

WHAT MAKES A POLITICALLY HEALTHY COMMUNITY?

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My profile of a politically healthy community evokes that Eden of a democracy that is the object of longing and (likely) misplaced nostalgia, whose contours have become more vivid to me with each year in office.

The politically healthy community is one where all of its citizens have the possibility of thriving. There, we cease to look for ways to eliminate poverty, with inadequate political constructions as a measure of our success. Instead we define prosperity at its minimum as a goal for every community member. I understand the goal of prosperity to mean the ability to feed, clothe, house, educate and nurture your family, and have that extra personal or social capital that allows you to make a contribution to your community as well.

To ensure that all citizens can develop their unique gifts and offer their best contribution to support a clear vision of the common good, there must be a strong system of public education, opportunities for continuing education as adults and a well-equipped and accessible public library system. These are the incubators of individual capacity that spawn higher-level civic engagement.

If a community is to successfully draw on its talent and engage it in the decision-making process for public issues,

- public service must be held in esteem, and dignity afforded those in elective office.
- there is a high level of representatively diverse participation in partisan political parties, full ballots and contested races at every level.
- it must boast a healthy non-profit sector that seeks innovation and partners with government appropriately – without supplanting a democratic government’s essential functions.

Leaders in a politically healthy community champion a diverse culture; develop the security of mutual respect by focusing the public agenda always on a clear vision for the common good; and encourage inquisitiveness, creativity and self-reliance among community members.

That leadership –in the schools, in local government and in the non-profit sector— cuts across socio-economic levels; is renewed continually with systematic recruitment and development that reflects diverse needs and perspectives; and propels local talent to state, national and international stages with the innovative ideas and models that emerge in that rich matrix of talent. That leadership models civility, nurtures and insists on the integrity of the community and of its public debate, and eschews the “us v. them” dichotomy that could create fissures within.

A politically healthy community has strong cultural definition. It enjoys shared community pride in its history, monuments and artifacts, natural resources and continued high quality of life. And its operations stem from an ethos of generosity and equal opportunity, a deep public value of diversity, and robust institutional structures and habits that foster cooperation and collaboration between organizations, and the public and private sectors.

This community is sustained by a free, open and politically astute press corps whose work is grounded in a strong ethic of civic responsibility and integrity. And the press is adequate to provide in-depth coverage of the issues and activities of the community, encouraging and demonstrating a varied and skilled approach to community problem-solving. A high percentage of the community is “connected”, awash in a free flow of ideas moving via many media.

A politically healthy community in fact defines its wealth in ideas – in new technologies and products that enrich the economy, but also in ideas that are embodied in customs and institutions, in the ordinances that evolve with and reflect the community as a healthy place for investment and for talent to grow.

A politically healthy community provides its members economic security and physical safety. Good low-income housing stock and public transportation are available; law enforcement is a respected and trusted presence; and a high percentage of locally-owned businesses operate successfully in a fluid economy.

I believe that the arts and humanities form the cultural infrastructure of a civil society, and therefore a politically healthy community. A democracy cannot flourish without them. They provide the creativity and spontaneity and sense of freedom necessary to fuel the ongoing struggle that is democracy. A politically healthy community invests in the arts to ensure the context and conditions that will make it robust and prosperous.