Studying Active Citizenship as an Element of Democratic Governance

Minnowbrook 50th Anniversary Conference Concept Paper
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"Everyone: After that last thing, I promised myself I was going to do something – you know, like, get active.
Everybody: So what did you do?
Everyone: I tweeted.
Everybody: Did you really? What did you write?
Everyone: I wrote, "This has to STOP!!!"
Everybody: How many exclamation points did you use? Did you capitalize any of it?
Everyone: Three. And yes.
Everybody: You're on the front lines of change."

"Bad News," *The New Yorker*, July 23, 2018, p.25.

A French philosopher Joseph de Maistre once said that every nation has the government it deserves. The Minnowbrook 50th Anniversary Conference presents an opportunity to reflect on our own role, as public administration scholars, in the current governance crisis. Having accumulated a wealth of evidence on the complexities and contingencies of its subjects – management, organization, leadership, collaboration, performance, privatization, and others – it is time we stop asking the question of our discipline's legitimacy and begin to ask the question of its impact. This brief essay supports the proposition of Minnowbrook III participants to reinvigorate the democratic foundations of public administration "in dark times" [1]. I will argue that public administration scholarship may have, once again, fallen behind the world of practice by largely ignoring the subject of citizenship[1] in its study of government and governance.

The crisis facing public administration in the late 1960s was influenced by many turbulent domestic and international developments: the escalation of the Vietnam War, the USSR's invasion of Czechoslovakia, Cultural Revolution in China, urban riots both in the US and in Europe, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., to name a few. Despite this, according to H. Lambright, there was "passion in the air", when thirty-four public administration scholars attended Minnowbrook I and proposed ideas seeking to redirect our field in ways that would address citizens' distrust towards government institutions [2]. The current political and social context, while unique, is no less tumultuous, although the feeling of angst seems more pronounced than the feeling of passion. Lead by a president whose initial approval ratings were the lowest since Gallup Poll began its surveys in 1945 [3], our nation is sharply divided on the issues of race, gender, immigration, gun violence, free speech, environment, education, access to

[1] Here, I refer to the concept of citizenship quite broadly: beyond the legal definition of the word and encompassing all residents of a democratic society.

health care, foreign policy, and others. It is harder than ever to pinpoint a set of "core American values" that unite the people of our country and can guide our public policies and the norms of administrative behavior.

While some "erosion of the public space" has been noted by the participants of the earlier Minnowbrook conferences [1], today's developments appear unprecedented. Many of those in charge of federal agencies appear to have fundamental disagreement with their past missions and core programs. Since 2016, the modus operandi of these agencies has been to undermine public institutions: de-regulate, de-nationalize, displace, downsize, demoralize, and divert. The nursing home care industry is just one example of these developments. Once fully governmental, the industry now includes over 14,000 facilities, 94% of which are private, but are largely paid by the federal Medicare and Medicaid programs. Since late 1970s, scores of federal, regional and state regulators have defined, evaluated, and publicly shared data on performance to help minimize information asymmetries between the clients, providers and third-party payors.[2] The 2016 elections prompted changes in this regulatory system. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services are now referring to nursing homes as "customers." Federal regulators discourage the regional surveyors from penalizing the providers, adding new levels of approval for large fines. As a result, numerous states report reduction in the amount and number of fines. Obama-era regulations requiring facilities to collect citizens' grievances are rolled back. Finally, private nursing homes are expected to generate millions of additional profits as a result of recent tax breaks [5]. The basic tenets of the New Public Management movement are apparent in this example: privately-delivered and publicly-funded services, significant managerial autonomy, less stringent monitoring, fewer sanctions, less public participation and transparency, and "customer"-orientation aimed, nevertheless, at corporations and not citizens. While the New Public Management reforms received ample criticism in the public administration literature, its principles are still broadly applied in the U.S. government today.

The example above illustrates that, as academics, we may have missed an opportunity to reach our audiences with a message on what makes our governments more effective *and* what makes them moral. For over a century, the key question we have been asking was: *What administrative arrangements result in better outcomes?* We have debated over which arrangements worked better: centralized or decentralized, autonomous or interconnected, dynamic or stable, hierarchical or market-based. We have also identified a range of outcomes to look at: efficiency and effectiveness, quality and quantity, scope and access, equity and equality, responsiveness and representation. With our pervasive focus on organizations, policies, managers, employees, and networks, we have not addressed the question: *What makes our democracy stronger?* By focusing on organizations and institutions, our field has largely overlooked the key element of a healthy democratic system – an active and informed citizen. Thus, today's reality may be reinforced by our limited efforts to understand the barriers and opportunities to strengthen democratic citizenship and our failure to instill among our students the values and the skills necessary to build a more active citizenry. It is also exacerbated by the practitioners' reluctance to create the mechanisms that keep citizens aware and actively involved in their nation's issues in ways that go beyond voting.

Active citizens certainly participate in protests, but they also do much more. They run for public office; they articulate their needs and interests at public hearings; they serve on advisory boards

[2] After 30 years, these regulations are still evolving: just recently, new Medicare data on payroll records called into question years of self-reported data submitted by organizations as a part of their annual state inspections [4].

and inform local governments' decisions on future priorities; and they actively share feedback on taxpayer-funded goods and services. No democracy can be complete without active citizenry. In 1968, one strong theme reported by Minnowbrook I organizers was that of "caring" for those served and "politics of love" [2]. While continuing to invest our efforts in studying how to run the business of government, as well as how to run the constitution, I call for understanding how those we serve can become more active and constant participants of their nation's government, and what strategies governments can pursue to ensure this process. Among the questions we might consider are:

- What does it mean to be an active citizen in contemporary society? How do different conceptualizations of citizenship proposed by Frederickson [6] and others – subject, voter, customer, client, interest-group representative, and others – co-exist today?
- What factors help shape active citizenship?
- What mechanisms are there for active citizens to participate in governance?
- What mechanisms for participation are most effective across policy areas?

The democratic foundations of public administration are certainly not limited to the study of citizens and their interactions with and participation in government. We should also study the democratic dimensions of networks, public-private partnerships, leadership, performance measurement, goal setting, and other subjects that have been mostly approached from a fiscal, structural or managerial standpoint.

Furthermore, in our *professional* field, it is *as* important to research these questions *as* it is to put our findings into action. With the current political pressures affecting government agencies, our service may be instrumental in helping these agencies stay the course. Having mastered the task of publishing our findings in highly ranked peer-reviewed outlets – and, for some of us, even pitching our work to the media – more scholars need to be involved in putting their knowledge and the evidence they generate to action. The latter can be achieved directly, by advising federal, state and local governments on their policies and programs – both concurrently with academic work and during sabbatical leaves. Schools of Public Affairs should consider incentivizing these efforts the way they incentivize publications and external visibility. Change can also be achieved through teaching. While I have always loved teaching, the latter has been instrumental during the past months to help me overcome my personal feeling of helplessness and angst about the state of our field. We can put our knowledge to action by training public administration students to (1) be prepared and willing to share power with citizens by educating, empowering, engaging, and placing them in leadership roles; (2) critically examine their organizations and be committed to facts, truth, transparency, and accountability; and (3) be clear on their ethical obligations in a democracy and remain resilient and prepared to face the moral choices in the workplace, as the political pendulum swings from one ideology to another.

Approximately 9,000 protests took place in the United States in 2017 [7]. Many of these protests have been among the largest in the history of our nation [8]. They may also be the most diverse by virtue of including minorities, members of the LGBTQ community, immigrants, women, and youth. Clearly, these individuals are ready and committed to being active citizens of our nation. If we fail to understand the subject of citizenship, we may become disconnected from and irrelevant to the new generation of citizens and public servants. Our work, on the other hand, can inform and inspire their actions.

Bio

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