



Building Truly Connected Communities of Results:

Social Revival for Political Realists

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Yuval Levin believes institutional revival is the key to addressing the social crisis we face but he laments that “our politics and culture are horrifically ill-suited” to addressing the challenge. (*A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream*, p. 23)

His argument calls to mind Peter [Drucker’s observation](#) that “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” It also resonates with Katherine Gehl and Michael Porter’s thesis that the duopoly comprising [The Politics Industry](#) precludes the competition among ideas required to achieve better, less polarizing outcomes. The [popular definition of insanity](#) comes into play as well, i.e., continuing to do the same thing over and over again and expecting different result.

Levin says the crisis is massive and requires that political leaders “must listen to what people are asking for and help them get it.” Toward the end, he suggests populism has a role to play in reordering our nation’s priorities. Yet, he argues, “our society is in need of something it lacks but *isn’t* asking for.” (p. 15) On that score his point is reminiscent of Steve [Jobs’ anti-establishment view](#) that it is not the role of consumers to know what they want but rather for entrepreneurs to show them what they don’t realize they can have.

As for the underlying causes, Levin suggests the crisis is a matter of isolation, mistrust, and alienation based upon a “shortage of belonging, confidence, and legitimacy.” (p. 15) In short, it is a “crisis of connectedness.” (p. 16) Moreover, common diagnoses of the problem “all share a definition of connectedness that ... seems lacking. All essentially envision a kind of formless connection ...” (p. 17)

What Levin believes necessary is revitalization of our institutions, by which he means “the durable forms of our common life ... the frameworks and structures of what we do together.” (p. 19) The institution, he says, “organizes its people into a particular form moved by a purpose... In other words, institutions are by their nature formative. They structure our perceptions and our interactions, and as a result they structure us... They are at once constraining and enabling. [They give] each of us a role and therefore a shape or form in the world.” (p. 20)

However, how well they do so is subject to question. As the techie acronym indicates, [WYSIWYG](#) – what you see is what you get from existing institutions. To get something different, continuous and potentially transformative improvement should be pursued, based upon a clear vision supported by longer-term goals, near-term objectives, and reliable performance indicators embraced by [consciously connected communities](#).

With respect to politics and voting as institutions, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels aver that many thinkers embrace a *folk theory* of democracy that simply does not comport with reality. (*Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*)

While they do not purport to supply “a well-worked-out, new theory of democracy,” Achen and Bartels do summarize the evidence of failure of existing theories (p. 298):

- For most citizens most of the time, party and group loyalty are the primary drivers of vote choices. (p. 299)
- The so-called miracle of aggregation – summing the choices of many citizens and hoping their errors are offsetting – tends to dilute the resulting “errors,” but certainly does not eliminate them ... (p. 300)
- Issue congruence, insofar as it exists, is largely a product of ... other connections, most of them lacking policy content. (p. 301)
- Whatever else deliberation in its more refined and philosophically refined forms may have going for it, it is very likely to be distinctly *undemocratic* in practice ... (p. 301)
- The folk theory has ... structured how everyday citizens and important political figures have understood American government and American ideals. In consequence, foolish reform movements have relied upon its teachings ... (p. 302)
- The point of reform should not be simply to maximize popular influence in the political process, but to facilitate *more effective* influence. (p. 303)
- [While the] theory of *retrospective voting* offers more scope for political leadership ... citizens routinely fail in both [of its requirements, namely, knowing when times have been good or bad and understanding the role of government in producing those results.] (pp. 303 & 304)

Thus, Achen and Bartels conclude, “All the conventional defenses of democratic government are at odds with demonstrable, centrally important facts of political life.” In short, the state of democratic theory is in shambles. (p. 306)

So what should we do with that knowledge? Rather than continuing to gloss over the problem with euphemisms, they suggest the first step is to abandon the folk theory in pursuit of greater intellectual clarity and real political change. In particular, Achen and Bartels say we need to think more clearly about the contributions and limitations of citizens, groups, and political parties. (p. 328)

Looking forward, Raghuram Rajan sees both promise and peril in our future. “The promise,” he says, “comes from new technologies that can help solve our most worrisome problems ... The peril stems from influential communities not being able to adapt and instead impeding progress.” (*The Third Pillar: How Markets and the State Leave the Community Behind*, p. xii)

Therein lies a challenge to Levin’s conceptualization of the means to revive society. As Rajan notes, at least with respect to some of our institutions, the problem may be just the reverse – not too little influence but too much: “The state and the markets have expanded their powers and reach in tandem, and left the community relatively powerless ...” To correct the imbalance, he argues, “the solutions to many of our problems are to be found in bringing dysfunctional communities back to health ...” (p. xiii)

In support of his case, Rajan observes, “Markets and the state not only separated themselves from the community over time, they also steadily encroached on activities that strengthened bonds within the traditional community.” (p. xv) For the common good, he argues that pernicious trend must be reversed: “Unless absolutely essential, power should devolve from international bodies back to countries. Furthermore, within countries, power and funding should devolve from the federal level to communities.” (p. xx)

One creative way to begin to do that would be to *make charitable contributions tax creditable for all citizens* rather than merely tax deductible for the wealthy.

From the perspective of Gehl and Porter’s thesis, the effect would be to force the bureaucratic wing of The Politics Industry to *compete* with community-based charities for the right to spend our money for social welfare purposes. It would also remove politics and disenfranchise politicians from most of the affairs of life, thereby refocusing their attention on matters truly and appropriately of national concern. Furthermore, it would supercharge solution of Levin’s crisis of connectedness, by bolstering local bonds. Ultimately, the outcome would be the creation of a massive, dynamic, and highly effective market for good.

The simple fact that they are incumbent doesn’t mean existing institutions are necessarily the best, much less the only means of achieving our objectives. While most of them may have strategic plans, achievement of their objectives is far from optimal. Indeed, but for inertia and political influence, many of them may be ripe for *creative destruction*. Included among those are the relatively new social media giants, all of which are immature for business-quality usage and some features of which tend to aggravate counterproductive divisiveness as well.

Moreover, by its very nature, politics as an institution is inherently polarizing. While there are pleas for *bipartisanship*, the term itself is a non sequitur, an example of the kind of fuzzy thinking Achen and Bartels decry. By definition, “bi” means two and partisanship is grounded in something other than demonstrably effective results beyond the partisan elections themselves, which are inherently win/lose propositions.

Rather than continuing to elect to shift our personal responsibilities to others via such forced [false choices](#), wouldn’t it make more sense to take politics out of the equation to the greatest degree possible for most of the affairs of life? As Max [Weber pointed out](#), the defining feature of the state is monopoly claim to the legitimate use of violence, but shouldn’t coercion be strictly limited to instances in which it

is required to prevent harm to others? Shouldn't overwhelming consensus be required for the exercise of such awesome power?

With respect to the achievement of public objectives, our biggest institutions – U.S. federal agencies – have failed even to effectively track and report their progress, thumbing their noses at [the law](#) directing them to do so in a format that is readily comprehensible. What could be more ironically self-evident of arrogance and untrustworthiness than that, i.e., thwarting the “rule of law” while failing to account for what is being accomplished with our money?

Unfortunately, among the incumbent public institutions, all that seems to matter are political might and bureaucratic inertia. Is that really the best we can do? Must we continue to tolerate it, much less be expected to embrace it for the sake of blind solidarity?

As a sidebar with reference to Gehl and Porter’s explication of The Politics Industry, note the irony in the enquoted example [Google provides](#) to support its definition of the word “thwart”: oppose (a plan, attempt, or ambition) successfully. "the government had been able to thwart all attempts by opposition leaders to form new parties".

Rather than conforming ourselves to historically politically motivated institutions as Levin suggests, why not focus forward on the goals and objectives themselves? Indeed, when applied to government and political parties, his proposed solution sounds too much like the plot of George Orwell’s [Nineteen Eighty-Four](#).

While we should be conservative about discarding constructs that have proven useful over time, shouldn’t our institutions be explicitly, continuously, and dynamically reformed around the common and complementary objectives of We the People?

Furthermore, shouldn’t they be formed as close as possible to the affected individuals, families, and local communities rather than dictated from above by outmoded political and bureaucratic forces?

Ronald [Coase theorized](#) that commercial firms form when the cost of coordinating the means of production can be reduced relative to open, voluntary, market-based exchanges. Implicit are the assumptions that a) the market fails to deliver perfect information to customers and suppliers and b) resources can be more efficiently and effectively commanded and controlled from the top.

While the delivery of information to decision makers can always be improved, the shortcomings and indeed the tragedies associated with dictatorial governance are well known. Even the most benevolent dictators lack the capacity to compete with the market, and even in the most efficient organizations, the allocation of resources from the top down begins to deliver negative returns at some point.

It appears politics and elections may have reached that juncture. In true bipartisan fashion, both sides of divide fear that we risk falling into fascism while pointing their fingers at the other as the source of the problem. Are we wise and capable enough to recognize the actual source of the problem and pull back from the brink? Is there any realistic choice but to begin divesting power away from the center? Doesn't the same-old-same-old alternative draw us ever closer to the very thing both sides fear?

As Rajan has implied, technology now enables us to collaborate far more efficiently and effectively to solve problems than ever before possible. Surely, we can do better than [#gofpau](#) (good, old-fashioned

politics as usual). Let's not let it blind us to a much better, far less risky and far more collegial and productive alternative.

The first step is to clearly specify our values and objectives in an open, standard, machine-readable format like Strategy Markup Language ([#StratML](#), [ISO 17469-1](#)). As we begin doing so, value-added intermediaries will be empowered to enable us to dethrone outmoded institutions and build the future we have yet to discover together – in [Truly Connected communities of results](#) (CoRs).