

Looking Beyond Our Recent Past

BY TIMOTHY J. SHAFFER

Democratic theory, in the words of John Dryzek, took a “strong deliberative turn” in the 1990s (p. 1). What has emerged since that time has been a robust scholarly discussion about deliberative democracy and its theoretical dimensions, as well as the development and recognition of a field of practice that continues to develop. Scholars and practitioners have helped to create robust professional organizations such as the National Issues Forums Institute and National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, as well as an academic journal—the *Journal of Public Deliberation*—that provide space to think critically about this burgeoning domain. These opportunities, among many others, enable the field of public deliberation to continue to grow in practical and intellectual ways, contributing to what Caroline W. Lee in *Do-It-Yourself Democracy* identifies as the “public engagement industry.” Others, such as Peter Levine, have integrated public deliberation into a broader approach to civic life referred to in academic circles as civic studies. In his book, *We Are the One’s We Have Been Waiting For*, Levine noted the importance of opportunities to understand factual information about issues, to wrestle with diverse values, and to formulate strategies for cultivating a sense of shared, public life by asking all citizens to consider the question, What should you and I do?

With innovative approaches to public participation such as participatory budgeting and the citizens’ initiative review becoming more widely employed, it is no wonder that we might think that such experiments are without precedent. Yet to do so diminishes the potential for learning from experiments that came long before the “deliberative turn” of the early 1990s.

What follows is a brief introduction to a chapter of American history often overlooked, especially when considering questions about how we should live our lives and take actions based on knowledge about the issues that matter to us through citizen-centered discussion and deliberation. I contend that the account below—through focused attention on government administrators such as M. L. Wilson—is best interpreted through a civic studies

lens because it is a narrative about how government administrators (with intimate connections to higher education) viewed their work as being about facts, strategies, and values dealing with political life. This was primarily at the community level, but the work had implications for state and national policy at a time when some questioned democracy’s future.

Cultivating Democracy in the New Deal

For practitioners and scholars seeking to retrieve or learn from earlier times, the Progressive Era often holds a special place. It was a period of unique tensions: in a powerful way, it was a time of increased reliance of experts to solve public problems; but it was also a time of democratic revival with so-called “ordinary” citizens playing an important role in politics and democratic life.

The New Deal, in contrast, has often been viewed as a chapter in American democracy that relied almost exclusively on experts to ameliorate the many problems facing the country, embodying only half the Progressive Era’s influence. An element of the New Deal critique has been rooted in the justified claim that the government leaned profoundly on experts. President Franklin D. Roosevelt famously relied heavily on leading intellectuals of the time, turning to a select number of professors who would popularly become known as the “Brains Trust.” Beyond this immediate circle of close advisors there were also many others who came to fill the ranks of the New Deal agencies. This larger group included what Anthony J. Badger in *The New Deal* referred to as, “A remarkable host of young, bright, idealistic lawyers, social workers, and engineers.” (p. 6). They were, in the words of Richard S. Kirkendall, “service intellectuals—men of academically trained intelligence whose work as intellectuals related closely to affairs of great importance and interest to men outside of the university.” (p. 456).

Playing essential roles in bringing the New Deal to life, these intellectuals developed new democratic roles for the federal government. Building on a tradition that took hold during the Progressive Era,

administrators embraced technocratic approaches to address the many challenges facing the nation. But as we will see with a select group of administrators in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), how they viewed themselves and their work reveals a much more complex nature of what it meant to be a New Deal intellectual and administrator, particularly for those who valued and explicitly framed their vision for the USDA through a democratic lens.

By way of introduction, we begin with a quote from then USDA Under-Secretary M. L. Wilson, the central actor shaping the Department's democratic efforts, who wrote in "Patterns of Rural Cultures":

"... I have always believed that no single specialist or expert, nor any single body of scientific knowledge, can ever deal adequately with even a relatively small and apparently detached agricultural problem. I believe that when, for instance, we have a farm problem that seems on the surface to be wholly an economic matter, we may safely take it for granted that the economic problem is interwoven with factors that are political, sociological, psychological, philosophical, and even religious. And we should realize that any solution or policy that is decided upon is bound to have effects upon human life and conduct that none but philosophy and religion openly profess to judge. Economic wisdom alone, therefore, is not enough for proper consideration of agricultural problems that by common consent are defined as economic problems. We cannot escape getting involved in questions of moral, philosophical, and spiritual values whenever we touch upon any social problem." (p. 218).

This quote embodies, in many ways, the philosophy shaping an effort led by a handful of government administrators to broaden and redefine how public problems were thought about and addressed through what was called the Program Study and Discussion (PSD) unit—first as a Section of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and later as a Division in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, both within the USDA. Motivated not only by a desire to solve agricultural problems but also by a commitment to support and strengthen civic life through education, administrators began a conversation about a deliberative democracy and

civic education initiative in the winter of 1934 and spring of 1935.

This initiative was composed of two related parts: first, discussion groups that were organized and facilitated by local Cooperative Extension agents from land-grant colleges and universities with rural men and women, and second, Schools of Philosophy for Extension Workers that were organized and facilitated by USDA staff and prominent university faculty and intellectuals. From 1935 until the PSD was closed in 1946, over forty subjects were addressed through discussion group material (while groups were encouraged to address topics well beyond those outlined in government pamphlets). The PSD prepared and distributed millions of copies of discussion guides for communities to use as resources for thinking about various topics. Final numbers, as complete as possible, suggest that more than 3 million rural men and women participated in discussion groups, tens of thousands of discussion leaders were trained, and more than 150 schools were held with over 50,000 extension workers and other rural community leaders attending.

The breadth of the PSD remains impressive. With a modest staff, it engaged communities across the entire nation. They collaborated with institutions, primarily the land-grant colleges and Extension Service, and others such as library associations and farm organizations. But in the end, those with vested interests in agriculture (and support in Congress) viewed the PSD as a deviation from the USDA's more "traditional" work. Actions beginning in 1942 and continuing in subsequent years—led by the American Farm Bureau Federation, sympathetic supporters in Congress, and some within the land-grant colleges who felt the USDA should only provide statistical information and not engage in the planning and educational work as had been done since the mid-1930s—brought this democratic initiative to an end.

There are different ways scholars have written about this work. Jess Gilbert in *Planning Democracy* noted the "unusual innovation" of adult education being a central pillar of the USDA's role during the New Deal (p. 142). He argued in his contribution to *Fighting the Farm* that the intention behind these programs was to "expand the views of local

and state leaders in both government and society at large” (p. 136). Others, such as Andrew Jewett in the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, have focused on the fact that elite university faculty members were part of such an effort. I argue that the PSD and the philosophy behind it give us an important glimpse in the development of democratic theory and practice in the twentieth century. Drawing on Progressive Era roots, the PSD dealt with a world radically altered by the economic collapse of the Great Depression and its lingering impact. Much like our own time, the mid- to late-1930s and early 1940s were shaped by constricted economic opportunities, environmental disasters, and war. Nevertheless, administrators set out to rethink how a government agency could engage citizens through deliberative and educational work that connected with action to be taken by citizens.

It is important to stress that the PSD’s initiatives were not a perfect embodiment of democracy. However, those who gave life to these educational efforts had a particular vision of democracy and its promise. Although imperfect, these initiatives were an attempt to remake and cultivate democracy as a way of life instead of only being about voting and elections. Supporting attempts to develop a deeper knowledge about agricultural problems and how they intersected with broader cultural and political issues, administrators envisioned the USDA helping to address problems of and in democracy. As F. F. Elliott put it in a 1939 issue of *Land Policy Review*, “Erosion of the soil in which democracy can grow has also taken place at an accelerating rate.” (p. 2.)

Old Practices and New Interpretations of Democracy

What Wilson and others envisioned was not new. In fact, much of what USDA administrators wanted—to create spaces for citizens to engage and learn with and from one another—built on previous generations of work, especially within the land-grant system, Cooperative Extension Service, and the adult education field. In a 1997 essay, Jess Gilbert positioned Wilson and Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace within the agrarian tradition and suggested they viewed themselves as members in its continually developing and evolving history. For them, the agrarian tradition was a living thing,

and they sought to articulate how the New Deal was “entirely within the national tradition—not ‘un-American’ or subversive of it, as some conservatives held. Rather, it was the next step forward for their generation” (p. 135). Much like Progressive Era intellectuals and leaders who helped redefine what democracy and citizenship meant at the turn of the century, Wilson, Wallace, and others updated it again for their own time.

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One of Wallace’s first speeches in 1933 as Secretary of Agriculture was called “A Declaration of Interdependence.” He spoke about the desperate situation facing farmers as well as the many urban dwellers who turned to abandoned farms with the hope they might make some future for themselves. What needed to occur was “a mental adjustment, a willing reversal, of driving, pioneer opportunism, and ungoverned laissez-faire. The ungoverned push of rugged individualism perhaps had an economic justification in the days when we had all the West to surge upon and conquer; but this country has filled up now, and grown up.” Wallace would continue this call for new approaches in books such as *New Frontiers* and *America Must Choose*, emphasizing the need for new thinking and deliberative decision making to address the confounding challenges the country faced. Throughout his time as Secretary, Wallace viewed his role as one that enabled him to create opportunities for farm people to become more active and engaged around agricultural, and thus public, problems. Russell Lord in *The Agrarian Revival* quotes Wallace as saying, “What we’ve got to do is find a way to make a machine-age democracy effective.” (pp. 152–153).

Wilson shared many of Wallace’s views, one of them being that Americans needed to look beyond economics as the measure for understanding issues. Both expressed commitments to cultivating a new approach and outlook for citizens. Reflecting a position held by John Dewey, democracy to Wilson was

more a way of life rather than a rigidly defined political structure. He hoped for a renaissance in the United States in which people would “search their souls for the deeper, more fundamental philosophical meanings” and create new models of democratic processes. In 1940, Wilson wrote in the journal *Social Forces* that he was convinced the problems of rural life would not be solved by “present-day social science disciplines” but rather through a cultural approach “attempting to get an integrated view of life as it flows along” (p. 11). Democracy was real and lived. It was shaped by values and not simply something found in a textbook about the branches of government.

Wilson also believed issues needed to be named and framed as complex problems even when they appeared to be simple and straightforward. Education—particularly discussion and deliberation with others—was a powerful way for citizens to more fully understand the interconnected realities they faced. In a time when fundamental questions about democracy’s future were up for debate, the PSD cultivated space for thoughtful discussion. Wilson wrote in 1935 “Free and full discussion is the archstone of democracy” (p. 145). Rural people did not need to be preached at. Instead, they should be active participants in creating their future. This was not necessarily new to Extension agents, “but there has never been a better opportunity or a greater need for using it as a means of stimulating the flow of pro and con thought.” (p. 145) Democracy required participation and informed participation was based on education. We now look at one example of Wilson’s thinking about the connection between education and democracy and how, although 75 years earlier, he spoke to Levine’s interest in developing a scholarly approach to making sense of facts, values, and strategies in civic life.

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Education for Democracy

A striking example of Wilson’s thinking came in 1936 when he was the president of the American Country Life Association. That year its annual meeting was

held in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and the conference theme was “Education for Democracy.” As he noted in his speech, printed a year later, democracy’s struggle against dictatorship raised numerous questions about what democracy actually was:

Is democracy a fixed thing, or is it an evolving, changing idea? Are the concepts of liberty, equality, and fraternity different now from what they were when we lived in a simpler society? Is democracy related to the environment of a people? Did it take one form when we were a nation of frontier farmers, and must it take on different forms now that we have become a complex industrial country with the agricultural frontier gone, and most people engaged in highly specialized activities instead of continuing as members of a self-sufficient family unit such as we had 150 years ago? After all, is democracy simply a faith, an attitude on the part of individuals, or is it also a rule for living which must change as the conditions of life itself change?” (p. 9).

He continued by stating three assumptions that were “axiomatic with all those who believe in democracy” (p. 9). The first was that democracy must be based on a faith in the “inherent capabilities and worth-whileness of the average man” (p. 9). There must be, Wilson asserted, an assumption the average person has innate intelligence and reason and that because of this intelligence, wise decisions can be made through “the expression of open-minded opinions about the problems of living together” (p. 9). His second point was that democracy required participation by citizens and that we learn the democratic process by “doing things in a democratic way” (p. 10). The third point, in a sense, helped to accomplish the first two: “This faith in the common man and in the democratic method rests primarily upon the educational processes” (p. 10). Education was responsible for both setting up the framework of ideas as well as the interpretation of those ideas within that framework. For Wilson, to address the “complicated problems of democracy which are at present before us, and which lie ahead, either some new educational agencies must be developed, or readjustments must be made in some of those we now have” (p. 10). Discussion groups and deliberative practices were his idea to reshaping existing institutions such as the Extension Service.

To illustrate his point, he told a simple story about an “ordinary farmer in an ordinary farm community in the Middle West” (p. 11) and how he and others would meet each Friday evening during the winter. He elaborated on how the small group of 11 farmers decided which topics to discuss as well as the approach they took to discuss them. They did not vote on issues. Argument was not the goal.

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Instead, the farmers would “try to see all sides of the question, to get impartial facts, and each one of us forms his own ideas thereon” (p. 12). To Wilson, this particular account of farmers meeting was of great significance because such a gathering “is the basis for a great hope for democracy” (p. 12). Democratic discussion was not uncommon in the country and had recently been encouraged by “the Extension Service, the lecture hour at the Grange, and the educational periods in the meeting of the farm organizations and the ‘co-ops,’ by certain farm papers, by some rural and village school teachers, [and] by some of the churches.” (p. 13) Wilson used the discussion group model of adult education and community development work in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, as one example of such work taking place. Borrowing language that might be found in one of the country churches mentioned, Wilson said, “The prophets speak of things not happening ‘until the fullness of time thereof.’ I am sure the time has come when there is a demand for a great discussion movement on the part of the citizens” (p. 14). Wilson spoke about “a national program” with reference to the PSD’s discussion groups and how such an initiative “should become one of the major activities in the field of agricultural organization and education,” (p. 14) alongside other more recognized goals such as better farm practices and foreign trade. In this context, adult group discussion and deliberation were to be seen as both a “means and as an end” (p. 14). The pressing problems of democracy required they be addressed beyond the confines of schools and universities, too often environments where curricula situated subjects in “air-tight compartments” (p. 15). Democracy needed

to be constantly reshaped. It could not be thought about as some abstract issue removed from the real-time challenges facing Americans.

Wilson closed his presidential address with five points: First, there needed to be a clear differentiation between what group discussion was and what it was not. There were techniques to be used to move from an educational model based on listening and memorizing to one based on discussion and thinking. Second, “discussion” needed to be popularized by the likes of Extension and other farm organizations, but not simply in rhetoric. They had to be, in Wilson’s words, “prepared to back up their sales talk with service and assistance” (p. 16). Third, Extension needed to play a role in training local leaders in the “technique and methods of group discussion,” and it, “will not come about without organization and effort” (p. 16). Closely related, Wilson’s fourth point was that demonstrations were needed to show how good discussion occurred, just as Extension did with more traditional agricultural issues. Seaman A. Knapp’s demonstration method could serve as an example insofar that citizens might benefit from seeing how democratic discussion occurred. Finally, after discussion groups had been set up, “a great responsibility rest[ed] upon the educational agencies ... to service these groups with material that will aid and assist them” (p. 16). If education had a role to play in democracy, discussion groups were its modern manifestation. This presidential address captures the essence of Wilson’s philosophy that complex public problems required citizens to learn from one another before they could act. Wilson and others were not simply romantics longing for a bygone era of the New England town hall meeting. The world was rapidly changing and their response was a commitment to democracy, cutting against the grain of so much of how the New Deal has been narrated as a period of an increasingly powerful federal government and a shift to bureaucracy and expertise.

What can easily be lost in the retelling of these initiatives was the degree to which local knowledge and experience was valued alongside technical expertise from the USDA and how citizens were recognized as civic actors with their own agency. Stressing that neither science nor the social sciences would alone solve problems, Wilson believed that

cooperation was essential “not merely in our own lines, not merely in our own class, not merely in our own nation, but in the world as a whole.” Through discussion groups and schools, education played a central role in the ongoing development of democracy and active citizenship. Rather than professing an official position, discussion groups and schools experienced a USDA that acknowledged the complexity of public problems which, in turn, demanded full participation from both “ordinary” citizens and experts. In many ways, it was this openness to the question of agriculture policy that led to the end of this period of democratic experimentation.

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Established institutions such as the American Farm Bureau Federation began to push back against democratic efforts within the USDA to cultivate in citizens a sense that they could and should make their own decisions about the problems facing them. By 1946, the Farm Bureau was successful in curtailing the USDA in its democratic work and the PSD was shuttered. The USDA work shifted away from action and engagement to more traditionally defined scientific research. The cultivation of democratic habits was replaced with statistical research and surveys.

Conclusions and Questions

So what difference does it make that rural people gathered together in living rooms and discussed national agriculture policy? What benefit came from Extension agents and other community leaders gathering at multiday schools of philosophy for continuing education? One place where it seems this work is particularly pertinent is within the land-grant university and its Extension system. Today, there are university faculty and Extension educators in states across the country who have utilized deliberative approaches in community settings. In many instances, they have partnered with local non-profit organizations and/or government agencies to more richly engage citizens. By doing so, these

professionals are challenging a dominant paradigm within higher education which views engagement with wider audiences primarily through an expert model of disseminating scientific-based research. They provide opportunities and space for deliberation, situating education and knowledge creation in community settings. Through such processes, citizens can make informed decisions and take action in response to the challenges they face, not simply by adopting certain practices espoused by university experts, but by taking into consideration factual information, conflicting values, and strategies for addressing their concerns—done in collaboration with university faculty.

As engaged academic professionals struggle to have their work valued by their universities and the wider public, citing the efforts made during the New Deal could help to frame democratic efforts as a retrieval of a forgotten past rather than being seen as a deviation from a narrowly defined tradition and trajectory. Instead of a nationally supported initiative, today we have more localized attempts to use education as a tool for cultivating democratic practices and habits. But many of these individuals don’t realize they are developing modern manifestations of an approach to public problems that was used more than 70 years ago, often within their own universities. Similarly, discussions about how government agencies might more meaningfully engage citizens can draw on the PSD as a robust example of a federal agency in collaborative partnerships.

By creating spaces for citizens to learn from one another, deliberate, and (in partnership with the USDA’s more explicit action programs) act, Wallace, Wilson, Carl F. Taeusch (head of the PSD), and PSD staff sought to cultivate a more holistic approach to problems. The USDA faced numerous rural challenges, but they asked themselves difficult questions about how best to ensure citizens were knowledgeable about problems so they could act on them. The philosophy shaping these administrators was one that challenged the budding liberalism of the day. They wrestled with value-laden issues as a government entity. This was not without critique, however, and the exchange between an editor of *America*, a Catholic magazine, and Taeusch highlights the push-back the PSD received for approaching its work as it did. Framing the most pressing agricultural issues

as questions for citizens to answer themselves serves as a reminder of the importance of this story, of the attempts made to strengthen democracy while simultaneously seeking to address public problems.

Framing the most pressing agricultural issues as questions for citizens to answer themselves serves as a reminder of the importance of this story, of the attempts made to strengthen democracy while simultaneously seeking to address public problems.

As we think about the continued development of deliberative democracy and civic engagement, especially for public institutions like universities and governments, it is imperative to reclaim periods in the past that help us to imagine and articulate what it means to live public spirited lives that recognize the knowledge and agency of citizens. This is particularly important within institutions that focus increasingly on the provision of research-based technical knowledge to citizens and communities for their own consumption or use without much attention to the implications of such knowledge. Higher education and federal bureaucracies are often viewed as being out of touch with democratic life and active citizenship. Yet, as this brief account about the PSD reveals, we can uncover forgotten stories that offer a different narrative which, in part, help us to construct our own today. This story is particularly important when looking at administrators or others in roles that afford them some degree of influence within their respective institutions. Often we can focus on grass root efforts for cultivating democracy, but we must also direct our attention to those in administrative and leadership roles since so much also comes from those within institutions settings.

In conclusion, if we ask the question, “What should you and I do?” we find a particularly insightful response from M. L. Wilson and the PSD’s work in the 1930s and 1940s. Discussion groups and schools engaged the three important and interrelated matters Levine identifies as being central to civic renewal: facts, values, and strategies. If we want to continue to develop our thinking about the role professionals can play in cultivating democratic

practice and habits, we must not only look to the work we are doing today but also revisit and reclaim narratives from our distant past. We can learn a great deal from those who have come before us and wrestled with many of the same challenges we can so easily view as “new” today.

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