



## Political Education for a Fairer Economy

HERBERT J. GANS

*The economy isn't doing it—that is, raising wages sufficiently for all. Political action is needed, argues the author. But the public just may not know enough about how to do it. Political education is in order.*

Capitalism has always been hard on the poor, but now it is increasingly so for the working and lower-middle classes as well. Today's global economy sheds good jobs while creating too many bad jobs, that is, poorly paid and insecure ones. Although the long period of wage stagnation may be ending for some, the below-median-income population and even some above-the-median earners are still living from paycheck to paycheck, as the rich get richer.

Consequently, the best and perhaps the only way the economically victimized can now better their economic condition is through political action. They need to vote and to join in strategic political activity to press for government intervention that results in better jobs, higher incomes, a more comprehensive safety net.

However, too many of today's economic victims are so uninformed politically and economically that they support policies that only hurt them even more. Instead of using politics to help themselves, too many vote for politicians who promise to help them but, once in office, mainly enable big business and the very rich to become richer. Instead, many take their economic troubles out on immigrants and darker-skinned people when they should be demanding a fairer labor market and economy.

These popular self-defeating reactions are still not well understood, but there is one rarely considered reason: most of the people reacting in this way have never received a proper political education. Thus, they have no sense of their potential political muscle or how to use it for their economic betterment.

Admittedly, the business community and the donor class can spend large sums to preserve their present hold on the government. Moreover, the

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victims of the economy still need to figure out how to exercise the power of their numbers. But they have not yet received the political schooling to think about how they might do so.

### ADDING POLITICS TO PUBLIC EDUCATION

Although public education prides itself on training young people for citizenship, the schools only teach civics and government. They almost never teach politics and thus do not supply students with the necessary political knowledge.

The failure of public education to teach politics is nothing short of amazing. Admittedly, the Founding Fathers did not favor political participation by the general public, and the founders of public education may have shared their feelings. Even now, local school boards try to avoid controversial subjects like politics, and a federal initiative for a political education would probably cause a firestorm.

In addition, parents may feel that politics is too dirty to be taught to youngsters. They may also believe that neither they nor their children need to know much about politics because their major obligation, to vote every second and fourth year, can be satisfied without such knowledge. That belief could even have been justified when the economy in which people earned their living improved their fortunes without their paying much attention to government and politics.

The post-World War II period of affluence supported their inattention. As a result, many people continued to vote like their parents—or stay home at election time. Thus, they felt no great need to inform themselves about politics.

However, the changes in the American economy require that they now do so—and that requires a political education.

Whether enough people want to learn, whether the right teaching materials can be created, and whether politicians and the politically powerful are willing to have them taught is not at all certain.

Even initiating such a project would take time, and implementing it would show results only slowly, probably not for a decade or more. However, discussing whether adding politics to public education is feasible—and if so, what and how it needs to be done—ought to begin now.

To start that discussion, I would suggest four objectives for a political education and for adults as well as students.

First, people must learn that even if they dislike politics, it is ever present, and they can try to alter the government and parts of the economy in their behalf. Consequently, they must understand what politics and politicians can and cannot do for them.

Second, people should be taught what they can and cannot do to obtain the policies and programs that benefit them. They must learn to understand

the necessity of making demands, voting, and at times joining others in more active participation in the political process.

Third, people need instruction in how to cope with the strategies as well as the tricks that elected politicians use to satisfy the holders of undue economic and political power, retain the support of their base, and try to ensure their reelection.

Fourth, people need to learn how to figure out their self-interests, how to defend themselves against those seeking to impose their own interests on them, and which politicians and political organizations can help them do so.

### TEACHING POLITICS IN HIGH SCHOOL

American youngsters spend four years in high school, sufficient time to help them start to learn the politics they need to know after they graduate, including enough about labor markets and the larger economy once they look for jobs.

Professionals trained in high school curriculum development can determine what kinds of coursework and other instruction will achieve high school versions of the above-mentioned objectives. Locals familiar with the area's politics should help to make the teaching relevant to the students.

Coursework should include hearing from local and national politicians and political organizations as well as representatives of the business community, labor unions, and consumer organizations. Internships in local government should be available to students in the higher grades so to add some immersion in actual politics. Youngsters who have already participated in student politics may benefit especially from immersion in adult politics.

The federal government will most likely have to fund and even develop student political education. Otherwise, it will probably be provided only by more affluent communities and those able to deal with the several kinds of opposition to teaching young people about controversial topics.

### ADULT EDUCATION IN POLITICS

Adults need an education in politics as much as students—and more urgently because they are today's voters and nonvoters.

However, their political education must conquer two formidable hurdles. One is insufficient interest in the subject, which is in part an effect of the widespread distaste for politics and politicians.

The lack of interest helps to explain why only 60 percent of the eligible voters turned out in the last presidential election, and many of them based their vote on familial or local community party loyalty. Others picked the candidates who told them what they wanted to hear or appeared to be most like them culturally or socially.

The second hurdle: unlike students who are a captive audience, adults can only be offered opportunities to educate themselves. Thus, they will need attractive incentives to do so.

An adult political education cannot require going back to school. Nor should it be taxing or time consuming.

Adults are best reached through direct contact and their personal networks, but that is extremely labor intensive and costly, as election campaign ground games demonstrate.

The best incentive for adults to educate themselves—and perhaps even to obtain that education—is some participation in politics other than voting. Attending political meetings, especially with their elected officials, and taking part in occasional demonstrations might stimulate their interest in further political learning.

Economic and other painful losses, fear of downward mobility, intense anger, or long-lasting frustration may also function as incentives, particularly if they are also felt by friends, neighbors, and at least part of the community.

### THE MEDIA AS POLITICAL EDUCATORS

Nonetheless, probably only a small number of adults will actually seek even a minimal political education. For the large majority, the entertainment and information media—mass and social—may be a more practical way to begin their education.

Despite the popularity of social media, entertainment television still attracts the largest audiences. It and other entertainment media attract popular audiences in part by a focus on personalities and drama, and politics lends itself to both.

Political TV series like *The Veep* and *West Wing* that depict characters from the two highest offices in the political land have been successful. Why not also try lower-level characters, such as a congressional representative, lobbyist, bureaucrat, and activist. Locally oriented political dramas and comedies featuring congressmen and women, mayors, and even neighborhood politicians might attract other parts of the general audience.

Stories that try to reduce popular antipathy toward politicians and inaccurate stereotypes about them are needed as well. Why politicians must sometimes talk from what voters describe as both sides of their mouths, and why they engage in so-called squabbling, are relevant topics, too.

Other stories should explore what encourages or forces politicians to engage in exaggeration, falsehood, and outright lying—currently a particularly appropriate subject.

At some point, programs about the role of power in society and how ordinary people can challenge it should be tried. Dramatic and melodramatic films and television series already depict power struggles, but almost always

among ancient or imaginary rulers and other elites. Stories about how contemporary power struggles affect ordinary people would be preferable.

Entertainment television and movies shown or streamed on television need not be the only teaching platform, however. Popular plays, musicals, short stories, and novels, including romance fiction, can also be used.

Social media should be useful as well; for example, those in which participants can discuss how current but also long-lasting political issues impact them. Trolls and others bent on sabotaging serious discussion would have to be kept out, however.

Creating politically inflected entertainment is not easy, for it cannot be didactic, sermonizing, patronizing, or overtly partisan.

The news media can also be asked to educate, especially if they can connect the political dots in the events they mainly cover. The events themselves offer teachable moments, but they must be complemented by stories about the political lessons they offer.

Policy education is probably handled best by documentaries, but political disagreements over policies can be turned into dramas that can combine fact and fiction. The current fashion for dystopian stories should be complemented with utopian ones that dramatize desirable but feasible future policies.

Still, use of the mass and social media for adult political education faces several obstacles. Probably the most important one: whether the media could attract a large enough audience to the quasi-educational entertainment I have suggested. Could it even compete with today's entertainment programming, which offers diversion, escape, and thrills?

Also, would advertisers be willing to sell their wares on programs that include informal instruction about politics? Above all, can the mass media figure out how to aid their audience's political education without upsetting the political and other self-interested watchdogs that hover over most of the media.

Right now, the answer to most of these questions could well be no. However, once high schoolers and college students who have received a political education become adults, some may be ready for further education. In that case, the entertainment and informational media might be more willing to supply it.

#### A MORE IMMEDIATE START OF POLITICAL SCHOOLING

Actually, if President Trump continues to govern in behalf of the business community and the donor class and fails to deliver on his job creation and other economic promises, the working- and lower-middle-class voters who helped to elect him may be ready to turn to politics—and even without a political education.

Although liberals and the left should not be over confident, the continual protest activities that have accompanied Trump's presidency could spread to

his initial supporters and others from the economically victimized population. That possibility will probably require organizers and other leaders who know or can figure out how to attract this population. Drawing in the Democrats who did not vote in 2016 and some habitual nonvoters would help too.

If and when a higher level of political interest spreads throughout the country, perhaps a number of local and state governments could be persuaded to start teaching high schoolers about politics.

Needless to say, such governments would have to be liberal. However, in the long run, liberal control of federal and state governments for more than an election cycle or two would be needed to place political education on a firm footing.

Liberal governments would also be able to support nonprofit radio television and digital mass and social media with educational agendas.

Even so, teaching does not automatically ensure learning. It will probably take place only if enough people believe that it can help to bring about a fairer labor market and a fairer economy.