

Politics for People

Every morning as I get ready for work I listen to the local news. Lately the political ads are run at every commercial break – and they’ll only increase between now and Election Day. But despite the huge amounts of money spent on campaigns Americans are not turning out at the polls.

Many will say that people are apathetic about politics and government. But a study by The Harwood Group found that Americans are not apathetic – they’re “mad as the devil” because they feel that the political system has pushed them out of their place in governing the nation. They blame powerful lobbyists, the media and “professional” politicians for creating a system where money – not the voters – votes.

From the politicians’ perspective, they find the public generally uninformed, more emotional than reasonable, and indifferent to serious problems, according to another Harwood report. They do not see a substantive role for the public. They recognize that the public can vote them out of office, but beyond that any role that the public could play in government is unexplored.

What will it take to get the American public involved in politics? According to “Politics for People” by David Matthews the answer is public deliberation. He notes that there are a great many places where people can complain or advocate for their cause, but there are few opportunities for us to talk calmly with those who have a different opinion.

The media often breaks down complex political issues into twenty-second sound bites. But people don’t come to understand an issue by hearing only its simplest elements. A dialogue that helps them see the connections between issues and their own values and that points out the consequences of possible choices is what is needed.

And while people will not necessarily become politically active because they have been involved in deliberation, it is also true that people have to have a personal stake in an issue before they will become politically active. Deliberation helps them understand how issues impact them and their community.

How can you get involved in public deliberation? The Kettering Foundation has developed the National Issues Forum format where citizens have the opportunity to rationally discuss issues that can be very emotional. University of Missouri Extension is a partner in bringing Issues Forums to local communities. If you would like to see what topics are available you can check out the National Issues Forum Institute web site at <http://www.nifi.org/issues.html>. To try to schedule a forum in your community, contact Georgia Stuart-Simmons, MU Extension Community Development Specialist at 660-747-3193 or your local University of Missouri Extension center at 660-885-5556.

News Column
Georgia Stuart-Simmons
Community Development Specialist