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Introduction:

Do We Care About Personal Democracy?

American democratic institutions are built upon a guarded faith in a limited but developmental capacity of the country's citizens to actualize freedom, equality and self-determination through the exercise of their democratic rights. If indeed this exercise has atrophied with misuse, as pre-2008 voting records and November 2010 election returns suggest, the question is whether the loss of freedom, equality and self-determination via those institutions can be far behind. The exercise of democratic rights is theoretically a deliberate activity, to be activated or bypassed by individual choice. But in practice, obstructions abound to deter participation. Citizen engagement in process is deeply affected by available vehicles to link both passive and proactive citizens with the quality of their governmental representation and their perception of its legitimacy.

An alternative vernacular title to this work could be *America! Eat Your Own Home-Grown Spinach Before Presenting it for Someone Else's Consumption*. Active citizenship is personally compelling to me, in part because of the many years I've lived and traveled in Africa. In the midst of extended residence in Nairobi, Kenya during the 1980s and 1990s, I witnessed incredible bravery on a widespread scale, as people struggled for expression, solidarity, decent living standards and tolerant self-rule during the height of that country's democracy movement. For the last seven years, I've been

intimately connected with Liberia, as its people struggle to take a democratic path away from a violent past. In both cases, those citizens are very aware of two realities Americans seem to forget: To protect citizen rights and accompanying benefits, people need to energize, educate themselves and vote. Institutional democratic process is a gift to that end, provided participation is full and fair. Returning from sundry places like Kenya and Liberia, I am dumbfounded to find Americans assertively disengaged from both their internationally touted democratic process and the shared aspects of their civil society. They remain unconvinced of their obligation to exercise their rights, so hard won by past generations. I'm not alone in this concern. Increasing numbers of scholars are convinced that reforming American democracy at home is far more pressing than experimenting in self-congratulating democracy promotion abroad. The first step should be nonpartisan dedication to revitalizing a national civic culture to get the country back on track.

Present levels of disengagement and resulting disenchantment are not intrinsic to the United States. Participatory associations have historically and theoretically been judged tremendously important to America's civic character, for they appear to have encouraged, enabled and enlarged a widespread, repeated engagement that has contributed on a personal and societal level to achieving Alexis de Tocqueville's celebrated "self-interest properly understood." Tocqueville had suggested in the first half of the 19th century that Americans' tendency to band together in association expanded their sense of self-interest and guarded against their individualistic tendencies to retreat into cocooned personal worlds.¹ Although the level of this "banding" and evidence of its positive effects have fluctuated throughout the nation's history, our society's affiliating proclivity has become integral to national self-image for contrasting reasons. Associations are seen variously as brakes to government growth through preserving private potential, social reengagement recipes for frustrated citizenry, expertise augmenters that enable informed participation, or allied builders of a common interest in the public sphere. Increasingly, they are also considered to be propaganda vehicles with cloudy legislative agendas. Because of this range in interpretation and practice, political theorist Mark E. Warren cautions in *Democracy and Associations* that Americans should

carefully consider associations' character and effect before embracing their personal or societal appeal. He notes that there has been little work on "*what* we should expect associations to do for democracies or *why* we should expect associations to carry out these democratic functions."²

In that spirit, I have set out to examine how civic associations operate in practice and to assess their chances for survival in the unregulated nonprofit climate established by the Supreme Court's 2010 decision regarding Citizens United versus the Federal Election Commission. There are considerable democratic stakes in their fortunes. The League of Women Voters (henceforth frequently termed the League) presents a compelling choice for a case study since it is literally dedicated to strengthening and expanding democracy. But its example also contains complexity and a degree of uneven performance. Like any human endeavor, the League's makeup and operation will pull it in several different directions to varying applause. Some critics might charge that by virtue of its association form, it is simply another interest group seeking the success of its own self-serving, if public-spirited agenda. Admirers, however, will claim that its process and achievements should be emulated and preserved.

This book takes an interdisciplinary approach to explore what makes one association democratically beneficial and consider whether such findings matter on a larger scale. It considers the League of Women Voters' origins, evolution, record, membership, and gradually declining numbers in the context of democratic theory, American history, and organizational study. These combined perspectives help pose reasons for the League's longevity and enable a forecast, through its prospects, for the character of future self-rule through civic-focused associations.

The League of Women Voters is an association that can be said to provide "democratic effects" through its operations linking individual citizens with the public sphere. In fact, it could be argued that the organization provides the "social substance of liberal-democratic procedures."³ As such, it provides a dramatic departure from the professionalized and closeted association models of our time. Over the course of its ninety-two year nonpartisan history, the League has committed itself to the motivation, enablement and

education of both its uniquely engaged members and those of the nation at-large on active citizenship, contemporary issues, and advocacy to promote reformed democratic process and equitable participation. Answering Warren's challenge to examine the impact and rationale for associations' engagement with democracy, this book will argue that the compelling component is the League's "why." (The essence of association motivation to engage in civics is, of course, highly telling for impact in developing democracies like Kenya and Liberia as well.) Direct descendants of the seventy-two year suffragist battle to win votes for women, the League's Progressive founders pledged to make that fight worthwhile by launching the League to help women *and* men vote freely, regularly and wisely to improve their country while passing on a legacy of cherished, hard-won and activated citizenship. This motivation to equip newly empowered female voters helped insure its dedication to internal self-governance and developmental substantive operation. Examination of the League will illustrate how, if one judges Warren's equation four paragraphs back to be important to democracy, it is particularly critical to consider *how* associations judged democratically beneficial act in practice in order to advance national social capital through their operation. The League passes the democratic bar most fundamentally by making self-rule in America's great geographical, demographic and technological span achievable on a practical daily level.

Rating the League on an association scale is a distinctly relative task. Judging by public relations campaigns and political activity in 2012, associations continue to actively promote interest and invite partisan combination. For reasons made clear within Chapters 2 and 3, most of the financially thriving groups will be found decidedly lacking in democratic potential regardless of message, membership numbers or facebook "likes." Social capital theorist Robert D. Putnam concluded the Twentieth Century with presentation of worrisome membership trends in associations and the accompanying decline in civic engagement and social capital. He made an important clarification about associations that are high in numbers yet operate essentially as "'tertiary' organizations . . . in which 'membership is essentially an honorific rhetorical device for fundraising.'"⁴ Examples of these numerous groups include the National

Rifle Association and the American Civil Liberties Union, both of which rank within the top ten associations in terms of contributing members but also provide minimal opportunity for individual engagement. It is these national trends toward mysterious, elite direction of groups that shape public opinion and command large resources which make consideration of the League of Women Voters' democratic potential particularly significant. As professionalism grows in the previously volunteer-driven association world, well-financed extremist voices influence the public agenda, and the diversity of American people retreats voluntarily or through compulsion from civic life. As evidence of the latter, some previously flourishing local chapters of the League are disbanding, and its leadership is pondering how to compete and retain character. The League's future may be of interest far beyond its membership, as prospects for deliberative self-rule decline.

Material for the case study is rich but, until now, nonintegrated. Different labels could apply to the League, and each has its own literature. Given its central role in activating the Nineteenth Amendment, some researchers examine it as a feminist organization dedicated to expanding the rights of women. Historians also examine its link with the character and intent of the original Progressives. Deliberative democrats focus on its encouragement of public dialogue about contentious issues. Public administrators study its record in propelling the identification and encouragement of collective action to deal with wide-impact problems in a public interest fashion. Those compelled by Putnam's lament on a decline of bridging interaction will celebrate its active and theoretically diverse membership. Voting practitioners will focus on its provision of nonpartisan materials, events and advocacy that strengthen Americans' ability to vote on election days. Some political scientists consider its operation as an interest group, pairing its effectiveness on "public" agendas with the personal interests of its supporters.

Interesting as some of the alternative angles may be, my primary focus is to address Warren's measure of a democratically beneficial association. Perhaps unsurprisingly, my conclusion is that the League of Women Voters fits Warren's socio-cultural definition of a civically virtuous, democracy-promoting association with a "distinct disposition that underwrite[s] democratic process, including a

willingness to play by the rules, attend to the common good, trust others, empathize with others, tolerate differences, respect rights, and deliberate and listen in good faith.”⁵

But theoretical approbation doesn't sustain day-to-day operation. Given the besieged character of such an association and the concurrent imperative to reenergize an ailing national civic culture, I will argue that there is considerable reason to publicly sustain civic groups like the League of Women Voters. Such intervention could be either indirect or targeted and still have consequence. Prioritizing national civic education would likely draw from the League's legacy and re-inspire its future. Public valuing of citizenship would alter individual motivation to join. Reforming the nonprofit sector and clarifying the definition of a civic membership group would make personal choices clearer and enable tax policy adjustment for the sector. Experimenting in public rewards or penalties for civic actions might increase free time for public duties and energize those previously disinclined. Policing fair association practice could help avoid bullying from other wealthy partisan groups intent on specific outcome.

To head toward that conclusion, the book contains three sections. Part I on National Trends includes this Introduction as Chapter 1. Chapter 2 examines the highly diverse theory affecting American associations, attempts an association typology and explores their diverse relationships with the public, government and democratic practice over time. Chapter 3 ponders what affects associations' democratic merits on individual, cultural and self-governing grounds, reviewing arguments in favor of public interest orientation and active membership. Chapter 4 considers research on civic association member characteristics, motivations and trends. Chapter 5 examines dwindling memberships and considers general tools and viruses that affect association sustainability.

With those national trends in place, Part II on The League's Promise begins to explore why the League of Women Voters is such a compelling contemporary case study for the relationship between American democracy and associations. Chapter 6 considers the League in historical context, looking at how its Suffrage origins and early struggles impacted its structural and purposive evolution. It further gauges its distinctive style and function, the

consistent dedication to grassroots process, and particular characteristics of its membership. Chapter 7 applies the earlier-described standards of democratically beneficial public interest associations to the League. At a general level, its record will be determined by activity within its mission areas: fostering education on citizenship, preparing and energizing people for democratic engagement, and encouraging the formation of “enlarged” public opinion. But the reality will prove a bit more complicated. Thus, the chapter considers whether the League’s progressive advocacy compromises non-partisanship or public interest representation and whether public problems do get solved in an enlarged fashion through its efforts. Attention will be devoted to its dedication to respecting the democratic process, its contributions toward social trust, and its identification and pursuit of the common good. Limitations flowing from difference and positions on gender advocacy will be considered. Tensions will be explored between institutional preservation and social impact. Finally, I will explore the degree of institutional compensation for democratic effects rendered.

The Argument for Sustaining Particular Democratic Associations contained within the Conclusion in Part Three, Chapter 8 will focus on the national stakes in survival of civic membership groups. It questions whether public interest membership groups like the League of Women Voters remain important and viable within contemporary America. Do they contribute toward shared values, and what are the stakes if particular ones disband? As particularized advocacy takes off without financial constraints, the voice of “public interest” is becoming faint and less effective, leading some to disagree that public participation, as sometimes “contracted out” through associations, is beneficial to democratic culture. Trends toward heightened partisanship and disengaged citizenry may demonstrate serious implications for national democratic legitimacy, and suggest self-rule is dangerously off-track and vulnerable to hijacking. Yet close examination hints that solutions may reside in the very degree of the approaching debacle.