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### Sporting Political Actors

Community centers are a hub of political activity. Although not every organization focuses on politics per se, the underlying social and cultural milieu reflects the political background of the neighborhood. On a very basic level, the “townhall spirit” of America’s democratic process mythologizes participatory democracy. From this foundation, participants’ personal experiences, local politics, and social demographics impact a program’s goals and implementation. My experience at one community center highlights the implicit political discourse flowing under the project’s everyday surface.

For my community experience, I worked at two institutions. This essay focuses on the first program: a local school’s physical education center. This program catered to local seniors and disabled people and coaches trained them in sports. The school was among the more prominent schools in the neighborhood, having played a large part in community efforts since the 1950s. The program itself was fairly new, having been developed within the last five years. Although the school had hosted “senior’s nights” for bingo or social functions, this program emphasized an active lifestyle for elderly folks. More recently, the school district has made an effort to reach out to disabled people and this program’s evolution was a manifestation of this outgrowth. The school received limited funds from the city to purchase and maintain equipment, hire coaches and specialists to oversee the activities, and a small amount for advertising and miscellaneous expenses.

As a volunteer, I worked closely with one coach. I had to familiarize myself with the modified rules and equipment to make the sports senior- and disabled-friendly. I was responsible for setting up equipment, watching the games, and cleaning up. I also had some minor administrative duties, such photocopying and mailing brochures, posting flyers, and assisting the players to and from the school grounds. As a non-native English speaker, I had to make sure my words and instructions were clear and concise for the hard-of-hearing, and I had to learn to keep my assignments organized and work areas clean.

Although a program devoted to seniors and disabled people seemed free of political entanglements, I learned that politics underlined much of the program's execution. On a local level, the program was part of a platform to rescue a candidate from a troubled campaign. He promised to allocate funds to enhance social programs for the disadvantaged if he was elected. The program itself is corruption free, runs smoothly, and seems free of controversy; nevertheless, its origins did have a shady component.

On a larger political level, the program tries to bring seniors and the disabled back into the community. Long marginalized in a youth-oriented and very mobile nation, seniors and disabled people have felt left out of the political conversation. The program affirms the American process of participatory democracy built on the local level by caring for those disadvantaged groups. Seniors and disabled people, in turn, feel they have a stake in the system, appreciate the Powers-that-be who have committed resources toward them, and are compelled to support the status quo.

Seniors especially feel empowered in having a sports center they can call their own. Throughout my stay in the program, I noticed a lack of younger people—either relatives or friends—who came to watch the elderly partake and cheer them on. From these observations,

and from the conversations I overhear, seniors feel devalued in a larger society that places greater emphasis on youth. Although most restaurants, shopping malls, and other public spaces are senior- and disabled-accessible, many of these places are designed to cater to younger adults or young families. For example, at the school's regular sporting events, the crowds and atmosphere are more conducive to teenagers and their parents: seniors or people with disabilities comprise a distinct minority.

At the senior center, the roles are reversed: coaches, administrative personnel, and volunteers all cater to their needs. This senior-friendly environment affirms their self-worth. Here, seniors can relive past glories (many of them had played sports in their own youths), social network with their peers, and not worry about "cramping" the enjoyment of young people. Indeed, I have heard many seniors express their approval of having a personal space and many of them build their weekly schedules around the program.

Among their peers, they feel they can freely express themselves: many are nostalgic for "the good old days" before social taboos—homosexuality, miscegenation, and secularism entered the public discourse. Their life histories have made the majority of white seniors socially conservative: during their recreational downtimes between games, they do not have to worry about political correctness and jargon. Here, the program's confined space affirms their social positions among their peers. Not all of the seniors are in accord: few African-Americans and Latinos are nostalgic for the Civil Rights struggles of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, social space and the participatory nature of the sports allow them to ban together in a demonstration of "senior power." Seniors—with their disposable income and visible media presence—can channel this strength outside the program as a strong constituency.

Similarly, for many disabled people, having a center allows them to be themselves. Everyday life outside the program places their disabilities in a public spotlight, where many people are sympathetic, but their empathy may seem condescending to the disabled. Here, however, their handicaps become merely an obstacle to overcome. Like the Horatio Alger myth of the boy who overcame hardships to live the American Dream, disabled clients use sports as a tool to confirm their own success stories. Even if they strike out or fumble the ball, the efforts give them a feeling of empowerment. This physical activism has the potential to translate to political power outside the program.

As a volunteer, I witnessed many of the clients' sense of accomplishment. Before the program, I regarded people with physical handicaps with compassion, but also some pity. I thought that they resented having physical ailments that prevented them from performing daily activities with the ease of "normal" people. My stint at the program, however, has given me insight into their potential as political players. Far from being passive players, disabled people have formed networks of solidarity and support. One woman had legs that prohibited her from rounding the bases in a softball game. On my last day, she finally did make it to the home plate, both her team and the opposing team burst into mad applause. As friends, and as a potential political group, handicaps can become signifiers of strength.

On a practical level, seniors and disabled people can apply many of the exercises to their daily lives. However, from a political perspective, programs that cater to specific demographic groups also pave the way for political agency as well. From a local standpoint, a program allows communities to care for marginalized and disadvantaged people, affirming the building blocks of American participatory democracy. From the perspective of the clients, the program gives them a personal space in which they are the prime actors. Their achievements and physical progress

endows them with a group solidarity that can translate to the voting booths. Even though I worked in the program, I was a friendly outsider from the players. Nevertheless, in the grander scheme of American democracy, I shared in their victories as well.

