

SHARED LIFE: Community in the Political Sphere

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About me: My name is Patrick Van Hoven. I am a 17-year-old high school junior at Woodside High School in Woodside, California, US. I live in Portola Valley, California, US. I am interested in philosophy and political theory, and in using humanities disciplines to affect change in the real world. You can reach me at pgvanhoven@gmail.com, or at (650) 880-8315



Community is at the heart of human relation. We are all members of communities, in our jobs, in our education, with our families, with our friends—there is even a community of readers of this journal. We derive meaning and fulfillment from engagement with and membership in these communities. And yet, as Mary Catherine Basch said, “[w]hat Augustine said of time may well be applied to community: ‘If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain to a questioner, I do not know.’”¹ Community is something we can all recognize, and yet its precise nature is elusive; it is so implicit, so ever-present in the everyday human experience that its specific facets are rendered irrelevant in the face of its constant existence. Its most essential form, though, can be distilled into three key factors: community is a common life, as it transcends its individual members. It is a shared life, in that it involves mutual connections between its individual members. And it is a principled life, in that it is defined by ideals and motives around which the members orient themselves.²

Throughout history, various thinkers have characterized the nature of the political sphere as a community. This is a fair characterization. Aristotle famously said that “man is by nature a political animal.”³ Interestingly, though, a single word of this translation is in dispute. *πολιτικὸν* is the Greek

adjective for “political,” but is also the Greek adjective for “social.”⁴ With that in mind, Aristotle’s words can be read both as before, and as “man is by nature a *social* animal.” There is no way to know if Aristotle intended this word choice to be ambiguous, but these two possible versions of Aristotle’s famous quote reveal the intertwined nature of community, society, and politics. The relationships between individuals in the realm of politics form a constellation of shared values and goals that constitute the common, shared, and principled life of a community. In that sense, Aristotle’s classification of citizens as political actors is identical to a classification of citizens as social, *communal* actors.

If a citizenry is to be considered a community, it must share some collection of shared values or principles. When this idea is introduced, it can be temptingly interpreted, especially by partisans, as a requirement of agreement on some set of political issues within whatever Overton Window is contextually relevant.⁵ However, the shared values necessary for a community *do not* need to be specific, partisan policy positions—indeed, such policy positions would be too fickle to provide a substantive basis for a stable community. Instead, the shared principles of a political community should be broader and more abstract. John Rawls believed that political communities are united by a shared consensus about justice.⁶ The American political community could be said to be united by historically precedented values such as liberty, freedom, equality, and opportunity, as such ideals were among those embedded in American politics by our founding documents. In an even broader sense, a political community could be defined merely by a group of engaged citizens willing and able to use their individual agency to improve the polity in which they are a member. Importantly, whatever common values exist, a political citizenry is a community only when those values shape the political interactions between citizens and are valued as legitimate ideals that the work of politics should be oriented toward.

In order for a political community to be considered as such, common values must, as stated, shape the political interactions between citizens. In small political communities—ancient tribes, small town governments—such political interactions occur naturally

in everyday life. On the contrary, community-building political interactions do not occur naturally in the everyday life of a citizen of the modern nation state, as such states are simply too large for people to feel connected to the political process in their everyday social lives. Therefore, large polities require collaborative institutions in which citizens can come together and instantiate political community. John Patrick Coby said that “while the community *originates* for the sake of mere life, it *exists* for the sake of the good life.”⁷ Communities, then, need effective vehicles of the good life. They need institutions.

The most prominent institution of political community in the modern democracy is the popular election. Emilee Booth Chapman, in her book *Election Day*, examined the role of elections in fostering political community:

[V]oting makes salient the fact that modern democracy is a mass collective phenomenon. Voting is irreducibly something we do together. It serves as a reminder that our political agency depends on joining together with others. The practice of popular voting, then, especially when it conforms to the ideal of approximately universal participation, provides an occasion for the community to express its commitment to democracy’s core values of political equality and popular sovereignty, and for citizens to affirm and participate in this expression.⁸

Voting is an inherently collaborative undertaking. Citizens vote “not just to express a political opinion, but to make a shared decision,”⁹ a decision that could not be made without the involvement of most members of the political community. Voting is also the main democratic avenue through which the community can exercise its power to create the good that it exists to create. But voting is not the only institution that can serve to instantiate community in a political citizenry. Citizens’ assemblies,¹⁰ civic education, presidential debates, social media discourse, and a free press are all institutions that also serve to identify shared values and act on those values for the betterment of the polity. They serve to bring citizens into engagement with politics

and with each other, and thus bring about the shared life and meaningful interpersonal relations that define what it means to be a community.

Political communities can not be merely reduced to the sum total of their citizens—communities transcend their members. The political community takes a group of individuals united by the cold bonds of citizenship and connects them with the warm tethers of shared ideals and opportunities for interpersonal political engagement. It accepts the differing identities of its constituent members and confers back on them a common identity, an identity of inextricable relation to the other members of the community, an identity that makes possible the social preponderance of political values that drove Aristotle to name the democratic citizen as a “political animal.” It is created by institutions of collaborative citizenship, interpersonal engagement, and dissemination of free information, and is maintained by the interests of its members in using the political community to define the political future. In short: community is what bridges the gap between citizen and citizen, who were connected pre-community only by their relation to the state. It is what makes politics human.

Notes

1. Mary Catherine Baseheart, “Edith Stein’s Philosophy of Community,” *The Personalist Forum* 8, no. 1 (season-01 1992): 163–73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20708633>, 163.
2. See Baseheart, “Edith Stein’s Philosophy of Community,” 168.
3. Aristotle, *The Politics* (Penguin UK, 1981), 1253a.
4. πολιτικὸν is derived from πόλις, the Greek word for “city.”
5. The Overton Window of a certain political context refers to the spread of policy positions that are generally accepted by society as legitimate options; see “The Overton Window,” Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2019, <https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow>.
6. James W. Nickel, “Rawls on Political Community and Principles of Justice,” *Law And Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (May 1990): 205–16, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00142834>, 206.
7. John Patrick Coby, “Aristotle’s Four Conceptions of Politics,” *Government: Faculty Publications*, Smith College (1986), https://scholarworks.smith.edu/gov_facpubs/40, 13–14; emphasis added.
8. Emilee Booth Chapman, *Election Day* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 14.
9. Chapman, *Election Day*, 160.
10. See Eva Talmadge, “Citizens’ Assemblies: Are They the Future of Democracy?,” *The Guardian*, February 1, 2023, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/feb/01/citizens-assemblies-are-they-the-future-of-democracy.

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