

Civil Society's Support for Formal Democracy

How Realistic Are Expectations in Mexico, the U.S. and the UK?

Mike Aiken*

INTRODUCTION

Both Mexico and the United States have been in the grip of presidential elections in 2012. The outcomes of these formal democratic contests are vital for the citizens of both countries, but another important dimension for sustaining representative liberal democracy is often invoked: civil society. This essay asks why it is seen as important in Latin American and Anglo-Saxon contexts, and if it can meet the expectations placed upon it. The argument is that civil society has roots in three different traditions that can play complementary roles to formal democracy. However, governments need to be aware that these traditions cannot be conveniently translated into state purposes. In addition, civil society has no immunity to the forces afflicting the political culture in which it is situated.

WHY IS CIVIL SOCIETY IMPORTANT FOR REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY?

Why should civil society be of interest to representative democratic governments in Mexico, the U.S. or elsewhere? J. S. Mill, writing in 1861, understood that the “political machinery does not act of itself” but needs from citizens “not their simple acquiescence, but their active participation” and requires a force from “*outside* the machinery.” Today we would see civil society as one of these forces. Let us look at four reasons given for the importance of civil society to formal democracy.

* Visiting research fellow at the Co-operatives Research Unit, Open University, Milton Keynes and currently undertaking research in Mexico into civic action, mike.aiken@open.ac.uk.



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First, there has been a slow realization of a crisis amidst the “mature” democracies. There is, in short, a *decline in formal participation* in representative democracy. In the Anglo-Saxon countries, voter turnout continues to fall. In U.S. presidential elections, little over 60 percent of the electorate has voted since the turn of the century. In the UK, since 2000, voter participation has fallen to similar levels after averaging 75 percent a decade earlier. In Canada, the participation of young people in elections has been only half that of older age groups according to Pammet’s “Election Canada.” Meanwhile, political party membership is declining. In the UK, according to NCVO’s *Almanac*, the Conservative Party’s 1.2 million members in 1970 had declined to around 200 000 by 2008. In contrast,

other organizations, particularly single-issue campaigns, grew enormously: Friends of the Earth's membership increased from 1 000 in 1971 to 100 000 by 2011. On-line social forums have also proliferated.

A second concern has been the *decline in trust* in politicians and public service. This has traditionally been low in Latin American countries and Anglo-Saxon populations appear to be following. Trust in governments and public institutions has fallen in nearly all the major industrialized countries since the mid-1990s and, according to Blind's research from 2007, "plummets when it comes to Latin America." Similar surveys, however, show leaders of civil society organizations enjoying high levels of public confidence only outstripped by doctors.

A third reason lies in the *growing complexity* of modern industrialized countries and the increasing individualization of needs. This means that the implementation of social, economic, or environmental policy should be adapted to take account of the particularities of geography, demographics, and culture. Recruiting citizen groups to co-design and co-implementation policy holds the promise of building co-responsibility, local ownership, and efficiency in social delivery.

A fourth reason is connected to *social innovation*, which may emerge from deliberation and debate far removed from centers of traditional policy making. Environmental issues, gay and lesbian rights, and indigenous people's concerns might never have originated in the programs of major political parties.

Civil society is celebrated as an important player in these issues but politicians are often hazy on the means by which it will interact with formal processes. Barack Obama, whose roots were in social action projects, provided an idealistic description of civil society at a Russian forum in July 2009. He spoke of how

the best ideas and solutions come from ordinary citizens who become involved in their communities and in their countries . . . by mobilizing and organizing and changing people's hearts and minds. . . [to] change the political landscape. . . [,] a vibrant civil society. . .¹

He included "the freedom of people to . . . speak their minds, to organize peacefully" and emphasized the underpinning institutions such as a free press, fair administration of justice, and accountable government. Nevertheless civil society was rarely mentioned by the president for domestic audiences in recent state of the union addresses.

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In Mexico, the term usually appears in policy in relation to civil society *organizations*, although there are appeals to society in general. The outgoing president, Felipe Calderón, was not unusual in saying little directly about civil society. Nevertheless many state and federal forums relating to crime and drug trafficking seek the participation of civil society organizations. Calderón's "state of the union" address in September 2010 talked of the power of government, media, and the entire society to use their strengths in a manner of co-responsibility; and he urged "civil society organizations to work shoulder to shoulder" with Congress to control crime. The Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) exhorts daily that "what makes a great nation is the participation of the people," although formal processes are emphasized. Meanwhile, the emergence of student protests during the elections in 2012, under the label #YoSoy132, and the role of activists in the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity, appeared to provide examples of the hand of civil society directly interacting with the formal process.

THREE TRADITIONS OF "CIVIL SOCIETY"

Before proceeding, it is important to ask: what do we mean by civil society? This essay identifies three contrasting traditions which infuse our current use of the term: the organizational, the deliberative, and the civic.

The *organizational tradition* has its clearest exponent in Tocqueville's studies of U.S. associations in the nineteenth century. For him, they encouraged social mixing, provided training in political organization, and offered a parallel structure whereby local concerns could be advocated to formal democracy from a membership base. This tradition emphasized developing cohesion among individuals and groups or, in Robert Putnam's contemporary terms, "building social capital."

The *deliberative tradition* originated in Aristotle's *Treatise on Government*. He saw civil society as rooted in government searching for "the good" and discovering common purposes

aimed at “justice” for all citizens. Different ideas about the “good” would be reconciled by a “deliberative council” that was not an organ of power but rather resembled a team of doctors offering diagnosis and treatment to realize the “good.” Modern versions draw on Hegel, who saw civil society as a *mediator* between the individual, family, and the state. Hence, Gramsci and Habermas envisaged a *deliberative space*, while Fred Powell, writing in 2007, spoke of a public space where “debate is still possible in a peaceful, ethical, and democratic form.”²

A *civic tradition*, an idea popularized recently by Adalbert Evers, focuses on the “civic culture” that is enacted in institutional and group settings. This includes the behavior of politicians, civil servants, and citizens, plus the values and ethical standards of professional practice. Civicness includes a “disposition” to do just deeds for the community. These activities help reproduce a civic tradition. Such ideas are closely linked to Almond and Verba’s research in the 1960s (revisited in 1989), which examined the “civic culture” of Mexico, the United States, and the UK. They argued that stable democracies needed a civic culture in which citizens were “active and involved” in “informed, analytic, and rational” ways, but these entailed specific sets of beliefs, feelings, and values.

CAN CIVIL SOCIETY MEET THE EXPECTATIONS?

How far can these traditions contribute to addressing the challenges faced by formal democracies?

First, it may be partially true that civil society action can feed an involvement in formal political processes. Barack Obama’s professional career, which encompassed the *deliberative* and *organizational* traditions of civil society, led him to the presidency. Nevertheless, we need to be cautious about drawing a straight arrow between civil society activity and engagement in formal politics. For some people, the informal engagement in civil society activities without specific or instrumental political aims is a direct alternative to formal pol-

itics. Citizens may seek debate and critique, but still have little inclination to engage in representative democracy.

Second, civil society organizations can build trust and increase the social glue in localities—but not always. Veenstra’s Canadian research in 2006 suggested that meaningful participation was “significantly related to . . . social trust”; however, involvement in a “breadth of civil society organizations” could increase *social*, but not necessarily *political*, trust.³ A lack of social trust and civic tradition in Latin American countries may present a pre-existing barrier to mobilizing that undermines both formal democratic *and* civil society engagement. Meanwhile, in Anglo-Saxon countries, neighborhood associations may sometimes mobilize homogeneous groups and so entrench social divisions against the “other” rather than contribute to social cohesion.

Third, some international institutions have sought to build civil society in emerging democracies, believing that a large number of independent organizations will provide collaborative partners for social delivery and indicate a “vibrant civil society.” There are two points to make here. On the one hand, the numbers game oversimplifies the organizational tradition. It would imply that Chile or East Germany in the 1980s had no civil society because they lacked a specified number of constituted associations. Yet, a state lacking a Cat Protection League may still have strong deliberative or civic traditions. On the other hand, if we are interested in civil society’s role in co-designing local policy, it is vital to understand the types of associations, what they do, and who runs them, rather than how many exist. To take the extreme example, narco gangs and the Ku Klux Klan could claim to be organizations between the state, market, and family with a set of values and actions to promote. Would we welcome their role in sustaining representative democracy and co-designing local policy?

Furthermore, while an urban neighborhood group might not claim to represent all local interests, an over-hasty public agency may claim that collaboration with them is equivalent to one true voice of local civil society. The co-design of local policies can lead to other difficulties. In Mexico, we might ask if civil society groups have been “captured” in a clientelist regime. In the U.S. and the UK, we could consider if groups have been subtly co-opted by state or market as deliverers of public services in competitive contracting environments. Indigenous councils, farmers’ organizations, and round tables in Mexico along with community development and regeneration partnerships in the U.S. and the UK have had to confront the complex issues of their own legitimacy in co-design.

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Fourth, in Latin American contexts, where clientelism and cronyism persist, any deliberative processes may lead to formulaic discussion and pre-determined outcomes. Collusion with a complex mix of patronage including municipal departments, public sector agencies, and trade unions may produce conventional rather than innovative solutions. In Anglo-Saxon countries, collaborations between state and civil society organizations have also faced dilemmas. Unequal power relations and differential expert knowledge can result in decisions strongly steered by the state, or translated by administrative procedures that squeeze out inspiration.

CONCLUSION

There are clear shortcomings in simplistic views about how civil society can complement formal representative democracy in Latin American or Anglo-Saxon contexts. We do not need to minimize civil society's contribution but to complicate it. The organizational, deliberative, and civic traditions have much to offer but in negotiated ways: there is no simple virtuous circle between individuals, civil society, and representative democracy. The existing political culture will also infuse those relations differently in various country contexts. Civil society may be aspiring—in a myriad of idiosyncratic and muddled ways—to the “just” in society and so represent a social good in its own right. However, without a trusted civic culture in public and professional life, alongside institutional frameworks including accountable government, equal justice, and a free press, civil society will find it hard to flourish. Although it cannot be “operationalized” in any straightforward way by the state apparatus, it may need to be better understood and nurtured by governments. Paradoxically, its fluid nature does not pre-dispose it to capture by state—or market—machinery without disfigurement. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Barack Obama, “Remarks at the Parallel Civil Society Summit in Moscow, Russia,” July 7, 2009, <http://csis.org/event/president-obama-joins-us-russia-civil-society-summit>, accessed April, 21, 2012.

² Fred Powell, *The Politics of Civil Society: Neoliberalism or Social Left?* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2007), p. 22.

³ P. K. Blind, “Building Trust in Government in the Twenty-First Century: Review of Literature and Emerging Issues,” paper presented at the 7th Global Forum on Reinventing Government, June 26-29, 2007, Vienna, pp. 6 and 13, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UN/UNPAN025062.pdf>, accessed April, 21, 2012.

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