

Local Associations as Schools for Democratic Practice

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It is clear that most associations are created to enable the purposes of people who are “like-minded”. Whether it is an association of people who collect the stamps of Israel or who gather because of their common love of bowling, what they have in common is the “glue” that holds them together. They associate because they care about the same thing and/or they care about each other.

The activities of these “like-minded” associations tend to focus on administrative matters, arrangements for activities, making their advocacy more effective, and increasing the visibility of the group and its purposes. Rarely do these groups have tensions or divisions that one might describe as small “p” political.

Where might one look for associations where decisions of a political character require resolution? One such venue is neighborhood associations and block clubs. They often engage in decisions regarding local property, security, municipal services, local youth, etc. It is usually the case that there are diverse viewpoints that need to be resolved. One reason for these differing viewpoints is that each homeowner/renter chooses a residence because of their unique individual situation. They infrequently are involved in identifying the interests of their neighbors before they choose a household. Therefore they tend to be much more diverse in their interests and confront quite diverse neighborhood questions. As a result, most neighborhood organizations and block clubs are engaged in serious resident political discussions embedded in diverse self-interests. As these local associations grapple with diverse views and multiple concerns, they act as experiential educators about democratic practice.

A useful question might be to identify other associations where their “unlike-mindedness” requires decision-making through dialogue, debate, discourse, deliberation, etc.

Local associational decision-making, whether “like-minded” or not, tends to be a bonding process. The focus is internal. However, there is also the question of associational bridging. When do more parochial local associations have the motive to bridge? Most commonly in cities there are associations of neighborhood associations. These coalitions provide another level of learning about the democratic process because they multiply the nature of the issues and the nature of the constituents.

Another useful question is what other kinds of associations tend toward creating bridging structure, and where are there associational bridging structure among diverse, rather than “like-minded” groups?