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**A Tale of Two Playgrounds:
Young People and Politics**

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Political education – its content and its pedagogy – can open a window into larger questions. Let me tell the tale of two playgrounds. They illustrate two different politics.

The first, drawn from Public Achievement, the youth civic education initiative sponsored by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, is about a different kind of politics. This is the politics of public work, a framework we have developed over the last decade. Here, young people are conceived civically as co-creators of a democratic way of life. Politics has a “jazz-like” quality, negotiating diverse interests for the sake of creating things of broad public benefit. We know from evaluations that it is possible to re-engage young adults with politics through experiences like Public Achievement.

The second playground story conveys another politics. I use it to surface some of the hidden elements in what today’s college students experience as politics and where these elements come from. It draws attention to the door-to-door canvass – a mobilizing and fundraising mechanism created by citizen action groups which also purports to educate for democracy. The canvass, I will argue, embodies a Manichean politics in which the forces of good do battle against the forces of evil. Canvass politics is a crystallized version and ideal type of the conception of politics dominant today.

The first story suggests ways to re-engage young people politically. The second story points to large obstacles in the way, including conventional ideas of “politics” itself.

A Tale of Two Playgrounds

The first story is about a group of young people in the working class North Rice area of St. Paul, part of the youth civic engagement initiative called Public Achievement. In this case, Public Achievement teams of 5th, 6th, and 7th graders worked four years to create a playground. They eventually succeeded, overcoming many obstacles. One leader was recognized by Governor Jesse Ventura in his first State of the State address in 1999.

Watching the St. Paul Public Achievement playground group unfold over the years, I know the rich civic and political learning that took place in the school, St. Bernard’s. Dozens of children were directly involved and the whole school, parish, and neighborhood were all affected. A number of students from Jim Farr’s political sciences classes at Minnesota were also involved, coaching the teams of Public Achievement.

In Public Achievement teams of young people – ranging from elementary through high school students -- work over the school year on public issues they choose. They are coached by adults, who help them develop achievable goals and learn political skills and political concepts. At St. Bernard’s, generations of teams continued to work on the issue. In order to succeed, teams had to turn neighborhood opinion around on the issue (neighbors had originally thought that a playground might be a magnet for gangs). They had to get the parish council on their side, negotiate zoning changes with city officials,

and raise \$60,000 from local businesses. To accomplish these feats, the kids had to learn how to interview people, write letters, give speeches, call people on the phone they didn't know. They had to negotiate, make alliances, raise money, map power, do research.

They also learned about political concepts – power, public life, diverse interests, and politics itself. The framework we use in Public Achievement stresses this sort of effort as a different kind of politics, what can be called a “public work politics” of everyday public problem solving and public creation. Such a politics has deep roots in American civic and populist traditions, extending well into the 1940s, but sharply eroded after World War II. At its heart it sees a democratic way of life as something citizens create together, not simply through government as proxy. Young people are conceived as citizens today, not simply as citizens in preparation. They are co-creators of the democratic way of life in their schools, neighborhoods and the larger society and world.

Last year we had about 1800 young people doing Public Achievement in 44 sites in seven communities, with about 300 coaches. They worked on a large range of issues, from teen pregnancy and school violence to environmental concerns and the curriculum of their schools. Through evaluations, we have found that young people and college coaches, alike, develop many political skills: chairing meetings, interviewing, negotiating interests, public speaking, writing lessons, holding each other accountable, researching issues, to mention a few. College students and youth of all ages in Public Achievement teams also develop a different and favorable view of politics itself as a result of their experiences. A couple of years ago Angela Matthews, a visiting young adult leader of Public Achievement in Northern Ireland, gave a speech to a Twin Cities PA conference. It included young people from third grade through college. She asked, “how many of you like politics?” Most – without any prompting – raised their hands. Then she made her point: “It’s because we’re doing politics; it’s not simply something politicians do.”

Joe Kunkel, a colleague at Mankato State University, has the education majors coach in Public Achievement. Joe uses two assessments to explore skills and views of politics. He has coaches survey of political and professional skills practiced by kids in the teams at Dakota Middle School – seventh and eighth grade – in Mankato. This year, 54% made a phone call to an adult in authority; 80% interviewed adults; 43 % used a power map to identify people to contact; 50% chaired meetings; and 72% spoke in public.

Kunkel also assigns his college students a concluding essay reflecting on their experience. He asks them what the teams they coached learned, in their judgment, and also what they themselves learned about “democracy, citizenship, politics, and working in groups.” A few quotes are illustrative. “Coming into PA I thought that citizenship meant to live in the United States and that politics was something only politicians were involved in,” said one. “However as the year went on everything turned into a political struggle. I could not believe how big a role politics played even in a Middle School. The kids and I had to deal with the principal, workers at Hy_vee, and people at Echo. I am proud to say the kids handled this all themselves, but I know exactly how big of a role politics will be playing as I enter the teaching world.”

One of the striking things illustrated by his students’ papers is the latent political energies of this generation. “I am amazed by what I have learned,” said one. “Not only did I learn to be an effective coach, I also learned about what it means to be an active citizen. We as coaches are in a sense renewing democracy for future generations. It has

become clear to me through this course that the concept of democracy in America has lost much of its luster and it must be restored.” Or another. “First off, I learned something fundamental about democracy. Democracy is only what we make it,” said another. “No longer do I just sit back and let this crazy democracy machine roll by. If we do not like something we can take steps to make the situation better.”

I could continue with inspiring stories and quotes. But this sense of possibility is not the full picture. The problem we face is illustrated by the second story.

The second story is about a young friend of mine – I will call him Mike, keeping his circumstances veiled because he hasn’t left his job yet -- who works for the affiliate of a nationwide community organizing network in a large urban area. A group of kids in the neighborhood where he is organizing told him they want to get a playground. Mike, who knows about the Public Achievement experience, wanted to see what they could do.

Mike approached the local organizing director for the citizen group. But she was skeptical. “What does a playground have to do with power?” she asked. She feared that concentrating on a playground might detract from the upcoming mayor’s race. She believed energy should go into mobilizing citizens for clearly “progressive” causes.

Her conclusion was that Mike could work with the teenagers on the playground only under certain conditions. He had to be able to “cut” the issue in a progressive way, which is organizing language for identifying a clear enemy and making sure most people agree. He had to figure out how it could be used to organize a protest.

As Mike talked with the kids, this approach didn’t make much sense. It wasn’t likely to get a playground, even if they could find out whom in the Parks Department to target as an enemy. In any case, through the summer months, the organization became increasingly involved in the mayor’s race. Mike felt relief, and so did other staff. “Our organizing clay suddenly makes sense when poured into this mold,” Mike commented. “Some camaraderie is really beginning to creep into walls that seemed to house folks who talked about quitting over cigarettes nearly every day. Campaigning is all about numbers, mobilizing the base and turning out the regulars. We don’t even pretend to develop leaders or build anything sustaining. We just go out and get the numbers.”

This episode is telling. Over the last generation, many activist citizen groups have emerged that purport to be educating citizens for political life, increasing citizen participation, and creating responsive government. But what do they mean by politics?

I have looked for a number of years at the meaning of “politics” in the most successful citizen groups, like the Industrial Areas Foundation network, which includes a wide range of political and religious viewpoints and devotes considerable attention to developing the public skills of leaders. Moreover, over the past twelve years, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship has been directly involved in many action research partnerships on citizen politics and civic engagement. These range from Public Achievement and the Jane Addams School for Democracy with new immigrants to a current university-wide Civic Engagement Task Force at Minnesota aimed at renewing

the land grant public purpose. From the playground to the University, politics in its richest and most productive sense depends on breaking free of a Manichean framework.¹

Manichean politics pits the forces of good versus the forces of evil. It is enshrined as a kind of orthodoxy in political science, conveyed by the famous definition of Harold Lasswell: politics is the struggle over “who gets what, when, and how.” Close analysis of both communitarian political frameworks and their leftist critics, alike, reveal a view of politics as a “zero-sum” struggle over scarce resources.²

Political life always contains conflict, drama, and clashing interests. Politics includes recognition of the inevitable difference of interests in society, and the ability to surface and deal constructively with them, as Bernard Crick observes in *In Defense of Politics*. But conflict around interests takes different forms, depending on context and overall objectives. Politics is sometimes like a war, or football, with clear winners and losers. Election campaigns take on many of these qualities, even in the most civil of cases. A fight over a toxic waste dump is even more likely to have a war-like character.

Yet in settings where the point is the creation of things of broad public benefit, politics is better understood as a negotiation of diverse interests and points of view in order to accomplish something. It was precisely this sense of politics that I believe led Wynton Marsalis to liken democracy to jazz on the Ken Burns PBS series: “In American life, you have all these different agendas. You have conflict. And we’re attempting to achieve harmony through conflict. It’s like an argument with the intent to work something out...that’s what jazz music is. It’s exactly like democracy.”³

The first playground story was jazz-like politics. In such politics, forming alliances and learning to understand the experiences, interests, and world-views of others, including those we disagree with profoundly, are foundational skills. Political energy is generated by the ability to improvise, try new things, and develop new relationships. A rigid division of the world into saints and sinners makes that impossible.

This points to another issue. Mike’s community organization is shaped by the technologies that it uses, especially its door-to-door canvass operation. The canvass not only produces an election-mode sort of organizing. Its mechanistic, standardized, and war-like quality also has the effect of turning off very large numbers of young adults

¹ In the 20th century, Simone Weil was a rare voice in political philosophy in pointing out that such practical work among diverse interests can often have democratizing effects. As she put it, “It is a fine sight to see a handful of workmen...checked by some difficulty, [who] ponder the problem...make various suggestions for dealing with it, and then...apply the method conceived by one, who may or may not have any official authority. At such moments the image of a free community appears.” Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, University of Massachusetts, 1973, pp. 106, 101.

² This argument is developed in “Democratic Reconstruction” and “The Civic Renewal Movement in America,” lectures at the University of Wisconsin, on the web, www.ssc.wisc.edu/havenscenter/boyte.htm.

³ As Marsalis elaborated in the first Burns show, “The real power of jazz is that a group of people can come together and improvise...negotiate their agendas with each other. Bach improvised, but he wasn’t going to look at the second viola. Whereas in jazz I could go to Milwaukee and there would be three musicians in the bar at 2:30 in the morning and you never know what they’re going to do. The four of us are going to have a conversation in the language of music.” This is the politics of the first playground.

from politics entirely. The canvass is the elephant in the room of political socialization. It is also an “ideal type,” embodying dominant conceptions of politics.

The Costs of Realpolitik

Canvass politics surfaced last year in the Nader campaign and continues now in what he calls his “Democracy Rising” initiative. For a generation, the Nader network has been dependent on the canvass. Behind the Nader phenomenon is a larger dynamic yet. The door-to-door canvass, as well as allied forms of mobilization technology like telemarketing on issues and internet lobbying, have exploded in scale. They contribute to the widespread sense that politics is more like a war than like jazz.

The canvass began in 1974 when Marc Anderson, with Citizens for a Better Environment, joined with Heather Booth, founder of Midwest Academy, who was developing a network of state citizen organizations that became Citizen Action. It involves paid staff going door to door on an issue, raising money and collecting signatures on a petition. Over the past twenty six or twenty seven years, a number of canvass operations have developed including Clean Water Action, Citizen Action, ACORN, the Public Interest Research Groups, Public Action, among others. I’ve known about the canvass from the beginning. My 1986 book with Heather Booth and Steve Max, *Citizen Action and the New American Populism* was partly a defense of the canvass. I know well the sense of urgency which bred it, an urgency broadly felt. When I went to a Camp David seminar on the future of democracy in January, 1995, organized by Bill Galston, Hillary Clinton conveyed the same urgency about conservative business mobilization that I’d heard from citizen action leaders for years. Moreover, it has undeniable victories to its credit, playing large roles in the passage of legislation such as clean water and creation of the toxic waste superfund.

The canvass was conceived as a method for large-scale mobilizations of working and middle class citizens to counter corporate pressure, growing rapidly in the 1970s, to roll back environmental, consumer, affirmative action and other government regulations. Supporters argue that the canvass teaches about public policy and the core principles of citizen participation on a large, face-to-face scale, unlike other technologies such as television advertising. Chris Williams, a one-time environmental planner who had become convinced of the need for independent “citizen organizing,” worked with Indiana Citizen Action Coalition because he believed it provided an alternative source of information for the public. “The press simply hadn’t covered the corruption that was going on around issues like utilities,” he explained. “With the canvass we were able to let people in key legislative districts know that the public service commission was controlled by the utility companies themselves.”

More subtly –crucial to the motivation of many who structure canvass operations – it is seen as communicating the key principle of citizen action: ordinary citizens are not powerless to affect the forces which seem otherwise to overwhelm them. Larry Marx, one of the most articulate philosophers of the canvass, said that “the canvass validates people’s feelings that the rules of the game are rigged, perceptions that on their own make them feel psychologically paranoid.” In his view, “The basic message is that people don’t have to just take it. ‘We’re not helpless victims. We can control our own lives.’”

Critics like John Judis have argued that the canvass has damaging if little explored effects on American politics. In an important article in *The American Prospect* Judis proposed that the canvass was a key element in the emergence of what he calls “advocacy group politics,” groups dominated by professionals, with much more tenuous connection to their members than older style interest groups.⁴

Here, I emphasize a different issue. It seems to me that the crucial thing about the canvass is its underlying theory of politics, and the way that theory plays itself out in what young people involved learn about “politics.”

The canvass’s political framework had several roots, including Saul Alinsky’s second book, *Rules for Radicals*, the new “majority organizing” strategy of George Wiley and the National Welfare Rights Organization, and arguments of French new leftist Andre Gorz, in *Strategy for Labor*. My own efforts sought to add a populist historical and theoretical dimension to this framework, arguing that the new left had been profoundly mistaken to scorn American democratic traditions and symbols, as well as local institutions like neighborhood groups and religious congregations.⁵

Today, the progressive philosophy behind the canvass is most explicitly and elaborately articulated by Ralph Nader. According to Nader, democracy is being taken over by corporate interests. Only what he calls “an aroused and active citizenry” can form a counter-force. This means citizen mobilization, as well as creating an explicit progressive political presence on the left of American politics.

The canvass used by citizen action groups have an explicit goal of activating citizens, not simply raising money. A set of principles structure what this means:

- Focus on down-to-earth winnable issues;
- Define issues in ways that cross lines of class, race, and religion which had proven bitterly divisive in the sixties;
- Target an “enemy” who can be used to dramatize the issue,
- Mobilize progressive forces of change through forms of mass action.

The canvass thus crystallizes, in ideal type, widespread assumptions about politics: Politics is a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources. It pits the forces of good, in this case the powerless, against the forces of evil, powerful corporate interests. This framework shapes organizations like Mike’s. Though the precise array of evil oppressors and innocent victims varies, it also shapes many other citizen efforts. The canvass’s impact on concepts and practices of citizen participation and young people’s political outlook has been largely unexplored. In citizen action groups, the canvass has regularly

⁴ John Judis, “The Pressure Elite,” *The American Prospect* No. 9 (1992). Quotes from canvassers and supporters in Boyte, Heather Booth, and Steve Max, *Citizen Action and the New American Populism*, Temple, 1986, p. 76, 72, 78. We surveyed the literature through 1985. For one treatment, see John Herbers, “Canvassers Hope to Reach 15 Million on Energy Costs,” *New York Times*, March 27, 1983.

⁵ On the new populist movement, see Harry C. Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement*, Temple, 1980; and Boyte, *Commonwealth: A Return to Citizen Politics*, Free Press, 1989; also Carmen Sirianni and Lew Friedland, *Civic Innovation in America*, UC-Berkeley, 2001, and our Center’s web site, <http://www.publicwork.org>. For public work alternatives, in addition, see the striking partnerships forming in the family practice field, at www.familylife1st.org.

become the tail that wags the dog, as occurred in Mike's experience. Every kind of organizing tends to become a campaign. I believe the evidence suggests that as a result, public leadership development or creating sustainable local cultures of civic involvement disappear as serious objectives.

The canvass itself is a highly scripted form of interaction that distills the mobilizing framework of powerful interests versus progressive forces for change. The canvasser has to meet a nightly quota of fund raising, usually through delivering a prepared script. In addition to fundraising, the canvasser usually seeks to get signatures for a petition for a piece of legislation or other policy goal. It is worse than hard work. Canvassers talk constantly about the "burnout" that comes from such scripted, narrow, and often manipulative encounters with citizens. A remarkable number of those who try it quit within a few days – fifty or sixty percent, at least. Still, large numbers survive the initial cuts. During the summer, tens of thousands of young people are canvassing. They participate in a canvass culture, with pep talks, songs, conferences, and other experiences.

I have worried for some time about the effects on political learning of the fundraising canvass, as well as other forms of civic canvass such as surveys or candidate promotion, which also have a mechanical and Manichean quality. The scale of the door-to-door canvass is vast, though I cannot find a systematic account in the literature since the mid-eighties. In *Citizen Action and the New American Populism* we estimated that the canvass was reaching at least 12 million households year after year, more during large national campaigns. In states like Massachusetts with long-standing canvasses, more than 80% of the population knew the main canvass organization.

In recent years when I asked graduate students at the Humphrey Institute how many had canvassed, more than half raised their hands. Most disliked it. Many hated it. I consulted with Dana Fisher, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of Wisconsin who formerly was assistant director of a PIRG canvass in Pennsylvania and then a director of the national canvass. Fisher's estimate is that using very conservative figures, at least 150,000 young people survive the initial cut and each year. At Princeton, her former school, perhaps 10% of the student body has canvassed. In Pennsylvania, as many as 15-20% of students in public universities may have tried out for the canvass.

Conservatively, over the last generation this amounts to 3.5 million people who have canvassed. Think of the consequences: Generation X has had personal experiences with a Manichean politics which is oversimplified, scripted, and unpleasant. My guess is that such real life experiences powerfully shape the findings of the Kettering Harwood report on student attitudes toward politics, which showed that most students think it means protests and nasty fights, as well as elections. We clearly need more research.

I want to raise the question of the canvass's effects on political learning – and more broadly the effects of the Manichean politics it embodies on the political culture. The definition of "politics-as-war" works, I believe, to delegitimize politics generally. We also need to pose the question of unearthing and debating underlying political paradigms and models. Politics will always have Manichean elements. But we need ways to spread much more widely the practice and the theory a jazz-like politics of public work, if we are to re-engage young people with democracy, or to reinvigorate the commonwealth. *Thanks to Melissa Bass, Liz Beaumont, Anne Colby, Chris Curtiss, Tom Ehrlich, Dana Fisher, Bill Galston, Nan Kari, Dan May, Nan Skelton, and David Thelen for helpful feedback on this piece.*