Bruce Ackerman
Reviving Democratic Citizenship?

ABSTRACT:

Many of our inherited civic institutions are dead or dying. Besides the formal act of voting, the most significant act of citizenship is to show your passport at the border, and thereby gain re-admission to the country. But it is quite possible to live in America today without regularly dealing with others as fellow citizens – fellow workers or professionals, yes; fellow religionists, yes; but fellow citizens, focusing on our common predicament as Americans?

The "citizenship agenda" aims to create new sociological contexts for the exercise of democratic citizenship in ordinary life. This is the unifying theme of a series of books: *Voting with Dollars* (with Ian Ayres), granting each voter 50 "patriot dollars" to give to his favorite candidate or political party, *Deliberation Day* (with James Fishkin) proposing a new national holiday before each election at which citizens deliberate on the merits of rival candidates, *The Decline and Fall of the American Republic*, proposing a system of electronic news-vouchers to rejuvenate professional journalism; and *The Stakeholder Society* (with Anne Alstott), proposing a new form of citizenship inheritance of property. I will be emphasizing the synergistic relationships between these four initiatives.

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Progressives have been fighting a rear-guard battle in defense of the achievements of the twentieth century – public education and progressive taxation, social security and Medicare, civil rights and environmental protection, union rights and workplace safety. Barack Obama's health care program, while a significant step forward, simply fulfills an old progressive initiative laid out by Theodore Roosevelt and Harry Truman, and many others over the past century. It does not represent new thinking that confronts the distinctive challenges of contemporary life.

Many old ideas are good ideas. But a politics of nostalgia won't be good enough to defend our democracy against plutocratic attack. From the American and French Revolutions to the day-before-yesterday, we have expanded our democratic legacy through acts of bold institutional innovation – some more successful than others, but all pushing forward the movement to greater political inclusion, individual freedom, and social justice. If we are to move further down this path, there is an imperative need for large acts of sociological imagination.

In preparing a new reform agenda, we should proceed in the distinctive spirit of realistic idealism. As realists, we should try to design institutional initiatives that will *actually work* in the real world, using all the tools of modern policy analysis for a hard-headed exploration of real-world options. Good intentions aren't enough.

And yet we should also be unembarrassed idealists: We should not content ourselves with narrow variations on the status quo, but aim for practical frameworks that would enable ordinary citizens take charge of their political and economic lives. We should seek to establish that the meaningful exercise of American citizenship is no pipedream, but a practical project well worth a tough political struggle.

This has been the spirit of four efforts of mine to kick off a new round of debate over the shape of the citizenship agenda: *Voting with Dollars*, with Ian Ayres; *Deliberation Day*, with Jim Fishkin; and *The Stakeholder Society*, with Anne Alstott (all Yale University Press paperbacks); and most recently, my proposal for a National Endowment for Journalism, in my *Decline and Fall of the American Republic* (Harvard, 2010). In setting out four planks of a new agenda, we have tried to develop the art of talking about big ideas in ordinary English, staying clear of techno-babble. This is only way to convince millions of ordinary people that meaningful citizenship is a real-world possibility – if only they took the future into their own hands.

I won't really mind if you find these proposals wrong-headed or counterproductive – nobody can please everybody, and you may be provoked to come up with better ideas than we have offered. But I will have utterly failed if you find them obscure or pedantic.

Begin with the problem of big money in politics. The top one percent of Americans give over ninety percent of the money to political candidates; and with the recent rise of the Superpacs, we no longer even try to disguise our emerging plutocracy in democratic dress.

To reform the system, we need something new: Give every voter a special credit card account containing $50 that they can spend only on federal election campaigns. Armed with their cards, voters could go to local ATM machines whenever they liked and send their "patriot dollars" to favored candidates and political organizations. About 140 million Americans went to the polls in 2008. If they also had a chance to go to their ATMs, they would have injected about 7 billion federally funded patriot dollars into the campaign -- greatly diluting the power of the private $4 billion spent by all candidates for federal office in the last electoral cycle.

Patriot would invigorate the politics of ordinary citizenship. When each American voter has 50 patriot dollars in his pocket, candidates will have a powerful incentive to reach out and grab it. Fundraising will become a community affair – a box lunch for 100 can gross $5000! These outreach efforts will provoke hundreds of millions of conversations: Who should get the money? Who is a charlatan and who is really concerned about the country?

Patriot has many merits, but one great limitation. Once citizens go to their ATMs to beam their patriot money onward, the candidates will continue to spend most of their on sound-bite appeals to hot-button issues. Patriotic finance will redistribute the sound-bites, emphasizing themes with greater resonance for ordinary citizens. But we will still be living in a sound-bite democracy, and this isn't good enough.

The next challenge is to provide citizens with the tools they need to move beyond the media blitz, and engage in thoughtful political discussion. An exemplary model is the American jury. Twelve men and women begin in total ignorance, but they learn a lot during the course of the trial. After hearing competing arguments, and reasoning together, they regularly – if not invariably -- come up with perfectly sensible conclusions.

The task is to design a similar format for politics. Working with my friend, Stanford political scientist Jim Fishkin, we've come up with a practical proposal based on a new technique, Deliberative Polling, which has been field-tested in 75 settings throughout the world – from Australia to Bulgaria, China to Denmark, Baton Rouge to Philadelphia.

Each Poll invites a few hundred citizens to spend a week-end deliberating on major issues of public policy. Before they arrive, participants respond to a standard questionnaire that explores their knowledge about, and positions on, the issues. They then answer the same questionnaire after completing their deliberations.

Comparing these before-and-after responses, Fishkin and his team of social scientists have rigorously established that participants greatly increase their understanding of the issues and often change their minds on the best course of action. Ten percent swings are common. No less important, participants leave with a more confident sense of their capacities as citizens.

These experiments suggest a new way of thinking about democratic reform. Fishkin and I urge the creation of a new national holiday: Deliberation Day, which will be held two weeks before critical national elections. It should be an official holiday. Ordinary business will come to a halt, and citizens will be invited to gather at neighborhood centers to discuss the central issues raised by the leading candidates for the presidency or prime ministership. Nobody will be forced to attend, but as with jury service, participants should be paid a stipend for the day's work of citizenship.

DDay begins with a nationally televised debate between the candidates, who discuss the leading issues in the traditional way. But then citizens will deliberate in small groups of fifteen, and later in larger plenary assemblies. The small groups begin where the televised debate leaves off. Each spends an hour defining questions that the national candidates left unanswered. Everybody then proceeds to a 500-citizen assembly to hear their questions answered by local representatives of the major parties.

After lunch, participants repeat the morning procedure. By the end of the day, citizens will have moved beyond the top-down television debate by the leading candidates. They will achieve a bottom-up understanding of the choices confronting the nation. Discussions begun on DDay will continue during the run-up to Election Day, drawing tens of millions of other citizens into the escalating national dialogue.

If Deliberation Day succeeds, sound bite democracy will come to an end. Candidates would have powerful incentives to create longer and more substantive "infomercials." Newscasts would be full of exit polls determining the extent to which citizen discussion had changed voting preferences – framing the intensifying debate that culminates only on Election Day. While there will always be plenty of room for a politics of personality, the new system would put the focus where it belongs: on the crucial issues determining the future of America.

My book with Fishkin works out the proposal in detail. But for now, it's more important to place the proposal into the larger context defined by the patriot dollar initiative. In our present sound-bite democracy, voters are bombarded by hot-button slogans generated by well-financed special interests: the point is to arouse knee-jerk reactions, not informed judgments. So it's no surprise that most voters go to the polls with only the vaguest understanding of the issues.

But once they are provided with new tools for engagement, voters will be in a position to take their citizenship seriously. From the very beginning of the presidential campaign, candidates will be reaching out to them with great vigor – if only to pick their pockets and get at their patriot dollars. As citizens begin "to vote with their dollars," Deliberation Day will loom on the horizon. Candidates will no longer spend most of their money on 30-second sound-bites. They will be beaming longer "infomercials" to enable partisans to state their case intelligently on DDay. By the time Election Day arrives, voters will be going to the polls with a far better sense of the stakes before the nation, and the nature of the rival responses proposed by the candidates.

The democratic promise of DDay can be further enhanced by an effort to shape the Internet as a force for citizenship deliberation. Despite the vibrancy of the blogosphere, the hard truth is that the Internet is destroying professional journalism. The

speed of this transformation is extraordinary. In the United States, the overall number of newspaper reporters and broadcast news analysts has already dropped from 66,000 in 2000 to 52,000 in 2009, with devastating cuts in the Washington press corps.[1] But this is only the beginning. The very existence of journalism is at stake. We are losing a vibrant corps of serious reporters whose job is to dig for facts and provide both sides of the story in a relatively impartial fashion.

The blogosphere can't be expected to take up the slack. First-class reporting on national and international affairs isn't for amateurs. It requires lots of training and lots of contacts and lots of expenses. It also requires reporters with the well-honed capacity to write for a broad audience – something that eludes the overwhelming majority of academic specialists and think-tank policy wonks. And it requires editors who recognize the need to maintain their organization's long-term credibility when presenting the hot-button news of the day. The modern newspaper created the right incentives, but without a comparable business model for the new technology, blogging will degenerate into a postmodern nightmare—with millions spouting off without any concern for the facts.

Enter the Internet news voucher. Under my proposal, Internet users click a box whenever they read a news article that contributes to their political understanding. These reader "votes" would be transmitted to a National Endowment for Journalism, which would compensate the news organization originating the article on the basis of a strict mathematical formula: the more clicks, the bigger the check from the Endowment.

Some might find this prospect daunting. Readers may flock to sensationalist sites and click to support their "news reports." But common sense, as well as fundamental liberal values, counsels against any governmental effort to regulate the quality of news.

Nevertheless, some basic restrictions should apply. For starters, the government should not be in the business of subsidizing libel. It should limit grants to news organizations prepared to put up an insurance policy to cover the costs of compensating people whose reputations they destroy through false reporting. This means that a news organization must go into the marketplace and satisfy an insurance company that they

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[1] My report on job losses in journalism is derived from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which changed its reporting categories in 2004. Before then, it aggregated journalists working in newspapers and broadcast news into a single group. More recently it has treated "broadcast news analysts" and "reporters and correspondents" separately. My own figure for 2009 adds the two categories together, to permit comparison with the 2000 report. Compare Bureau of Labor Statistics data for 2000 at www.bls.gov/oes/2000/oes273020.htm with data for 2009 at www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes273022.htm and www.bls.gov/oes/2009/may/oes273021.htm.

The hard numbers provided by BLS may underestimate the size of job losses. According to Paper Cuts, a journalism website, the newspaper industry lost more than 15,992 jobs in 2008 and 14,845 jobs in 2009. See graphicdesignr.net/papercuts. These numbers are based on self-reporting and aren't comparable to the BLS figures; nevertheless, they are ominous. For a thoughtful qualitative assessment, see Leonard Downie Jr. and Michael Schudson, "The Reconstruction of American Journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review* (Oct. 19, 2009) ("most large newspapers" have already eliminated foreign correspondents and many of their Washington-based journalists), at www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the_reconstruction_of_american.php?page=all.

have the resources to do serious fact-checking. It's only if they pass this market test that they can open their voucher account with the National Endowment.[2]

As a safeguard against fraud, each reader will have to convince the Endowment that she is a real person, and not merely a computer program designed to inflate the article's popularity. Before she can click in support, she will have to spend a few seconds typing in some random words or syllables. Though the time spent typing may seem trivial, it will serve to discriminate between the cynics and the citizens. After all, the reader won't receive any private reward for "wasting" her time, day after day, clicking her approval of the articles deserving public support. She will participate only if, as a good citizen, she is willing to spend a few moments in the broader project of creating a vibrant public dialogue.

The resulting system will bear a family resemblance to Voting with Dollars and Deliberation Day. Like patriot dollars, the National Endowment sets up a voucher system that permits the decentralized show of support by concerned citizens. Like Deliberation Day, it engineers a credible micro-context for the responsible exercise of citizenship – but this time on a day-to-day basis.

No need to exaggerate. I am not conjuring up some mythic version of Periclean Athens. I am not asking modern Americans to don their togas, but to click their computers, send patriot dollars via their ATM machines and talk to their neighbors at local community centers – while spending most of their time earning a living and leading a fulfilling personal life. I am not longing for some brave new world, but one where ordinary citizens can check the power of big money to control our sound-bite democracy.

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Real reform in politics comes cheap. The patriot dollars initiative would cost about $2 billion dollars on an annualized basis ($6 billion during presidential elections, $2.5 billion during mid-term elections). Similarly the National Endowment for Journalism would have a huge impact if citizen-clicks could direct $1 to $2 billion dollars a year to journalistic sites.

DDay is also pretty cheap. Running the facilities would cost about $2 billion if 50 to 70 million Americans show up. The big cost comes in creating a new national holiday – which would more-or-less close down the economy, losing a day's economic output. But we can avoid this large "opportunity cost" by celebrating President's Day in late October rather than the middle of February. I'm very confident that George Washington and Abe Lincoln would applaud the move – since a Day of Citizen Deliberation would serve as a superior memorial than the current consumerist orgies at the Presidents' Day Sale!

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[2] For further (important) design issues, see Bruce Ackerman, The Decline and Fall of the American Republic (2010).

But once we move from political to economic citizenship, we confront big price tags. Only a large initiative has the chance to stop the spiraling inequalities that endanger the future of democratic life.

There can be no disputing the basic facts: Between 1979 and 2006, the top one percent's share of total income grew from 9% to 19%. And the the problem is getting worse, not better. During the boom between 1993 and 2008, the top one percent took more than half of the total increase in national income, as economists Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez have established in path-breaking work. They also show that that the top one-tenth of one percent is doing even better. The elite's share of the national wealth has quadrupled over the past forty years -- growing from 1.28% in 1979 to 5% in 2008. America is becoming a poorly disguised plutocracy. And wealth is even more concentrated than income. According to data compiled by the Federal Reserve, the top 1% owned a 35% of the wealth, as opposed to 21% of the income, in 2006-2007. America is becoming a poorly disguised plutocracy.

Below the plutocrats, the country has a three-class system. About 30 percent of America's children will graduate from four-year colleges and move into the ranks of the symbol-using class. But the vast middle class, who graduate high school or a two-year college, will fail to share in the prosperity of the symbol users. To be sure, they won't confront the long-term unemployment that will threaten the bottom fifth who drop out of high-school.[3] But that is small consolation.

Over the last half-century, progressives have fashioned some new legal tools to struggle against these forces of economic exclusion: most notably, in civil rights law. They have spent numberless hours seeking to pry open more good jobs for blacks, women, and other subordinated groups. For all the half-steps, the result has been a great triumph of inclusion: many more Americans can realistically demand equal treatment in the workplace. But by itself, it does nothing to address the widening gap between the oligarchs, the minority of privileged symbol-users and the broad middle class in this country.

If we don't do anything to confront these gaps, conservatives will continue to exploit middle class anxieties to create a backlash against a welfare state that seeks to help the bottom fifth of Americans sustain a minimal economic livelihood. There is a big hole here in the progressive vision of economic citizenship, and Anne Alstott and I try to fill it in *The Stakeholder Society*. Our idea is simple: As a birthright of citizenship, each American should be guaranteed a stake of $80,000 as he or she confronts the challenges of life as a young adult.

This stake will cover four years of tuition at a good private college, allowing the typical college graduate to start off life without a crippling debt burden.[4] But the initiative

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[3] *Id.*

[4] According to the College Board, the average private nonprofit 4-year college charged $21,235 in 2005-06. Multiplied by four, that's $84,940.
See Press Release, College Board, Tuition Increases Slow at Public Colleges, According to the College Board's 2005 Reports on College Pricing and Financial Aid, (Oct. 18, 2005) http://www.collegeboard.com/press/releases/48884.html.

will yield even greater gains for the 7 out of 10 Americans who never gain the economic autonomy that a four-year degree provides. An $80,000 nest-egg will provide middle-class Americans with a rough-and-ready sense of economic independence, permitting them to confront the labor market with their heads held high.

Stakeholding creates a new institution – citizenship inheritance – to compete with traditional family inheritance. In contrast to right-wing efforts to eliminate the "death tax" on the rich and super-rich, the citizenship agenda offers a more democratic vision. The nation's wealth, after all, is the product of generations of work by all Americans – the policeman on the beat, the teacher in the school, no less than the financial wizards on Wall Street. Stakeholding recognizes this basic point by granting all citizens a share of the nation's wealth as he or she starts out in life, when they need it most.

Before they can claim their $80,000, Americans will have to complete high school. The fifteen percent who drop out will only receive the interest on their stake, not the principal. But for the rest, there will be no strings attached. For the first time in a long time, ordinary Americans will have the real taste of economic freedom.

Some might throw away their $80,000 on frivolities. But the abuse of freedom by a few should not deprive the vast majority of a genuine opportunity to shape their lives while they are young. Today most men and women in their early twenties live lives of quiet desperation. While average American unemployment in 2010 was 9.6%, it was 15.5% for Americans between 20-24. Astonishingly, people in their early twenties face an unemployment rate similar to high-school dropouts. European economies display even more crushing, and disproportionate, burdens of unemployment on the rising generation.

This is where stakeholding makes its special contribution. Eighty thousand dollars would keep some in college who would otherwise drop out, and send others to college who can't afford it today. Others will decide that university isn't for them. But they will use their $80,000 to gain technical education, to pay off debt, buy a house, or otherwise gain a stable foothold in adult life.

To gain their citizenship inheritance, citizens will only be required to win a high school diploma -- thereby providing them with a powerful incentive against dropping-out. Once they reach 21 or so, all high school graduates should be treated as competent adults, with the right to a fair starting point in economic life.

The stakeholder society dramatically expands the progressive vision of economic citizenship. It gives a head-start to the young and most vital elements of American society, while continuing to provide a safety net for the poor and elderly.

All this comes with a new tax, but one that gets to the heart of the problem, hitting only Americans in the 3 percent at the top of the wealth distribution. About three and a half million Americans would qualify for stakeholding each year. Based on data reflecting the impact of the current recession, their $80,000 stakes can be funded by an annual wealth tax two percent on households with assets above 1.5 million dollars. This estimate assumes a 28 percent tax evasion rate; if the economic elite prove to be more responsible, their tax rate would be lower.

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Will we be able to seize the moment by bringing dynamic new ideas to the table, or will we content ourselves with rehashing noble-but-tired variations on twentieth century themes?

The year is 2020. Citizens have voted with their patriot dollars; they have debated stakeholding at Deliberation Day, and supported its further consideration through the National Endowment for Journalism, before voting for candidates who have enacted a

a substantial citizen inheritance into law.

Or maybe Americans have left these initial proposals far behind, and have come up with a more attractive and effective citizenship agenda that makes sense of twenty-first century aspirations?