refers here to the underlying preferences of all citizens within the community. Because public opinion is normally

unarticulated, there are few devices by which public officials can be made aware of the underlying policy preferences of citizens. Perhaps the most important mechanism in American politics for communicating such public preferences to policymakers is elections. By competing with other candidates for public office, elected officials have important incentives to discover the dominant preferences within communities. Because of fear of electoral defeat, public officials have incentives to enact policies which anticipate the preferences of voters. Thus, when elections function properly, they ensure a modicum amount of responsiveness to public opinion. However, particularly in "reformed" cities, it is questionable whether elections function properly. The absence of partisan labels on the ballot results in high levels of voter confusion regarding the policy position of most candidates for public office; voters thus have great difficulty matching their policy preferences against the preferences of the candidates. This confusion is exaggerated by the need for voters to choose numerous councilmen on an at-large basis. Determining whether



a single ward councilman has adequately represented a citizen's policy preferences is a task which is more easily and successfully accomplished than determining how adequately each of the several councilmen elected at-large have represented a citizen's preferences. The result is that, in reformed cities, there is little assurance that elected councilmen have policy concerns which accurately reflect public policy preferences. Rather than being accountable to the public at election time, the city manager is, of course, accountable to these councilmen whose own preferences may well depart significantly from those preferences which are dominant in the community. In short, city managers live in an environment where they are intentionally insulated from the public, and they have few incentives to be directly responsive to dominant citizen preferences or public opinion.

In addition to communicating their preferences to public officials through elections, citizens have a second vehicle by which they can have an input into the policy process in cities. By joining political and civic groups concerned with community affairs, many citizens find a convenient method for effectively expressing their concerns and preferences to public officials. Although some public officials and administrators maintain the attitude that they should be unresponsive to interest group demands, there is little question that, for the most part, the preferences of interest groups are well-reflected in the public policies of cities. In both reformed and unreformed cities, politicians and administrators are frequently responsive to citizens' preferences when they are articulated through interest groups (Lowi, 1969). It is important to recognize, however, that not all citizens are members of interest groups. The evidence suggests that only a very small proportion of the entire community (approximately 10 to 20 per cent of all citizens) join groups which

articulate political preferences and that joiners of groups are disproportionately middle and upper class citizens (Verba and Nie, 1972: 125-137). The result, of course, is that when policymakers respond positively to interest group demands, they respond *unequally* to the preferences of all citizens. When policymakers distribute policy benefits in the ways preferred by citizens who belong to interest groups, the distribution of advantages in cities is often such that many unorganized (frequently lower and working class) individuals question whether living in the community is indeed mutually advantageous.

In summary, low levels of responsiveness to citizen preferences exist in those communities where the concerns and preferences of public officials are the major basis for public policy decisions. When interest group demands are highly reflected in the public policies of communities, a pattern of *unequal* or *biased* responsiveness tends to exist in communities. According to the middle and upper class character of interest groups, this pattern normally benefits relatively advantaged citizens. *Because city managers normally work in an environment in which the concerns of public officials and interest groups are the bases of public policy, satisfactory levels of responsiveness and equality of treatment of citizen preferences are often lacking in their cities.*

III

The achievement of higher levels of responsiveness and equal treatment of citizen preferences requires that city administrators make greater efforts to discern the preferences and concerns of *all* citizens within their communities. Furthermore, public officials should attempt to distribute policy benefits in such a way that the *overall pattern* of distribution reflects equally the various preferences of advantaged and disadvantaged citizens. Although no single simple solution or technology exists enabling city officials to attain satisfactory levels of

responsiveness and equal treatment, the following guidelines might be useful for administrators seeking to enhance the democratic character of their communities.

(1) *Recognize that the priorities, preferences, and concerns of the lower and working classes, ethnic groups, and blacks often differ significantly from the priorities of more advantaged citizens with whom public officials interact most frequently.* The interest groups which are normally most active in city politics (business, professional, and civic groups), middle and upper class citizens, and public officials all tend to give high priority to what can be called *investment policies*. These citizens prefer that cities place great emphasis in such areas as economic growth, capital improvements, city planning, and education; in short, advantaged citizens prefer policies which promise high returns in the future. More disadvantaged citizens, however, can ill-afford the luxury of investing in the future when present needs are so overwhelming. Thus, these citizens give priorities to what can be called *gratification policies* which provide immediate advantages for them (e.g., welfare services, public health, low-income housing, etc.). The point here is not to suggest that gratification policies are more legitimate than investment policies; cities, such as New York, which place too great of an emphasis on short-term gratification policies and too little emphasis on long-term investment policies clearly run great dangers. Rather, it is important to note that when cities over-emphasize the investment priorities of the business and civic interests within a community, a pattern of severely biased responsiveness can occur which results in high levels of dissatisfaction among disadvantaged citizens.¹

(2) *Recognize the unrepresentative character of the demands of well-organized interest groups and attempt to compensate for this problem by seeking out spokesmen for disadvantaged groups.* The concern

here is with increasing the representativeness of the demands which public officials receive through their communications with interest groups. Specifically, public officials may be able to do two things to enhance such representativeness. First, they can encourage existing groups to expand their organizational base so that their organizations better represent the interests of relatively disadvantaged citizens. It is appropriate for public officials to ask of interest group leaders, "Who do you represent?", and it is appropriate for public officials to inform such leaders that they are more impressed by groups which are broadly representative of the community than by narrow special-interest groups.

Second, public officials can be especially receptive to new groups which form in communities to represent the concerns of previously unorganized and perhaps disadvantaged citizens. In order to have an interest group system which represents the diverse preferences of all citizens in a community, neighborhood groups, civil rights groups, tenants organizations, environmental groups, etc. must be encouraged and developed so that they can compete effectively with the better organized business, civic and professional groups in the city. When these new groups are in the process of formation, they will lack many of the political skills and resources which older organizations have developed. Thus, they will frequently appear to be clumsy and ineffectual. The public official who seeks to minimize responsiveness bias in his community should be extraordinarily patient with such groups. By being as responsive as possible to such organizations, he or she can promote the growth of these groups into more skilled and effective participants in the interest group system of communities.²

(3) *Develop or expand those administrative devices which enable municipal services to be more effectively delivered to citizens.* Many cities have created an

Ombudsman office and other "complaint departments" which enable city administrators to identify weaknesses or deficiencies in their policy delivery systems. When cities are able to identify specific dissatisfactions of citizens and take effective remedial action to eliminate the source of discontent, higher levels of responsiveness in communities are achieved. However, it must be recognized that all citizens will not utilize these complaint departments equally. Again it is the more efficacious middle and upper class citizens who utilize such administrative devices (Verba and Vie, 1972:132). Unless special care is taken to encourage utilization of such complaint departments by disadvantaged citizens, these devices are not likely to reduce the more serious problem confronting communities: the existence of extensive responsiveness bias.

(4) *In the evaluation of public policy, pay particular attention to the distribution of benefits and burdens of the policy among diverse subpopulations within the community. In addition, pay attention to the distribution of citizen satisfactions and dissatisfactions of that policy.* Even in what appears to be administrative non-political decisions, it is unlikely that the effects of these decisions are the same for all people in the community. Contrary to belief that is fairly widespread among city managers, there *are* "republican and democratic ways to pave a street." When a city decides to "improve" a street in a working-class or ethnic neighborhood by making it a thoroughfare leading to the rims of the city where the middle and upper class reside, the residents of the neighborhood incur the burdens of noise, displacement, and divided neighborhoods, while commuters obtain the benefits of a safer and quicker route home.

Most actions contemplated and undertaken by city officials affect different people in the community in different ways. It is this differential

distribution of the benefits and burdens of all public policies that makes governance in all communities inherently political. When city officials ignore the existence of such "politics", they are very unlikely to achieve a satisfactory level of *equal responsiveness* to the preferences of all members of their community. And when some citizens perceive that they have received fewer benefits than burdens from the policies of a city, a mockery is made of the democratic ideal of a community as a cooperative venture for the mutual advantage of all members.

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1. A more specific understanding of the diverse policy preferences of different citizens within the community can be accomplished through properly executed survey research of random or stratified samples of the community. The interested reader is advised to consult Charles Backstrom and Gerald Hursh (1963).

2. City officials should be especially careful not to perceive new groups as devices for cooptation of the disadvantaged. Instead, the purpose of such organizations is to provide public officials with information concerning the needs and concerns of those citizens who have previously been ignored by them.

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