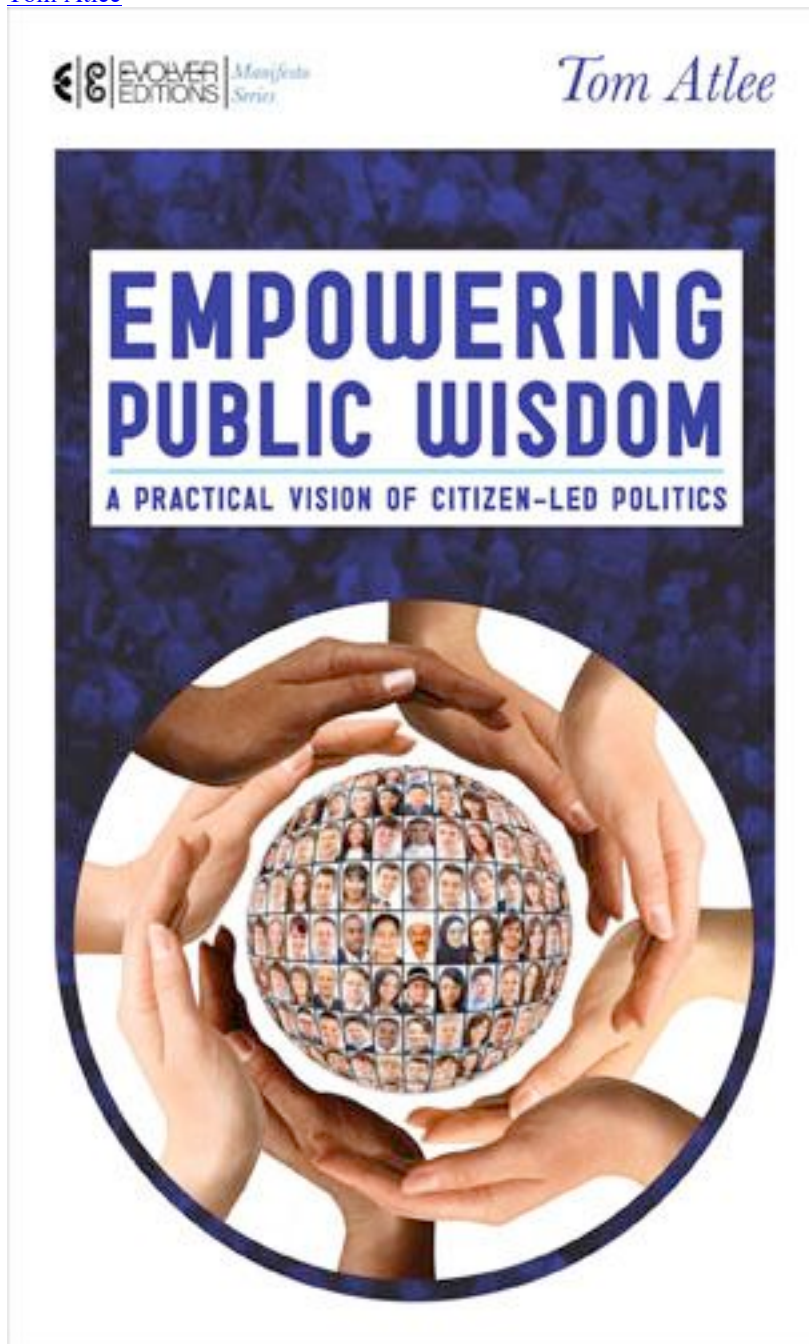


Commons Feature

Empowering Public Wisdom: Chapter 1, A Practical Vision of Citizen-Led Politics

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The following is the first installment of [Empowering Public Wisdom: A Practical Vision of Citizen-Led Politics](#), available from EVOLVER EDITIONS/North Atlantic Books. You can visit the Empowering Public Wisdom homepage [here](#).

Part ONE: A Wiser Democracy — Taking It Seriously

CHAPTER 1: Democracy Is about Power — and the People

Democracy—all politics—is about power: who has it and how they use it. Do people try to dominate each other and the world? Do they work together for the common good?

Do they have the freedom to develop and use their own personal and collective power?

If we want to preserve and expand democracy, we need to understand some important facts about power.

Power, Social Power, and Personal Power

Power is the ability to do, to act, to have an effect, to influence life. This is *power-to*, the most fundamental form of power: simply the power to accomplish things. Democracy is about the power that we, the people, have—the power to do the things that we, as individuals and collectively, want to do and that need doing.

POWER – TO INVOLVES FREEDOM

Power-to involves freedom—freedom-from (freedom from barriers, oppression, and harm) and freedom-to (freedom to take effective action). Freedom-from is what most people think of when they think of freedom. But there's this other freedom, as well: freedom-to. We don't really have freedom to do, be, or have something unless we have both opportunity and possibility to achieve it. Most of us are not, realistically speaking, free to suspend ourselves in midair (except in outer space). Someone who has no legs is not, realistically speaking, free to walk up ten flights of stairs.

So democracy is partly about keeping our commons—the shared life-spaces where we all live together—both unhampered by unreasonable limits (freedom-from) and rich with equal opportunities (freedom-to). We want to be able to speak out, get together, enter buildings in wheelchairs, be fairly considered for jobs, and all the rest. Democracy doesn't always or necessarily mean we will be helped—although we might be, if that is the will of our fellows—but it does mean that we should have rights and opportunities comparable to everyone else's. How we use those rights and opportunities is up to us—as long as we don't undermine other people's rights and freedoms in the process.

The fact that our freedom exists in the context of other people's freedom means that freedom can never be absolute. But it can be optimized: that is, it can be made as broad and full as possible for everyone involved, given the limitations of the circumstances. Working that out is—or should be—one of the great ongoing projects of our democratic life. It helps a lot if we respect and listen to each other. It makes a difference if we then use what we learn to search together for good answers that benefit us all.

Freedom and power are linked at the hip. You will never find one without the other.

POWER-OVER TRANSLATES INTO SOCIAL POWER

Which brings us back to power. Power-to breaks down into a number of other types of power. The form of power most people think of is *power-over*. Power-over is the ability to control, determine, dominate, or destroy—or unduly influence—someone or something. We apply power-over in many parts of our individual and collective lives, from controlling cars and hammers to building and bombing skyscrapers to managing amber waves of grain and kids at the dinner table.

When power-over translates into social power, it means the ability to control society, to dominate opponents, to garner greater privileges, to win in political and economic battlegrounds. People and groups with superior weapons, knowledge of scientific public relations, tons of money, authority to imprison people, and/or ownership of mass media have an abundance of power-over. Even individual qualities like intelligence, creativity, sexuality, and personality can provide power-over in social situations. Ideally, in a democracy, social power (of the power-over variety) is distributed broadly, fairly, and relatively evenly, so that it doesn't distort our ability to make good public decisions and treat each other decently. This helps us ensure an appropriate level of freedom for all concerned.

Decentralization, human rights, and social justice and equity are all democratic principles that support the distribution of social power.

However, there is often need for social power to be centralized or concentrated. Some functions are naturally best handled at a particular level of society—personal, local, state, national, international. Ideally a function would be assigned to the lowest level at which it can be effectively handled. For example, most people believe that a country's defense is best addressed at the national level, rather than at the county or individual citizen levels. Obviously, care for the oceans needs to be done at transnational, even global levels. On the other hand, the structure of your ongoing education is best left to you, personally, although local school boards and state and national legislatures may deem it appropriate to have certain broadly applied standards for a diploma or certificate that is recognized by the whole society.

When social power is centralized or concentrated it poses a *potential* threat to democracy. As Lord Acton famously said: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Two strategies help make concentrated power more benign. One is to *balance* it with other centers of concentrated social power. For example, the three branches of the U.S. government—legislative, administrative, and judicial—were designed to "check and balance" each other. Each branch has certain specified powers, but can be challenged, bypassed, or overruled by the other branches in specific ways and circumstances. Unions and corporate leaders have powers that balance each other, at least somewhat. Lately we've seen small groups and movements—from terrorists to nonviolent activists like Martin Luther King, Jr., from Occupy Wall Street to hackers and bloggers—balance the concentrated power of giant national and transnational institutions, at least somewhat. In a healthy democracy, whenever power gets too concentrated, other powers show up to challenge and attempt to balance it.

The second strategy to make concentrated power more benign is to make it *answerable* to those over whom it is exercised. This is why government transparency, investigative journalism, whistleblowers, and civilian oversight of police, military, and intelligence services are so important. Elections also constitute a powerful form of answerability, if they are fair and done in a context where we, the people, actually know what public officials have been doing and who is funding their electoral campaigns. The answerability principle is also why corporations—some of which are arguably the best examples of concentrated power on earth today—are supposed to be chartered by the community or state, and their performance reviewed before the charter is periodically renewed or withdrawn. If a group, organization, or person with undue concentrated power resists all efforts to balance their power or make it answerable, that power needs to be broken up and/or its functions distributed to others. This is usually quite difficult, but we've seen examples ranging from antitrust laws to the American Revolution.

One way or another, if we wish to preserve our democracy we must mitigate the toxic tendencies of concentrated power.

POWER WITH

However—and this is a key point—all these safeguards are only necessary because we're talking about power-over. There's another form of power—*power-with*, the power of collaboration and synergy—which is equally valuable whether it is distributed or concentrated. Working together—especially when we use our differences well—makes each of us more powerful. All of us together know more and can do more than any of us individually. Working together we can usually serve our self-interest better than if we fight for what we want against the self-interest of others.

At any given time in the development of a group or culture, there will be things that people can agree on and things they can't agree on. Power-with is clearly the best choice for achieving what we agree on. Power-over is clearly workable—in a sort of rough-and-tumble way—for those things we can't agree on: either someone with dominant power tells everyone else what to do, or there's a contest to see who can win enough power to make the others comply or back down—the idea behind majority voting.

What's interesting about what's going on in our society right now is that power-with strategies—especially quality conversation—are increasingly being used to expand the territory of what we can agree on. This is true even though we're seeing more polarized battles and power plays in politics, economics, and many other spheres.

Key developments in the recent popularity of power-with strategies include Roger Fisher and William Ury's watershed 1981 book, *Getting to Yes*, in which they explain "Principled Negotiation." They encourage adversarial negotiators to stop fighting, manipulating, and compromising, and instead work together to identify the legitimate interests of all sides and then work together to figure out how to

satisfy those legitimate interests.

Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication practice provides a way to dig below people's disagreeable behaviors to the emotions that drive those behaviors, and then to dig further to understand the unmet basic needs that evoke those emotions, and finally to look together for strategies that will satisfy those basic needs in ways that are agreeable to everyone involved.

Future Search conferences bring key players involved in a situation together to review their shared (and usually problematic) past, to look together at shared current realities, and to "search for common ground"—that is, visions they all can buy into and projects they can work on together. Differences get noted and set aside while participants focus on the search for common ground.

The prominent international nonprofit Search for Common Ground works in two dozen conflicted countries getting adversaries to hear each other's views; identify common fears, hopes, and interests; and work to develop solutions that address as many of their interests as possible.

In the last decade even more potent methods like Dynamic Facilitation have been developed that use the energy and information-rich substance of conflict itself to come to collective breakthroughs and unprecedented *ah-ha!* solutions. It turns out that when people feel fully and authentically heard, as they are in Dynamic Facilitation, they stop pushing and resisting and begin to start listening to each other. When most everyone in the group has been well heard—and all participants become more clearly aware of the full complexity of their situation—they find themselves working together to address the "mess" of the whole situation. Often they end up going deeper or wider, or jumping totally "out of the box"; they understand the problem in new ways; and they arrive at unexpectedly creative solutions.

These examples are just the tip of the iceberg of what we already can do to address differences and conflicts—*if we want to and if we know how*. These and other methods will be explored further in this book.

Although such methods don't always work for all people in all situations, the number of people and situations for which they *do* work is increasing as the understanding and competence of theorists and practitioners grow. Power-with is fast becoming as strategic and skilled a science as power-over. Even military and business schools are teaching the power of cooperation. Power-with is also becoming a source of power in sustainability practices—working *with* bugs and bacteria to compost garbage and recycle wastes or working *with* wind and water to generate energy. All fields and practices that stress collaboration are exercising power-with.

POWER FROM WITHIN

Feeding into this new capacity is our growing understanding of a third form of power: *power-from-within*. It starts with understanding the power available from people's passions, interests, and natural inclinations. Kids who are interested in a subject learn it with no one forcing them to. So-called Open Space conferences are set up to have no prior agendas, but rather to help people who share particular passions find each other, talk, and work together. Permaculture practitioners arrange plants, animals, and physical aspects of a garden site together so that every organism pursuing its own self-interest causes the whole designed ecosystem to readily yield benefits for every organism involved, including its human gardeners.

Power-from-within includes not only our passions but our special capacities. Every one of us has skills and talents, knowledge and experience, many forms of intelligence and spirit, perhaps even conscious connection to powers greater than ourselves. All these personal qualities contribute to our ability to shape what happens the world, as long as we appreciate, nurture, and use them. And all of them can be enhanced in groups and cultures that respect and encourage them in their members. Furthermore, groups themselves have collective capacities—including collective experience, intelligence, and resources greater than the sum of the individual members—they can tap as power-from-within.

So there is power in tapping the natural life energies, experience, and capacities that already exist in individuals and groups, in organizations and communities, in societies and the world. Many group process experts speak of "the magic in the middle"—which means that there is power and wisdom that arises from *within* and *among* the group's members. This power and wisdom does not come from the individuals themselves so much as from their interactions, from a kind of group energy or intelligence that shows up because these people are together. Their very

presence together calls forth certain ideas or behaviors that would not have emerged otherwise—if their culture and interactions support that happening. Many transformational consultants claim that every living system—every person, community, and organization—has within it the answers it needs.

But this often depends on certain processes and ways of being together that build synergy between the life of the group and the individual lives of its members. The group enhances the individuals' thinking, feeling, and competence, and the individuals enhance the functionality and creativity of the group. Everyone involved—especially the facilitator or coach—works to enhance both of these dynamics.

This kind of group synergy is often dramatically demonstrated in sports teams and jazz ensembles who are “in the groove.” Power-with and power-from-within merge into an almost aesthetic surge of power-to. This “group flow” is quite exciting to watch and even more thrilling to be part of. People “lose themselves” in the group—not by becoming smaller or less themselves, but by expanding to embrace more of the group's interactive power within their own capacities and responses. The distinction between self and group becomes meaningless because they are both subsumed in this higher form of power and intelligence that is thoroughly dependent on all of them and their in-tune interactions.

This synergy between power-with and power-from within is not always as dramatic as what I've articulated here. But usually those involved feel it as an expansion of themselves, their awareness, and their role in the world. They have been empowered.

The fact that this can happen in groups working on public issues has profound significance for what we normally think of as “politics.”

One of the things it means is that a group of separate citizens who come together in this way can find themselves expanding into a shared identity often experienced as *We the People*—a palpable sense of collective agency that is mythically in charge in a democracy. These folks know they have what's needed to make politics and government work. They know they were just ordinary citizens hours or days before, but now they've seen a new level of citizenship and a new level of power, freedom, and responsibility. They can *feel* how this *We the People* identity is a force to be reckoned with.

Who Is “The People” or “The Public”?

The dictionary defines *the people* as “the citizens of a country, especially when considered in relation to those who govern them.” And it defines *the public* as “ordinary people in general; the community.” In a democracy—theoretically, at least—the people govern themselves, and we speak of “public opinion” and “public will.” So in this book, when I speak of either the people or the public—and especially when I use the phrase *We the People*—I am referring to the whole democratic citizenry—the inclusive community of civic persons—as the collective sovereign ruler of its society.

In the vision in this book, the public is not just a bunch of isolated disengaged individuals. It is *the people* in the sense of Lincoln's memorable phrase “a government of the people, by the people, for the people.” *The public or the people* is a collective entity capable of exercising coherent political agency on its own behalf. It is the sovereign in a self-governing society. It is the entity that created the U.S. Constitution—and this *people* can show up as sovereign at any time and place that “it” chooses to. In this book, the public—*We the People*—is whose voice we are looking for—comparable to the voice we hear in public opinion polls, but more coherent and wise, less divided and uninformed.

And when I talk about *public wisdom* I am suggesting that the public has latent wisdom that can be brought out and then spoken by its public voice—the voice of the people. I then claim that the people can and must empower their public wisdom to have real impact in the world.

I trust that by now it is clear I'm not talking about all the groups that *claim* to represent or be *the people*. I'm not talking about Tea Partiers sending a fax blast to Congress. I'm not talking about a million peace marchers in the streets protesting an impending war. I'm not talking about a Communist politburo or the U.S. Congress claiming to speak for “the people.” I'm not talking about any one party, group, or institution claiming the mantle of “the

people.” I’m talking about an *inclusive* We the People, an *actual* We the People, a public voice arising from diverse, ordinary citizens who have bothered to really hear each other, to see each other, and then to serve their children, their communities, their country, and their world together, not only despite their differences but by using their differences creatively to speak with one inclusive and wise voice.

That public voice they create together is a voice sorely missing from today’s political discourse. What we hear now is not the voice of the whole society. What we hear now is the noise of opposing voices, of partisan voices—the voices of the parts. This is all fine and good—healthy and necessary, actually—but it is *not* the voice of the people, not the inclusive voice of the whole.

Most people don’t believe such an inclusive, coherent voice is possible. Some even fear it, thinking it will drown out dissent and diversity. However, those who participate in the most powerful forms of conversation—dialogue (speaking truly, and truly hearing one another), deliberation (thoroughly learning about and exploring an issue together to make a decision) and choice-creating (stepping out of roles and positions to seek together what’s best for all)—know otherwise. They know that using such methods to bring forth a coherent public voice *honors and treasures diversity and dissent*. They have experienced this together. They feel its integrity in their bones. They feel its power—a power so much more powerful than any one side could ever generate separately.

Perhaps the main thing stopping that feeling from changing the world is that these newly realized *extraordinary citizens*—these ordinary citizens who have experienced what it is like to tap the wisdom and power of We the People through their own thoughtful conversation— don’t know what to do with their newfound power and wisdom. They just know that something very different and important has happened among them.

Through this kind of process, the sleeping giant of *the people* is slowly waking up, but it doesn’t quite know what to do next. In the rest of this book you will find a vision for awakening the wisdom of the people. It will invite you to consider that what’s most important in democracy today is not so much mass participation by whoever shows up to voice their opinions. What’s most important is engaging the *full diversity* of the population—a microcosm of We the People—with the *full diversity* of relevant information in ways that help them find *authentic common ground*. They can only do this using power-with and power-from-within. And when they do this, they create legitimate *public wisdom*, which is the foundation for a new, wiser form of democracy.

Summary

Democracy is about power.

In one sense, we already knew that. But now that sentence means much more than it ever has before. It means that democracy is about *using the right kind of power for the job*, starting with a real effort to tap into the magic and wisdom of power-with and power-from within—including attending to the passions, interests, and needs that underlie our battles with each other. Sure, we can always fall back on the battle strategies of power-over and see who wins. But why go there first when there is so much treasure to be had by channeling our differences and common ground into a cascade of shared possibilities?

Just because our current systems of politics and governance—and economics and so many others—are designed to get us to compete doesn’t mean we have to always go there. We can create new systems that help us work together more powerfully.

When I talk about coming together, even though we’re all so different, I’m not talking about compromise—at least not compromise that makes us feel we’ve lost important things along the way. I’m talking about the shared creation of solutions and visions that the vast majority of us feel are realistic and good—even brilliant. . . .
Even wise.

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