Political Bosses or Publics: Who Rules in Democracy?

COMPS PAPER
(Senior Thesis)

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This paper is concerned with a significant point of contention between two different, yet influential schools of democratic thought. This tension is realized in their opposing answers to the question: what role should power and institutions play in a democratic society? Addressing this question provides us with an understanding of what is at stake in the debate in which these schools are engaged and provides us with a deeper understanding of what is meant by “democratic” government. First, I take up the minimalist view of democracy, as originally put forth in Joseph Schumpeter’s *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, in which periodic elections are seen as a way to legitimize the institutions of the state and the actions of its agents. I then contrast this minimalist view with a more robust, alternative vision of democratic thought. I use Jeffrey Isaac’s imagery in describing this school and call it “Sisyphean democracy”. On this alternative view, democracy cannot be reduced to a system in which the state rules via official powers of “command and control”. Rather, these thinkers view democracy as a process in which non-elite citizens come together and collaborate to find solutions to the larger problems they face. Such solutions will always be incomplete and in need of revision; the Sisyphean democrat’s work is never done. Democracy, in a particular strand of this tradition, is not so much a form of state as it is a civic culture of dialogue and direct communal engagement.

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1 Shaun McElhenny identified and defined this school of thought in his essay, *Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Normative Analysis*
2 Jeffrey Isaac: *The Poverty of Progressivism*
3 Vincent Ostrom: *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies* pp. 4
In order to flesh out what this continuous process of communal engagement will actually look like, I turn to one of the prominent voices in the Sisyphean school: John Dewey. Dewey provides us with an account of how to manage modern power in a democratically legitimate way. In doing so, he saves the Sisyphean view from being solely constituted by oppositional, disruptive action. Because he offers a vision of power that may be accountable and attentive to the public it serves, Dewey gives the Sisyphean school the positive, creative dimension of its voice.

Finally, I apply this question of the scope of democracy to the context of the Latino community of Northfield, Minnesota. Specifically, I look at the way institutions have been erected to empower and serve the community outside the realm of the official state government. This case study shows how the points of tension between the minimalists and Sisypheans manifest themselves in a tangible example. Much of the political action I engage attempts to negotiate the space *between* the state and the reality of non-citizen members of the community. As such, while these efforts find a place in Dewey’s account of Sisyphean democracy, they are necessarily external to the workings of Schumpeter’s minimalist vision of democracy as embodied by the state. By providing examples of how publics can form and operate in fluid ways, beyond the mechanism of elections, this case study shows how Dewey is able to account for a set of democratic activities that have no place in the minimalists’ depiction of democracy.

**Schumpeter: Elitist and Minimalist**

Despite containing only two chapters devoted explicitly to the workings of democracy, Joseph Schumpeter’s classic work, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* has had a profound impact on the trajectory of democratic thought. In it, Schumpeter
lays the foundation for the minimalist, state-centric conception of democracy that still permeates the public discourse today. Most notably, Schumpeter’s thinking finds a contemporary voice in the political theorist, Adam Przeworski, and may be seen at work in the worldview of recent neo-conservative thinkers and policy-makers. The drive to “democratize” portions of the world by encouraging countries to adopt elections is one example of Schumpeter’s contemporary influence. As such, when taking up Schumpeter’s vision of democracy, we are also engaging the larger minimalist mode of thought, for which he serves as an iconic proxy.

Schumpeter begins by critiquing what he calls the “Classical Doctrine of Democracy”, which he defines as, “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will.”

It is important to note at this point that Schumpeter has already assumed a classical republican framework in his understanding of what constitutes democracy. Notice that Schumpeter defines democracy as a system in which an elected elite is responsible for acting on the behalf of “the people itself”. In doing so, he has already limited the meaning of democracy, as he puts it, to an “institutional arrangement”; it is only a way to structure the machinery of government through representation. This claim will be contested later by John Dewey, who conversely asserts that democracy is a public ethos, and can never be confined to a given institution.

Schumpeter’s criticism of “classical” democracy hinges largely on his claim that in order to be successfully realized, it would require a homogenous society; the existence

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4 Joseph Schumpeter: Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy pp. 251
of conflicting interests would undermine the very basis of democratic legitimacy and lead to chaos. He makes this claim by first stating that the “Classical Doctrine of Democracy” assumes that there exists a “Common Good”, which is the undeniable goal of society, the “obvious beacon light of policy, which is always simple to define and which every normal person can be made to see by means of rational argument”. Since the “Common Good” is obvious to virtually everyone, and every sane person will want to implement it, there must also exist a “Common Will”. Schumpeter claims that

The only thing, barring stupidity and sinister interests, that can possibly bring in disagreement and account for the presence of an opposition is a difference of opinion as to the speed with which the goal, itself common to nearly all, is to be approached. Thus every member of the community, conscious of that goal, knowing his or her mind, discerning what is good and what is bad, takes part, actively and responsibly, in furthering the former and fighting the latter and all the members taken together control their public affairs.

At this moment, Schumpeter is responding to a vision of democratic legitimacy originally articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in The Social Contract. Rousseau, by invoking the idea of a “common good” and “common will”, attempted to provide an account of how a democratically legitimate government may be erected within a commonwealth. In this passage, Schumpeter mocks Rousseau as naïve, and challenges the notion that any one person could ever conceive of, much less act in the name of, a common good or common will.

Schumpeter dismisses Rousseau’s model of democratic governance as foolishly superficial in its characterization of would-be citizens. There can never be, as he rightly notes, only one “Common Good” or “Common Will” in any society. Anyone who has ever lived in a free and open society would have to concede this point to Schumpeter;

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5 Ibid pp. 250
6 Ibid
there are few, if any, important issues on which all citizens of the United States would agree. However, this lack of ideological uniformity does not yet condemn democracy as untenable as a political ideal. In fact, deliberative democrats like Dewey characterize these disagreements as precisely the moments in which constructive dialogue is transformative and enriching for a democratic society. While Dewey and others view pluralism of ideas as a resource to be mined in the collective creation of knowledge, Schumpeter argues that the lack of a universal “Common Will” precludes the possibility of “Classical Democracy”.

Schumpeter’s attack on “Classical Democracy” is also based on a deeply unforgiving view of humanity, and more specifically, of groups of people. He cites the psychologist Gustave Le Bon as showing that crowds cause

the sudden disappearance, in a state of excitement, of moral restraints and civilized modes of thinking and feeling, the sudden eruption of primitive impulses, infantilisms and criminal propensities- he made us face gruesome facts that everybody knew but nobody wished to see and he thereby dealt a serious blow to the picture of man’s nature which underlies the classical doctrine of democracy and democratic folklore about revolutions.7

If Schumpeter and Le Bon are right, and groups of people cannot be trusted to make reasonable, mature decision on their own behalf, it would seem that the democratic ideal of collaborative self-government is recklessly idealistic. We might ask ourselves how fair Schumpeter’s use of mob psychology really is at this point. Is it the case that groups of people tend to devolve into crazed, blood-thirsty mobs, or is he merely exaggerating a relatively specific phenomenon?

Regardless of how generously we interpret this passage, Schumpeter is not simply giving an account of mob mentality. He is attacking group-think more broadly, arguing

7 Ibid pp. 257
that any association of people, whether bound by physical proximity or connected by forms of communication, will tend to act in a dangerously knee-jerk manner:

Moreover, those phenomena are not confined to a crowd in the sense of a physical agglomeration of many people. Newspaper readers, radio audiences, members of a party even if not physically gathered together are terribly easy to work up into a psychological crowd and into a state of frenzy in which attempt at rational argument only spurs the animal spirits.8

Schumpeter’s cynical estimation of the reflective capacity of networks of people makes sense, given his experience in post-World War I Germany. After the economic depression and collective national humiliation brought on by the Treaty of Versailles, “Schumpeter had begun to worry that voters and leaders of low-income groups were becoming desperate and therefore ripe for demagoguery from both the right and the left.”9 This experience seems to have left a lasting impression on his thought.

If Schumpeter is right, and groups of people are not to be trusted with any serious decision, society will require a way to insulate the power of government from the self-destructive tendencies of the masses. On this view, self-rule by the people, or even a majority of the people would be simply irresponsible. It makes sense then, that Schumpeter offers a view of democracy that involves as little actual action on the part of the public as possible. Following this line of thought, it would seem prudent to invest power and responsibility in a refined, responsible elite. This classically republican formulation seeks to save society from the demos’ supposed shortsightedness and ignorance. Schumpeter distinguishes himself from classical republicans by refusing to follow this move. Like Madison before him, he is wary of foolishness not only in the

8Ibid

9McCraw: Prophet of Innovation pp. 175. Schumpeter’s fears, of course, foreshadowed the eventual rise to power through democratic elections, of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Party.
masses, but also in the distinguished assemblies of the elite. Indeed, on both their views, the quarrelsome, selfish, and petty nature of mankind is virtually ubiquitous, and may be observed both on the street corner and in the rarified halls of government. As Schumpeter puts it:

Every parliament, every committee, every council of war composed of a dozen generals in their sixties, displays, in however mild a form, some of those features that stand out so glaringly in the case of the rabble, in particular a reduced sense of responsibility, a lower level of energy of thought and greater sensitiveness to non-logical influences. 10

So groups of people, regardless of their social rank, tend to be irresponsible, intellectually lazy, and dangerously driven by emotion. Schumpeter would agree with Aristotle’s characterization of humans as inherently political, but he would view this social predisposition as a danger to be guarded against, rather than an asset to be exploited. Like Madison in Federalist #10 and #52, Schumpeter is concerned that bodies of representatives will succumb to the same temptations and capriciousness as factions of “the rabble”. However, unlike the Federalist, Schumpeter does not propose a system of checks and balances to limit the ability of any one body of government to dominate. His solution is far simpler and far more problematic.

Schumpeter argues that insofar as groups of people cannot be trusted to engage in self-governance or responsible representation, democracy, as articulated in “the Classical Doctrine”, is untenable. If we are to live in a viable democratic society, we must first radically re-define what we mean by “democracy”. He proposes that democracy should simply be defined as a process in which would-be leaders claim power through competitive elections. He begins this move by arguing that the central trouble with

10Schumpeter pp. 257
democracy is that it is centered in the proposition that “the people” hold a definite and rational opinion about every individual question and that they give effect to this opinion—in a democracy—by choosing “representatives” who will see to it that the opinion is carried out. Thus the selection of the representatives is made secondary to the primary purpose of the democratic arrangement which is to vest the power of deciding political issues in the electorate.\textsuperscript{11}

This is precisely where Schumpeter’s program ceases to describe anything actually resembling democracy. By advocating for a system in which democratic legitimacy is detached from an account of the representation of ordinary citizens, Schumpeter is attempting to circumvent the very meaning of the word “democracy”. The entire point of this passage is to avoid a system that would “vest the power of deciding political issues in the electorate”. He continues,

Suppose we reverse the roles of these two elements and make the deciding of issues by the electorate secondary to the election of the men who are to do the deciding. To put it differently, we now take the view that the role of the people is to produce a government, or else an intermediate body which in turn will produce a national executive or government. \textit{And we define: the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decision in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.}\textsuperscript{12} (emphasis added)

So “the democratic method”, on Schumpeter’s view, is entirely fulfilled by holding periodic elections. Democracy is merely an “institutional arrangement,” a means of ordering the state. Schumpeter has done something remarkable here. He has extracted talk of democracy from any attempt at realizing self-governance. On his view, the electorate does not rule, even by proxy, as the Federalists argue. It exists only to somehow produce a government. This formulation seems to intentionally obscure the meaning of a word that translates to “the rule of the people.” Democracy, genuinely

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid pp. 269
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid
conceived, is surely something more than meeting at regular intervals to approve a leader. As Dewey describes it, democracy is a public ethos, a way of thinking about the world and orienting ourselves to our fellow man. A Sheldon Wolin puts it, democracy is a moment of “rebirth”\(^\text{13}\), a “reclamation of one’s powers”\(^\text{14}\). Even contemporary republicanism, as described by Rousseau, is not merely a way of deciding who rules; rather it is a way of investing the public trust in the hands of a government. That trust is always revocable, and the final power of sovereignty always remains with the people. This is precisely why Rousseau takes pains to distinguish between the “sovereign” (the people) and the “executive” (the body to whom power is delegated). In both democratic and republican visions of government, the executive never fully wrests power from the clutches of the larger people; governments simply borrow their right to act on behalf of the people, who necessarily retain their right to reclaim power.

However, on Schumpeter’s view, “the rabble”, as he puts it, do not prominently factor into the “democratic method”. The real work of democracy is instead saved for a political class to push and pull the strings of public opinion:

> Party and machine politicians are simply the response to the fact that the electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede, and they constitute an attempt to regulate political competition exactly similar to the corresponding practices of a trade association.  
> **The psycho-technics of party management and party advertising, slogans and marching tunes, are not accessories. They are of the essence of politics. So is the political boss.**\(^\text{15}\) (emphasis added)

So the true power of this “democratic” method does not rest with the voter and the citizen. Indeed, “the electoral mass is incapable of any action other than a stampede,” and it would be foolish to intentionally empower the electorate. This passage gets at the

\(^{13}\) Wolin, Norm and Form  
\(^{14}\) Wolin, Norm and Form, Politics and Vision  
\(^{15}\) Ibid pp. 283
essence of Schumpeter’s vision of democracy; what he really means when he invokes the term is rule by “the political boss”, not rule by the people in any earnest sense. Public opinion, on his view, is not something actually produced by the public; it is the handiwork of a political class, achieved through the “psycho-technics of party management and party advertising, slogans and marching-tunes”. It might be said then, that the public does not actually elect anyone in any real sense. Rather, political operatives elect people. The public is simply the tool through which these hired agents achieve their professional aspirations, much like a butcher handles a knife or a carpenter requires a saw.

In short, because Schumpeter has such a low estimation of the reflective capabilities of ordinary citizens, he aims to show that democracy as self-rule is an untenable political ideal. However, rather than discarding the language of democracy, and embracing another political language, he dresses up his elite-driven, top-down vision of governance as somehow being democratically legitimized. In doing so he strips the term of its real meaning; what is left is a hollow vestige of the original ideal.

The Happy Sisyphus: Democracy as the Eternal Uphill March

The minimalist view of democracy articulated by Schumpeter has come under fire from a school of thinkers I call Sisyphean democrats. Democracy, these thinkers contend, cannot be limited to an institutional arrangement in which the onus of action falls entirely, or even mainly, on the agents of government. Nor can the input of the demos be adequately captured through the periodic election of candidates for republican governance. These thinkers argue, each in their own way, that democracy demands much more of us. Rather than a form of government, they view it as a continuous, unfinished
process of creative action and the renewal of inattentive forms of power. In this way, those who take up the work of democracy may be likened to Sisyphus, constantly striving and stumbling towards the mountaintop of the society they hope to help create. In this mode of thinking, democracy, as Dewey puts it, is perpetually a “task before us”\textsuperscript{16} rather than merely a way of ordering institutions.

Why do I borrow Jeffrey Issac’s depiction of the condemned Greek king Sisyphus to describe this vision of democracy? King Sisyphus, after all, seems to be a tragic and cautionary figure, a warning against human excess rather than a model for a public ethos. Punished by the Gods for his wickedness, he is condemned to futilely roll a boulder up a mountain, only to have it inevitably roll back down again, for all eternity. In its more common interpretation, this myth appears to warn against the courage necessary for democratic action; after all, why should we strive to advance the boulder of a social cause if we are certain that we will only be crushed by the inevitable downhill regression of failure in the end? Isaac adopts a different reading of the tale, saying:

Sisyphus is doomed to persist, without end, in the impossible task of raising his stone to the top of the mountain. His fate is to fail. Such a fate could well cause him to despair. But on Camus’s telling, \textit{Sisyphus learns that it is not the mountaintop but the rock that is his true fate}. His universe henceforth “seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. \textit{The struggle toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” }Sisyphus’s happiness is a tragic happiness, but it is more than despair because Sisyphus is motivated by a value—the value of his own agency—and so motivated, his struggle, and its always inadequate results, has meaning. Those who interpret the myth of Sisyphus as a story of futility are mistaken, for it is only from the standpoint of the mountaintop that Sisyphus fails.\textsuperscript{17} (emphasis added)
This passage captures the essence of this alternative vision of democracy. On this view, though the work of democracy is always incomplete, though we inevitably falter in our gains, we are encouraged by the inherent value of our struggle and by the pressing importance of the vision we serve. It is not the endpoint that motivates the democratic actor, but the intrinsic worth of the small, seemingly miniscule gains she accomplishes on the way. Democracy, when reconfigured through a Sisyphean lens, is something much more than a system of government; it is the continual, perpetually incomplete struggle through which we try to make a better, more just society for those who have yet to come. This process, insofar as it is always set within the inherited horizon of inequality and injustice, necessarily involves the revision of current forms of power.

The democrat, then, like the mythical Sisyphus, is forever dutifully marching uphill, bearing her heavy load. On this view, the work of democracy may be seen as a manifestation of the prophetic biblical tradition of challenging tainted, idolatrous forms of power. In the vocabulary of Jewish theology, such attempts are made in the name of “tikkun olam”, “repairing the world”. The spoils of these advances are necessarily, frustratingly incomplete, and the ideal of a perfectly democratic promised land is always left unrealized, tantalizingly positioned beyond our grasp. Cornel West articulates the essence of this point when he says:

This will to transform corrupted forms of elite rule into more democratic ways of life is an extraordinary force, though each new democratic result of the exercise of this will falls short of democratic ideals. *This is why all democracies are incomplete and unfinished, and this is why American democracy is a work in progress.*18 (emphasis added)

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18 Cornel West: *Democracy Matters.* pp. 204.
As West says, all democracies, by definition, are works in progress. Democracy as a form of government is an unrealizable ideal. It is for precisely this reason that democratic actors must continue to strive in the manner of the happy Sisyphus, encouraged by their incomplete gains, convinced of the value of their struggle, and content to dedicate their toil to the promise of future generations.

This view of democracy as always unfinished and demanding our creative attention is heavily influenced by American Pragmatism, and its melioristic view of human agency. Meliorism, a pillar of the Pragmatists’ worldview, is the belief that progress is neither inevitable nor impossible, but depends on human action. As William James, a leading light of the Pragmatist school, describes this view:

> Take for example, any one of us in this room with the ideals which he cherishes and is willing to live and work for. Every such ideal realized will be one moment in the world’s salvation. But these ideals are not bare abstract possibilities. They are grounded, they are live possibilities, for we are their champions and pledges, and if the complementary conditions come and add themselves, our ideals will become actual things. What now are the complementary conditions? They are first such a mixture of things as will in the fullness of time give us a chance, a gap that we can spring into, and finally, our act. \(^{19}\)

The Sisyphean democrat then, must be the “champion” of the reforms she wants to see in her world. She must struggle, often against disheartening circumstances, with the faith that sooner or later, the world will be receptive to her mission and “the fullness of time will give her a chance”. The Pragmatists’ emphasis on the uncertain nature of existence, as expressed through the meliorism of James, provides us with the intellectual foundation which blossoms into this highly demanding account of democratic citizenship.

The uncertainty of the melioristic stance is important to flesh out here. James is not suggesting that our best efforts alone will bring about the world we hope for; at least

\(^{19}\) William James: *Pragmatism* pp. 128-129
not easily or quickly. As Dewey puts it in *The Public and Its Problems*, “progress is not steady and continuous. Retrogression is as periodic as advance.”

Much then, is demanded of these intrepid democratic actors. They must have the courage of vision and the existential strength to weather the inevitable disappointments and “retrogressions” on their slow, hard climb towards the society they hope to make. Like Moses, they must resign themselves to the impossibility of their own entry into the promised land they struggle to reach; that possibility is only open to the next generation, to Joshua. Jeffrey Isaac, from whom I stole the image of Sisyphus to describe this democratic struggle, captures the sturdy mindset demanded of would-be reformers when he warns,

> The kinds of democratic responses that are likely to be effective are bound to be partial, limiting, fractious, and in many ways unsatisfying. They are likely to disappoint the modernist quest for mastery and the progressive faith in the future. And they are likely to frustrate the democratic project of collective self-control and self-governance.

The pessimist would stop there, the optimist would eventually succumb to disillusionment. But the Sisyphean democrat, with her melioristic worldview, continues with Issac:

> Yet it is the great virtue of democracy as a form of politics that it prizes contingency, experimentation, critique, and further experimentation, ad infinitum. For, in the end, politics, even under the most favorable circumstances, is nothing else but the Sisyphean task of constructing provisional solutions to our unmasterable difficulties. (emphasis added)

It is this melioristic stance that sustains the Sisyphean democrat through the otherwise daunting impossibilities of her mission. The melioristic outlook assigns an importance to human efforts, even if those efforts do not yet yield the result in whose

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20 John Dewey: *The Public and Its Problems* pp. 30
21 Jeffrey Isaac: *The Poverty of Progressivism* pp. 188
22 Ibid
name they were given. Thus, the Sisyphean democrat is encouraged by the implicit value of the small, fleeting, often defiant efforts she offers, with the knowledge that she may never actually see their fruits born.

This highly active depiction of democratic life could not differ more from the vision of democracy offered by Schumpeter. Whereas Schumpeter seeks to insulate power from the dangerous tendencies of the masses, the Sisyphians demand that we all, regardless of rank, continually strive and scratch for the world we hope to create. Whereas Schumpeter hopes for a passive, disengaged, easily controlled demos, the Sisyphians yearn for a people who question and demand accountability from earthly forms of power. Whereas Schumpeter views democratic action as necessarily predefined within a rigid constitution, the Sisyphians view it as experimental in nature, defined by an ongoing process of public inquiry. As then President-elect Barack Obama, whose campaign in many ways captured the tone of the happy Sisyphus, put it in on the night of November 4, 2008, in his call to the American people: “And above all, I will ask you to join in the work of remaking this nation the only way its been done in America for two-hundred and twenty-one years - block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand.”

At this point it is important to note that the Sisyphean tradition of democracy is home to a number of different strands of thought. This tradition has been manifested in both a positive and negative interpretation; it can be both creative as well as destructive. For instance, Sheldon Wolin argues that democracy is necessarily opposed to any institutional form because elites always seek to dominate the larger public. On this view,  

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/11/04/obama-victory-speech_n_141194.html
democracy may only be realized as a fugitive moment, a romantically unsustainable attempt to take back one’s power in the face of the overwhelming inevitability of elite rule.\(^{24}\) The Sisyphean actor, then, engages in fleeting, intermittent incursions towards the summit with the knowledge that she will eventually be crushed at the bottom of the mountain. This fatalistic, unqualified suspicion of elites is not ubiquitous among the Sisypheans, and precludes the more realistic possibilities that the tradition has to offer.

So the Sisypheans argue that democracy cannot be confined to an institutional arrangement, as Schumpeter contends. Rather, it is a long, hard march towards an envisioned utopia that demands our courage, our creativity, and our toil. We are left to ask, though, what these efforts will actually look like within this narrative of vision and struggle. How are power and institutions to be ordered within the efforts of this Sisyphean framework? Is it possible to simultaneously resist the elitism of Schumpeter and the perpetual suspicion of elites found in the darker strand of the Sisyphean tradition? Put simply, how is one to go about the work of actually climbing the mountain? To answer these questions, I turn to one of the most influential members of the Sisyphean tradition: John Dewey.

**John Dewey: Experts on tap, not on top**

Why do I focus on John Dewey at this juncture? After all, a great many thinkers may be properly described as occupying the Sisyphean pantheon. Alexis de Tocqueville, Rousseau, Wolin, West, Vincent Ostrom, and Laurie Balfour, to name only a few, come to mind. But it is Dewey who gives us an account of how to manage modern political power in a democratically acceptable way. In doing so, he saves the Sisyphean view

\(^{24}\) Wolin: *Norm and Form* pp. 56
from being necessarily anti-institutional, from being a fugitive\textsuperscript{25}, as Wolin contends. In Dewey’s articulation, the Sisyphean struggle may find a manifestation in, but can never be confined to, an institutional form. In his highly fluid account of human associations, representation is a possible, though not guaranteed, vehicle of democratic advancement.

In addition to articulating the proper ordering of democratic power, Dewey puts forth a view of democracy that is highly demanding of ordinary citizens and constantly in need of revision and attention. The influence of his predecessor in the Pragmatism movement, William James, seems apparent in his essay, \textit{Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us}, in which Dewey makes explicit his rejection of a Schumpeterian program of democracy as merely institution:

If I emphasize that the task [democracy] can be accomplished only by inventive effort and creative activity, it is in part because the depth of the present crisis is due in considerable part to the fact that for a long period we acted as if our democracy were something that perpetuated itself automatically; as if our ancestors had succeeded in setting up a machine that solved the problem of perpetual motion in politics. We acted as if democracy were something that took place mainly at Washington and Albany— or some other state capital—under the impetus of what happened when men and women went to the polls once a year or so—which is a some-what extreme way of saying that \textit{we have had the habit of thinking of democracy as a kind of political mechanism that will work as long as citizens were reasonably faithful in performing political duties}.\textsuperscript{26}

So allowing Schumpeter’s political operatives to push and pull the strings of public opinion is insufficient for the realization of democracy. Democracy demands more of citizens than just showing up to “the polls once a year or so”. It is not a “political mechanism”, but something much more inclusive and elusive. It requires our “inventive effort and creative activity”, not just our vote. He continues:

Of late years we have heard more and more frequently that this is not enough; that

\begin{itemize}
  \item[25] Sheldon Wolin
  \item[26] John Dewey: \textit{Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us} pp. 225
\end{itemize}
democracy is a way of life. This saying gets down to hard pan. But I am not sure that something of the externality of the old idea does not cling to the new and better statement. In any case we can escape from this external way of thinking only as we realize in thought and act that democracy is a personal way of individual life; that it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life. Instead of thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes.27

This formulation’s stark contrast to Schumpeter’s vision of democracy is rooted in Dewey’s fundamentally different view of human nature. Whereas the demos, in Schumpeter’s account, are “the rabble”, unfit for any stake in public action, Dewey proclaims that, “Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature.”28 As such, Dewey’s program demands a great deal from the individual citizens of a democratic society. For Dewey, democracy is properly conceived as a culture of inquiry and collaboration that must be cultivated by individuals from all walks of life. The responsibility for action in democracy lies not with politicians and elite operatives, but rather within the melioristic strivings of the whole citizenry. This radically inclusive formulation, that democracy as a culture, demands much from all of us runs counter to Schumpeter’s view that the demos are a volatile, unreflective “herd”. As Dewey articulates this faith in the demos:

Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth. This faith may be enacted in statutes, but it is only on paper unless it is put in force in the attitudes which human beings display to one another in all the incidents and relations of daily life.29

27 Ibid pp. 226
28 Ibid
29 Ibid
Again, for Dewey, democracy is not a form of government as much as it is a necessarily pervasive way of life. Participation in this culture draws all citizens into the civic work of collectively realizing democracy. As Dewey says, “The democratic belief in the principle of leadership is a generous one. It is universal. It is belief in the capacity of every person to lead his own life free from coercion and imposition by others provided right conditions are supplied.”

Furthermore, the erection of this cultural framework is always incomplete and in need of further advance. For Dewey, democracy as an ideal culture will never be fully realized; in this way, Dewey fits within the Sisyphean school’s emphasis on relentless revision.

For every way of life that fails in its democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched. The task of this release and enrichment is one that has to be carried on day by day. Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute. (emphasis added)

As this passage shows, Dewey explicitly articulates the perpetually incomplete nature of the Sisyphean project. Indeed, he regards democracy less as a potential reality and more as an ideal to be continually kept in view:

Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself. It is an ideal in the only intelligible sense of an ideal: namely, the tendency and movement of some thing which exists carried to its final limit, viewed as completed, perfected. Since things do not attain such fulfillment but are in actuality distracted and interfered with, democracy in this sense is not a fact and never will be. (emphasis added)

30 Ibid pp. 227
31 Ibid pp. 229-230
32 John Dewey: The Public and Its Problems pp. 148
While *Creative Democracy* articulates Dewey’s vision of what is meant by a democratic culture, it is *The Public and Its Problems* that is widely regarded as his most influential and explicitly political work. In it, Dewey provides his account of the constantly evolving nature of human associations and provides us with a template to think about the democratic management of modern political power. Whereas Schumpeter rejects “the Classical Doctrine of Democracy” because of society’s lack of homogeneity, Dewey uses the diversity of social interests as a starting point for his fluid view of democratic organization. In doing so, Dewey provides us with an ambivalent of institutional power; it can be used for good or ill, and as a result, is in need of our constant attention and revision.

Dewey’s view of representation in democratic society is rooted in his claim that people are linked through a countless number of evolving “publics” that are created by the existence of common concerns.

The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for. Officials are those who look out for and take care of the interests thus affected. Since those who are indirectly affected are not direct participants in the transactions in question, it is necessary that certain persons be set apart to represent them, and see to it that their interests are conserved and protected.33

So representatives are needed to manage the often incomprehensibly complex ways in which circumstances bind us together in a common cause. Since we, as individual citizens, could never effectively manage the demands of all the myriad publics in which we find ourselves, we require representatives to act on our behalf. This act of a public defining its identity through the creation of representation is, for Dewey, the foundational

33 Ibid. pp. 16
moment of a democratic state. In this respect, Dewey’s position is distinct from both Schumpeter’s view that government ought to exist beyond the interaction of the demos and the claim of darker Sisypheans like Wolin, that the elite-dominated institutions of government are necessarily unhinged from democratic legitimacy. For Dewey, genuinely accountable and attentive representation is something to be perpetually sought after and rarely gained. When it is finally achieved, it is by nature precarious, and can only be maintained by our vigilance.

An essential component of these publics is their constantly evolving nature. Just as our material realities continually change and require re-description, so too must our understanding of our civic bonds be continually revised and rearticulated. This formulation lies at the heart of Dewey’s account of democratic representation. It also provides the foundation for his alternative to Schumpeter; since the publics that compose a society are always in a state continual flux, the institutions we erect to represent them must be attentive to these changes in order to retain their democratic legitimacy. In this sense, the democratic state must constantly evolve to address the dynamic needs of its constituent publics. Thus, Dewey provides us with a third way between Schumpeter’s elitist institutionalism and more radical calls for an account of democracy that is completely divorced from the state. On Dewey’s view, the state can be made to be responsive to the changing needs of the publics that make up society, but such accountable representation cannot be ensured by institutional arrangements. The creation of a democratic state will require our continual attention. It will demand the courageous agency of the meliorist; it will demand a happy Sisyphus. As Dewey puts it, “The

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34 Wolin Norm and Form, Politics and Vision
35 Dewey, PAP pp. 69
formation of states must be an experimental process.”\textsuperscript{36} He continues, more provocatively, “By its very nature, a state is ever something to be scrutinized, investigated, searched for. \textit{Almost as soon as its form is stabilized, it needs to be re-made.}\textsuperscript{37} (emphasis added)

It is important to emphasize, at this point, that Dewey’s holds a precarious view of the potential of state power. As he says, “Only through constant watchfulness and criticism of public officials by citizens can a state be maintained in integrity and usefulness.”\textsuperscript{38} But, even given this reservation, Dewey still maintains that representatives are necessary to successfully manage the multiple publics that compose a society. Without the vision and efficiency offered by leadership, the publics will be rendered “inchoate”. Furthermore, Dewey argues that harnessing the abilities of experts is essential to the well being of the public. For Dewey, those among us with access to specialized knowledge or resources need not necessarily be pitted against the interests of society at large. Dewey invokes the image of the shoemaker to illustrate his conception of how this relationship ought to be understood. Referencing De Tocqueville’s \textit{Democracy in America}, he writes:

he pointed out in effect that popular government is educative as other modes of political regulation are not. \textit{It forces a recognition that there are common interests}, even though the recognition of \textit{what} they are is confused; and the need it enforces of discussion and publicity brings about some clarification of what they are. \textit{The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied}. Popular government has at least created public spirit even if its success in informing that spirit has not been great.\textsuperscript{39} (emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. pp. 33
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. pp. 31-32
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. pp. 69
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. pp. 207
So experts have access to invaluable resources that the rest of us do not. As Walter Lippman argues in *Public Opinion*, the problems of modern states demand a wealth of information and expertise that none of us can exhaustively possess alone. But, as Dewey points out, the demos also possess an important knowledge of the lived realities of society that experts and representatives, given their removed existences, can never fully grasp. In this way, the public discourse demanded by Dewey’s conception of democracy recognizes the necessity of both of these epistemic resources.

Dewey’s view of the proper relationship between the public and elites (e.g. representatives and experts) is a nuanced one. As mentioned above, Dewey articulates the many ways in which power ought to be invested in specific individuals whose talents differentiate them from the larger community. However, Dewey also notes that disruptive action is often necessary to overtake forms of power that have become inattentive and entrenched: “the change of the form of states is so often effected only by revolution.”

Nevertheless, for Dewey, this revolutionary impulse need not exhaust the possibilities of democratic advances. The Sisyphean democrat, in her uphill march, has more tools at her disposal than simply contesting current forms of power. Through creativity and vigilance, we can hope to help create the accountable and responsive state necessary to ensure the possibility of a sustainable democratic life. As Melvin L. Rogers puts it, in his introduction to *The Public and Its Problems*.

Indeed, as we continue our commitment and defense of democracy, this may in fact be Dewey’s lasting contribution—namely, a view that sees democracy as always a task before us, but as containing the resources within itself to imagine beyond its specific limitations.

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40 Ibid pp. 46
41 Melvin L. Rogers: *John Dewey and His Vision of Democracy: An Introduction* pp. 47
In short, Dewey not only articulates an alternative vision of democratic life, he also provides us with an account of how to go about the work of realizing that vision. For Dewey, the democratic state is always incomplete, always in the act of becoming. As he notes, there will surely always be a great deal to frustrate the democratic reformer. But, as Isaac suggests, if the standard-bearer of democracy wishes to accomplish anything worthwhile, she must learn to be happy with the demanding nature of her fate; she must learn to accept the proverbial rock as her destiny. In the language of Dewey, to take up the Sisyphean vision, she must find that the inherent honor and value in the act of searching for the democratic state is enough to sustain her efforts. Dewey’s contribution to the Sisyphean tradition is invaluable because he shows that this search for democracy can be positive as well as negative; it can be creative as well as disruptive. Though Sisypheans will often want to clear away outdated, ineffective forms of power, they will also, on Dewey’s view, want to construct new forms of representation and harness new sources of expertise. The challenge for the Deweyian is to be vigilant enough to make forms of power receptive to the needs of the ever-evolving publics that comprise a people. It is in this process of searching for a democratic state, that the Sisyphean struggle finds its productive form.

From Theory to Practice

This paper has thus far attempted to expose Schumpeter’s minimalistic account of democracy as a hollow promise and has proposed an alternative vision, the Sisyphean school, in its stead. Within the Sisypheans, I have focused on the democratic vision of John Dewey because he rescues this tradition from being confined to the darker
descriptions offered by Wolin and others. Dewey, I argue, provides us with the resources necessary to realize the melioristic possibilities of the Sisyphean project.

I now move away from the theoretical and towards the tangible to help show the reader what this productive vision of Sisyphean democracy can look like in a specific context. This case study highlights the key differences between the programs of Schumpeter and Dewey, as the actors discussed, by virtue of operating beyond the purview of the state, fit within the Sisyphean, but not the Schumpeterian vision of democracy.

**Democratic Action Beyond the State:**
**Leadership and Institutions in Northfield, Minnesota**

**I. Introduction**

Because the Latino community of Northfield includes many undocumented immigrants, in a way, it exists beyond the official form of representation embodied by the state. As Héctor Tobar says in his recent book, *Translation Nation*, “The absence of a collective local voice vis-à-vis the political and legal system is one of the conditions that defines those places that immigrants and migrants call home in America.”

He expands on this point later, recalling his own experiences in the Latino community of Los Angeles:

a majority of the people were not and could not be citizens. They were foreign-born and not naturalized, and thus ineligible to vote. There was a great abyss between the formal institutions of American democracy and the language and culture of the populace. The “more perfect union” conceived by Jefferson and the founding fathers-where authority originated from the “people” and the instrument of their will, the ballot box-was a hollow shell.

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42 Héctor Tobar: *Translation Nation* 217
43 Ibid 218
Much of any immigrant community, given their legal status, exists in a political space that is neither completely foreign nor fully within the official domain of the state. As such, members of these communities are often unable to utilize formal representation as a means to exert political influence, are unable to access social services, and are generally unable to enjoy the securities and benefits of citizenship.

Proponents of Schumpeter’s account of democracy will likely take issue with this claim. Non-citizens, they might argue, are by definition beyond the purview of the state. If they wish to receive the full benefits of citizenship, they need only undergo the already existing process of naturalization. A democratic state, in order to maintain its integrity, must exclude non-citizens, except insofar as it offers a path to citizenship. That democracy is confined to an account of statehood exposes an important rift between Schumpeter and Dewey. On Dewey’s view, the ballot box’s inability to provide a community with a viable form of representation does not yet mean that it exists beyond the scope of democracy. This point, that democracy is an amorphous mode of civic engagement that respects no artificial boundaries of state has deep implications for the competing visions of Schumpeter and Dewey. If Schumpeter is right, and democracy is merely the “psychotechnics” and back-room dealings of the political operative, then undocumented immigrants are clearly beyond the reach of the democratic process. But, if we take Dewey and the Sisyphians seriously, we must recognize that the non-state institutions erected to represent and serve the Latino community in Northfield are legitimate examples of democratic action. The existence of the organizations described in this case study exposes the inability of minimalist theory to capture the full workings of the democratic way of life.
II. Sisypheans in Northfield:
Actors and Institutions

What follows is a brief description of a selection of democratic institutions and leaders operating within and around the Latino community in Northfield. Information for this case study was collected through a series of interviews conducted from June to November, 2008, and through a review of the public information offered by the websites of a number of these institutions. I am not offering an exhaustive account of democratic organizing in Northfield, or even a comprehensive depiction of the individuals and projects mentioned. After all, my writing on the Latino community is constrained by my positioning as a non-Latino outsider who is not fluent in Spanish and who has little formal training in sociological or anthropological research. Rather, this brief glimpse is meant to provide a few examples of what sort of work will find a home within Dewey’s description of Sisyphean democratic action.

To peer into the Latino political world of Northfield, MN, as I have attempted to do, is to discover a tightly intertwined community of actors and institutions. Such interconnectedness seems inevitable in a town of approximately 18,000, with a Latino minority recently estimated at 419 adults, many of whom can trace their roots back to the common origin of Maltrata, Mexico.

1. The Church of St. Dominic

This interconnectedness is perhaps best shown through the political significance of the Church of St. Dominic (the town’s Catholic church) and its priest, Father Denny Dempsey. The church serves as a venue for dialogue and deliberation within the Latino

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44 Jose Pacas, *League of Rural Voters-Civic Engagement, Northfield Campaign*. The report also found that there were 293 Latino households in Northfield.
community in the context of a larger social reality that often compels them to remain quiet about their grievances. Father Dempsey offered three reasons why the church has come to serve this role: it is a Spanish-speaking environment, people are able to interact with others they already know from their community, many of whom share the common origin of Maltrata, and there are no concerns about the legal consequences of one’s opinions. As a result of its role as a safe space for dialogue, the church has nurtured the creation of a number of significant initiatives concerning the Latino community. It might be said that the church provides a deliberative framework in which publics are able to articulate themselves and move to action.

2. Healthfinders Collaborative

The Healthfinders Collaborative is an example of the creative possibilities of the communal space provided by St. Dominic. As Healthfinders’ website recounts:

In the summer of 2002, a group of Latino leaders from St. Dominic parish in Northfield began meeting after mass to identify how to mobilize their community to address issues affecting them… The top issue identified by the Latino community was access to healthcare and medicine. With these findings in hand, the Latino leaders approached Anglo leaders in the parish. In 2002, parishioners at St. Dominic Church in Northfield completed a health survey. The survey showed that about 7% of the non-Latino parish members had issues with health care access, insurance, or prescription drug costs, and nearly 75% of the Latino parish members had these issues. The survey proved to be the “tipping point,” calling community members to action.45

In this example, members of the Latino community came to see themselves as a public, affected by their common experiences of inadequate access to health care. In addition to this core public united by shared experience, a secondary public, bound by a concern for the well-being of the larger community formed: “The collaborative is unique in the area

45 http://www.healthfindersmn.org/history.html
in reaching across both ethnic (Anglo and Latino) and geographic (Northfield and Faribault) boundaries to address a pressing issue, making a better place for everyone.”46

The collaborative went on to establish a free clinic and an array of programs aimed fulfilling its stated mission, “to provide quality, accessible and culturally sensitive healthcare services, at no cost, to low-income and uninsured residents of greater Rice County.”47

3. Father Denny Dempsey

Father Dempsey’s role in the Latino community is not limited to providing a deliberative framework from which programs like Healthfinders may be created. As the Parish priest and a bi-lingual Anglo, the Father occupies a unique social position at the cultural intersection between Northfield’s Latino minority and Anglo majority. Multiple sources informed me that the Father is viewed with a widespread sense of respect and trust among those in the Latino community. This social comfort, along with his official role in the church, leads him be viewed as a resource for the mediation of problems that emanate from the external Anglo majority. For instance, if there is ever suspicion that the Federal immigration agency, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), is about to conduct a raid, the Father will put out the word to warn undocumented residents to take refuge. One of the places where people may find sanctuary is the church. The Father told me an anecdote in which someone spotted ICE agents in town and tipped him off. He went to investigate and determined that they were there to detain a specific individual, a Ukraine national. After learning this, he was able to reassure his undocumented parishioners that they were not in any immediate danger.

46 Ibid
47 http://www.healthfindersmn.org/index.html
Another example of Father Dempsey’s role as intermediary occurred in an incident this past fall in which illegally parked cars belonging to members of the Latino community were removed by a professional towing company, after a landlord contacted the company. The company, fearing potential retaliation from the owners of the cars, hastily completed the job, leaving the cars damaged. The owners of the cars came to Father Dempsey for advice on how to proceed. This put Father Dempsey in the position of an advocate for his parishioners. The Father first contacted a lawyer, who informed him that given the car owners’ undocumented status, they could not pursue legal recourse against the towing company. The Father then attempted to set up a meeting between the landlord and concerned members of the community, to prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future. The meeting did not materialize. Nevertheless, this episode provides us with an example of Dewey’s conception of a public coming into being, finding a representative, and attempting to create an appropriate response to the common cause that unites it. The fact that this public’s actions did not bear any tangible fruit does not take away from its ability to demonstrate the mechanisms of Dewey’s conception of Sisyphean democracy.

4. Growing up Healthy

Another example of an individual attempting to serve as an intermediary between the Latino minority and the Anglo majority is Janice Muth’s program, Growing up Healthy. The program’s funding came from a state wide initiative by the Blue-Cross/Blue Shield insurance company to address the “social determinants of health”, and to assess how best to “change social conditions from birth to age five”. After holding a series of 22 focus groups in Spanish, English and Somali, Mrs. Muth concluded that
“there was a population in the county that felt marginalized, not connected to existing programs that existed to serve families”.

In her program’s attempt to provide increased access to healthcare in these communities, Mrs. Muth identified four target neighborhoods, two of which are in Northfield. She then recruited and trained community organizers in these neighborhoods, whom she charged with the task of connecting their communities to the resources and services that were already in place. When I spoke to Mrs. Muth, she was attempting to gain seats for her community organizers on Growing up Healthy’s advisory board, which was primarily comprised of the heads of social care organizations. By attempting to provide the social service complex with the Latino community’s input, as represented by her community organizers, she hoped to help these organizations realize “where are the gaps? Then go back to your agencies and make changes.” In doing so, she was working to provide Dewey’s shoemaker (the social care organizations) with the shoe-shopper’s feedback, in the form of the community organizers. By attempting to make this system more attentive to the needs of the immigrant community, Growing up Healthy strives to help bridge the “vacuum” between the community and the state.

5. Familias en Acción and TORCH

Yet another example of non-Latinos viewing themselves as somehow linked to the material reality of their Latino counterparts and acting as a trans-ethnic public can be found in the story of Familias en Acción and its offshoot, TORCH (Tackling Obstacles and Reaching College Hopes). The story of Familias en Acción begins with Beth Berry, a licensed psychologist, moving to Northfield 14 years ago to work as an elementary school counselor. Her work helped her cultivate a concern for issues of equity in
education. As she said, “my interest started specifically with some kids I was working with at the time”. She remembered a scene that captures the motivation behind her eventual decision to begin organizing: “I remember seven years ago, this [Latina] gal was a 3rd grader, arm in arm with a white, blue eyed kid. And they were saying, ‘we’re gonna be college roommates.’” This otherwise trivial anecdote is memorable because of the disparity in academic achievement between Anglos and Latinos at the time. Mrs. Berry remembers, “18% of 8th grade Latinos passed the basic skills tests and we were in the top 5% in the state for the general population.” After seeing these results, she was taken aback, wondering “what’s wrong here? ... A few of us [concerned Anglos] got together and said, ‘what are we going to do?’” She then remembers meeting, over coffee, to write a grant proposal for the fledgling organization that would become Familias en Acción.

After a public kick-off event, the group began to meet on a regular basis and now meets on the 3rd Wednesday of even months. Mrs. Berry characterizes the group as “a grass-roots organization that has gone wherever we see opportunities and needs.” The group currently has eight core members, including ESL (English as a Second Language) workers and social work faculty from St. Olaf. Father Dempsey and Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin, director of the Rural Enterprise Center,48 have both attended meetings at some point. The group is best understood as a deliberative space out of which initiatives aimed at attaining educational equity are created. Most notable among these efforts, is the creation of TORCH.

TORCH was founded in 2004 with the goal of increasing graduation and college

48 The REC, a program of the Mainstreet Project, provides training and resources to rural Latino entrepreneurs. In addition, the REC operates a free-range chicken co-op that directly distributes meat to over 125 costumers, provides access to a community vegetable garden, and provides bookkeeping services in Spanish.
attention rates among Latino and low income students. The program is funded by a $90,000 per year grant and has grown considerably since its inception. It was initially intended to serve 80 and now serves 175 middle and high school students. About 80% of the current students are Latino. Mrs. Berry remembered “the rumor was in 2004 that we’d never graduated a male Latino. We graduated multiple last year.” She noted that multiple TORCH alumni have now gone on to college. “I hope some of them will come back and help out because sooner or later the grant funds will run out. You have to phase yourself out.” This statement nicely captures the tone of the Sisyphean school; Mrs. Berry realizes that her efforts are a humble part of a larger, trans-generational struggle towards educational equity.

III. Common Experiences and Indirect Transactions: The Realization of a Public

This account of actors and institutions in Northfield is by no means exhaustive. It is merely an attempt to show what Dewey’s creative account of Sisyphean democracy looks like in a particular context. In addition, it underscores an important difference between Dewey and Schumpeter, as these efforts may find a home within Dewey’s, but not Schumpeter’s vision of democracy.

There are two levels on which Dewey’s articulation of how a public comes into being may be used to understand the political action occurring in and around the Latino community of Northfield. On the one hand, there are instances in which members of the Latino minority, bound together by a set of common experiences and concerns, take themselves to constitute a public and subsequently move to “see to it that their interests

49 To re-examine Dewey’s description of a public, refer to the block quotation on page 20
are conserved and protected.”

This describes the way in which the Healthfinders Collaborative was conceived and how members of the Latino community reacted to the damage of the towing incident.

But this description is not sufficient for all the actors and institutions described in this paper. Indeed, some of the individuals mentioned are Anglos with few personal ties to the Latino community. In these examples, it seems that regard for one’s neighbors, including those who are part of an “other”, can at times move one to action in a way that seeks to address the material realities of those whose experiences one does not share. It is this regard for the other that causes Dewey’s publics to manifest themselves across dividing social lines. Thus, in this second set of instances, we can see how, on Dewey’s account, “The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions” (emphasis added). In these instances, Anglos who do not share the experiences of their Latino neighbors, still take themselves to be “affected by the indirect consequences of transactions”, where transactions may mean disparities in educational achievement, access to health care, or some other material reality. This helps explain why, in these instances, Anglos with seemingly little personal stake in the condition of the Latino community have worked to help address social ills felt by their Latino counterparts. By virtue of sharing a town, these individuals have conceived of their own fates as being somehow bound up with those whose collective experience they do not share.

This point, that people of different backgrounds and social positioning can conceive of their fates as somehow intertwined, represents an answer to Schumpeter’s

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50 PAP pp. 16
51 Ibid
dismissal of the “Classical Doctrine of Democracy”. While he may be right that there can never be only one “Common Good” and “Common Will” which are apparent to us all, this case study suggests that, even given the myriad divisions of a pluralistic society, our interests will still align at certain key points. Thus, Janice Muth was moved to work for better access to healthcare in the Latino community, and Beth Berry compelled to try to get more Latino students to college. Perhaps, rather than the singular common good dismissed by Schumpeter, this case study shows us that there are instead many common goods, in which the segmented portions of our society can, for a moment, become united. Though we may not always agree on everything, it becomes clear to us that there are certain shared goods that benefit us both. Thus, it becomes clear to me that when your child has access to education and healthcare, my world is better, and when your child does not, my own security is somehow threatened. Beyond the recognition that access to these opportunities may keep my streets safer and leads to communally enriching possibilities (an investment in your child is an investment in the future of my society), this sentiment also entails a recognition of myself in you; it requires empathy. Suffering in your household somehow diminishes my own life. In this way, while Schumpeter is right to point out that no singular Common Good exists in a democratic society, Dewey shows how our interests can indeed be united in a common good, around which we come to see ourselves as somehow linked in a common cause and subsequently form a public.

A note of caution is needed here. This larger, transcendent public united by empathy is necessarily secondary to the core public bound by common experience. Given their positioning, those who experience the daily social realities of an issue have epistemic resources and social capital at their disposal that the larger public can never
marshal. Attempts to address issues in a community that originate from without are always in danger of lapsing into inattentiveness, irrelevance, or heavy-handedness. It is this recognition of the importance of the knowledge of lived experience that led Janice Muth to enlist her community organizers from the neighborhoods she hoped to serve, and led Anglo parish leaders to heed the call of the survey of the Latino community that led to the Healthfinders Collaborative. Like Dewey’s shoemaker, they recognized that without the input of the core public they hoped to help, their good intentions would be for naught. Dewey’s shoemaker instructs the way this relationship is properly manifested: while members of the Anglo majority may take themselves to be bound by empathy to the fates of their Latino neighbors, only Latinos themselves know “that it pinches and where it pinches”. Nevertheless, the Sisyphean dream rests with the possibility that all of us, regardless of our social positioning, can see ourselves in one another, listen to each other’s voices, and act accordingly to strive for a better world for all our children.

This case study reinforces the Sisyphean claim that any attempts at the furthering of a democratic reality will ultimately seem incomplete and in need of further efforts. For all the work of these actors, the Latino and Anglo worlds of Northfield are still, in many ways, “closed” communities, marked by inequalities of access and security. There are still and will remain undocumented immigrants who worry about deportation and disparities in the lived realities of Anglos and Latinos. This concession is the essence of the Sisyphean school’s worldview. But, as these initiatives demonstrate, efforts to make regimes more accountable and inclusive need not be limited to fleeting moments of rebellion and disruption, as in the darker strand of the Sisyphean tradition. The examples

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52 Jose Pacas
provided show what is meant by Dewey’s claim that the search for the democratic state occurs when publics realize themselves and come together to “see that their interests are conserved”. Yet despite the advances made by these efforts, democracy perpetually remains, as Dewey puts it, “a task before us.”
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