
These are just some of the deep and pervasive problems continuing to face American society in the first years of the 21st century. And quite frankly, our politicians are at a partisan stalemate and our political system just doesn’t seem up to the task. We have seen increased polarization and an inability of our political class to set aside their narrow self-interests to act for a broader common good. At the same time, ordinary citizens are often relegated to the sidelines in public life, leading to what some have termed “a citizenless democracy” (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012, p. 1). Thus, underlying all of these issues seems to be the larger challenge around how we make collective decisions and act together – what David Mathews (2014) has termed “problems of democracy itself” (p. xvii).

For the past few decades, an alarm has been sounded as to the crisis of democracy in American society. A series of reports and research studies (e.g., Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012) have indicated a dramatic decrease in civic involvement, as Americans – and most especially young people – are voting less, have less civic knowledge, do not trust government or other civic institutions, and are even “bowling alone” as Robert Putman now famously noted as an indicator of the loss of social capital in communities (2000). Moreover, according to a major new study by the Pew Research Center (2014), political polarization is more deeply embedded in our lives than at any time in recent history, and those who participate most in public life are also the most ideological and polarized.

And yet, to address the adaptive challenges we face – including the renewal of democracy itself – we need diverse groups to work together for the public good while also calling upon new and creative voices to focus on sustainable solutions. That is why Thomas Ehrlich and Ernestine Fu’s new book, *Civic Work, Civic Lessons: Two Generations Reflect on Public Service*, is so timely. Ehrlich and Fu offer personal stories and insights into how this kind of democratic renewal is not only needed, but also possible. They offer a stirring and passionate memoir about the lives of people trying to make democracy work as it should through a commitment to public service.

This commitment has for many decades been at the core of the work of Thomas Ehrlich, a luminary figure with a long career in government, nonprofits, and higher education. Inspired by President Kennedy’s call for young people like him to ask “not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country” (a version of which was originally set to be the title of this book), Ehrlich dedicated his life to public service, serving in the Kennedy Administration and then subsequently in the Johnson, Ford, Carter, and Clinton administrations. His notable government work included serving as the first head of the Legal Services Corporation, the director of the agency responsible for foreign-aid policy under President Carter, and on the board of the Corporation for National and Community Service. He also had a distinguished career in academia, serving as president of Indiana University, provost of the University of Pennsylvania, and dean of the Stanford Law School.

During his years in higher education, Ehrlich was a pioneer in the efforts of Campus Compact, founded in the mid-1980s to encourage college students to engage in communities, and he subsequently helped to launch the contemporary service-learning movement on college campuses as chair of the board of Campus Compact by overseeing the shift in focus.
from student volunteerism toward the institutionalization of civic engagement through academic service-learning. Among his many distinctions, Campus Compact’s award for civically engaged faculty is named for him.

Along these lines, Ehrlich (1999) also co-authored one of the most significant public documents calling for American colleges and universities to respond to the crisis of democracy. In this pursuit, Campus Compact issued The Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education (Ehrlich & Hollander), originally signed by more than 500 college presidents, calling for a “recommitment of higher education to its civic purposes.”

In this memoir, Ehrlich reflects on his “civic lessons” from this and other civic work. However, always the innovator, Ehrlich adds an interesting twist to his latest book: It is co-written with a talented undergraduate student from Stanford University, Ernestine Fu. Fu is not an ordinary youth leader, having started her civic work early by founding a successful arts-based nonprofit organization in high school that capitalized on the artistic talents of her peers to bring music to senior adults and people with disabilities. While a college student, Fu continued to put her entrepreneurial skills to work on a series of local and national public service projects, including as an advisory board member for a youth service foundation that donates significant funds to youth organizations as well as being a student member of the Stanford Board of Trustees.

The co-authors have an age difference of 57 years, an unlikely but winning collaboration for a book aiming to “be of interest to readers of all ages, and particularly young people” with the hopes of “helping others in their community” (p. xii). From our experience, that’s a growing audience. We were actually inspired by the intergenerational co-authorship, and thus decided to do this review together.

We both studied at a first of its kind major and minor dedicated to educating students for public and community service studies at Providence College—18 years apart—and couldn’t agree more with Ehrlich and Fu’s hope that “people of all ages can find enormous satisfaction in civic work, just as we have” (p. xii). This is a hope we have seen realized among our peers and students who are involved in multi-year, developmental public service programs in higher education now offered not only at Providence College but also at Stanford University and a growing number of other campuses (Mitchell, Visconti, Keene, & Battistoni, 2011). Longo is an associate professor in public and community service studies, and Fleming is a recent graduate from that program, having spent the last four years being introduced to and immersed in community projects with civic professionals who are passionate about working on behalf of the public good. While chronologically years apart, we both found the book highly relatable and engaging. The casual narrative of both authors recounting specific experiences in the field allows the reader to feel as if she is slipping into Ehrlich’s official shoes for a day to experience first-hand the government at work, or standing next to Fu as she plays the flute while leading others in her high school nonprofit.

Our observations of the current state of American politics and civic engagement match the concerns described by Ehrlich and Fu. While passionate about starting a career in the public sector in the hopes of improving the quality of life within communities, Fleming has heard her peers and others complain about today’s civic environment, most notably the polarization of political parties. Although her undergraduate program was focused on public and community service, Fleming noted that the majority of her fellow graduating majors were entering the nonprofit sector while very few were interested in pursuing careers in government. It is telling that a group of young people passionate about spending their life contributing to the public good is more attracted to nonprofit organizations than the government.

Understanding these kinds of generational shifts through the stories of Ehrlich and Fu is what makes their partnership so rich. Civic Work, Civic Lessons is specifically organized around seven civic lessons for promoting youth civic engagement—drawing upon the experiences of Ehrlich and Fu—in their distinctive voices. The book also draws upon a series of focus groups the authors conducted with dozens of young people in the San Francisco Bay Area.

This memoir should be read alongside other recent books on civic renewal, most notably The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future (2014), the latest from David Mathews, one of Ehrlich’s few true contemporaries, and We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America (2013), by Peter Levine, a leading voice for the next generation of civic engagement. While Ehrlich and Fu primarily draw upon their first-hand experiences in public life, Mathews and Levine examine the latest research to arrive at similar conclusions about the challenges facing our democracy as well as a way forward with strategies for citizens to deliberate, build relationships, and act collaboratively. All three books are hopeful about the possibilities for the future of democracy, but recognize that this promise can only be realized by putting citizens at the center of this work.

Readers who have spent time with the study and practice of civic engagement will probably not find many surprises in the list of civic lessons offered by Ehrlich and Fu, which starts with a tribute to the
importance of mentors, role models, and teachers as the first civic lesson—understood rightly as often “the single most significant force in encouraging civic work” (p. 1). Here, the intergenerational storytelling has power as Ehrlich reflects on his first civic role model, his mother, who inspired a young Thomas by overcoming challenges in her private life (including suffering from clinical depression) to do important public work during World War II and then as an expert witness for an accused communist during the hysteria of the McCarthy era. Ehrlich also draws upon stories and lessons from his mentors with distinguished public careers, such as Judge Learned Hand, a leading judicial thinker of the 20th century, along with Abram Chayes and George W. Ball, top State Department officials during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. He learned much from these leaders, including “the importance of taking special pride in the craft of civic work” (p. 7).

Ehrlich notes that civic mentors are so vital because “they put a human face on what may otherwise seem an arid and abstract ideal” (p. 4). And thus, aptly, side-by-side with these historical figures are stories of the everyday mentors that are so essential to healthy youth development, the kinds of mentors that must be at the heart of contemporary civic renewal. These ordinary mentors include people like Mr. Rodriguez, a high school music teacher at Fu’s school, who believed in and supported the nonprofit Fu founded. Based on her experiences, Fu wisely notes, “My own best mentors have given me space, sometimes to stumble, but more important, to find my own path” (p. 17).

This mentor-mentee relationship, perhaps fittingly, brought the musical talents of youth to the community with the assistance of a supportive adult educator. An earlier study of three educational interventions with high school and college-aged youth designed to create political engagement outcomes demonstrated that the metaphor of teacher as “coach” or “maestro” may be the best model for working with students in the area of civic engagement (Longo, Drury, & Battistoni, 2006). The knowledge and skills necessary for political engagement are more akin to what is learned through athletics or music performance than the traditional academic model, so the role of the educator needs to adjust accordingly.

As in athletics and music, the main lesson of democratic citizenship is learned through practicing democracy; the “teacher” is one who sets up the practice routine and is there to guide the student through tasks and in reflecting upon the performance afterward. This doesn't diminish the role of educators at all; in fact, it enhances their place in setting the ultimate goals and context for practicing politics, and in providing tools and opportunities for reflection on students’ civic work, as is seen in the examples set forth by the authors. Concluding the lesson on the value of mentors, Fu names her co-author as one of these figures in her life and explains that in her experiences, Ehrlich “guided me in my civic journey and pushed me further than I ever thought I could have gone” (p. 22).

In a second lesson, which may seem obvious but is essential in our polarizing environment where scoring political points often outweighs solving public problems, the authors argue that “civic work should serve the public interest.” Here the stories offer an interesting generational shift as Ehrlich, who is 80 and a member of what has been termed the Silent Generation (born 1928-1945), often sees civic work as public service in the government sector. As such, Ehrlich’s narratives in Civic Work, Civic Lessons are filled with stories from government work, including historic events, such as his role as a government lawyer during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The narratives of Fu, and the members of what has been termed the Millennial Generation (born after 1980), tend to be focused on stories of volunteering in communities through nonprofit organizations, such as Fu's efforts to bring music to seniors and the work of her high school peers who volunteered to build transitional housing in Latin America. “As these stories make clear,” Fu remarks, “I view the public interest as a broad umbrella under which a range of civic activities can occur” (p. 33).

These stories from students expanding their understanding of how youth can contribute to the public good is reminiscent of the results of a Wingspread Conference just over a decade ago that resulted in The New Student Politics. In 2001, 33 college students met at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin to discuss their “civic experiences” in higher education. This conversation led to the student-written New Student Politics (Long, 2002), which forcefully argues that student work in communities is not an alternative to politics but rather an “alternative politics.” This new politics enables students to blend the personal and the political and address public issues through community-based work. While many of the students at Wingspread expressed frustration with politics-as-usual, they were not apathetic or disengaged. To the contrary, they pointed out that what many perceive as disengagement may actually be a conscious choice; they argued that, in fact, many students are deeply involved in non-traditional forms of engagement. These students saw their “service politics” as the bridge between community service and conventional politics, combining public power with community and relationships.

These findings were confirmed in a 2007 study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic
Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) in which students reported that they saw their volunteer work in communities as a complement to politics (Kiesa et al., 2007), and can again be seen in the voices of Fu and her peers. Students, who described their work trying to stop sex trafficking abroad, starting nonprofits, and leading preventive health programs for high-risk populations, talked about public work in personal, participatory, relational, collaborative, and non-political ways to Ehrlich and Fu. Even a student who ran for city council reflected, “It’s about the power of one. If you change the life of one child, you can change one family, one block, one community.”

Another committed student stated, “I may not change the system, but if I can spread goodness to at least one person, and that person spreads goodness to another, I know I have done my job” (p. 39). Like students at Wingspread, the Millennials captured in Civic Work, Civic Lessons are clearly engaged in public life and want to make a difference, but are turned off by partisan politics and the role played by special interest groups and big money in American politics.

Ehrlich, of course, has been at the center of the argument made by civic professionals and researchers about the importance of connecting direct community service with political engagement, having co-authored several books on this theme: Educating Citizens (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens, 2003) and Educating for Democracy (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, and Corngold, 2007). Thus, it is not surprising that he reasons, “Education for good citizenship should involve learning more than just individualistic civic activities like helping in a community kitchen. It should also include promoting systemic improvements in the civic life of one’s community.” He continues, “this means learning why the community has such a kitchen and what it will take, as a matter of public policy, to ensure that the kitchen is no longer needed” (p. 62).

There could be more of this kind of critical reflection in Civic Work, Civic Lessons – with an analysis of the consequences of how civic work is framed and practiced. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) argue that conceptions of citizenship matter, and outline the distinctions among the personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented citizens and their implications for democratic citizenship preparation. This research certainly wouldn’t be new to Ehrlich, as his leadership with the Carnegie Foundation Political Engagement Project (Colby et al., 2007) examined twenty-one college and university courses and co-curricular programs that address preparation for democratic participation, including Kahne’s Civic Leadership Institute at Mills College. Yet, the stories in Civic Work, Civic Lessons make no such distinction between various approaches to public service – with acts of charitable volunteerism, service-learning, paid government work, social entrepreneurship, activism, and other forms of civic work lumped together without careful attention to “the politics involved in educating for democracy” (Westheimer & Kahne, p. 263). While there is a certain value in letting the stories speak for themselves, this also ignores larger social and political issues that emerge from the stories.

While refreshing in its approach of having a joint memoir from two different generations, Civic Work, Civic Lessons often feels more like parallel storytelling, while a genuine dialogue between the authors would have added value. The dialogue format has been used effectively in other works of this sort, most notably through the unique experiences and collective wisdom of Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990) in We Make the Road by Walking. What Horton and Freire accomplish, and would have added much to the Ehrlich and Fu collection, is the ability to co-create and push one another in the give-and-take of dialogue – no easy feat. Still, we would have welcomed the authors taking some risks with more dialogue around the intergenerational differences that emerge in the text.

What Horton and Freire do so well is provide a critical analysis of issues of power and privilege in public service. As Harry Boyte (2004) contends, service routinely “neglects to teach about root causes and power relationships, fails to stress productive impact, ignores politics, and downplays the strengths and talents of those being served” (p. 12). Yet, while these issues are prescient in many stories of civic work – from how Ehrlich is offered new civic assignments and opportunities through a network of relationships, to the civic infrastructure available to students at Stanford University not available to most college students (not to mention the most unengaged group of young people who currently aren’t enrolled in higher education) – issues of power and privilege are largely ignored in the lessons in this book.

While quiet on these issues, they offer other useful civic lessons about the importance of civic practice, motivations, moral leadership, and setting clear goals – each filled with stories of success and learning from failure. In the third lesson, Ehrlich and Fu use first-hand experiences to make the case for the importance of “both the big picture and the details” (p. 42). Ehrlich pays special attention to the civic work of one of his mentors, George W. Ball, whom he admires because of his ability to see the “big picture” in American foreign policy during the run-up to the Vietnam War – with his unsuccessful advocacy against the escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam during the Johnson Administration. In reflecting on the tragic misjudgment of some of his contempo-
rariess (specifically former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, a champion of the Vietnam War strategy), Ehrlich compassionately notes, “It is important not to confuse right judgment with dedicated civic service” (p. 46).

In the fourth lesson, the authors acknowledge that not all people involved in civic work come with the same set of motivations, explaining that “serving the public interest need not be the only motive for civic work” (p. 59). Fu tells both her own story and those of youth active in public service, providing a variety of factors drawing people into this work. Nevertheless, a common theme throughout the narratives is an event or period of their lives when they interacted with or witnessed people struggling—along with an appreciation for advantages in their own lives. A student at Fu’s former high school, Carly, told the coauthor that “being exposed to the trouble-ridden urban environment of the part of Los Angeles where she lived and went to school influenced her to engage in civic work” (p. 70). In addition to this motivation, Fu also describes how participation in community service as part of a service-learning course can be a gateway into public service.

This lesson intends to teach the audience that people do not always begin engaging in civic work via the same route, and they don’t always, or have to, get involved for solely selfless reasons. Fu’s section of this chapter provides a more nuanced lesson for the reader, and offers especially critical information, because she discusses what exactly inspires Millennials to think about the good of the public and take up civic work. This lesson again makes clear that younger Americans have a strikingly different relationship with civic life than older generations. Fu explains the kinds of experiences Millennials have had that have pushed them to take action. Understanding these motivations—such as interactions with diversity and societal issues, community service programs, and service-learning courses—is critical information because it gives us a roadmap for attracting younger generations to public life. As Fu explains, “growing up exposed to opportunities for service at an early age helped these individuals realize the need to help other people in the world” (p. 73).

The authors also discuss the importance of moral leadership to public service as the fifth lesson, noting the old adage: a core “test” of an action or inaction is whether one “would be comfortable in having it appear on the front page of a major newspaper” (p. 82). One particularly interesting story of moral leadership involves Ehrlich’s negotiation with the board to become the first president of the Legal Services Corporation, a government agency responsible for providing legal services to the poor. As his confirmation came into trouble because of the politics surrounding his chosen deputy, Ehrlich refused to compromise for political expediency, risking his appointment because of the importance of “following his moral conscience” (p. 82).

Ultimately, he prevailed and was appointed with his deputy and they served ably together for several years, winning over earlier skeptics. Yet later, and seemingly without contradiction, Ehrlich discusses his dealings with Bob Knight, the legendary college basketball coach, where Ehrlich was much more willing to compromise and play the long-game. Ehrlich brings us inside some of the dilemmas and pressures that come with public leadership when as the new president at Indiana University he decided not to officially sanction the popular and successful Hoosiers coach for making offensive comments (beyond an initial rebuke); he feared losing the coach to another school (which would have caused an outcry among the many fervent Hoosier alumni and fans) in order to stay focused on accomplishing his academic priorities. It seems that moral leadership involves sticking to your principles, but also knowing when to compromise to achieve broader goals—which is the sixth lesson: “clear goals must be set in civic work” (p. 99).

Lesson seven is an important reminder of humility, a virtue that can be easily forgotten in public life. Humility is necessary for admitting to and then learning from the inevitable failures that come from trying to address complex public issues. Similarly, with humility comes the ability to realize “it is never wise to expect gratitude, let alone depend on it, to make civic work deeply satisfying and fulfilling” (p. 128). As Fu later reflects, “civic work yields its own rewards in the sense of personal satisfaction that is gained and that becomes part of one’s identity” (p. 143).

In reflecting on this final lesson about the importance of “civic work being its own reward,” Ehrlich notes that, “It has been one of the great pleasures of my professional life that I have been able to put into prose some of the insights that I learned in my civic work in the context of educating students” (p. 136).

Civic Work, Civic Lessons is one more example of Ehrlich voicing his insights to educate the next generation. And while at times there is some incongruence between the stories of Ehrlich and Fu, with the hopes for the intergenerational partnership going somewhat unfilled, Fu’s voice most clearly shines in the concluding chapter in describing the role of technology in civic renewal.

In what feels like a passing of the baton from one generation to the next, Fu outlines a pathway for “mak[ing] existing civic education and engagement efforts more student and citizen centered using new technology such as digital media” (p. 162). Using these new medias, she contends that civic work can attract a target audience, engage people in ways we
never could have dreamed of, transform collective advocacy into civic action, and then measure results. These final ideas are among the important and timely practices for future civic work. And for those interested in addressing our most pressing public problems—including the problems of democracy—this kind of practiced wisdom could not come soon enough.

References


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