egalitarian, consensual democracy has had some staying power. Yet no one has studied such a democracy in practice. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when “participatory democracies” of a unitary form appeared everywhere like fragile bubbles, I decided to investigate their attraction and their mechanics. It was this investigation that led me to analyze the relations among common interest, political equality, consensus, and face-to-face contact.

Chapter 3

The Inner Logic of Unitary Democracy

To PEOPLE steeped in the adversary tradition, the very notion of unitary democracy usually appears naive and impractical. They assume that interests are always in conflict, that individuals never respect one another equally, that consensus is always a sham in which some are afraid to make their true feelings known, and that face-to-face meetings are too cumbersome to play a significant role in a modern national polity. Describing the circumstances in which these adversary assumptions do not hold true requires, first, a definition of some crucial terms.

I begin with an analysis of interests, asking when and how the members of a polity can have their interests in common. I then argue that the more the members of a polity have common interests, the less they need to protect their interests against one another and, consequently, the less they need equal power in order to protect those interests. I also argue that a high degree of common interest allows a polity to exploit the advantages of decision making by consensus rather than by majority rule and, in the smallest polities, to settle issues by face-to-face negotiation among those concerned rather than by electing representatives or relying on secret ballot referenda.

The analysis in this volume is restricted to those polities that call themselves “democracies” and to democratic theory. Polities other than democracies can also usefully be ranged along a spectrum from common to conflicting interests, but I have not extended the analysis to cover the subtleties and possible contradictions that these other forms of human association introduce. Furthermore, even nominal democracies usually
restrict citizenship in important respects, and I have not analysed these restrictions. Instead, I have looked at political practice and theory only as it applied to full citizens. This means ignoring women, slaves, resident aliens, and children in ancient Greece; nonresidents and children in my Vermont town; clients and volunteer workers in my crisis center.

Interests

Pure unitary democracy would require that all participants have common interests on all matters requiring collective decision. But do individuals ever have common interests, even on the limited range of issues requiring collective decisions? And if they do, how can they tell when this is the case? Answering these questions requires a brief definition of what I mean by "interest" and "common interest."

Defining "interest" is as difficult as defining "the good." No philosopher has ever done either adequately. Indeed, interest is intimately related to the good, since one can easily argue that what is in your interest is what is good for you. Given the intractability of the problem, I will define interests as "enlightened" preferences among policy choices (that is, preferences based on full information), without insisting that this is the only defensible definition or claiming that it subsumes every legitimate use of the term.

Some will reject this definition on the grounds that interests are "objective" and can be determined independently of an individual's subjective preferences, no matter how enlightened. The view that interests are objective poses no problems for my theoretical analysis. Everything I say about unitary and adversary democracies would be equally true using an objective definition of interests. Those who adopt such a definition are, however, likely to reject some of my empirical claims regarding the degree to which members of specific polities have common or conflicting interests. The degree of discrepancy between their judgments and mine will depend on the criterion they choose for defining objective interests. An ethical criterion will have one set of practical implications, a psychological criterion will have another, a Marxist criterion still another.

Others will reject my definition of interests as enlightened preferences on the grounds that one can never know what people would want if they had full information and that we must therefore rely on their actual preferences to define their interests. Those who take this position will have some difficulty with my analysis of unitary democracy since the central assumption of unitary democracy is that, while its members may initially have conflicting preferences about a given issue, goodwill, mutual understanding, and rational discussion can lead to the emergence of a common enlightened preference that is good for everyone. Those who equate interests with current preferences should also be less worried than I am about situations in which unitary democracies create what I call a false consensus by manipulating their members' feelings in such a way that some members' conscious preferences do not coincide with their true interests. Nor should those who equate interests with current preferences be as worried as I am about the ways in which both unitary and adversary democracies distort preferences by restricting and manipulating the flow of information.

For purposes of this analysis, then, I will define "interests" as "enlightened preferences" among policy choices, "enlightened" meaning the preferences that people would have if their information were perfect, including the knowledge they would have in retrospect if they had had a chance to live out the consequences of each choice before actually making a decision. This is not an "operational" definition, for it can never be put into practice. No one can ever have perfect information. No one can ever live out two or more choices in such a way as to experience the full effects of each and then choose between them. Nevertheless, the exercise of imagining what it would be like to have experienced two or more choices suggests the kind of analysis we should conduct in trying to understand what someone's interests are. When I write of the interests of particular groups of people in my case studies, I will attempt to perform this mental experiment, taking into account not only what the individuals concerned say their preferences are, but also what their objective circumstances indicate their enlightened preferences might be.

In the discussion that follows, I intend to stretch the concept of interest, or enlightened preference, to cover a wide variety of choices, including those that involve altruistic motives, ideals, and even trivial matters of taste. In regard to taste, if neither orange cake nor walnut cake is better for you, if you have full knowledge of all flavors and their consequences, if you have "lived out" the choice between orange cake and walnut cake, and if you still prefer orange cake, I will say that your enlightened preference is for orange cake. Then if the cafeteria, reduced for financial reasons to serving only one kind of cake, must make a policy choice on
this matter, I will say that it is in your interest to see that it serves orange cake.

In regard to altruism, I will say that, if you have made the good of another individual your own through empathy, then promoting that person’s well-being is in your interest. Likewise, if you have made the good of a group your own (for example, through patriotism), I will say that promoting the group’s welfare is in your interest.

Finally, I will include the fulfillment of your ideals as one of your interests. This definition of interest is broader than some of the definitions implicit in ordinary discourse. People often distinguish, for instance, between acts that promote their “interest” and acts that promote the welfare of others. They also distinguish acting on the basis of “interest” from acting on principle.\(^{9}\) However, my usage is also consistent with ordinary discourse. It does not seem a distortion of meaning to speak of my having an interest in someone else’s welfare or in ending famine in Biafra if I have no material stake in the outcome but have so identified myself with the achievement of these goals that they have become part of myself in the same way as my need for clean air or a higher income.\(^{9}\) This usage seems especially natural in the context of adversary democracy, one of whose distinguishing features is its attempt to handle conflicts over moral as well as material interests on the basis of one-citizen/one-vote, majority rule. I will therefore use the one word, “interest,” to cover all these different types of enlightened preference. “Self-regarding” or even “selfish” interest will mean a purely personal good; “other-regarding” and “public-regarding” interest will denote making the good of another individual or group one’s own; and “ideal-regarding” interest will mean identifying one’s own good with the realization of some principle.

**Common Interests**

No group of people, however small, ever has completely identical interests. Each a state would require not only that one course of action meet the enlightened preferences of every participant, but also that in every conceivable policy choice that could come before them, the enlightened preferences of every participant be the same. This condition is virtually never met.

Many groups can have a common interest on a particular policy. That is, if all the participants knew what their enlightened preferences were, they might indeed find that these preferences led them all to support one policy over another.\(^{9}\) Yet the participants’ interests would still not be identical. They would probably have different reasons for preferring the policy, be willing to incur different costs to gain their preference, and have different enlightened preferences about how the policy could best be implemented. These differences might well become significant as other, hardly separable issues came up for decision.

A perfect unitary democracy would, over time, require identical interests—common interests on every conceivable policy that could come before the group. Perfect unitary democracy will therefore never be found in the real world. Neither will perfect adversary democracy, which assumes conflicts of interest on all issues except the peaceful settlement of disputes. These two ideal types are simply useful end points for a spectrum on which we can array real polities. Because interests are in fact never absolutely identical, I will use the term “identical interests” only when speaking theoretically, to express the distance between an actual situation and that theoretical point. In describing real situations, I will refer to “common interests” in a particular policy or policies and to “similar interests” on a wide range of issues.

If we allow both individual and group altruism into the definition of interest, then individuals may come to have common interests for any of three reasons. First, and most obviously, their private interests and ideals can overlap either by coincidence or because they arise from similar circumstances.\(^{10}\) Second, empathy can lead individuals to make one another’s good their own. Individual interests do not then overlap; instead, the separate individuals fuse, in a sense, into one. Third, several individuals may adopt as their own the good not of one another but of the whole polity. This process can have two forms. The public-spirited can adopt as their own the good of others in their group, not as specific individuals, but as a collectivity. Thus they may favor a policy that promotes the group’s general welfare even when it provides them with no personal benefits and may involve them in considerable cost or inconvenience.\(^{11}\) A second way of making the good of the whole one’s own is to adopt as one’s own the goal or function of the collectivity itself. Carried to its logical conclusion, this approach could lead to decisions that were against the selfish interest of every member of the polity. Thus, if the function of an academic department were to advance knowledge, its members could in principle conclude that the best way to do this would be for them all to resign and give up their places to more competent teachers and scholars. Adopting the good of the whole is therefore in some situations clearly not quite the same thing as making the good of
the other individuals in the polity one’s own. Yet if two or more people make the good of the whole their own, and if they understand this good in the same way, they will have a common interest.

The degree to which there are common interests in a democracy determines many of its other features: the kind of equality it seeks, its decision rule, and the intimacy of its relations. A democracy of common interests will emphasize equality of status rather than equal protection of interests, consensus rather than majority rule, and face-to-face contact rather than the more impersonal mechanisms of referenda or electoral representation.

Equality: Equal Respect versus Equal Protection of Interests

Friendship is seldom lasting but between equals, or when the superiority on one side is reduced by some equivalent advantage on the other.

SAMUEL JOHNSON

Unitary democracy requires a rough equality of respect among its members in order to preserve the bond of friendship that draws them together. Like friendships, unitary democracies are composed of equals, not because the members, out of envy or rapacity, want to tear down the prominent and share their goods, but because potential superiors and potential inferiors alike gain from stressing the ways in which they are equal. Reducing the social distance between the members ties them more tightly to one another. In a friendship, for example, the potential superior who asks to be addressed by a first name is not being altruistic; by lowering the barriers of rank, he or she hopes to foster closer communication and a less constricted relationship. The bonds thus forged make empathy easier and so facilitate the creation of a common interest.

I do not contend that all close ties between human beings require equality; families and many agricultural societies provide evidence to the contrary. Conservative social theorists like Toennies have even argued on the basis of these examples that community requires hierarchy rather than equality, because equality breaks up the only stable (hierarchical) bonds between human beings, leaving each individual equal but separate. In this argument, the mutual isolation of modern life derives in part from the modern penchant for equality.

The experience of the hunter-gatherers—or of colleagues in a tightly knit academic department—refutes the contention that bonds of community require inequalities of status. Equal status itself creates bonds, although bonds of a different kind. Children, who idolize their elders and enjoy dominating younger siblings, like best to play with others their own age; they want to be met and understood, challenged but not overwhelmed. Adults also form friendships among those with whom they feel in some way on a par, and any situation that puts people in clearly unequal roles is a threat to the friendship between them. Many individuals want the exhilaration, mutual trust, and reciprocity of working with equals. They want colleagues, not minions or bosses.

Even in modern capitalist society, this form of equality is a necessary part of personal friendship. In both of his major studies of exchange relationships, George Homans concludes that friendship requires “similarity of esteem.” And the same sentiment is echoed in precapitalist societies, not only in ancient Greece, but also in fourteenth-century England. Indeed, the only cross-cultural anthropological study of friendship concludes that in every known society “equality—the idea of dual souls, alter ego—is part and parcel of friendship.”

This form of equality is qualitative, not quantitative. It has to do with subjective relations among human beings, with the tone, the nature, the kind of bond between them. To our modern quantitative understanding, the phrases “equal status” and “equal respect” conjure up a misleading picture of little mounds of status or respect, carefully measured and leveled so that none exceeds the others in height, width, or weight. But the equality I mean has to do with people’s vivid sense of underlying identity—a sense that rebels against the idea that either person is superior or inferior to the other.

Equal respect need not depend on equal ability. It can arise from moments of emotional identification. In the first flush of discovering their common history, women in the radical women’s movement felt a tremendous sense of “sisterhood.” To feel that all women were sisters meant that all other differences faded into insignificance beside the overwhelming understanding that they had, so to speak, grown up together—shared the same fears, troubles, ways of coping, humiliations, and joys. In the era of sisterhood, institutional reminders of the distinctions and inequalities of the larger society became intolerable. Women found too much in each other to respect.

To the extent that we feel we share experience with another, we feel alike, and hence in some sense equal. We think of this underlying experience when we say that, although human beings may be unequal in
outward qualities, they are equal underneath. Our common experience allows us to view others as somehow independent of their social roles and titles, which are clearly unequal. Blood brothers and sisters, unequal in skills, often feel these sentiments of identity and equality of respect. Workers, blacks, Jews, women, nationalists—all groups with a common past—can, in stressing that past, evoke feelings of identity and equality. "Fraternity" does not contradict the ideal of equality, but rests on a perception of underlying likeness.

Concern with equality takes different forms in unitary and adversary democracies. While unitary democracies are primarily concerned with equal respect and equal status, the logic of adversary democracy implies a primary concern with equal protection of interests. Adversary democracy arose to resolve conflicts in situations where there was little agreement about the common good or, indeed, about the nature of the good. Without some definition of the good, there is no way of arguing that any one individual's interests have more value than any other's. Thus, there is no basis for arguing that any one individual's interests should have more weight in the political process than any other's. Whenever there is no precedent to fall back on, equality is an obvious and therefore often uncontroversial solution to the problem of distribution. Equal division is a mechanical process that, in the words of Isaiah Berlin, "needs no reasons." It becomes the solution of choice at moments when a society has no reasons. In politics, adversary democracy provides exactly this mechanical process: without judging between them, it weighs every citizen's interests equally.

The suffrage, distributed on the basis of one-person/one-vote, is a first step toward the equal protection of interests. But the traditional arguments for universal suffrage can always be extended to demands for equal power because an equal vote will not protect one's interests unless it is backed by equal power. The logic of adversary democracy may also ultimately require the distribution of political outcomes in proportion to a group's numerical weight in the population because, at least under majority rule, equal power will not protect equally the interests of a permanent minority.

In a pure unitary democracy, where the interests of the members are identical, the adversary rationale for equal power is eliminated. Individual interests are not in conflict and therefore need not be protected equally. One group of people—the oldest members, the intellectual vanguard, the most interested, or the best administrators—can wield more power than the others and still exercise that power in the interests of all.

Arguments for unequal power, therefore, almost invariably assume that all parties have similar interests. In the doctor–patient or captain–passenger analogies frequently cited to justify unequal power, the doctor and patient are assumed to have a similar interest in curing the patient, the captain and passenger a similar interest in getting the ship safely to shore. Robert Dahl, for example, in discussing the "Criterion of Competence," makes this assumption. So does John Stuart Mill in his argument for weighted votes and Edmund Burke in his argument for the unfettered representative. Because the citizens of the two small democracies studied here often believed that their interests were the same, they often felt comfortable in collective decisions where some of their number had more power than others.

On some issues, however, the interests of the members of both the town meeting and the radical workplace did conflict. So, too, do the interests of the doctor and patient or captain and passenger. When this happens, and joint decisions must still be arrived at, the rationale for unequal power collapses. In these moments, unequal power simply results in the powerful getting their way. How equally power should be divided in a democracy therefore depends partly on how similar the members' interests—private-regarding, other-regarding, and ideal-regarding—really are. By the same logic, the degree to which elected representatives in a democracy should act on mandates from their constituents or should feel free to pursue what they see as the interests of the polity as a whole also depends on the degree to which the interests—again, private-, other-, and ideal-regarding—of the citizens and the representatives are in fact similar. The greater the common interest, the less need a polity has for equal power in order to protect members' interests equally.

While no real polity is composed of members whose interests are identical, polities do vary in the degree to which their members have common and conflicting interests. When there are costs to establishing equal power, as there usually are, a democracy should force itself to pay those costs more in moments of conflicting interest than in moments of common interest.

The Decision Rule: Consensus versus Majority Rule

The decision rule of consensus also baffles most people who think in adversary terms. Only a polity in which individuals have many of their interests in common can use a consensus rule on every issue without its resulting in impasse or in extreme social coercion. When individual in-
interests are in irresolvable conflict, a consensus requirement guarantees either deadlock in favor of the status quo or social pressure on dissenters to go along. These are admittedly serious drawbacks, but in practice, moments of common interest occur far more frequently than adversary theorists assume. When a decision encompasses problems with a correct solution, or when participants in a decision can sympathize with one another or make the good of the whole their own, common interests are possible. Most tribes, committees, and intimates, all groups where these conditions hold, make their decisions by reaching a consensus on each issue. Globally, consensual democracy is still at least as common as majority-rule democracy. In non-Western societies, the local village council, the corporation, and even the national legislature will consciously and frequently make their decisions by consensus. Even in Western societies, consensual decision making is far more common than we usually realize, partly because it is often disguised behind formal majoritarian procedures. The assumption of common interests and the dynamic of face-to-face contact can lead not only friends but business organizations, committees of all sorts, academic departments, and even legislatures to make most of their decisions by consensus. For most human beings, the face-to-face, consensual decision among equals is the everyday experience, and majority rule the exception.

I will use the term "consensus" to describe a form of decision making in which, after discussion, one or more members of the assembly sum up prevailing sentiment, and if no objections are voiced, this becomes agreed-on policy. Although the formal logic of consensus may be technically the same as that of a "unanimity rule," the two terms conjure up quite different processes. In a consensual process, as under a strict unanimity rule, the determined opposition of one member can usually prevent collective action, and if the group acts in spite of that opposition, the dissenter will not be obligated by the group decision. But the consensual process differs in form from a strict unanimity rule in that no vote is taken, and it differs in purpose from strict unanimity rule in that people usually adopt it when they expect to agree, not when they expect to differ.

This last distinction is vital. The informal, nonquantitative, consensual process is not designed to protect individual interests. If the members of a group can acknowledge that their interests conflict, they can then agree unanimously to make a bargain, giving one part of the group the goods it desires on the condition that the other part of the group gets other goods that it desires ("side payments"). But collectivities whose members have many common interests often develop norms that make it difficult even to suggest that individual interests might conflict. Groups that are accustomed to using consensus find it hard to recognize and to legitimate conflicts of interest by allowing bargains, distributing benefits proportionately, taking turns, or making decisions by majority rule. Just like couples who feel they must act on every issue as if they were one, consensual groups often find themselves unable to shift to adversary techniques when their members' interests begin to conflict. Such groups end up either reinforcing the status quo or, in an informal and unacknowledged manner, forcing the minority to go along.

The spectrum which stretches from the unitary to the adversary polity does not end with the latter. When interests conflict on a sufficiently large number of interests and along sufficiently consistent lines, even majority rule becomes unworkable, because the losers refuse to be bound by the result. At this point, no polity is possible. Yet collective decisions are still possible on specific issues as long as all parties agree. Thus, as we shall see, the unanimity requirement appears in different forms at both extremes of the spectrum running from trust to mistrust. What I will term consensus, as distinct from a formal unanimity rule, appears only in a unitary democracy.

Level of Intimacy: Face-to-Face Contact versus the Secret Ballot

There is no logical reason why individuals who meet face to face should not see most human relations in terms of conflict, make decisions by majority vote, or stress the equal protection of interests in the resolution of those decisions. Experience teaches us, however, that in practice face-to-face contact increases the perception of likeness, encourages decision making by consensus, and perhaps even enhances equality of status. It does this in a variety of ways. On the positive side, it seems to increase the actual congruence of interests by encouraging the empathy by which individual members make one another's interests their own. It also encourages the recognition of common interest by allowing subtleties of direct communication. On the negative side, it increases the possibility of conformity through intimidation, resulting in a false or managed consensus.

Rousseau believed that the groups of peasants he saw in Switzerland "regulating affairs of the State under an oak, and always acting wisely" were "among the happiest people in the world." But whatever the effects of bringing the Swiss together under an oak, bringing the members
of my two small democracies together in a meeting hall did not invariably make them the happiest people in the world. When citizens have a common interest, face-to-face contact—which allows debate, empathy, listening, learning, changing opinions, and a burst of solidarity when a decision is reached—can bring real joy. But in the face of conflict, emotions turn sour.

Even in representative systems, an aversion to conflict leads citizens to avoid discussing politics; in face-to-face assemblies, similar aversions have more profound effects. Some people do not attend meetings because they know in advance that they will get upset. If they do attend, they may still need the support of a faction before they can find courage enough to enter the fray. They may hold back what they have to say until they lose control and become too angry to listen. Fear of conflict leads those with influence in a meeting to suppress important issues rather than letting them surface and cause disruption. It leads them also to avoid the appearance of conflict by pressing for unanimity. If these techniques are successful, the consensual decision that results does not reflect a common interest. For these reasons, in both the town meeting and the democratic workplace, face-to-face decision making worked better in times of common interest than it did in times of irreconcilable conflict. When a polity has to handle many questions of conflicting interest, most people prefer a secret ballot and a method of combining preferences, like referenda or electoral representation, that puts some distance between them and their opponents.

Face-to-face meetings of all citizens are in any case impossible on a nationwide level, although meetings of smaller groups can still have a significant influence on national policy. All parliamentary systems, for instance, end up with face-to-face meetings of elected representatives. Although the incentives to finding a common interest are usually partially offset by the personality, professional socialization, and structural position of the representatives, face-to-face interaction in a legislature can take on the same character as in a direct town meeting or workers’ assembly. Unitary or pseudo-unitary moments in a primarily adversary system often derive from these face-to-face pressures. If decisions in industry or government were decentralized to the level of workers’ councils and neighborhood assemblies, and if these assemblies met face to face, as is to some degree the case in Yugoslavia, this too would affect what is now primarily an adversary system.

Much of this volume will be devoted to a detailed analysis of unitary and adversary modes in two democracies close to the unitary end of the spectrum. These democracies are not free of conflict; indeed, these pages report mostly their moments of greatest conflict. Both democracies have learned, to some degree, to shift back and forth between unitary and adversary modes of decision making, depending on the degree to which their members’ interests conflict, but neither has learned how to guarantee the equal protection of interests when conflicts erupt. In both democracies, but particularly in the town meeting, unitary procedures therefore occasionally mask actual conflicts of interest, to the detriment of citizens who are already at a disadvantage.
usual. Olive Pierce read a piece in praise of Harvey Simonds, the refaced school director just voted out. ("Thankless public office. . . . For twelve years, braved weather. . . . Sane, sound Yankee good sense. . . . Thank you.") The volunteer fire department got an increased appropriation.

By 3:45, many had left. In the discussion of the appropriation for roads, Bedell's demand, "Why do we need money for roads if everyone has to build their own culverts like I do?" brought general groans. The road commissioner began to argue with him, and when Bedell quoted Vermont Statute Title 19, Section 34, from his notes, the commissioner broke in: "I've got something I want to say, Clayton. Apparently the selectmen don't want to say it, but I will. You've got no business running your manure spreader up and down the road."

"You're trying to tell me how to run my business like these zoning people?"

"Somebody ought to because you're letting manure fall all over the road!" Delighted laughter greeted the road commissioner's last sally, and Bedell fell silent. The last few items passed unanimously with little discussion, and by 4:20 the meeting had adjourned.

The town meeting was over. A selectman had been elected with no opposition. An increased school budget, which would bear heavily on the poorer farmers, had been voted in by a nearly unanimous voice vote. A Planning Commission headed by one of the richest and most politically experienced men in town had lost its funding. The ninety town residents who had showed up for the meeting—the legislators of the town—returned to their homes.

WRATH and love came up to town meeting in company.
—EMERSON

LEFT the town meeting grinning. This meeting, unlike the ones I had attended in other states, had finally fitted my fantasy of what a town meeting should be, and perhaps had been when Tocqueville and Emerson described them. These people had debated energetically the practical and the ideological sides of issues vital to their town. They had taken responsibility for the decisions they would have to live with. Votes had been close. Farmers and workers had spoken out often and strong. The town had no obvious "power elite."

In the interviews later, I intended to pursue the question of class—that is, whether some economic groups in the town participated more in town meeting and felt more powerful than others. I had not intended to ask questions about the forces that promote consensus in the face-to-face democracy of a town meeting. Yet talking with the townspeople six months after the meeting, I discovered that face-to-face conflict in town meeting creates fears of which I had not been sufficiently aware. These fears made the town meeting act more like a unitary democracy than it would otherwise have done. Several years later, when I had finished interviewing the workers at Helpline and had thought through the impli-
cations of my research, I realized that friendship as well as fear pushed Selby toward unitary democracy. But it was the fears I noticed first.

Young James Pedley, for example, had recently been appointed to the small town job of Viewer of Wood and Lumber. This office requires its incumbent on rare occasions to examine and classify the quality of lumber sold in the town. Primarily, however, it served to show Jamie Pedley that the townspeople he respects recognize his continuing interest in town affairs. Pedley, like one or two of Selby's other poorer farmers, does speak out in town meeting. But even he hesitates to pit what he calls the "public speaking and parliamentary rule" he learned back in high school from the Future Farmers of America against the greater verbal and legal skills of others at the meeting. For him, the psychic costs of town meeting have a simple physical manifestation. "I kinda dread going," he told me, "because I know when I come home I'm going to have the worst headache I ever had, a splitting headache."

A year before, Jamie Pedley was partially blinded in one eye when a piece flew off his old harvester. He concluded then that he was "not even a good farmer." Yet he has to master these feelings of failure in order to go to, and talk at, town meetings:

There's a few people who really are brave enough to get up and say what they think in town meetings in this day and age. They'd sit back and say, "Well, it don't make any difference whether I go or not; they're going to get what they want." They're afraid to get up and say what they want.

"Cause it does take a little bit of courage. 'Specially if you get up and make a boo-boo. I mean you make a mistake and say something, then people would never get up and say anything again. They feel themselves inferior.

Now, I guess when you basically put down a person, now myself, I feel inferior. They're fools. They're speaking in ways, to other people. I mean, at times, I'll tell anybody no, if it doesn't bother me, when it does, and I won't let anybody know that it bothers me. And in the end, I'm damn glad I didn't. Well you got—oh, let's see, forty percent of the people on this road that don't show up for town meeting—a lot of them feel that way.

Clayton Bedell is one of those who does not usually show up. Before the town meeting in 1970, he had not attended a meeting in ten years. In the end, his vote and one other could be considered the deciding two that deprived the Regional Planning Commission of its funding. Yet Bedell's arguments had met patenting explanations, and his anger had evoked the threat of a lawsuit that he had neither the expertise nor the money to meet. Although he spoke a great deal at the meeting, he left convinced that, as he put it, "If I got any say, it'd be the first time I ever had a say!"

In the town meeting, people had laughed at Bedell when the road commissioner took him to task for letting manure fall off his spreader onto the road. Months after the meeting, as I talked with people in town, some were still laughing or even sneering:

Clayton Bedell is just an ordinary farmer, that's all he is.

We had an occasion this last spring, and it got to a, well, it got to a personal conflict, and the person that got up and made a perfect fool of himself and insulted this taxpayer, it should have been stopped right there and it wasn't.

When people get out of place—I say "people" but I really mean one man—when they're disagreeable and insult everyone, or actually insult just one man, I don't like it. Of course, he's definitely from the lower strata of society, if you have to say "higher" or "lower," you know.

Some people make a lot of noise, but they aren't the people who ought to control things, and they don't.

Some of the poorer and less-educated people in town are intimidated when someone like Clayton Bedell gets treated this way. Edith Hurley, living in a tiny apartment over the general store and just barely managing never to go on welfare, sides with her more affluent neighbors in laughing at Bedell. Yet she quietly draws a lesson for herself. She has not attended a town meeting in the last ten years:

I don't care to—well, to tell my part, you know, right along a whole mess of people. . . . I don't know, I don't like to get up in town meeting and say, well, this and that. . . . well, everybody's looking, or doing something, and they'll say [whisper], "She's a fool!" There's one man in particular [Bedell], that's up on this road here, boy oh boy, he's into hot water all the time. [He talks up in town meetings? Oh! Gracious to Betsy, I guess he did. [Do people pay attention to him?] Hah, hah, no they don't, boy, we just, ah . . .

Florence Johnson, who cleans house on a weekly basis for people in Selby and in the next town, lives with her five children in a trailer off one of the town's dirt back-hill roads. She sympathizes with Bedell but draws the same practical conclusion from what she has heard of the incident. She has never gone to a town meeting. Asked why she thinks so few people go, she answers:

I don't know. If you go there, and you speak up, they make fun of you for speaking up and so on, and I guess people just don't want to go and be made fun of. Why, I don't say anything so they don't just laugh it off anyway.

I mean we have some friends [Bedell] that went last year, and the guy stood up, and he said some things about a few issues . . . and they just laughed at him. So what good did it do him to open his mouth? I mean, he'd have been better off if he had stayed home. Like Edith Hurley, she too has a vivid picture of what would happen if she spoke:
They all sit there, and they listen while you're talking, but the minute you leave the room or something, they laugh behind your back and poke fun at it because you did open your mouth.

The fear of being made to seem a fool is compounded by the fear of losing one's self-control. People who do not like to speak in public often hold back their ideas and feelings until their pent-up anger breaks down the barriers of reticence. In the 1940s, Granville Hicks contended that the typical "native" in a small town in New York avoided talking until he was almost out of control.

Even with his feeling that the majority are behind him, he has to work himself up to the point of self-expression, and he usually talks wildly. If, on the other hand, he thinks he is in the minority, a still greater emotional pressure is necessary to bring him to his feet, and when he gets there, he usually explodes.

In Selby, even a retired businessman whose job required speaking says he would only speak up at town meeting if he got mad:

Some people are eloquent and can make others feel inferior. They can shut them down. I wouldn't say a word at town meetings unless they got me madder'n hell.

His wife, too, has only spoken at a town meeting once, and again it was when she was angry. A young truck driver would only think of speaking at the meeting if he "got mad enough." Edith Hurley, who is afraid that people might whisper, "She's a fool," decided she might speak in the town meeting if she got mad. "Unless I get mad," she says, "[then] I'm going to tell you about it. Unless I get mad, [then] I can tell them off."

But the loss of control that can accompany anger produces problems of its own. One old farmer, for instance, who never finished elementary school, is restrained from speaking by believing, like Hurley and Johnson, that if he did get up at a town meeting and say something, "Why, they'd all laugh at me." "I did speak once," he says, "and pretty near got threw out. Got to speaking too loud. I get to swearing." He imagines that things were different before women's suffrage. Now "you got to hold your temper." The meeting is "not like it used to be. No, [then] you could shake your fist in the other's face!"

To counter the anxiety of speaking in public, groups will sometimes caucus before they anticipate a major conflict, delegate some of their number to speak, and rev up the motors of self-confidence by assuring one another that they are right. In another town about the size of Selby, I witnessed such a ritual among a small group of partisans who met the night before town meeting to discuss a major issue that was coming up the next day. They collected at the house of one of the participants for a strategy session after supper; went over the issue, the personalities of their opponents, and the major points in their argument; and bolstered one another's courage against the coming ordeal.

They needed this support because face-to-face contact, along with exposing one publicly to being a fool, makes the disagreements people voice seem more like personal criticism. Even in the abstract and intellectual pages of a journal, ideas can rarely be divorced from the personalities of their advocates. Face-to-face contact reinforces this identification. Points of information reach the floor of town meeting dressed in the personality of particular human beings. Citizens at the meeting dismiss what Clayton Bedell says because his speech and tumbledown farm place him in "the lower strata of society." Bedell knows this. Robert Gretsch too knows that people—ironically often the same people who dislike Bedell—vote against his Planning Commission because they find him abrasive and condescending or because he dresses, speaks, and lives in a style more cosmopolitan than they.

Nor can differing opinions be dissociated from bitter personal disputes among individuals. Gretsch's debate with Bedell on zoning in 1970 was in many ways a private war, not eased by the complicated history, known to many at the meeting, of Gretsch's broken fences and Bedell's foraging cows. When I asked one of the selectmen, a taciturn master carpenter, if he found anything frustrating about town meetings, he looked at the ground and grit out the words: "Too much personalities involved." Phyllis Gunn, who became active in town affairs soon after she moved in twenty-one years before, told me bitterly, "They get so darned personal at town meeting!" A more recent newcomer attended one Selby town meeting and concluded: "No one likes each other!"

Afraid of the enemies they will make, some townspeople in Selby hesitate not only to speak in town meeting but also to accept town office. One newcomer's husband took time from running their antique business to be selectman six years before, but quit the job because, as she explains stiffly, "My husband is the kind that doesn't like to have disagreements."

An older farmer, poor enough to have to work out in the winter for twenty-three dollars a day, held the job of Lister, or property appraiser, for seven years. For his wife, it was a difficult experience. "Now a number of farmers do take office occasionally," she says, "but Lord, there's so much criticism and so little pay!" One woman who fought for the increased school budget in 1969 feels that "there are several people in town who've held it against me ever since." Another comments drily, "You make a few enemies." Phyllis Gunn, when asked if she ever speaks at meetings,
lets loose her sarcasm: "Oh, yes, often—it makes me very popular!" And another newcomer answers the same question: "Speak? All the time. That's how I got so many enemies." When his wife suggests that town meetings give people a chance to say what they think, he shakes his head and snorts, "Well, you make a lot of enemies, that's all I know.

In a town this small, your enemies are also your neighbors for life, so, as Phyllis Gunn says, "People are reluctant to be counted. If my neighbor's for it and I'm against it, there'll be trouble." An old-timer points out that local intermarriage makes it worse: "People are afraid to oppose each other in a small town. It's family relationships. You can't say anything because you might be talking about their own relatives."

For an official criticism can make even the town meeting dinner unpleasant. In 1969, says one young schoolteacher, the teachers were

put on the spot. We just sat and people got on each side, and we had to be right in the middle of the table. And so it seemed like you were getting pro and con all the way around you—so as delicious a dinner as it was, it didn't digest that easily.

Another town official describes giving a report in town meeting: "You felt as though you were in the spotlight, you know, and they were going to nail you."

Time and again in the interviews, the townspeople gave as a major reason people don't speak up their fear of criticism. "They're just scared," "scared to death...petrified," "afraid to open up," "afraid...fear or something...no courage." "Some people are afraid to get up and say anything." "They're afraid that others won't like it." Or as Lena Thresher has it, "Everybody's pussy!"

Physical proximity in a dispute can even induce unconscious fears of violence. The sight and sound of anger can trigger "fight or flight" mechanisms—sweating hands, adrenalin pumped into the bloodstream, and a quickened heartbeat. These effects may be pleasant in some contexts, but in a dispute in town meeting, most people do not relish the excitement.

When communication is overloaded and the signals people give touch emotions in untried ways, the outcome is sometimes unpredictable, so the participant is likely to feel that the meeting is never completely under control. The group has a life of its own; the individual is always outnumbered. Consequently, the tension in a direct democracy sometimes has within it an element of physical fear. Phyllis Gunn gets excited herself as she describes how, whenever someone takes a controversial stand at town meeting, people at the meeting become "very frightened of what you think. Their anxiety level goes SWOOOSH!"—she sweeps her arm violently up above her head—"Way up!"

Three people in town say, they actually like the "fights" in town meeting, but many more are upset by them. One young woman, living in a neat, new trailer along the state highway, has never been to a town meeting. But she says, "Well, to me, all it is is more or less a fight...a big argument." In a trailer half a mile away, a factory worker who has also never attended, agrees: "Myself, I just get sick of, uh, get sick of it, I say...[to] sit and listen to 'em argue and wrangle for four or five hours." A farmer's wife says that she goes to town meeting sometimes, "but after they get to arguing about so much and it doesn't amount to anything, I get sick of it." Edith Hurley has never gone to a town meeting, but still reports with distaste that "you get in a lot of hubbub...people get quarreling." Others describe the meeting as "this bickering back and forth," "petty quarrels," a "nasty argument," and "a big fight." Lena Thresher says that she does not like "the way people knowingly go against one another." Even one of the three who rather enjoy the fights agrees that many are put off by them. Many will not go to the meeting, she says, and when you ask them why, "they'll say, 'Too damn many arguments!' An older woman sums it up—"I just don't like disagreeable situations."

Even in a representative democracy, many nonvoters avoid politics because it involves conflict. Face-to-face confrontation increases the tension dramatically: Jamie Pedley acquires a splitting headache. An older man claims he stopped going because he is afraid for his heart. A man in the next town tells how his hands shake for hours after the meeting. Altogether more than a quarter of the people I talked to suggested without prompting that the conflictual character of the town meeting in some way upset them.

The Consequences of Fear

After Selby's 1970 meeting, I heard many criticisms of Homer Allen, the moderator. This was not because he had not known the difference between "with and without discount," because he had not made clear which item in the agenda was being discussed, or because he had wasted time over the discrepancy between Harvey's and Mildred's accounts. People criticized him for not having stopped the fight between Gretsch and Bedell. The moderator's main job, people feel, is to keep the peace. He
should quash the first sign of anger or quickly expel the perpetrator. Roberts’ Rules of Order, the gavel, the constable—all the trappings of formal procedure—should save the townspeople from the explosions that can build up face to face. The title of “moderator” is well chosen.

Yet relaxing the rules of order helps quiet other fears. It diffuses the formality of the meeting, substitutes a private or familial atmosphere for a public one, and lets friendly as well as unfriendly feelings come out. Lapses from parliamentary rule can make the townspeople feel more at home.

Because the moderator is only Homer Allen, who does not know the meaning of “with or without discount” any more than any other people at the meeting, those who can follow the meeting in their town reports are also likely to take some responsibility for its progress. In 1970, when Allen could not answer the question about discounts, someone else solved his problem by calling out from the floor the suggestion that “we have the collection of taxes same as in the past!” Later in the meeting, a woman in the back helped out by asking: “Don’t Harvey have his figures with him so he can check them against Mildred’s?” Ralph Holt suggested from the floor: “Let’s put the vote over till Harvey checks his figures out with Mildred,” while another man was prompted to add: “Good idea, Ralph. Let’s go on with other business!” Without going so far as to praise disasters for their laudable propensity to bring people together in mutual aid, I would argue that the intermittent disorder in this meeting served to spread responsibility. In the interviews, the people who said they generally did not talk in town meeting also seemed to take pride in mentioning that they sometimes spoke, “just to second a nomination or make a motion—help the meeting along.”

The informality in Selby’s meeting includes using first names and joking. Wallace Tyson makes a sally about his wife’s “huge” salary, calls out a comment on Harvey Simonds (“If his figures aren’t right, I’ll get him later!”), or, in another town meeting, jokes about the three women who had been town auditors for years (“I nominate Leona Bussiere because if Leona didn’t do it, Ada Mosher wouldn’t do it, and if Ada Mosher didn’t do it, Ethel Quimby would be out in the cold!”). These witticisms, not very funny to an outsider, relieve the tension and remind the townspeople that they are all friends, all in on the joke.

The feeling of friendship extends beyond joking and first names to a form of mutual protection. In public, Selby’s townspeople are usually careful of one another’s feelings. Why are the same people returned to office time after time? “They don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings.” A newcomer finds that an incompetent school bus driver cannot be fired because “He’s a nice guy.” In town meeting itself, whenever any incumbent is voted out of office, Dora Brunell always finds a moment to read a citation she and another woman have composed on the virtues of the former official. In one recent town meeting, after Selectman Coffin had sold some land to a nonprofit developer, made a large profit himself, and deprived the town permanently of taxes from that land, he received only one vote when the ballots were counted. Yet no one at the meeting mentioned his misdeeds. The meeting elected another selectman with no discussion, and after the election, Dora Brunell read, to great applause, a testimonial to Coffin that ended, “We gratefully allow him this brief vacation before putting him in harness again.”

In the same way, selectmen and townspeople sometimes conspire—consciously and unconsciously—to prevent controversial matters like a road commissioner’s illegal work with the town’s backhoe from ever coming up at town meeting. If the road commissioner has to be punished, or even fired, they would prefer not to have it done publicly.

To avoid the kind of open fight in town meeting that might hurt feelings, the selectmen and school directors do some groundwork beforehand, finding candidates who are acceptable to everyone and will agree to take office. They ask around, get suggestions, and sound out likely prospects. The night before a meeting, a selectman gets on the phone to make sure the candidates come to the meeting. At the meeting itself, the election usually goes off routinely. In 1970, for instance, the grapevine had reported to Homer Allen that some felt he was getting too old for the job, and he had made it clear in return that he no longer cared to be selectman. Yet at the town meeting, someone nominated him anyway, an arrangement that allowed him to withdraw with good grace. A friend nominated Frank Pate, but Frank knew that someone else had informally agreed to take the job, so he too withdrew his name in order to make the vote for the remaining candidate unanimous.

The elected officer was thereby spared a fight and at the same time was allowed to feel he had the full support of the town. Without such protection against public defeat and open hostility, many townspeople would be unwilling to run for office at all.

Elections in a town meeting, like those in a football team, an academic department, or most other groups that value unity, tend to proceed this way from informal negotiation to formal unanimity. The disguise is most easily penetrated when, as in American presidential conventions, a formal unity succeeds bitter rivalry. But the pattern is often the same, although less obvious, in smaller groups.

Town meetings will try to reach unanimity even on substantive issues.
The religious towns of seventeenth-century New England actively pursued the ideal of harmony. Few town decisions were made by majority vote. The town clerk recorded in the minutes only that "the town decided," "agreed," or "voted" a certain policy. The desire for unity was so great that when an issue did create two seemingly irreconcilable factions, a town might deal with the problem by dividing in two rather than deciding by majority vote. Although New England towns today are no longer bound by a religious conviction that prescribes unity among the people of God, they still, like other unitary groups, committees, or tribes, prefer to make decisions unanimously. When agreement seems impossible, they usually still strive to minimize conflict. Town meeting government for the same reasons is likely to be nonpartisan. Factions are thought to turn neighbor against neighbor in daily lives.

In any given instance, it is often difficult to separate the yearning for harmony from the desire to avoid conflict or from the simple dislike of not having one's own way. All these motives may have prompted one older woman to remark wistfully at the end of a partisan, conflict-toned meeting in another small town in Vermont:

It's always been such a peaceful town. But now these people come in—they say they want to live here because it is peaceful—and then they just argue and won't trust anyone.

As she turned to go home, she concluded, "I feel tired. I don't think people will come if they know they'll get too tired." The town meeting was no longer her own; it had lost its qualities of friendship.

For those who are full members of a community, the friendly joking and informality, the attempts to cover up embarrassing incidents, and the unanimous votes make a potentially frightening situation bearable. Each of these actions eases tension, dissipates friction, and allows the shier members of the community to participate more fully. For the "ingroup," these devices make the difference between a welcoming friendship to which they belong and a self-interested competition to which they would be uneasy spectators.

Unfortunately, the very devices that make participation easier for established members of the community make it harder for newcomers. The same procedure that spares Homer Allen the shame of being voted out of office leads the stranger quite rightly to suspect that the entire story behind the vote for selectman is not being told. As the vote for selectman takes less than ten minutes, all the nominees but one withdraw, and the voters are asked to participate in a unanimous aye vote, those not in the know can only be convinced that they have been had. Jamie Fedley says:

Sometimes a few people get together, and they'll sort of cut and dry things. Somebody will get up and make a nomination, someone second it, and someone else get right up and move the nominations cease. It's very cut and dried.

Lena Threscher describes another town meeting on the school budget:

This small group had got together first, and everyone had learned their part, what they were supposed to say, and they swept the budget through the meeting.

A farmer who holds a set of small town offices and feels impervious to group pressure explains the coercive effect on others of a voice vote instead of a secret ballot:

If you say, "Those in favor say aye," they'll vote aye. I call 'em so many sheep following the goats. People should have the courage to vote no if they mean no.

Another town officer who opposed the school budget at the 1969 special meeting points out angrily that a voice vote made it more difficult for the townspeople to vote against that budget:

You're looked down on if you say no to anything the school director wants. If anyone thought quickly enough, they could say they want to do it by ballot.

To people not familiar with the town meeting, these practices can be more than a source of irritation: they can be totally discouraging. A retired road worker who never finished elementary school says:

Probably a lot feel same as I do. They don't get a chance to speak their piece. If you get up and say your piece, they'll call you out of order whether you are or not.

It's all cut and dried before the town meeting. They'll pass right over you if you get up to nominate. It's organized their way before the meeting. No, I never speak. I've seen so many called out of order.

Phyllis Gunn tells me that "If you don't say what they want to hear you're not even acknowledged. I had to ask four times on a question about the budget, but they'd rather not talk about it. If you don't agree with them, they don't want to hear you."

In a town meeting, each decision to resolve a matter beforehand to avoid hurt feelings becomes simultaneously a decision to withhold in-
formation from those who need it most. The informality and occasional confusion also make it harder for the uninitiated to understand the issues. Even a resident of twenty-one years' standing like Phyllis Gunn can sometimes suspect that there are habitual, deliberate attempts to keep outsiders from understanding what is going on." The confusing thing about it," she says, "is that no one knows what they're voting for. I'm sure this is deliberate!" When I looked surprised, she added, "Actually, it probably isn't, but that is the way it comes across."

The informality that lets some townspeople feel that they are part of an intimate community also emphasizes to outsiders that they are not. They may not even know who "Mildred" and "Harvey" are, and it will take years before some of them will dare to call the stern, white-haired town clerk by her first name. Most newcomers will never feel easy about laughing at one of Wally Tyson's jokes. They will be confused by conventions like the one that the school meeting in the middle of the town meeting. In a system based on informal knowledge, they may find themselves asking "stupid" questions, like the young woman in Selby's meeting the following year who asked about allocating money for a kindergarten, when "everyone" knew that this item, only on the warning by state law, was always unanimously voted down.

Outsiders will also see the protection that the selectmen extend to their erring road commissioner as corruption. Such outsiders often press for formal, universalistic, public standards, and as they do so, they tear away the web of informal protection that the community extends to its own. The young newcomer who was confused with the procedure and, meaning no harm, asked the candidates for school director to identify themselves and to say a few words about their candidacy, forced Harvey Simonds, a laborer, to speak in public and expose himself to the risk of ridicule. Worse, the demand came at a moment when the three votes for school director had placed him at the bottom of a field of four, and he might well at that point have wanted to vanish. Not surprisingly, hidden in his mumbles was a withdrawal from the race. Mrs. Thresher told me afterward that Harvey Simonds had decided not to continue to be active in town affairs: "He's given up."

In this town meeting, as in many face-to-face democracies, the fears of making a fool of oneself, of losing control, of criticism, and of making enemies all contribute to the tension that arises in the settlement of disputes. The informal arrangements for the suppression of conflict that result tyrannize as well as protect. To preserve an atmosphere of agree-

ment, the more powerful participants are likely to withhold information and to exert subtle pressures that often work ultimately to the disadvantage of the least powerful.

Such tyranny is not usually deliberate. Nor, although it generally works against the interests of the least powerful, is it always the tyranny of one stable group over another. For although insiders generally benefit from these arrangements, most participants in the town meeting are neither entirely insiders nor entirely outsiders. Most of the participants benefit in some way from the meeting's informality and from its efforts to prevent embarrassment and open conflict. At the same time, most participants also feel that they do not always know what is going on. Lena Thresher can be angry at the way the outsiders embarrassed Harvey Simonds and at the same time complain about how the insiders sweep decisions through a meeting. The ways she wants the meeting to manage conflict also in the long run increase her own feelings of powerlessness.

Repressing conflict therefore has its uses. Participation in face-to-face democracies is not automatically therapeutic: it can make participants feel humiliated, frightened, and even more powerless than before. Joking, informality, avoiding public embarrassment, and downplaying disruptive issues help assuage these fears, but while setting an emotional tone conducive to democracy as friendship, these soothing measures further isolate the powerless.

**Wanting to Be Friends**

The notes from my first town meeting in Selby reflect, for the most part, its adversary aspects. When I discovered the extent of the fears that people revealed to me in subsequent interviews, I attributed most of the unanimity in the town meeting to fear of conflict. Only after spending time in the more unitary crisis center did I realize that Selby could not be fully understood with the categories of traditional adversary analysis. Only then did I begin paying retrospective attention to the unitary side of Selby's political life. This evolution in my methods means that my investigation of the disadvantages of unitary behavior in Selby has more depth and detail than my investigation of its advantages.

My emphasis on the pitfalls of unitary democracy in Selby derives from both substantive and methodological considerations. Substantively, the
citizens of Selby do have many conflicting interests, and the town is consequently closer to the adversary end of the political spectrum than is my second case, the worker-controlled crisis center. When Selby put unitary procedures into practice, those procedures came under greater strain than they did in the crisis center and more frequently worked against the already disadvantaged. For these reasons Selby gave me an excellent opportunity to document the problems of unitary democracy.

Yet my emphasis on the negative side of unitary democracy is also related to the way I went about studying the town. Trained in the adversary discipline of political science, I had begun by looking for a town where serious issues closely divided the populace. I decided to study Selby in large part because Selby had such a conflict while most other towns did not. I did not include in my questionnaire any items on perception of common interest and when someone made a comment like “We’re all friends here” or “They’re just like I am” in an interview, I did not usually ask what they meant or seem interested.

It was only when I looked back at Selby after completing my study of the crisis center that I began to see the positive forces making for genuine consensus in the town. There are three routes to genuine consensus in any group: overlapping private interests, individuals adopting the good of others as their own, and individuals making the good of the whole their own. All three routes are easier to follow in Selby than in most communities. Thus, while there are major conflicts of interest in Selby, it is still a far more unitary polity than, say, the United States.

The unanimous vote in Selby’s 1970 town meeting approving the budget for the town’s volunteer fire department, for example, need not have resulted from fear of conflict. It may instead have reflected something close to a genuine common interest. The homogeneity of the town’s population meant that risk from fire did not vary enough among the individuals at town meeting to give them substantially different needs for fire protection. The implicit questions before the meeting therefore became administrative: “What is the appropriate level of fire protection for everyone?” and “Is this level being delivered for the lowest cost?” These were technical problems, not matters of differing interest; in theory, questions like these could have correct answers. In fact, because it would have cost too much to collect sufficient information to answer these questions even approximately correctly, the town meeting accepted the judgment of its technical experts, the men of the volunteer fire department. This decision was probably in the interest of everyone at the meeting. Administrative questions like these appear often enough in town meeting for Selby’s citizens to grow accustomed to having common rather than conflicting interests.

Selby’s citizens also create common interest when they adopt as their own the interests of fellow citizens. They do not call Harvey or Mildred on the carpet for not having the figures right in the town report because they are likely to think: “What if I were in their shoes?” The conspiracy of silence around former Selectman Coffin’s misdeeds, the kind encomium after any official is voted out of office, and the efforts to prevent open disagreement in electing the town’s officials all protect those who expose themselves by taking office. This empathetic protection is a general predisposition in town meeting, although it admits of exceptions: the Clayton Bedells and Robert Gretschs of the system are less carefully protected than others. Bedell is poor and Gretsch a newcomer, their personal styles are different from the rest, and their outspokenness makes others think they are thick-skinned, not needing the protection that the community customarily extends to is own. The townpeople then, do not distribute their empathy equally. Yet their ability to understand and respect their neighbors’ needs still seems to generate a good part of the common interest of the town.

In addition to overlapping private interests and empathy, another source of harmony in Selby’s is that some people—possibly a good many—have made the good of the whole town their own. Some of these people told me in the interviews that they generally went to town meeting out of “duty” or spoke “just to help the meeting along.” One farmer contributed land for the dump because it was “for the town,” while many gave their time to the volunteer fire department, the library, or the Old Home Day celebration. Some of those who had had to “go on the town” for support during hard times paid the town back when their fortunes improved. Others would will money to the library when they died, just as the original donor of the building had done. In their interviews, such people said they did these things because “It’s for our town.”

While self-interest no doubt enters into this altruism, it still means that Selby can rely on voluntary gifts of time and money to an extent that towns with a less unitary tradition cannot. Towns larger than Selby, and towns that do not bring their citizens together once a year in town meeting, seem more often to have a “free rider” problem: their members are willing to accept the benefits of contributions from others without contributing anything themselves. Such towns have fewer informal social pressures to take the place of formal coercion, but in addition, their population seems to get less positive satisfaction out of helping the town.
In Selby, the people who volunteer their time, money, or land for town projects talk about “the town” almost as if it were part of their family. At one point in the 1970 Selby meeting, Ed Holt taunted Robert Gretsch by challenging his motives: “You say you’re just doing it for the town”; Gretsch countered with a sarcastic: “I don’t suppose anyone can believe people do things for charity,” and Holt retorted, “No, I don’t!” The interchange illuminates how subtly unitary and adversary assumptions intertwine in Selby’s democracy. Gretsch in the end was able to trap Holt into the adversary claim that Selby’s citizens only acted out of self-interest. In a more unitary polity, Holt would never have agreed with Gretsch, even in a confused debate where he meant to attack only Gretsch’s motives, not those of the other Selby citizens. But on the unitary side, Holt had lived in Selby all his life, and he knew what it meant to do things “for the town.” Gretsch’s translation of this idea into a diffuse, undirected “do things for charity” betrayed his big city origins. He found it hard to understand or to imitate the personal terms in which some of Selby’s citizens thought of their town. Holt’s “town” was a real, living entity, with interests of its own, just like a person. Thinking of the town like this made it easier for Holt and others like him to adopt its interests as their own.

Selby’s citizens thus have three potential strands of common interest—interest in technically correct solutions, empathy with others, and the possibility of adopting the good of the whole as their own. The face-to-face character of the town meeting deepens the ties that bind members of the town together. Citizens who see one another at a meeting realize that their opponents are human. Warmth creeps into their voices when they tell me even about someone like Bedell: “Well, I suppose he has to have his say.” While an abrasive personality may turn the townspeople away from some proposal, a friendly explanation of why the books are not balanced can meet with sympathy. Moreover, the citizen who manages to attend town meeting year after year will collect a set of memories—sitting down to the home-cooked dinner, laughing or wondering at Wally Tyson’s jokes, watching the mother of the family down the road try to keep her young son quiet and follow the town report at the same time, walking up to deliver a ballot and getting a smile from the ballot counter, voting the appropriation for Old Home Day with a unanimous chorus of ayes, learning the ins and outs of the meeting, and perhaps even helping it along by seconding a nomination. One day, such a citizen is likely to look around and think: “These are my neighbors,” and “This is our town.” The face-to-face quality of town meeting has helped bring about a feeling touched with love. When the townspeople of Selby search for unanimity, it is not only because they fear conflict but also because they want to be friends. As Emerson says, both wrath and love come up to town meeting in company.

Unitary versus Adversary Democracy

When Selby’s townspeople have similar interests on questions of policy, they can act like a unitary democracy. But they also face conflicts of interest, and when that happens, they must shift from the harmonious consensus they prefer into the adversary mode: one-citizen/one-vote, majority rule.

The Selby townspeople encounter at least three problems when they try to do this. First, since they are not entirely comfortable with the adversary process, their fear of argument and desire to remain friends make them try to avoid conflict in the meeting itself. The present chapter has documented this effect of face-to-face assembly. In Selby’s 1970 town meeting, it is true, an argument did arise over zoning between the poorer, older farmers and the richer newcomers, but the meeting’s gentle conspiracy to dampen disputes prevented other potential conflicts from emerging. The divergent views of old and young, high and low taxpayers, and villagers and nonvillagers on the issue of school expenses and transportation never surfaced, for example. Not bringing conflicts into the open like this usually gives more power to the members of whatever inside group settles things informally before or after the meeting.

Second, although it is relatively easy in principle for a meeting to shift from consensual decision making to majority rule, one-citizen/one-vote, it is harder to make the shift from unitary to adversary assumptions in selecting town officers. As the next chapter will show, Selby’s townspeople by and large consider themselves friends with common interests. They therefore tend to select leaders primarily on the basis of presumed competence, assuming those they select will use their greater competence in common affairs for the good of the whole. Selby’s citizens do not try to select leaders who will represent their individual interests when these interests conflict with those of other citizens. As a result, when interests do conflict, the town’s officers are not representative of the citizenry and may have both interests and preferences at odds with those of the majority. This elite is also likely, consciously or unconsciously, to prevent some decisions from reaching the policy arena at all.
Third, while these two problems arise because it is difficult to shift from the unitary to the adversary mode, even implementing adversary ideals poses a problem. As later chapters will indicate, some groups in Selby are more likely than others to attend the town meeting. The mechanism of one-citizen/one-vote, majority rule in an open assembly therefore consistently overrepresents certain interests. This pattern persists even when overt conflict erupts.

I will argue that any democracy that incorporates the elements of face-to-face assembly in its local institutions should address itself to these three problems. It must learn how to make the switch from unitary adversary procedures in its meetings, and it should learn to consider both common and conflicting interests in selecting its leaders. It should also design adversary procedures that protect interests as equally as possible.

Unfortunately, using Selby as I do in the following chapters to point out the problems of the unitary mode runs the risk of making it seem as if there are problems and no joy. When a French-Canadian farmer tells me, “Anybody in this town, we’re all friends. You can stop and talk to anyone,” I use his words only to suggest how little he realizes that in moments of conflict his “friends” do not necessarily represent his interests. In my concentration on the problems of unitary democracy, I do not stress the benefits in mutual warmth that he reaps from a community where social and political life is indeed very like a friendship. In the second study, of a worker-managed urban crisis center, I discuss the benefits of unitary democracy in more detail.

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The Common Interest

In these assemblies, the public weal, the call of . . . duty, [and] religion, were heard . . .

—EMERSON

The SELBY townspeople generally explain political conflict in their town as resulting not from conflicting interests but from conflicting estimates of who can best pursue the common good. Most of the townspeople think that taking the job of selectman is an unselfish gesture, made for the good of the town. The town officials, even in moments of bitter conflict, see themselves as responsible for the good of all, not just one group. A school director who worked hard to push through the controversial increase in the school budget, sending notes out with all the children to get their parents to come to the meeting and to outvote their opponents, nevertheless reflects afterward on the “terrible burden” the higher taxes would place on the very people he had tried so hard to defeat. Seeing no contradiction, he mixes within one sentence thanks that his own side had won and genuine sympathy for the side that lost: “It was very gratifying. The parents came out, and we . . . got an overwhelming vote, and they raised the tax, and it was really a burden on everyone.”

This way of looking at the town assumes that in most, or at least many, cases, there is a public weal, a common good. Sometimes the common good involves no more than finding a technical solution to a problem. In one town meeting that raised the question of how to garage the town equipment, for instance, several men in the assembly came up with sug-
Leslie, a black woman from the Shelter, told me that her first reaction to the same Community Day was:

Yuk! I felt really pissed off because I wanted to spend my Saturday with my kid watching cartoons and didn’t want to be there! I was hung over, and I was missing a day with my kid. I walk in and people are picking grapes and twisting their heads, being elephants. (laugh) I just thought, “What’s the matter with you? What’s wrong with you?”

Exercises designed to relax the participants thus succeeded only in further alienating those who felt already on foreign turf.

In spite of their training in group process, other ways in which the staff at Helpline tried to deal with or to avoid conflict also backfired in a way that further estranged those peripheral to the group. The informal negotiations that often went on before public meetings, the “groundwork” whereby staff members would “cultivate, go around, and discuss with people” before a meeting, sometimes convinced the relative outsiders that the meeting itself was essentially ineffective. In the first Community Day, the decision on how CCC would actually cut its staff was put off until after the meeting. As a consequence, Danny, one of the least active members of the Shelter, commented on the eventual compromise: “I know the way they did this was with some heavy wheeling and dealing!” He pointed out that matters not brought up explicitly at Community Day could be “slipped right through”.

They could do it! All this input was shit! I could be right there at the Community Day and the Shelter could be right there ... and it just wouldn’t be dealt with fairly, I don’t think.

Other members of the Shelter, which as a group was the least connected to the informal decision networks at Helpline, sometimes concluded that by the time they got to a meeting the decision “had already been sort of set up.”

Thus, in spite of being conscious of the problem of avoidance, in spite of training in group skills, and in spite of explicit techniques like breaking large meetings down into small groups, patterns of conflict avoidance continued to arise, not only on this Community Day but throughout the history of Helpline. Those patterns in turn were likely to work to the disadvantage of those not fully integrated into the organization’s informal networks.

Consensus and the Common Interest

Although having to reduce the budget by a third brought out many underlying conflicts at Helpline, the staff resolved even this issue by consensus. Eventually CCC brought the CPC a second budget, cut by a third; CPC representatives took that budget to the service groups; and although some people were not fully satisfied with all its provisions, every group finally agreed to the second budget. Conflict had surfaced in the face-to-face meeting, and people had taken measures to repress it, but the Community Day seems nevertheless to have helped the staff in both CCC and the other groups to understand one another’s feelings and points of view.

This was the way members of Helpline wanted to make their decisions. Despite their divisions, they believed that they could and should reach unity on issues of this kind. Their ideal was a unitary democracy; and requiring consensus gave that ideal institutional form. According to Helpline’s rules, no decision involving the organization as a whole could be taken without the agreement of every one of its members. Within most service groups the procedure was the same. The decision rule—which, following both Helpline and New Left usage, I will call consensus rather than unanimity—required a great deal of real unity in the organization but did not demand unanimous substantive agreement on every point. It required instead that dissenters’ objections be sought out, heard, and taken into consideration, and that at the end of the process they agree they could “live with” the decision of the greater part of the group.

Helpline had introduced the idea of stating that one could “live with”
a decision, creating what they called "second-order consensus," primarily as a time-saving device. At first, most members expected it to cover only minor disagreements and not to override the assumption that the members' interests were essentially the same. When I observed consensus in practice, however, some of the service groups applied the verbal formula of second-order consensus in a way that made it quite similar to conventional majority rule.

Indeed, consensus as practiced at Helpline—and I would guess consensus in every organization with a formal unanimity rule—differed from majority rule in degree rather than in kind. Every decision-making rule, including majority rule, assumes that the losers can in some way "live with" a decision. The losers always have the option of leaving the polity, if only, in the most extreme cases, by suicide. To stay in the polity is, therefore, to make a statement of the weakest sort that one can literally "live with" a decision. Beyond this, the successful use of majority rule also requires some large-scale agreement on the rules of the game.

The reverse is also true. In face-to-face organizations, the actual practice of formal majority rule often looks more like consensus. Fears of conflict and the desire for harmony generate informal pressures to achieve unanimity. To the extent that a group operates emotionally like a friendship, the serious discomfort of any member with a decision makes the others reluctant to press forward with that decision. Thus, no polity in fact ever institutes a purely unitary or purely adversary decision-rule.

The formal rule of consensus can best be understood as giving legal support to the drive for harmony that appears in most face-to-face groups. It accentuates, but does not change, the character of the unifying processes that arise even when the face-to-face organization has a formal majority rule. Its advantages and disadvantages are those of unitary democracy as a whole, which works better the more an organization approaches unity and worse the more it must handle insuperable conflicts.

Although spontaneous consensus arises frequently and unnoticed when there is no disagreement whatever on either ends or means, the consensus decisions I examine in this chapter all began with spontaneous disagreement, usually over ends, but occasionally over means. The consensual process was one of converting initial disagreement into agreement or at least into universal willingness to go along with the result. This process takes time, and it must be repeated whenever anyone changes his or her mind or a newcomer with different ideas joins the group. It can also result in unclear decisions. When interests are in conflict, requiring consensus will result either in deadlock or in social coercion.

When interests conflict, therefore, consensus usually benefits those whose interests lie with the status quo (with the exception that requiring consensus allows those who object to the status quo to keep bringing up their objections over and over; it thus prevents the majority from simply cutting off discussion). Consensus benefits those who can make things happen outside the consensual process and who therefore set the boundaries for the decision. It benefits those who have the inner strength to stand up to group pressure. It benefits those who have the resources to act in moments of inactivity. Finally, it benefits those who determine the definition and formulation of issues and the tone of discussion.

Yet in spite of the costs in time, repetition, occasional lack of clarity, and potential inequality, requiring consensus has significant advantages whenever interests can be reconciled. It directs members' attention to the common good. It intensifies the tendency of any face-to-face group to focus attention and communication on dissenters, trying to draw them into the group. It encourages people to listen carefully to both the emotional tone and the intellectual content of what the others say. It helps bring out information, forges commitment, discourages factions, and creates the morale-building sense that "we are all in this together."

In Helpline, as in Selby, the group's pressure for unanimity distracted individuals from their personal interests. In both cases, this was a mixed blessing. At Helpline, however, the members' interests were closer than they were in Selby. The benefits of assuming common interests were therefore greater and the costs less. At Helpline all were committed to a common task—giving therapeutic support to people in trouble, while criticizing the polity and economy from which that trouble derived. Individual members inevitably had different interpretations of what that task entailed, and each service group had also evolved its own distinctive collective interpretation, ranging from the Shelter's commitment to "good service" for the runaways, through the Van's fantasy of a street people's revolution, to CCC's vision of a humane reordering of relationships through counseling, communes, and personal growth. These differing interpretations of the common interest provided a major source of disunity in the organization, especially when they coincided with the distinctive interests of the various service groups. The differing private interests of individuals were a second source of conflict. But their common task of "critical" therapy and their common bourgeois capitalist enemy bound the members of Helpline together in a unity more firm than that of most geographical polities, and made the assumption that important interests were similar true more often in Helpline than in Selby.
This chapter documents the uneasy tension between the assumption of common interest and the forces that made for disunity at Helpline. It begins by looking closely at instances that illustrate the disadvantages and advantages of consensus.

The Disadvantages of Consensus

Achieving consensus requires time—time that most of Helpline's staff would have rather spent providing services than making decisions. Clarence was disgusted at the waste of time. Bruce muttered that it was a good thing Helpline did not have to compete on the market with an efficient enterprise. Everyone complained about the time. Blocked by the time it takes to get something done or by the specter of hours "wasted" on meetings, highly motivated workers can get frustrated, angry, and depressed.

Helpline tried to preserve the spirit and the form of consensus even in emergencies, but discussion was inevitably curtailed. People who wanted their proposals to pass without amendment were therefore tempted to wait until the last moment to bring them up. The two most obvious instances of manipulation at Helpline used the pressure of time in that way, both causing considerable bitterness.

A second problem of consensus is repetition. Decisions must be made and remade. Because Helpline's unanimity rule required the consent of each member, it opened all policies to review whenever one or two people changed their minds or a new member joined the staff. Old members then felt "really frustrated because I hear the same thingy brought up over and over again."

In the Shelter, for instance, new members challenged an old policy against contact with a local street gang, the Scorpions. One of the new members explained:

People who hadn't been around long—and I was one of them—felt that the Scorpions were telling us they'd changed, they weren't the Scorpions anymore, and that their ways of crime and violence sort of thing, they weren't into that anymore, that they were peaceful people.

And from our experience that was the case. We heard histories of them invading the Shelter, using physical force, and causing all kinds of trouble. But that was from way back, considerably before we got there. And there just wasn't any evidence of it.

After a long discussion initiated by the newcomers, the Shelter decided to keep its old anti-Scorpion policy. This formally consensual decision masked an actual split of about eight to four. But some of the four dissenters found it difficult to implement a policy in which they did not believe. Their leniency undermined the policy in practice and several weeks later forced the Shelter to thrash the problem out again. At this point, feeling at the Shelter shifted, running about nine to three in favor of allowing contact with the Scorpions. This new policy of allowing contact was a disaster. The Scorpions terrorized the kids in the Shelter. The newcomers then asked for a return to the old policy, and the Shelter reinstated it, this time with unanimous, heartfelt consensus.

The final consensus on the Scorpions convinced at least one of the newcomers of the importance of genuine unanimity:

There has to be a really complete understanding among people, a common understanding. So that becomes one of the goals of the meeting—and not just the meeting—to get that common understanding.

The final consensus drew some newcomers closer to the Shelter, but the incident also pushed some older members farther away. Two of the three counselors who had consistently opposed any change in the Scorpion policy left the Shelter only two months later. Neither gave this event as a reason for leaving, but one decided to quit on the weekend of the pro-Scorpion decision, and the other came to the conclusion that "my opinions are a lot different than a lot of people's." The third, remaining at Helpline, told me ruefully about meetings at the Shelter:

Decisions are made, decisions are revised, four months later the same type of decision—and I find myself not participating in those. Now I'm not ready to give that energy; I don't have it.

Consensual decision making also generates imprecision. In order to reach unanimous agreement, groups formulate their collective decision so as to blur potential disagreements. Rotating responsibility for taking minutes, as Helpline did, exacerbated this tendency. Kaye pointed out that decisions on general policy were left fuzzy more often than were decisions to take action, which had an immediately visible effect:

We're clearly better at making decisions on financial matters. . . . do we apply for a grant or don't we? You can't just muddle along, so we make those decisions! A lot of decisions about the content of what we're doing get lost.

But even when a decision was to be implemented immediately, members grappled at verbal formulas that meant different things to differ-
ent people. Helpline's decision on the way it would cut its budget and staff by a third is a perfect example of the misleading use of a verbal formula. Everyone expected that the vital decision of what, and whom, to cut would come before the entire staff in a Community Day. However, before the Community Day, the CPC had to set the ground rules. The choice was either to give each service group autonomous control over the amount it cut its staff, with the assembly serving only to inform everyone of each group's plan, or instead to allow the assembly to pressure the service groups to reduce further. Two meetings of the CPC and a separate committee addressed this problem, eventually reaching a consensus that the Community Day would be one of "information sharing." But several days later, at the Community Day itself, two groups put strong pressure on CCC to cut more drastically, and their severe criticism sent a couple of CCC's members home in tears.

Later Ken, CCC's representative to the CPC, told me that he was absolutely certain that the CPC had decided not to allow this kind of criticism:

I think, I know—myself, I couldn't have done anything more to make it clear. I'm satisfied that I said things as clearly as I can say them. I don't know what else I could do... Both Nate and I made that position clear. I was even making it so clear that people were a little pissed about it in the agenda committee because they were saying, "We already understand that, we understand that!" I said that I really wanted to make sure that that was really clear. And it was!

However, Kaye, who had a strong interest in evaluating each service group, was equally certain that the CPC had made the opposite decision;

I never agreed to [a ban on criticism]. Clearly it wasn't done. Not in my mind, I know very clearly there wasn't [such a decision].

The CPC's formula of "information sharing" had served as a vehicle for false consensus. Everyone at the final meeting of the CPC had been able to agree that "information should be "shared." Some of the members at that meeting, however, including Ken and Nate, genuinely believed that this formula banned criticism; others, including Kaye, genuinely believed that the information shared would include criticism. None of the people involved had, to my knowledge, consciously or manipulatively left the decision unclear.¹

Majoritarian bodies do not all make clear decisions either. Arranging coalitions and attracting undecided votes into those coalitions is itself a consensual process that encourages ambiguity. In an adversary proceeding, however, opposing coalitions also have an interest in pointing out such ambiguities and in forcing their opponents to clarify them. Taking a vote therefore often involves a clear-cut choice between a number of relatively distinct alternatives. As one of Helpline's staff put it:

I think majority vote would make it more of a decision-making policy. Because of consensus, people talk about things, something will become a policy, and even the people in the room won't know about it. Because it's just sort of talked about. It's sort of like if everybody agrees, this is what we're going to do. There's always this continual argument—"This is the policy," "No, this is the policy!"—and nobody knows what it is!

Lack of clarity generally bedevils "less structured" alternatives to traditional forms of decision making.² A conscientious chairperson, writing decisions down, having "a central file of minutes for every meeting and [having] people who take those minutes really put them in the file—so that you can look back and say what was our decision October 2?" can help fight fuzzy decisions. But because spelling out disagreements often leads to trouble, even writing down a specific phrase, like "information sharing," will not prevent a group searching for consensus from unconsciously avoiding clarity.

If a group cannot reach even an ambiguous consensus, a consensus rule will produce either deadlock or social coercion. Deadlock either preserves the status quo or helps those willing and able to act independently. At Helpline, the Van group argued for months over whether and how to paint the Van vehicle. Bernie wanted it painted in psychedelic colors as a hippie emergency van; Dave and one of the volunteers wanted it a solid color with the simple identifying letters, "Helpline, Inc., Emergency Van." Alex wanted to leave it unpainted, incognito. They all advanced good reasons, but none convinced the others. As one Van member described it:

Alex was really against it. And Dave really felt it should be on. This had come up for discussion a few times, and each time it had just come to a standstill. Meanwhile it was unpainted. So in effect, it was Alex's decision that was being implemented.

And Dave finally challenged that by taking the Van out to a garage and painting it.

[Is that what you meant by a power play?] Yeah. Like who would actually do something to change the status quo. So that provoked a lot of hot feelings for a couple of weeks, but the Van remains painted to this day!

Problems of deadlock, repeating decisions, "wasted" time, and lack of clarity are all, in one sense, problems of efficiency. Such costs of a consensus rule must therefore be balanced against the gains in efficiency from ensuring coordination, individual commitment, and a more comprehen-
sive, informed decision. Insofar as consensus helps to produce a more humane, more loving, less coercive environment, this too must be taken into account. But consensus can also have negative effects on the quality of life, endangering as well as protecting the liberty of minorities.

In a consensual system, the minority is, in a sense, eliminated. After it agrees to go along, it leaves no trace. Its objections go unrecorded. Indeed, if those in the minority are intimidated, cannot give their reasons convincingly, or do not care enough to make a scene, they may never voice their objections. Therefore, because the costs in time and in emotional energy are often not worth the benefits of making one’s disagreement public, the final and major weakness of the consensual system is “people being bullied into consensus” and “just kind of going along with it.” One rather shy young woman told me that at meetings:

I'll just say “yes.” And I have felt myself very intimidated to say “no” at times when I felt everyone else would say “yes.” For example, a couple of little things have come up where I really honestly did have questions about things, but I didn't say anything until later because everyone seemed to say, “Oh yeah, let's do that.”

Nate, who loves to shock, put it dramatically:

What consensus means at Helpline is that if you disagree with something, with what a majority of people are saying, when you don't want to get out on a branch by yourself or with a small group of people, you keep your mouth shut!

In the second Community Day that I attended, for instance, the group was choosing the next year’s coordinator. Twenty-five of the forty-one paid staff attended that meeting; eighteen spoke. The chair commented, “Some people haven’t talked, specifically all the people around you, Bruce—Leslie, Pamela, Steve.” This got the three named people to say part of what they had on their minds, but seven others at the meeting never spoke a word. Pamela therefore asked for a straw vote before a motion for consensus was made, “just to know what people prefer.” “I don’t see a vote as apart from consensus,” she insisted. “I just thought of it as a way of hearing from other people without talking to everybody.” The straw vote made her point, revealing that nine people, or 31 percent at the meeting, were against the emerging “consensus.”

I would not have guessed from the discussion that had preceded the vote that the minority was anywhere near that large. Members of the minority were as likely to have spoken as were members of the majority, but they did not speak as often or voice their opposition strongly enough to make me aware of their numbers. Pamela had wanted a vote precisely because she felt her constituency to be less eloquent. She no doubt also wanted to put on record in some way that the emerging “consensus” was not at all unanimous since, she told me later, she had objected “from the start” to what she perceived as a subtle railroading of opinion.

For some people, registering their contrary opinion as “loyal opposition” is crucial to their integrity. The Van’s lack of unity made its members particularly aware of this point. One of them threw the DPW committee into an uproar by insisting, “Either do it by majority rule, in which case you win, or we do it by consensus, in which case nothing happens!” And it just blew people’s minds!” Eddie, also on the Van, warned that instead of “struggling” with the issues people would often say, “Well, let’s find a cool place that we both can agree on—which is compromising both positions. ‘Cause they don’t want to hurt each others’ feelings.”

Neither of these Van members objected to struggling through to a true consensus, but both realized that pressures for compromise often produce weak decisions that satisfy no one. They also saw those pressures as threats to individual integrity. The norms of honest expression, emotional risk in a supportive environment, and soliciting dissent that are part of group training protected Helpline’s members to some extent against this kind of subtle coercion. So did the members’ strong commitments to political and social ideals. But even at Helpline, the counterforces were not always strong enough to help individuals resist the group.

The Advantages of Consensus

Helpline needed unity. In the draining work of counseling, Helpline staff members relied on one another for constant support. The rule of consensus gave tangible expression to this emotional need for unity. In particular, it helped prevent the splintering of the organization into factions. Helpline’s staff disapproved of factions even more strongly than the townspeople of Selby. One of the people in Administrative Backup who had been at Helpline the longest spelled out this political philosophy with fervor:

Voting buys into blocs, setting up groups against one another, majority and minority, who wins and who loses—factions, backroom activities designed for the purpose of getting up enough votes for whatever reason. Consensual decision-making is much more oriented to the idea that we are all in this together!
Another argued that a consensual rule eliminated “political maneuvering to get your vote, which I know would happen! We have enough strong aggressive people who want to have their way, that they would lobby for whatever they wanted and try to get votes.” People did, of course, work behind the scenes to persuade others of their point of view. There were also ideological factions of a sort, centering on the different perspectives of the service groups. Service groups were likely to caucus and plan their strategies before important meetings the way factions do in a Vermont town. But just as the drive for unanimity in Selby discouraged partisan politics, so the formal rule of consensus at Helpline encouraged individual members to reach out from their service groups and try to identify with the whole. When members found themselves speaking as “us” against “them,” they often regretted it and tried to find contexts in which they could surmount those feelings. Without the formal rule of consensus, they believed, “there would be far more game playing than exists.”

Because it was frequently possible to uncover a truly common interest, the consensus rule had the further practical advantage of increasing commitment. The difficult, decentralized, unregulated work of Helpline demanded that each member be self-motivated. And in Helpline’s consensual system, every worker had at least formally agreed that the task at hand ought to be done. Kaye, easily irritated by slackness, praised consensus for generating commitment: “You have people doing things that they understand they should do, and have agreed to do. It’s an internalized sort of discipline.”

Arriving at consensus can also elicit more information than the process of majority rule. If, in order to make a decision satisfy everyone, everyone is encouraged to speak, the final decision will incorporate a more thorough assessment of each member’s needs. The pressure for unanimity can also throttle dissent and suppress information. But because the Helpline staff’s counseling training encouraged each individual to stand up to the group and because they had developed some skill in keeping in touch with their own feelings, the consensus rule at Helpline probably produced more information than it suppressed.

Ronnie in Administrative Backup, for example, once put together a grant proposal that, if it came through, would have brought Helpline $220,000 and made possible some badly needed evaluative research. The principal investigator, a young professor who had helped design the study, was to receive a full-time salary of $20,000. This was four times more than other staff members without dependents made at Helpline and clearly violated the organization’s egalitarian guidelines. Ronnie brought the proposal to CPC for approval only two weeks before it was due in Washington.

Helpline’s financial condition was so desperate that a few months later, every service group would have to cut its staff by a third. Everyone in the CPC meeting knew how much they needed the money. But this was the first time the $20,000 salary had been mentioned, and everyone was upset Eben, from the Farm, refused to go along: “I don’t feel comfortable with that. I will not be able to be part of a consensus that says go ahead with it.” Ronnie, getting more agitated by the minute, pointed out shrilly that there were only two people on the Farm. Tom, as coordinator, rejoined, “We’ve said we work on consensual decision-making models, and if this were a minor matter, it’d be different. But one group will not go along.” In the course of a heated discussion, a few others at the meeting supported Eben, and the group reached a consensus that, in spite of the time pressures, a committee would meet with the professor to work out some solution within the week, in time to send the question back to the service groups for final approval. The committee produced a compromise whereby the professor would get the salary, but would have an office at his university rather than at Helpline, would be paid by his university, would be considered a consultant and not a staff member, and would not participate in Helpline decisions. After the special committee presented its compromise to the CPC, the representatives took it back to the groups, who approved it. Ronnie sent in the grant proposal one day before the deadline. At the same time, the CPC resolved formally that future grant applications involving exceptions to Helpline regulations should be brought to CPC well ahead of time.

The consensus rule had forced a reformulation that, it turned out, met major needs within the organization. In the interviews, seventeen of the forty-one staff members volunteered that they would have been very disturbed if the professor had joined the Helpline staff with a $20,000 salary. Several had had a hard time even accepting the final compromise, and three still contended that the compromise violated Helpline’s principle of equality.

The compromise was not costless. From the moment the decision was brought to the CPC to the day the proposal went into the mailbox, nine days had passed. Counting one and a half hours in the first CPC meeting, fifteen minutes in the second, four more people reading the proposal, an hour in the special committee with the researcher, and an average of fifteen minutes in each service group, achieving consensus had required more than forty-two person-hours—a week’s work. Had the CPC made decisions by majority vote, it would probably have settled the matter
in a quarter as much time by approving the $20,000 salary with no changes. But by spending another thirty hours on the decision, Helpline had produced a better informed decision and had made it acceptable to a significant minority who might otherwise have disowned it.

Any organization that values its internal unity, whether governed by consensus, majority rule, or dictatorship, would be likely to discover some solution like Helpline's final compromise on the professor's salary. While Ronnie's not bringing the matter up until quite late increased the chances that his proposal would pass unamended, the formal rule of consensus redressed the balance, making it more likely that other opinions would be taken into account, even under the pressure of time.

Of all the advantages of consensus, the one that made the most difference to the staff members was the kind of interaction it encouraged. Because the members expected discussions to produce eventual agreement, those discussions became less unsettling. Assuming a common interest made them colleagues in a joint search rather than opponents in a competitive struggle. The need to include everyone promoted caring and listening.

Both the aggressive and the shy appreciated this effect. One self-confident woman told me:

I have a tendency to think that there is a right way to do things and a wrong way to do things, and the consensus model really breaks that down for me. By sitting through a three-hour meeting, by the time I get out of it I feel that the other person did have something to say, even if I felt that my way was the right way.

Two others, both by disposition rather quiet, said, "It's very hard sometimes to say things; I tend to feel shy. . . . Consensus is helpful because I feel like my opinion is listened to," and "I like consensual things because everyone can be heard."

The consensual goal at Helpline promoted strategies like breaking down the Community Days into small groups, where people were more likely to listen to another. Moreover, not being able to override potential opposition with numbers made it necessary to find out what that opposition really wanted:

"[With consensus] we work a little harder, compromises are worked out to a greater length, individual feelings have to be taken care of more, and those are important things to make this operation run the way it does."

"In consensus, there is a greater sensitivity to people's feelings per se—that is, You're feeling bad or you're upset, and I'm sorry, what's upsetting you?"

"If you couldn't state every single person's position in the room, as well and with as much feeling as your own, then you shouldn't be making consensual decisions!"

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Functional Sources of Consensus

The rule of consensus encouraged but could not guarantee unity at Helpline. The service groups that achieved genuine consensus on most issues were those whose work organization produced strong ties of friendship among the members and those that needed unity to function effectively. The service groups that did not nourish strong friendships or need informal cohesion to do their job frequently resorted to a "second order consensus" that was hard to distinguish from majority rule.

Table 4 shows the relationship between friendship patterns and consensual decision making. The groups with the largest number of interlocking friendships were also those most likely to achieve a form of consensus that did not paper over an underlying divided vote.

The relationship between functional need and consensus is harder to document but equally strong. Administrative Backup was the least closely knit group in Helpline. Unlike the other groups, it did not interview and hire most of its members. The staff as a whole selected the coordinator and treasurer, and each service group selected one of its members to work in the funding office. The other members of Administrative Backup

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**Table 4**

Unity in the Service Groups

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*The number of cases used to calculate each percentage is shown in parentheses.*
worked in separate offices on unrelated tasks. Ronnie jokingly put a sign on his door, "Ronnie Ratler: Research Empire"; Leon described his legal skills as giving him "a separate fief."

This lack of functional unity helps explain why Administrative Backup put less effort into achieving genuine unanimity than did the other service groups. When Deborah, the office manager, gave notice and recommended the abolition of her job, the only other woman in Administrative Backup and one of the five men strongly supported her in her stand, while two of the men opposed her. One of those most strongly opposed described the process:

I said that "I can't give my approval to it." I made a very clear strong statement on it. I guess I was making sure that people weren't thinking it was a consensus. 'Cause it certainly wasn't.

Another opponent explained what had happened in terms that would have applied well if Administrative Backup had had a formal majority rule:

If there is a clear majority, that usually prevails; and if there is a pretty evenly divided split, then it's usually stopped, and the status quo prevails.

I think there's a basic understanding that if you're working with a group of this many people you're not going to get your way all the time. So then you have to decide whether you can live with that, with the decision, or whether you really can't. [If you can't?] Then you have to disown that particular decision of the organization as something that you agree with and decide whether there's enough that you want to own to remain a part of it.

Although this decision had been far from unanimous, not one of the group indicated any "serious reservations" about the process used to reach it. In fact, one of those defeated considered this basically majoritarian process "just fine," although he was later to indicate on the questionnaire that consensus was "very crucial" to making Helpline what he wanted it to be.

The Emergency Van was the next least unified group. The Van's crew worked staggered shifts, in which a paid staff member was usually paired with a volunteer. This arrangement allowed for less interaction between paid staff members than in any other service group. As a result, the Van rarely reached genuine consensus about decisions. Indeed, it eventually made a unanimous decision to make future decisions by a two-thirds majority. That two-thirds majority would only be able to make decisions when the minority had had ample time to make its case: "Like what happens at the Van is that there is a vote taken and those opposed to it are given a couple of weeks to speak to other people and maybe to work it out." This procedure preserved the "listening" quality of consensus but allowed a group with little mutual commitment to function.

The Shelter was the most cohesive service group in Helpline. It occupied a building six or seven blocks from Helpline's main building. This isolation probably encouraged internal cohesion. More important, however, was the nature of its work. The Shelter provided lodging and counseling for runaways and increasingly also for poor kids between their own and a foster home, who came to the Shelter in moments of legal and emotional crisis. With thirteen distraught adolescents aged eleven to seventeen living together under one roof, new crises arose daily. Dealing with any one of these crises took all the efforts of those on duty and sometimes the combined efforts of the entire staff. The atmosphere at the Shelter often resembled that of a besieged outpost. Communications were brief and sometimes unspoken, with each staff member playing an understood role. Each gave a great deal when needed and understood when others had been pushed too far. In periods between bombardments, the warriors sat around in twos and threes, cracked jokes, shared comradely put-downs, and congratulated one another on having made it through:

You get high off the spirit of the crunches. I know these people; I know they are really going to be as crushed as I am, and they are really competent people. It's okay to be in a crunch with them.

After the crisis that finally reaffirmed the anti-Scorpion rule, one of the Shelter staff told me:

I think that one of the real high points in my life was that. . . . I felt really close to the other people—a real part of the community. In that week I was totally involved, every part of my being was involved. All of my emotions, the way I felt toward the kids, all of my inspirations—it was just really, really beautiful!

The work at the Shelter—interdependent, communal, ridden with crises, yet finite and well boundaried, allowing at times the sense of a task completed—thus strengthened ties between individuals, developed their attachment to the Shelter as a whole, and made it easier for them to adopt as their own the good of others and of the whole.

Unanimity at the Shelter was also a functional necessity. After the Scorpion crisis, for instance, a newcomer concluded:

If everyone isn't really agreed on some policy, it usually doesn't work. Because there's a lot of feeling required behind any of the things that you tell the kids. And the kids know whether it's there or not. They know whether you believe what you're saying. And a lot of times they'll really push you to the limits of justifying something or of explaining the sense of something.
And if it's just some policy that someone else has made—and sometimes
I've been in that situation, where it was somebody else's policy and I didn't
really agree with it and had real active doubts about it—if just doesn't work.
You just can't get it across to a kid.

Knowing this, the Shelter worked harder to achieve consensus than
did, say, Administrative Backup or the Van. The internal practice of
consensus in the Shelter carried over to decisions they made regarding the
organization as a whole. A Shelter member, who had been a delegate to the
Helpline DPW committee, explained it this way:

The Shelter can work by consensus because we share a tremendously
powerful central experience, which is dealing with the kids every day. When
I work at Bartlett Street [where the rest of Helpline is located], we all speak
as the Shelter,” whereas other groups say, “Well, it [the implicit vote] was
two-four-three.” We're very fortunate that way.

Just as the high morale at the Shelter made its staff more likely to adopt
the good of the whole as their own, so the Shelter's very ability to achieve
consensus helped maintain morale under difficult conditions. Even before
I began my interviews, one Shelter member said to me, laughing but full
of pride, “Well, obviously the Shelter is the best group!” In the inter-
views, two others said, quite simply, “I love the Shelter,” and “My feeling
for the Shelter is love.” A fourth Shelter member at the end of our inter-
view turned to me with genuine emotion and blurted, "We're wonderful,
God bless us!"

Identity of Interests

The essential question in assessing the consensus rule both in the service
groups and in Helpline as a whole is, I believe, to what extent the staff
had similar interests. Individual interests were never identical either
in the service groups or in the organization as a whole. Yet many minor
decisions were made by consensus on the basis of underlying common
interests. Even in major crises that potentially could split the organization
into two conflicting camps, it frequently seemed possible to discern
a common interest. All the advantages of consensus in this process ap-
ppeared in Helpline’s decision not to take a contract from the Air Force.

The issue arose when the Switchboard decided to take a $15,000
contract to work with some young Air Force recruits who had asked for
help improving the hotline and drug counseling service they had set up
at their base. Having reported their decision to the CPC almost as a
matter of course, the Switchboard staff was surprised to find other
members of the CPC questioning their judgment and sending the issue of
“helping the military” back to all the service groups for discussion.
Members of the Switchboard had made personal commitments to the
young Air Force men, whom they had come to know and like. In spite
of a position paper by some staff members opposing the contract and
a week’s discussion in the hallways, the members of Switchboard went
into the second, decisive CPC meeting still believing that objections to
the contract were no more than “Pavlovian radicalism.”

Four of the seven Switchboard staffers attended the meeting. They
argued that a hotline at the Air Force base already existed, that the
volunteers who staffed it had no experience in counseling, that the
adolescents in the Air Force who needed the counseling were suffering,
and that they and their wives would be afraid to go to an “alternative”
service off the base. They also argued that a hotline was not autom-
atically a prop to the military and that taking money from the Defense
Department was no worse than taking it from other conservative,
capitalist departments of the government, as long as it had no strings.

The opponents of the project argued that despite the Air Force’s
assurances there was no way for Helpline, with its meager resources, to
protect confidentiality or to determine how information collected on the
hotline would be used. Moreover, if the program were a success, it would
reduce discontent in the Air Force generally and at that base in particular.
The base was one of the three North American support bases for the
Vietnam-Cambodian bombing. When one of the Switchboard members
asked where anyone could draw the line between the proposed program
at the Air Force base and Helpline’s other hotline programs that also
took money from and helped support the government, Tom, who opposed
the project, answered simply, “We draw the line at the purveyors of
death and destruction.”

The debate was often emotional, “even more emotional,” one participant
reported, “than the [professor’s salary] thing!” Frank, on the Switchboard,
spoke movingly of his own experience in the Army and begged the
others to “talk about people, and people possibly in pain—that’s what
we ought to relate to!” Tanya, a member of Switchboard with deep
motherly feelings, had come to feel responsible for the young men who
were asking for counseling training. At one point in the debate, she
blurted out that if Helpline would not help them she “would like to
request that one of you tell them because I can’t!” Her plea made Ken,
violely in opposition, retort, “I'd be very happy to! I like to tell pigs
where to get off!” Ken’s words brought a deep flush to Tanya’s face and cries from the others: “Ken, that’s an outrageous statement!” and “They’re people, Ken!”

Yet in spite of these extremes of anger and conviction, the participants did not become wholly partisan. In the heat of the debate, Tanya, sympathetic to the young Air Force men, turned to Ken, who considered them “pigs,” and said quietly and, I believe, sincerely, “I want to learn from you.” Kaye, who also had come in committed to the project, chaired the meeting with concern for both sides and ended by saying, “I love being chairperson at meetings like this.” Even during the meeting, one of the participants commented, “This is one of the few good issues we’ve had in a long time. I’m interested and learning.”

In the course of the discussion, the two points against the Air Force that began to tell more and more were Helpline’s inability to guarantee absolute confidentiality to whomever used the hotline and the intimate connection of this particular base with the war in Vietnam. The Switchboard members were most moved by the argument about confidentiality, for the others, both points seemed equally troublesome. At the end of the meeting, a consensus was reached not to take the contract.

Afterward, all the major participants on both sides felt it had been a good meeting. The discussion had changed many people’s minds. Even the four members of the Switchboard, who had come into the meeting with strong feelings and had “lost,” told me independently that they were pleased with how the meeting had gone. Tanya had been responsible for bringing the young enlisted men to Helpline in the first place and had been close to tears several times in the meeting, but when I asked what she thought about the decision, she answered:

I liked that. And I was the one who brought that in. That felt really fine to me. I liked the debate we got into in the CPC meeting.

See, a lot of things can come out of these issues, and if they’re allowed to come out, I think it’s really fine.

I mean, the Air Force Base I was invested in! Obviously, I wanted to do it! And it didn’t work out, and I understand people’s reasons why. And that was fine. I mean, I was negotiate on that. I accepted what the end result was. I liked the process.

Even Frank, who had made the most emotional plea for keeping the contract, said afterward, “I didn’t feel that I had been manipulated or overwhelmed or bludgeoned into a situation. It was a very tough issue, one that I even had questions about myself.” Kaye told me that the “Air Force Base decision is the first time that something has been sensibly and clearly and cogently refused and rejected that made sense—to me.”

Switchboard’s fourth member at the meeting, Amy, actually gave this decision as an example of a “nice thing” about consensus. For her, the meeting had been “exciting and challenging,” for it had asked her “to think about things on a lot of different levels, about why you choose to do things and what your reasons are for doing them”:

It was stimulating to think about things on that sort of philosophical basis, and not just think, “Well, they would be giving us x amount of money and we should do it for practical reasons.”

The interests of all the staff members in this decision may not have been entirely identical. The people on Switchboard had closer relationships with the young men who had come to them for help; others in Helpline had a greater stake in the antiwar movement. The decision, which required giving up a $15,000 contract in a period of financial stringency, eventually led to cutting three staff positions, and those members whose positions were later cut presumably had a greater interest than others in taking the contract. Finally, the working-class members of the organization might have benefited, both psychologically and in terms of the future direction of the group, from a contract that would have served primarily working-class clients.

Yet the three members whose jobs were later cut, the three working-class members, and even those involved with the young Air Force men never seemed to weigh their material, class, or personal interests as heavily as they did their interest in reaching the “right” decision for the organization. For various reasons, including the group’s tacit assumption that only arguments addressed to the common good were legitimate, these members may not have realized that their individual interests were being sacrificed, or they may have underestimated the importance of these interests. But even with perfect information they might have judged such self-regarding interests less important to them than their interest in belonging to an organization that acted rightly. In this case all forty-one staff members would have a common interest, even in a conflict-ridden decision like that over the Air Force contract.

As an organization becomes larger and less self-selected, its members will be less likely to have identical views about what is “right.” Even in Helpline, some thought that its size and the “pretty broad spectrum of what our activities are and what our goals are” had brought the organization to the limits of consensus:

If we were all Shelter workers or we were all Switchboard workers, consensus would be easier because our goals would be closer and more aligned. The more disparity you get among the groups that are working together and
trying to make some kind of consensus, the harder it is. I think that it's pushing it, having basically four different groups.

Yet because the members needed each other's support, because the work required a high degree of individual commitment, and because a unanimity rule in these circumstances encouraged the staff to listen more carefully to one another, Helpline continued to keep consensus as its formal decision rule. Making decisions this way corresponded to a model each member held of how human beings ought to act toward one another. The decision rule of consensus, which required considerable unity to begin with, helped them behave like friends.

Chapter 15

Political Inequality: Helpline

The fact that Helpline could operate for five years under a unanimity rule—albeit one modified to take account of being able to "live with" a decision—provides the most impressive evidence of the existence of a strong common interest.

If only a few members had had inside information on decisions or if only a few had participated actively in them, this evidence for a common interest would be suspect. In Selby, for instance, citizens at town meeting often voted unanimously for a selectman. Yet because pre-election activity in which only a few participated generally resulted in all but one candidate withdrawing from the race, the resulting unanimity does not constitute convincing evidence for a strong common interest. At Helpline, even a discussion as long and thorough as the discussion of the Air Force contract did not raise all the points of potential conflict. But the evidence that everyone understood and had personally confronted most of the issues is stronger here than in Selby. Helpline's being able to come to a consensual decision on a question as potentially troublesome as the Air Force contract suggests that its members did have strong common interests. In regard to the protection of interests, therefore, equality of power would not be so important at Helpline as in Selby.

To the extent that real conflicts in Helpline emerged, however, those with greater power unquestionably had an advantage over the others. By common agreement, power at Helpline was unequally distributed. At the end of the interview, I asked the forty staff members I spoke with to place the names of all the staff members in one of a series of concentric circles around a central point depicting "the center of power at Helpline."
outcomes will protect individual interests more equally than face-to-face assemblies and consensus.

Critics of modern democracy, like the participatory collectives themselves, must recognize both the philosophical tension between adversary and unitary democracy and the practical need to employ different procedures when interests conflict rather than converge. Hannah Arendt, for example, argues that only with a council system of small face-to-face assemblies can a democracy achieve the values that come with the “direct participation of every citizen in the public affairs of the country.” But Arendt’s vision is limited by naiveté about how these small face-to-face assemblies would actually work. Her goal is “political freedom”—a citizen’s ability to speak and act publicly, to be a “participator in govern-ment.” She detests unanimity and the “role of a unanimously held ‘public opinion,’” for she believes that “no formation of opinion is even possible where all opinions have become the same.” Arendt thus makes the small face-to-face assembly the ultimate defense against the tyranny of a unanimous public opinion. However, while decentralization to small councils might well produce the local differences and consequent national debate that she predicts, the face-to-face assemblies themselves would generate strong pressures toward unanimity, as did Selby, Helpline, and probably even the Greek polis to which she harks back.

Local assemblies will always tend to apply unitary procedures even when interests conflict. But if they could learn to guard against this tendency and to shift from unitary to adversary procedures and back again, depending on the goals they wish to pursue and the extent to which their members actually have interests in common, they would serve their members’ interests better and might, in passing, help create a citizenry more able to judge the democratic performance of the nation-state. While no one will ever be able to determine common interests with perfect accuracy (since no one can ever know with certainty his or her own real interests, let alone the interests of others), asking the right question, and trying to determine those interests, makes one more likely to approximate that result. The members of small neighborhood and workplace democracies would be well placed to train themselves to recognize their self-regarding, public-regarding, and ideal-regarding interests, and they might learn how to pursue their interests against the interests of others without losing the capacity to shift back into the unitary mode whenever this again became possible.

Lessons for the Nation-State

I can summarize my argument regarding the nation-state in a syllogism. Its first premise, advanced in the last chapter, is that the larger the polity, the more likely it is that some individuals will have conflicting interests. Its second premise, advanced throughout the book, is that the more individual interests come in conflict, the more a democracy encompassing those interests must employ adversary procedures. These two premises demand the conclusion that democracies as large as the modern nation-state be primarily adversary democracies.

This is a bitter conclusion. It means rejecting the vision of national unitary democracy where interests coincide naturally, through unselfishness, or through the power of an idea. The unitary vision appeals to humanity’s most exalted sentiments—the deep joy of spontaneous communion, unselfishness, and commitment to a larger good. When a powerful ideal or moment of transcendence unites millions of people, the result is even more inspiring than in a small community. Yet on this scale, the unitary goal is also more dangerous, because with increasing size the chances of real conflict increase, and so, consequently, do the chances that an appeal to unity will obscure conflict to the benefit of those who launch the appeal.

Appeals to unity on a national scale take many forms. One involves the institutionalization of communal charisma: each citizen inspires every other citizen, and all acquire, to a greater or lesser degree, that touch of the gods that makes human beings able to call forth in others the spirit of sacrifice and nobility. The goal is to weave into everyday life those “moments of madness” in which each individual knows that he or she is a necessary part of the larger whole. The creation of such a national emotional communion is an integral part of most modern Marxian visions, partly because it helps to de-emphasize self-interested behavior when one does not want to rely fully on material incentives in production. Indeed, the communal energy kindled through mass mutual inspiration can, in the short run, produce extraordinary achievements. It can also enoble each citizen’s life. But as time goes on, the momentary exhilaration usually fades, to be replaced by social or institutional coercion on a national scale. The benefits diminish, while the costs become intolerable. Like war itself, efforts to create a unitary “moral equivalent of war” lose their glamor after a year or two.

A second approach to national unitary democracy is purely definitional. The theory of democracy in Leninist nations depends on the idea that
abolishing class-based society by definition abolishes all important conflicts of interest. With the abolition of classes, different groups will begin to work together in “deep harmony,” and political decisions can be founded on the citizen’s “undisputed conscious, sincere preference for the public interests, the state’s interests and the interests of the group, as opposed to private interests.” With only one class in the state, there will be no need for institutionalized conflict in the form of political parties and independent unions. So, for example, at the Tenth Party Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, Trotsky argued against the right of trade unions to strike on the grounds that, because the Soviet Union was a workers’ state, the unions as workers’ organizations had no reason to strike.

A third, conservative, approach to a national unitary ideal holds that wise statesmen must identify the common good in the realm of right and wrong, not of individual preferences, and either inspire the citizenry to follow that good or have the constitutional power to pursue it in spite of popular opposition. In this modified unitary democracy, the answer to “Who will guard the guardians?” comes from the constitutional process. The institutions that select an elite like the Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court and protect it from the short-run influence of the public are ultimately subject to the popular will. The constitutional aim is, in theory, only to delay popular retaliation long enough for citizens to consider their long-run as well as short-run interests. This approach usually assumes that citizens’ interests are similar in the important issues that come before the polity. But when there are consistent conflicts of interest either among citizens or between the elite and the public, this procedure is difficult to reconcile with the principle of equal protection.

Still another approach to national unitary democracy is the Japanese. This approach recognizes conflicts of interest, but assumes that the conflicting groups all contribute to the common good in a relatively stable, recognizable way. In Japan, political elites allocate government benefits among interest groups by giving great weight to a group’s traditional share, but expanding or contracting this share informally, depending on the group’s political power and on a rough impression of its contribution to the general welfare. Politicians, businessmen, and citizens all avoid “zero-sum” conceptions of the polity in which whatever one group receives must be taken from another, emphasizing instead formulas in which all share in the good or bad fortunes of the whole. Japan thus differs sharply from European consociational democracies, where zero-sum calculations predominate and allocations depend in theory on sheer numerical proportionality. Japan and countries like it are, in this sense, “pre-adversary.”

A fifth approach to the unitary ideal, consistent with each of the above, assumes that the nation’s major problems are susceptible of technically correct solutions, so that the polity can be concerned with the “administration of things, not the government of men.” While Mao, Marx, and Engels use the language of “correct solutions,” progressives in American national politics and “good government” organizations on the state and local level make the same assumption, expecting elected officials to act only as facilitators, technocrats, and efficient managers of the business of government.

Each of these five approaches to unitary democracy at the national level has its separate appeal—creating a citizenry whose daily life brings out the noblest elements in their makeup, overthrowing the dehumanizing division between owner and worker, overcoming parochial divisions in the pursuit of what is right, orchestrating the several interests in a society in a way that emphasizes their connection to the common welfare, and eliminating the waste and misdirection endemic to political conflict. It would be absurd not to recognize the value of these goals. Yet the logic of this volume suggests that they are all dangerous. They all tend to obscure conflict in such a way that the initially disadvantaged become even more so. Although in this book I have subjected only the problem of political equality to close scrutiny, freedom is also in jeopardy. When the assumption of common interest makes conflict illegitimate, a polity may no longer tolerate dissent.

The depressing conclusion is that democratic institutions on a national scale can seldom be based on the assumption of a common good. To think otherwise is to stretch to untenability each method of achieving a common good. The method of overlapping private interests becomes the fantasy of “me-plus”: you and you and all others add to my experience, take me out of and beyond myself, deepen my sensations and my thoughts, and take nothing away. Everyone adds; no one subtracts. The self expands, meeting no obstacles. So too with the method of making the good of others and the whole one’s own. No individual can be completely and solely altruistic or wrapped up in the corporate good. A rhetoric, propaganda, or fantasy that praises altruism or reason of state while disparaging all self-regarding interests will make it much harder for those who believe in it to sort out their actual interests.

Because of the size and complexity of any modern nation-state, many citizens’ interests will inevitably conflict. Yet a democracy based solely
Conclusion

on the cold facts of national conflict will encourage selfishness based on perceiving others as opponents and discourage reasoned discussion among people of good will. The effect is particularly noticeable in the realm of ideals. Adversary democracy, which derives from a fundamental moral relativism, transforms the pursuit of ideals from a dialogue into a bargain. In an adversary system, one person's belief is no more right than any other's; ideals are no different from other interests, the way to deal with ideals is therefore to weight each person's ideal equally and sum them all up, letting the numerically preponderant ideals prevail. When a collectivity treats ideals as interests and decides to settle such issues with a vote, it has given up on the hope that discussion, good will, and intelligence can lead to agreement on the common good. Few politicians and even fewer ordinary citizens find these consequences acceptable. To avoid them, most people apply to the nation unitary assumptions and a unitary rhetoric that even they themselves do not quite believe. The resulting conceptual and moral confusions help undermine the legitimacy of what is, in fact, a primarily adversary polity.

There are alternatives to repeating myths one only half believes. To begin with, in the adversary realm, the members of a polity can realize that adversary democracy has its own ideals, which, although less emotionally inspiring than unitary ideals, will still appeal to the citizen's sense of equity. Nations organized primarily as adversary democracies have not generally faced up to the radical implications of the central adversary principle that each citizen's interests deserve equal protection. This is primarily because making genuine efforts to achieve the equal protection of interests would require major shifts in the balance of power in every modern national democracy. In no adversary democracy would it be in the interests of those who now have greater power to begin to protect all citizens' interests equally. But the position of the less powerful is further weakened by the way the underlying contradiction in democratic theory between unitary and adversary democracy obscures the importance of equal protection in moments of conflict. If any democratic nation were to try genuinely to protect individual interests equally, this in itself could become a source of pride to its citizens.

Taking adversary ideals seriously would go a long way toward relieving the simple self-interested focus of adversary politics. But a national polity can also try to make some forms of the unitary experience available to its citizens. The safest place to do this is on the most local level, either the workplace or the neighborhood, where the greater information each citizen can have about any decision helps guard against false unity. With such decentralization, a nation operating primarily as an adversary demo

The Limits of Friendship

archy need not condemn its citizens to selfishness and amorality, any more than a state with no established church need condemn its citizens to atheism.

Moreover, even on the national level, some unitary, or almost unitary, moments can be preserved. First, even in a primary adversary democracy, citizens must agree to a significant extent on the ideals that sustain the adversary process itself and place them, by genuine consensus, somewhat beyond the adversary process.

Second, the pursuit of a higher goal—often responding to an external threat—can give citizens some common interests and convince them briefly that these are the only interests that count. These moments are precious, even though they must also be transitory. Just as couples can train themselves to acknowledge conflicts of interest, make explicit who wins and who loses, take turns in the winning, and yet return to a loving selflessness once a conflict is settled, so a nation can pull together in wartime or a natural emergency, then return to its normal bickering after the crisis. The transition is easier if a nation has made a deliberate effort to maintain its unitary institutions rather than letting them atrophy. And the national unitary moments are less dangerous the more a citizenry and its leadership has had the experience of consciously judging between unitary and adversary situations and choosing its democratic methods in accordance with this judgment.

Third, in the uninspiring arena of administration, a national bureaucracy can increase the frequency of a common good by handling technical decisions competently and by trying to resolve conflicts of interest on the basis of a rough principle of equal protection rather than denying the legitimacy of conflict.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, an interdependent, less competitive economy can vastly increase the average worker's experience of common interest with others. The effect of economic structure on common interest has not been the focus of this book, partly because the theme has been treated extensively by others, and partly because I advance here a claim for the independent, although not necessarily large, effect of political institutions on the generation of common interest. Yet the effect of a more cooperative economy on citizens' moral experience is one of the strongest normative claims of socialism. A nation interested in expanding its citizens' unitary experience can always use its control over the economy to help achieve that end.

In short, by fostering decentralized and highly participative units, by maintaining a few crucial remnants of consensus, by instituting primarily cooperative economic relations, and by treating adversary methods not
W

First Principles

Chapter 22