

I

Can Politics Be Fixed?

Three days after the presidential election, Barb L. of Billings, Montana was still distraught. Her team had shockingly lost the 2016 campaign, a wound that was both cultural and political for her:

Good news, parents and teachers. Your job just got a whole lot easier. If you have a child who is rude, petty, vindictive, crass, bullying, doesn't work well with others, makes fun of the disabled and imperfect, and blames others for anything that goes wrong, no worries. In fact, rejoice. You've got presidential material on your hands.
(*Billings Gazette*, November 15, 2016)

A bit further east, in Duluth, Minnesota, Georgianna H. was also disconsolate, declaring that "someone has thrown acid on my psyche." Then came the admissions:

Yes, I am indeed a fat pig who used to have blood coming out of my wherever. That's true. It's also true that long, long ago when I was a cute, young woman certain men seemed to believe they had a total right to grope me in public as if my privates were public property. And that's just me. What about Hispanics, Muslims, Gold Star parents, disabled people, African-Americans, and all the other innocent people verbally assaulted for months by the now newly elected Leader of the Free World?
(*Duluth News Tribune*, November 12, 2016)

One of Georgianna's neighbors had a bigger problem – he was hallucinating:

The morning after I awoke and the world was different, alien even. It felt like an eerie episode of *The Twilight Zone* in which people wake up in the morning to discover their entire suburban neighborhood was transported to an alien planet where they were to become slaves.

(David T., *Duluth News Tribune*, November 13, 2016)

Elsewhere in the country, people were happier. Declared Roy B. of Wichita Falls, Texas:

What a historic victory not for Donald Trump, not for the Republican Party, but for these United States of America and its people. This is not a victory for just the next four or, hopefully, the next eight years but for generations to come because of the looming Supreme Court appointments that are sure to come during President Trump's tenure in office.

(*Wichita Falls Times Record News*, November 10, 2016)

Jeffery K. was of mixed minds about the campaign. Like Roy B., he was pleased that Donald Trump had won, but he was miffed by how badly his fellow Americans were behaving post-election. "When President Barack Obama was elected and re-elected, there was a lot of disappointment and fear," he opined, "but you did not see riots or beatings. Nor did you have CEOs telling people who supported Obama that they should resign. I ask: Who are the real fascists and haters?" (*Duluth News Tribune*, November 15, 2016)

After taking all of this in, Jason C. of Fall River, Massachusetts called for a moratorium on the tumult. "Now that the election is over," he observed, "let's take some time to open a dialogue with someone you disagree with." Then he got specific:

Open up Facebook, make a phone call, text, chat in the neighborhood watering hole or eateries. Start a conversation with someone you disagree with. But this time do it from a starting point of empathy, compassion, and respect. See if you can't find just one thing you both agree with, that you want to change.

(*Fall River Herald News*, November 12, 2016)

I reflect in this book on people like Jason, Barb, Roy, and other Americans who write letters to the editor. Sometimes these folks say obvious things, sometimes banal things, and they can often be irritating. They trace their roots to the earliest days of the country, when broadsides flitted about in the colonies. Those who contributed to them were saccharine, intemperate, preachy, or all three, as if someone had ordained them. Eventually, their postings would become letters to the editor, and today they can also be found in myriad online forums. This book is about these unquiet Americans.

Quiet Americans are another matter entirely, and they drove pollsters crazy in 2016. They were sometimes called "shy Trump supporters," and survey experts wondered if they existed at all. It turns out that they did. Reflecting on election-day polls predicting a resounding victory for Hillary Clinton, veteran Republican strategist Mike Murphy

said: “I’ve believed in data for 30 years . . . and data died tonight.” The polling in 2016 was “a debacle on the order of Dewey defeats Truman,” observed the University of Virginia’s Larry Sabato. “The miss was far and wide,” admitted NBC News political director Chuck Todd. Speaking of media reportage more broadly, ProPublica’s Alec McGillis noted that “the media are so, so far removed from their country,” centered as they are in New York and Washington, and that they missed the churning among blue-collar workers in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin – a group now credited with handing Donald Trump his unexpected victory.¹

As it turns out, the polls better predicted the popular vote than the Electoral College’s, but that gave surveyors little solace. Here I will ask whether paying more attention to letter writers might have picked up more of the angst afflicting voters in fly-over counties. Letter writers, I will argue, sound a bit like politicians, a bit like journalists, but they have their own sound too. They are confident, argumentative, mildly perturbed. Letter writers know what they know and have clarified their values. Their bravado, their insouciance, can be off-putting, but it can also attract readers like a moth to a flame, which is why the letters column is among the most widely read parts of any newspaper. Writers’ idiosyncrasies often make readers feel superior to them, but that sense of superiority can become a narcotic, ensuring that readers return to the letters column for one more prediction, one more lamentation, one more suggestion for coping with life itself.

I use letters to the editor here to get at a mysterious concept: civic hope, or the ability to keep going when all seems bleak. On November 9, 2016, life was no longer worth living for many Americans. Protests, some of them violent, erupted in city after city. Feminists, African Americans, undocumented workers, and Muslims were beside themselves with worry, as were run-of-the-mill Democrats in areas such as Hoboken and Evanston. Almost immediately, though, counterintuitive possibilities began to be raised. The director of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, Shaun Harper, spoke of “the gift of Trump,” of new avenues for dramatizing “the racial ugliness of our nation.”² In a similar vein, *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne imagined how young people would now realize that “the coming months and years will require new and creative forms of political witness and organization” because of the campaign’s outcome.³ Even more imaginatively, a *Denver Post* writer saw Trump’s victory as potentially Pyrrhic: “If he governs as he’s campaigned – if he tries to build the wall, if he

blocks Muslims from entering the country, etc. – he may relegate Republicans to long-term minority status.”⁴

Hope among the ruins. But why? And how? Hope, I will argue, is not optimism; it is deeper, more enigmatic. It is the product of intense struggle and it means nothing without that struggle. The letter writers I will profile here exemplify that. They become energized when life seems dark, when problems abound, when the arena beckons. What makes them different from their neighbors? Why do they care? Why do they persist? This book addresses those mysteries.

THE PEOPLE’S VOICE

Erma D. decided it was time to write a letter to the editor and so she did. Her letter was published in the *Trenton Times* and it went like this:

I am 12 years old. I hear people shouting about having a military man for President. Who was the greatest President we ever had? Why, George Washington – a great soldier and a great General. He went through hardships, battles and sufferings; but he always came out victorious. General Eisenhower is the greatest soldier and General of our day. I know he follows in the footsteps of Washington, Father of Our Country, and will always be victorious.

(Erma D., *Trenton Times*, September 25, 1952)

Erma’s letter is coherent enough for a twelve-year-old and indisputably charming. More importantly, it has a buoyancy that seemed missing during the 2016 presidential election. Absent from her letter are the snarky comments made on Twitter about Jeb Bush or the barbs directed at Bernie Sanders’s improbable brand of socialism. There is a naiveté in Erma’s letter, a sensibility unsuited to the new millennium, which has turned its back on naiveté in all its forms. But there is something else in her letter that has also gone missing: civic hope.

I tracked down Erma D. sixty-three years after she wrote the only letter to the editor she would ever get published. When I spoke to her she was retired and living in Florida, a doting grandmother whose main political preoccupation consisted of watching Fox News (avidly, she admitted). She forgot that she had written her letter, and seeing it again brought tears to her eyes. When asked why she had taken pen to paper in 1952, Ms. D. imagined it was because two of her uncles had served in World War II (one of whom was wounded) but had returned home safely. That memory, too, brought tears to her eyes.

This book focuses on people like Erma D. It reports the results of a multi-year investigation of letters to the editor written in twelve American

cities between 1948 and 2012, a timeline that foreshadows the stresses and strains visited upon the nation during the 2016 presidential campaign. All the letters examined dealt with politics in some manner – local, state, or national – and the database consists of some 10,000 letters. Each of the letters was subjected to a scientific procedure known as content analysis, whereby expert coders documented the themes and tonalities of each letter to identify trends related to time, place, personality, and circumstance. In addition, ten different surveys were administered in these cities during the past twenty years to learn more about those who write letters, those who read them, and those who edit the letters prior to publication. In-depth interviews were also conducted with a sample of the writers to discover why letter-writing was important to them.

Why pay such careful attention to ordinary people doing such ordinary things? This book answers that question by focusing on civic hope, an expectation: (1) that enlightened leadership is possible despite human foibles; (2) that productive forms of citizenship will result from cultural pluralism; (3) that democratic traditions will yield prudent governance; (4) but that none of this will happen without constant struggle. Even as these sentences are being written, H. L. Mencken rises from his grave to wave us away from “the optimists and chronic hopers of the world, the believers in men, ideas and things. It is the settled habit of such folk to give ear to whatever is comforting; it is their settled faith that whatever is desirable will come to pass. A caressing confidence – but one, unfortunately, that is not borne out by human experience.”⁵

Is Mencken right? Can we comfortably ignore the Erma D.’s of the world? Does anyone believe in civic hope today? If so, who will admit to such beliefs in public, and are there enough such people to sustain a polity? Has civic hope become too idealistic a notion for an advanced, technological society? Have recent events – unwanted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a porous southern border leaking unwanted immigrants, campaigners spewing forth bilious stuff in 2016 – convinced Americans that politics is completely beneath them?

Thinkers from Thucydides to Rousseau, from Oakeshott to Dahl say that democratic citizenship is a great and good thing, but, then again, they never met Donald Trump. In an era of economic dislocations and tribal loyalties, suburban retrenchments and media trivialities, civic hope seems antediluvian. Never before, it would seem, have so many people been willing to do so little for so many others. Scandals in the United Way drive

down contributions. Neighborhood hegemonies push homeless shelters to urban peripheries. Two-income lifestyles erode time for volunteerism. Voter turnout plummets. If enlightened citizenship now counts at all, it counts for little. Civic hope? Surely not.

It was not always this way. When she wrote her first letter to the editor, Ann P. of Utica, New York was a bit older than Erma D. and her politics were different. Said Ann P. in 1984:

I am 15 1/2 years old. If I had the right to vote this year I don't know who I would vote for. President Reagan has an itchy trigger finger. He tries to act like he cares about senior citizens but he has cut back on funding for them, always wanting more for defense. I'm not crazy about the Mondale-Ferraro ticket either. Mondale was an ineffective vice president so why would he make an effective president? The only reason Ferraro was put on the ticket was to get the women's vote.

(*Utica Observer-Dispatch*, September 21, 1984)

Reading a letter like Ann P.'s makes one feel old and young at the same time – old because her nascent beliefs here are so raw, so available, but young because her political energy is so infectious. Most powerful of all, however, are her demands that leadership be audited, that political motives be made transparent, and that institutional renewal be prioritized. There is guilelessness here but there is civic hope as well.

This book does what public opinion pollsters also do. After all, researchers at the National Election Studies of the University of Michigan and the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago fan out across the nation every four years with a panoply of questionnaires, projective tests, and focus-group interviews to plumb the nation's soul, after which they formulate elaborate statistical models to understand political trends, so why not follow their lead?

Important though such work is, survey researchers cannot capture the *texture* of people's beliefs – the reasons underlying their opinions and the varied ways in which a given belief can be expressed. A book examining letters to the editor, alternatively, has no choice but to wrestle with these multiple layers of meaning. And so I will ask bolder questions than can be asked of public opinion polls: Have the cynicisms of our age sunk deep roots in the American populace, replacing old civic pieties with new forms of alienation? When ordinary citizens talk about politics, do they reproduce the news media's depressing agenda or do they imagine new, more hopeful possibilities? Do the children of the new millennium have less faith, or more faith, in the nation's democratic traditions than those who came before?

A CULTURE OF ARGUMENT

While surveys can tell us much about people's attitudes, letters to the editor reveal how those attitudes are *performed*. As I have listened to the people's voices over the years, I have noted their increasing frustrations but also their perseverance. Perhaps that is why letters columns are as lively today (and their editors as heavily solicited) as they were in the middle of the twentieth century – the starting point of this book. The people are happy . . . and so they write. The people are angry . . . and so they write. Civic hope is about hanging in, about keeping the pot stirred. It prizes a culture of argument that endures across time.

Perhaps that is what Tom L. had in mind when he wrote his first letter to the editor in 1968:

The people of the nation have loudly voiced a demand for change but neither party has answered with equal spirit. The political system in 1968 has malfunctioned – if not failed. No wonder youth like myself are so disillusioned with their initial contact with the system. I am 18 years old and I was enthusiastic in this political year of 1968. I thought that the United States was going to make major advances in both domestic and foreign policies by having the courage to make both rational and moral judgments on matters of importance like Vietnam. The results were nil. If I am not angry I am disillusioned and alienated from the present American political system. And I am not alone; hundreds of thousands of American young adults I am sure feel exactly the same. We are beginning to wonder what a true democracy is.

(*Utica Observer-Dispatch*, September 6, 1969)

Tom L.'s letter is thoughtful and passionate, and while it raises the specter of systemic disenchantment, his decision to write a letter – to turn citizenship into a performance – suggests that this would not be his last such act. Indeed, it was not. Tom L. went on to spend a lifetime in direct civic engagement, working in special education, overseeing a charter school, volunteering with men newly released from prison, consulting with emotionally disturbed students, and embracing every known aspect of the Quaker belief system. His letter in 1968 was a prologue to his life.

My hope is that this book will be a political history the American people can recognize as their own. It is based not on what elites have said – journalists, scholars, and pundits – but on what people next door have been saying. It will trace how geographical and partisan circumstances have changed between 1948 and the present and how the American people were changed as a result. Letters to the editor constitute a humble database, but that is its strength. People who write these letters

are not always the best informed, but they know what they know. I wrote this book because I wanted to know what they know.

Democracy in the United States is an impossible thing. It lets people with toxic attitudes vote and, worse, it lets them be elected to office. It lets presidents and senators bicker with one another even as pressing matters go unattended. It accepts new citizens without regard to their talents, attitudes, or personal histories. It doles out public funds so that all can be educated, even though many struggle to do so. It ministers to everyone in its public hospitals (even those without health insurance) and it cozies up to capitalism despite its shortcomings. After considerable pain, it lets black people vote, gay people get married, and Hillary Clinton run for president. What happens once those accommodations have been made? More complaining.

The vitality of a democracy, that is, lies not in its strengths but in its weaknesses, and in the willingness of its people to address those weaknesses without surcease. It is the imperfections of democracy that call forth a people. If democracies were not shot through with unstable premises and unsteady compacts, their citizens would remain quiet, removed from one another. Disagreements – endless, raucous disagreements – draw them in, or at least enough of them to have a debate. Therein lie the roots of civic hope. What is said in a letter is obviously important, but the writing of the letter is even more important.

Hence this book's thesis: *Creating and sustaining a culture of argument at the grassroots level make democracy flourish*. There are several parts to this claim:

1. *It takes work to create an argument.* Consider environmental issues, for example. My cache of letters finds no real mention of such matters until 1976. In 1992, however, they took a major jump in prominence, with an even more pronounced jump in 2000, probably because young people in the United States took up the cause as the years unfolded, eventually galvanizing their parents as well.
2. *It takes work to sustain an argument.* Feminism is a good example: Judging from my letters, it ramped up in the late 1970s and climbed throughout the 1980s, only to throttle back down in the 1990s, perhaps because young women began taking it for granted (inaugurating the post-feminist era?) as the new millennium rolled around.

3. *An argument must be two-sided.* An issue cannot depend on the enthusiasm of just one pressure group to energize a polity. So, for example, the “keep Christ in Christmas” folks had their day, as did the “communist sympathizer” crowd, but they can no longer generate an opponent – a fate the “no more immigration” cadre has not suffered in recent years.
4. *The argument must stimulate people at the grassroots level.* Elites can be part of the discussion, of course, but a local dialectic is especially needed. I find, for example, that “wages and prices” peaked as a topic for letter writers in the 1948, 1980, and 2000 elections but then stair-stepped downward in between, indicating that, important though it is, “income inequality” cannot consistently displace the myriad other issues important to everyday Americans.

A decidedly humble example shows such forces at work. Joe D. was nineteen when he wrote his first letter to the editor. He had been arrested for running a stop sign in Fort Worth, Texas in 1956 and his letter was a long and angry one. But even a portion of it points up the person, and the citizen, he would become:

We were . . . thrown into jail with a group of drunkards and a man who beat his wife. There was no window in our cell or any other part of the place where they put us. Also there was not any kind of bunk or bed to sleep on. We had to sleep on the concrete floor which was cold and hard. The cell was filled with the putrid odor of vomiting drunks. We were accused of drinking when it was very obvious that neither of us had indulged. We were also cursed and threatened by the officers who used violent and vulgar terms. After much pleading we were allowed to notify our parents of our whereabouts. The next day both of us had to pay \$10 in order to get out of jail. The boy with the car had to pay \$7.50 more in order to get back his car. Then, of course, we had to pay the traffic ticket.

(*Wichita Falls Times-Record-News*, April 13, 1956)

In a sense, young Mr. Joe D. discusses trivial matters here – a speeding ticket, a collection of drunks, some cursing, a deserved fine. Who is he to turn a simple traffic stop into a bulky Constitutional matter? He is, as it turns out, an American citizen who knows his rights, especially his right to express his rights. He fully understands that citizenship must be performed to have real meaning, so he attacked his argument as he attacked everything in his life – by over-performing. At age nineteen he was short and quick but also feisty. Despite having been brought up in blue-collar circumstances, he became a standout in track and field in college and then went on to create a track club that produced dozens of Olympic medals

and numerous world records. Joe D. became a social entrepreneur but first he became a citizen.

How, then, are democracies preserved? Through historical determinism? Not really, for the long sweep of history finds far more theocracies, monarchies, and dictatorships than democracies. Via formal institutionalization? Executive and legislative branches surely help governments function but non-democratic systems depend on these same entities as well. As result of economic prosperity? USA Inc. has unquestionably been a thriving corporation but it has also experienced wars and recessions without sacrificing its freedoms. By means of formal acculturation? The nation's schools have turned out generations of little citizens but schooling is a transitory thing, too often a passive thing, and governance needs a constant influx of energy.

While these other forces have their impact, *a democracy is at its best when it becomes a culture of complaint; it needs argument to keep itself going*. Talk to anyone with a letter-to-the-editor habit and you will find the reservoir on which it depends. "I'm not at all sure I'm having an impact," says Harold E. of Billings, Montana, "but I've just got to write." "The people in this town are lunatics," says Bruno D. of Trenton, New Jersey; "someone's got to straighten them out." "The squeaky wheel gets the grease," argues Eddie D. of Wichita Falls, Texas, "so if I squeak maybe someone will listen."⁶ Democrats like this perform civic hope each day. This book tells their story.

CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES

Attractive though the concept of civic hope might be, it seemed a rare thing during the presidential primaries of 2016. "To listen to the way some Republicans tell it," says the *New York Times*' Jeremy Peters, "America is a pretty awful place these days." With Donald Trump describing the nation as a "hell hole" and with Ted Cruz decrying "tyranny" and "lawlessness" at every campaign stop, their somber notes resonated with voters already feeling "angry, alienated and under threat."⁷ Years of stagnant incomes, same-sex marriages, and Muslim immigration had caused many Republicans to declare their country adrift. Traditional pols such as Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, and John Kasich tried to buck up their spirits but few seemed to be listening.

John Kennedy's "new frontier," Ronald Reagan's "shining city on a hill," and Bill Clinton's "thinking about tomorrow" were antique concepts for Republicans after eight years of Barack Obama. But there was