"Post-Election" Discussions

As Pete Shively noted in his last monthly summary of website and social media traffic, there has been an uptick in interest in the *Democratic Promise* guidebook. In addition to the links, uploads, and other traffic Pete noted, I have received quite a few calls and emails.

That type of inquiry is slowing now (which may say something about the short attention span of citizens). But as I noted in a reply to Pete's email, the inquiries mainly offered "going public" opportunities that were usually not practical for me or IF or were simply mismatched concepts that showed little or no understanding about our process and materials.

Since I am also a strong believer in attempting to match our process and materials to current citizen interests, I also felt I would be remiss if I didn't try to follow-up some of these opportunities.

I settled on five circumstances that I thought might offer some opportunity for conceptual discussion of issues around democratic governance, using our guidebook as a starting point. I "screened out" about seven other opportunities for various reasons (clear starting point biases and pre-formed conclusions, narrow agendas, over-connection to partisan groups, my confidence in the abilities of the organizers, and my limits in supporting and guiding discussions from a distance). Some of these limitations eventually arose in varying degrees in the five discussions I decided to support.

I was directly involved in one of these series (8 participants, two discussions, eastern Iowa County/western Dane County, Wisconsin) Group A. The others had shapes as follows:
1. Crawford and Vernon counties, Wisconsin (with several drop-ins from Iowa). Two discussions with from 12 to 16 participants, mostly left of center bio-regionalists with three rightwing militia members. Group B.
2. Red Wing Minnesota and surrounding areas. One two-session Saturday discussion, with nine participants. At least half drawn were from local DFL groups (MN version of the Democrats) and the other half from a MN grassroots effort to adopt proportional representation in legislative elections. They may form a more general "democratic reform" committee. Group C.
3. Online group based in Ann Arbor and made up of primarily of Michigan residents (though it sounds like they may have had a "resource" person from Canada participate in some interactions). They reported 5 interactions, with 2 of these fizzling because of low participation (they felt five was too low and wanted all 12 online). They may convene again. Participants were mainly

public employees and trade unionists, but seemed to have the full political spectrum on board (at least two Republican-leaners, who come from a "Michigan as a 'failed state' perspective"). Group D

4. Milwaukee, Wisconsin group. They told me that about 20 people signed up for an ambitious 3 session series and 17 showed up for the first session. Apparently some unpleasantness occurred with some participants hijacking the meeting and engaging in personal attacks. No subsequent meetings occurred. Group E.

General Observations

When discussions occur after polarizing events it is no surprise that some participants are inclined to focus on recent events and not on conceptual exploration. This was an issue to varying degrees in all the groups, but seemed strongest with the ones that leaned heavily on "what's wrong?" starting points instead of "what else might we want to try?" starting points.

Here's a brief review of what generally worked and what didn't"

- Having some supplementary material worked in a number of circumstances (what is the Electoral College, what is Citizen United decision, etc).
- Discussions that ended on a note of "here's what you could do next" seemed to satisfy participants more than those ending without such "hope".
- Discussion of local participation seemed to yield more creativity than discussion of national politics.
- Almost nothing good resulted from discussion digressions back to the 2016 Presidential election (exception, Group D below).
- The "disaffection" quotient among participants was high, but with those expressing long term dissatisfaction with our system being able to engage conceptually more easily than those angered at recent results.
- All groups experienced some degree of "election outcome grieving" and how it was handled seemed to have some bearing on whether conceptual discussion could occur.

Group Discussion

Group A

I co-facilitated this with an old friend and we had mostly "old hands" at public discussion and governance issues. Main points:
- Billed as the "Democracy Re-set Button".
- Resource rich: https://movetoamend.org/ http://ncdd.org/ http://fairelectionsnetwork.com/ and many others.
- Fairly wide ideological spectrum: Libertarians, moderate Republicans, Greens, socialists.

- Mostly active and engaged, a number of past and current local elected officials.
- Optimistic about local government, not so much about state and federal.

Group B

Lots of thinking outside the box here:

- Willingness to fundamentally redesign government, amend constitution, realign states, etc.
- Lots of discussion of "non-cooperation", civil disobedience, boycotts, etc.
- Three had recently returned from Standing Rock, North Dakota and felt that was more important to them than voting.
- Resources shared here, but mostly along line of "preppers", self-sufficiency, off-the-grid living, etc.
- Possibility raised of more actively partnering with nearby American Indian tribe (Ho Chunk nation).
- Talk of reviving a dormant bioregional group as a "shadow government".
- Some problems grappling with structural/constitutional issues raised by guidebook.
- Some friction here when women blamed men for Clinton's defeat.

Group C

Performed more on the order of "expanded/extended discussion" that we have been considering, with guidebook as starting point for more Minnesota-specific thinking:

- Getting money out of politics.
- Initiative and referenda.
- Proportional representation/enlarging roles of "3rd parties" (interesting side discussion here of how, in effect, there may be several latent political parties represented by non-voters who are discouraged by narrow choices of two-party system: social democrats/socialists, Christian democrats, race/ethnicity-based parties, etc).
- Interest in interstate compacts, Great Lakes governance, and cooperative projects with Ontario/Canada.
- "Problem" of "regressive" Wisconsin in terms of regional governance and shared infrastructure.
- Interest in taking offensive against anti-government forces and speaking up for "good government".
- Talk of further networking on these issues with others around state.

Group D

In some the most conventional/typical IF-style discussion:

- Frequently came back to possibilities in guidebook.
- Maybe too much "election grieving"?
- Had some problems with their online platform and scheduling misfires.
- Interesting discussion on role of media and "false news" in 2016 Presidential election (sending Pete's guidebook their way).
- Another example of "looking north" to Canada for some answers (like Group C).

Group E

Big sprawling mess:

- Example of an ongoing Milwaukee pattern of disruptors in public settings (probably traceable to "public notice" of the meeting).
- Got off to a rough start with various rants about how the meeting was focused on the wrong issues and should be about racism, sexism, capitalism, class, the banking system, and several other things I can't quite put a label to.
- Organizers got "rolled" and had no strategy to counter.
- My guess that the half of the turnout of well-intentioned citizens may never set foot out of their house again.

Take-A-Ways

Yes, preparation matters and perhaps even matters more where one is trying to move quickly on the heels of events. Lessons:

- The guidebook can work for those already versed in "civics", but is not an adequate education tool for those not versed in government operations and elections.
- Strong sense that the guidebook works best for those using it as a "launching pad" for more extended discussion of particular process and practice issues they intend to examine.
- Strongest parts of discussion seemed to focus on the values behind participant visions of democracy and whether those values can be realized with current practices and processes.