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Democracy in Non-Governmental Organizations in Israel

By

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Although political participation can take many different forms within a democratic regime, there is no doubt that in one way or another the notion is central to the very idea of a democracy. It is difficult to find a piece of research reported in contemporary journals of political science that does not purport to describe some form of political participation: studies of the voter, the party activist, the candidate, and the interest group all fall under the category of studies of participation. One of the reasons for such an interest in participation is that participation is a political fact, not an obscure and debatable value, which allows the political scientist to criticize the depth and extent of a democracy. In other words, participation is a behavioral phenomenon, in the sense that citizens either do or they do not participate, political scientists can measure and assess how democratic a democracy is. That is, the more citizens of a state are engaged in political life, the more democratic it is.

In recent years NGO's have been hailed and celebrated by many as positive forces that strengthen democracy. NGO's provide a channel for citizen participation in democracy that is so much richer than merely taking part in elections every couple of years, which is what classical democratic theory (often called representative democracy) had to offer.

Moreover, NGO's provide a solution to the gap that supposedly exists between the government and the people. They are a way for people to help themselves and not rely on the good will of a central government and its massive system of administration. NGO's, which are much smaller and much more focused than the central government, are supposedly capable of attending to needs people have that the government simply overlooks. They are a mediating force. When De Tocqueville visited America in 1835 this is exactly what caught his attention. He was impressed by America's democratic political culture and specifically by its web of NGO's through which people in the New England township were able to participate in democracy on a daily basis. The treatise he wrote, *Democracy in America*, describes the impact of participatory democracy upon the structure and dynamics of society.

Turning our attention to NGO's in Israel, one might get the impression that participatory democracy is very strong in Israel-- just look at the numbers of NGO's. There has been an amazing growth in the number of NGO's that operate in Israel. There are approximately 30,000 NGO's in Israel (Frenkel p.7). This paper argues that first impressions about democracy can be deceiving-- the apparent connection between NGO's and democracy is not sufficient for participatory democracy to flourish. More concretely, we learn from the case of NGOs in Israel's periphery that participatory democracy requires more than just a formal set of rules and procedures. It requires certain kinds of relationship between the people and the organizations through which civic life takes place. NGO's in and of themselves cannot be an alternative to a democratic political culture. Hence, despite the fact that Israel has experienced a booming in the number of NGO's that have been formed in recent years, this is not an indication as to the strength of democracy. Other parameters have to be looked at in order to get a fuller picture as to the extent of participatory democracy.

These factors have to do with the spirit of democracy, i.e., with the political culture. A similar claim can be made with respect to employee participation in the workplace.

The following paper is an extraction from a much larger study that examines Israel's political culture using De Tocqueville as a springboard in order to analyze Israel's civic culture. It deals with the issue of participatory democracy in the work of non-governmental organizations, especially in Israel's geographical periphery and in the development towns. Israel presents a fascinating case study. Though it is a young democracy, it not a third world democracy and it is strongly influenced by western ideals. It is a democracy working within a pressure cooker: large doses of immigration and severe security issues. These factors play a significant role in shaping the democratic political culture in Israel in a way that can be described as an anti-thesis to De Tocqueville's vision of participatory democracy.

DeTocqueville as Background: Alexis De Tocqueville arrived in the United States in May 1831, and departed its shores for his native France in February 1832, a mere nine months later. His insights about participatory democracy and the kind of political culture in which such a democracy can flourish still remain a powerful lesson over a century later.

“In no country of the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objects, than in America. Besides the permanent associations, which are established by law, under the names of townships, cities or counties, a vast number of others are formed and maintained by the agency of private individuals... In every case, at the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the government or in England some territorial magnate, in the United States you are sure to find associations.” (De Tocqueville, vol. 1, p.198.)

Civic associations are part of the American culture, and an important element of the citizen's political breeding, Tocqueville suggests, that the people in America look upon social authority with an eye of mistrust and instead rely upon themselves and their fellow citizens. Hence, associations are established for many different purposes: to promote public safety, commerce, industry, morality, religion, and sport. Associations can be futile or serious stuff, general or limited large or minute. Whenever a certain number of individual's contract together to promote in a certain manner the spread of a certain doctrine or interest, an association is formed. The motto is "getting involved." (Bellah, pp.167).

A related insight of De Tocqueville has to do with the decentralization of power. He discusses this matter in several contexts. In America, Tocqueville discovered a political system in which there is a distinction between the centralization of government and the lack of a centralized administration (p.89). Another facet of this has to do with the fact that municipalities enjoy a strong sense of municipal independence (p.69). Tocqueville suspects that this results from the basic principle of the sovereignty of the people (p.66).

Political Culture: Over the last twenty years new awareness has developed with respect to the significance of political culture as a prime force in shaping the political dynamics. This trend might have received new force with the work of scholars such as J. Rawls, (1994) B. Barry, (1995) Sandel, (1995), R. Bellah (1985) and A. MacIntyre (1982), though it is not new. The political culture is manifest in the verbal culture on Capital Hill, as well as in the voting patterns and media coverage of events. It has to do with the dynamics between administration and elected leaders and with such notions as accountability and responsibility. It is a very broad and often vague notion. Two related points result from this renewed understanding of the significance of political culture: the first is methodological and

the second goes to the heart of the issue of democratic participation. Methodologically, political culture cannot be quantified and measured, it has to do with a certain political ethos, as this is manifest with very concrete norms and practices and thus has to be understood by means of a narrative and through political interpretation. Subsequently, if political culture is a force that shapes the political dynamics, then no behaviorist and positivistic description of the democratic institutions or of patterns of participation will be sufficient to flesh out the spirit of the political culture. Those political scientists who rely only on the positivistic and behaviorist aspects of democratic participation in order to assess the strength of democracy will be blind to the non-behaviorist and non-positivistic aspects of the political culture can undermine participation. In the following study we are trying to get at the unique democratic political culture of Israeli democracy.

Let's get then to the actual study before time runs out. As suggested earlier, just by looking at the number of NGO's in Israel—dealing with such issues as religion, education, culture, leisure, welfare, politics, civil rights development, housing, health, labor, and the environment –one gets the impression that we have here a case of a vibrant participatory democracy. Formally this is true and there is no doubt that Israel is a democracy, a representative democracy in which the citizens elect their leaders every couple of years. Israel has all the necessary institutions required for a democratic regime to function. However, it is our contention that a deeper level of interpretation, an interpretation that examines the political culture and not just at the behaviorist patterns of participation, reveals the lost promise of participatory democracy in Israel. We come to understand “the lost promise” by looking at NGO's through two crossing angles: on the one hand, the styles of leadership in the periphery, and on the other hand the relations between center and periphery (what Tocqueville calls centralization). What becomes clear from such an analysis is that the

periphery is dominated by leaders who are bureaucratic administrators and is characterized by a strong dependence on the central government.

Politics has to do with leadership, and democratic politics has to do with democratic leaders. Leadership develops and can be observed in many different styles and forms. Two well known styles of political leadership that are relevant for understanding the political culture are, on the one hand, democratic political leadership (elected leadership) and on the other hand bureaucratic administration (nominated leadership). One of the characteristics of bureaucratic administrators is that they lack accountability and do not actually represent the people of the community. Naturally they are accountable to those who nominated them. Places that lack a democratic tradition, allow bureaucratic administrators, who are often assigned by the central government due to their family ties and connection with a certain clan or sector of society, to assume the role of leaders in local government and local organizations. When looking more specifically at the Israeli political system, it is possible to identify at least four types of leaders within the Israeli political system: Statesmen, Generals, Bureaucratic Administrators (*askanim*) and Princess. Local government and many of its fringe organizations are dominated by Bureaucratic Administrators. Moreover, due to historical and sociological reasons, Israel never encouraged the development of local politics and local interests. (Actually, the truth is that attempts to create a regional agenda were crushed by the central government). It is the central government's role to distribute financial support to local municipalities, and consequentially the supervision as to what municipalities do with public money is left in the hands of the central administration. Add to this the fact that local leaders are bureaucratic administrators who are not accountable to the local citizens and you get a political culture that is alien to democratic participation. NGO's can form and they can

have agendas, but without the support of the central government and the administrations they are left impotent.

Instead of a conclusion we wish to demonstrate this idea through an example. Recently Mr. Doe became involved in some local civic activity. Along with some friends he formed an NGO aimed at promoting track and field in Beer-Sheva, a blue collar, multicultural town in Israel's periphery. Track and Field has been a hobby of Mr. Doe for many years now. It is a hobby he cares about very much. He cares about track and field both as an athlete, as a parent and as a citizen. As an aging athlete reminiscing about his younger days, he wishes that his love would prosper and grow. As a parent, he hopes his children will have the opportunity to discover the beauty of track as well as the chance to exhaust their full athletic potential. Finally, as a citizen he is interested in seeing an abundance of opportunities for track and field activity in his community. His wish is that everyone would get involved in track and field in one way or another.

It is obvious that in any country, and especially in a country obsessed with large-scale security issues, it is hard to imagine any national political movement taking such a quirky issue as track and field and promoting it as the central focus of its agenda. National politics have to do with national issues, and as we all know, within a liberal community different people have different conceptions of the good. Mr. Doe's eccentric interest in track and field is just one conception of the good, among many different conceptions of the good that are possible. The central government is out there to guarantee a fair chance to different conceptions of the good and not in order to further any one particular conception of the good. Hence, as he cares about track and field, he realized that he should not wait for the central government and its massive system of administration to attend to his interests, rather he should help himself by way of local civic associations. Groups of citizens with common

interests can form civic associations and make a difference on a local scale. Thus, along with a group of friends he formed a local track and field NGO and went out to make a local difference. The story of Mr. Doe's failure to even make a small difference is the story of participatory democracy in Israel's periphery.

Before going any further it is important, however, to be realistic and lower our expectations. It is very possible and even likely that Mr. Doe's failure had to do with his own inadequacies and with the fact that track and field is not an issue worth promoting in such a community. Nevertheless, it might still be possible to learn from his failure about the structural and cultural problems that undermine participatory democracy in Israel. As suggested, these problems have to do both with the relationship between citizens and their local level of leaders as well as with the relationship between one peripheral region and the central government.

So, why did Mr. Doe fail? The municipal government owns the local sport facilities, and any new facility one wants to build has to receive the authorization of the local municipality. Hence if one wants access to a facility, one needs the support of the municipal government, and particularly the permission of the head of the sports department within the municipal government. Obviously, any attempt to organize a road race or any community event has to receive authorization of the local security officer. Moreover, access to schools (i.e., to the children involved in physical education programs) requires, again, the authorization of the local head of the local board of education. One cannot enter a school, whether to recruit potential athletes or to publicize an activity, without the authorization of the head of the board of education. Finally, and what is probably most significant, public financial support, is funneled by the central government (e.g., from the ministry of education

and sport) through the local municipality to various NGOs. However, how these public funds will be distributed is not something that can be regulated through formal rules, eventually it has a lot to do with the discretion and decisions of municipal administrators. To make a long story short, unless the chairperson of the board of education, the head of the local security office, and the head of the sports department have either a personal interest in supporting track and field, or unless they are accountable and responsible to the citizens of the community, there is little chance of gaining all the various authorizations required for the success of a third sector organization's particular agenda.

The political culture, which is characterized by a strong dependence on the central government along with a certain style of leadership dominated by bureaucratic administrators, constrains the participatory democracy in Israel's periphery.

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