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**THE NEED FOR CIVIC EDUCATION:
A COLLECTIVE ACTION PERSPECTIVE**

by

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THE NEED FOR CIVIC EDUCATION: A COLLECTIVE ACTION PERSPECTIVE

Elinor Ostrom

Why should we teach the theory of collective action as a critical element in courses on American government and political 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 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. 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.

In an earlier era, students in high school and colleges 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, 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.

In 1932, the trials and travails of governing and coping with problems in a local county, municipality, township, school district, or special district would have been regularly discussed by over 900,000 families where one member was serving on a local board. With a population of around 125 million and average household size of five persons per household, that meant that the major issues facing local communities were a major daily topic in 4 percent of all households in America at any one time. Given that citizens tended to rotate on and off these local boards relatively quickly, at least twice or three times the number of

families would have had one member on a local board over a two-decade period of time prior to a student entering college. The number of school houses in the family kitchen was even greater considering the households where at least one member volunteered for the fire fighters' 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 students. Their instruction in the structure of national, state and local government complemented and filled in what they had already learned by the time they got to school. 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.

In 1992, the number of citizens serving on local government boards has fallen by more than a half to around 432,000. Given the doubled 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.

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.

Our introductory course 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 much discussion of state and local affairs. Many fewer majors across campus require their students to take any courses on American government. So, if we are lucky enough to see many college students for one semester, we have a lot to teach them. And, unfortunately, we 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 how to take advantages of the opportunities that arise from conflict to better understand problems and use one's imagination to achieve conflict resolution.

The theory of collective action is itself undergoing considerable rethinking over recent decades. During the first half of this century, a naive group theory of politics presumed that whenever there were benefits of importance to all members of a group, 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 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, their behavior approaches that predicted in this model.

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). 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. 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.

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. 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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Supplemental Bibliography

We need to encourage our undergraduate students to acquire a basic library of key works that provide the foundation for an effective civic education. In the year-long introductory graduate-level syllabus for a course taught by Vincent Ostrom, Michael McGinnis, John Williams, or I, we recommend that graduate students build a library containing many of the books listed below. I thought I would share this list, which we have developed over many years.

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