

The Nature of the People's Power

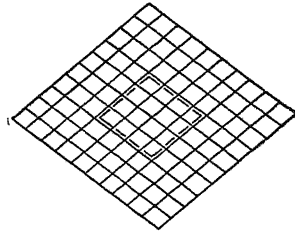
THE COMPLEXITY OF GOVERNMENT begins with the complexity of the individual. The very citizen who expects national government to be simple is himself a physical, psychological, political complexity. His life is a sort of working agreement between his various aspects. He has contradictory opinions and emotions; he has different degrees of belief and feeling; and these beliefs and feelings change. John Citizen will not trust fully any Gallup poll of his own individual sentiments; he knows, somehow, that there are many imponderables. Given some change in circumstance, some mild sentiment may become a passion or vice versa. Nor will he always know what change in circumstance affected him. If John Citizen worried about his own complexity and his own methods of making decisions as he worries about political complexity and the methods of making decisions in government, we should have a nation of psychoanalysts going about greeting one another: "You are nuts. How am I?"

John Citizen: An Intimate View

Usually John Citizen is relatively radical on some points and relatively reactionary on others. But his sentiments tend to bulk around a personal center of gravity between these two extremes. Each sentiment in turn has its more radical and more conservative aspects, but has a center of gravity around which the various aspects of that sentiment tend to group. He cannot do with respect to any one thing just what he wishes to do, because others of his sentiments qualify that desire. A sentiment, then, may appear as a sort of diamond-shaped molecule made up of smaller diamond-shaped atoms which are aspects of that sentiment, the more radical atoms being at the left, the more conservative ones at the right, the bulk clustering around a small central diamond which serves more or less as a center of gravity for that particular sentiment. That small diamond

describes how he believes or feels typically on that particular matter.

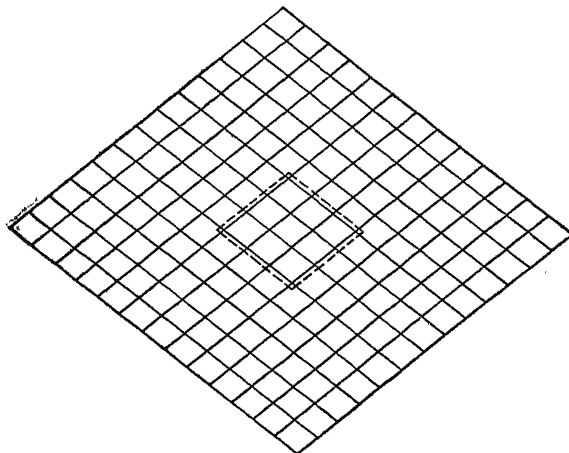
As a matter of fact, he is not utterly consistent or stable with regard to single sentiments. The atoms move and in turn change the



One of John Citizen's Sentiments

location of the sentiment diamond. The dotted lines represent the area on a sentiment spectrum within which in practice his sentiment will fluctuate.

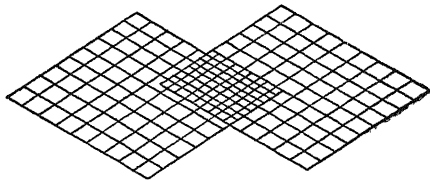
John Citizen as a person and as a voter is a body of such sentiments, some of them rather radical, some rather conservative. He may be represented by a much bigger diamond, made up of smaller sentiment diamonds. As a person he is not utterly consistent or stable or petrified, and again there are dotted lines to show his center of gravity. As his beliefs, judgments, feelings, and sentiments change, his center of gravity moves with respect to the general public-opinion spectrum,



John Citizen as a Composition of His Various Sentiments

but the feelings reassemble as a diamond, and it represents what he generally believes, feels, and does, and how he votes.

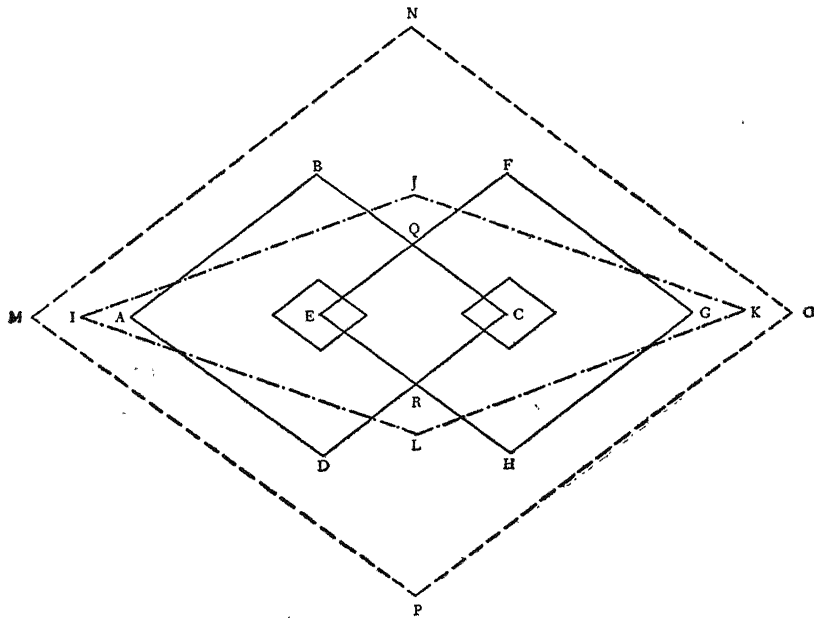
John Citizen Diamond has many uncertainties. He has some diffi-



Mr. and Mrs. John Citizen

culty about getting himself to do what he feels he should do. In this he resembles the Negro farmer who responded to urgings to attend a short course on better farming with "Laws, Marse Boss, Ah knows bettah now than Ah does." But he does have a center of gravity, which is a sort of working agreement with himself.

When he marries, his situation is further complicated. There then are two Diamonds, each complex, in a new, special working and living relationship. They may be relatively close to each other in the



general scale of sentiment and traits, but the center of one is not the center of the other; there is a new and distinct center which represents their center of gravity as a couple and the basis of their agreement as a family.

Mrs. John Citizen never does just as her pressure-group husband thinks he wishes her to do ("There's no way to understand women"), and he never does just as his pressure-group wife wishes him to do ("Men are like that, I guess"). But somehow a balance is established between them. They *affect* each other, but do not exactly *control* each other. When they have a flock of little Diamonds, the situation becomes more complicated, but the family still has a center of gravity.

Altogether too few of our people seem to understand that this is the nature of the political universe, that democratic government is something *affected* by all citizens and interest groups, but not specifically or precisely *controlled* by any of them.

The People and Their Parties

The American political universe is made up of various voting groups containing at present some sixty-odd million John Citizen diamonds plus again as many people who either cannot vote or do not. These latter are satellites; they always exert an influence on the spectrum location of the various group diamonds, but it is never certain precisely what the strength or character of the influence will be. Our political universe may then be symbolized by three great diamonds, each in motion within a fourth larger, universal diamond representing the totality of the social forces within our body politic. Two of the big diamonds represent the two major parties; the third denotes our large body of unattached or independent voters and the members of our union parties. (See chart on page 137.)

Let us say that diamond ABCD represents the Democratic Party, the diamond EFGH the Republican Party, the diamond IJKL the membership of the minor parties and all our independent voters. The Democratic diamond has, for reasons of political symbolism, been placed at the left of the Republican diamond. Diamond IJKL has, advisedly, been drawn so that it covers virtually the whole present political spectrum, extending both farther to the left than the diamond for the liberal party and farther to the right than that for the con-

servative. Each diamond has a center of gravity representing its base of agreement. As suggested by the size and shape of diamond IJKL, there is in the minor-party independent-voter group little agreement and little unity, but great power to contract and expand. Each party *tends* to nominate presidential candidates representing a position somewhere near its center of gravity. If the millions of small diamonds within the larger diamonds are visualized not as being inanimate and identical but as representing forces—or heads or hearts or spleens—rather than simply noses, one will begin to get at the reality of the political process. Organized groups are more powerful than unorganized individuals. The parties themselves are the great diamonds because they are organized forces. Within the great diamonds the normal distribution which gives the diamond its shape is a distribution of forces and not simply a distribution of inert bodies. Voters *can* exert new pressure because voters must be bid for. Yet the forces are strongly influenced by the nature of the political process to act in the manner symbolized by the center of voting gravity.

Party ABCD and party EFGH bid for support of voters in the competing diamond, and more particularly for voters in diamond IJKL. The national vote consists of the total number of votes cast by the citizens in all three diamonds and it determines the center of gravity for the whole political universe, represented by the diamond MNOP. This center identifies the base of agreement of the national majority. Its location will depend mainly upon the relative strength shown by the two major party diamonds, but it will be somewhere within the area of the diamond EQRC. A part of this central diamond is the area within which leadership has some choice, some discretion, some determining power. The whole central diamond represents the whole government with its historical and accepted as well as its newer and more controversial functions. This is the area from which it is possible for national leadership to maintain a position of authority. For the ins are trying desperately to stay in; the outs are trying desperately to evict them. The political process goes on daily, not simply during campaigns. The sensitivity of officials to signs of approval or disapproval, to symptoms of unrest and defection, is vastly more constant and acute than citizens believe. It may be that officials will seem unmoved by a chorus of pain from visitors in their offices. Appear-

ances can be misleading. The officials are listening to these voices and to other voices not quite so near; they are straining to catch significant overtones and undertones. For they must dance to a tune of which this office effort comprises only a part of a measure.

Noses count in politics, but noises do, too. Big Noises count extra. Individual leadership is always an important factor. Organized groups invariably exert an influence disproportionate to their number. The nature of the forces in politics and the kind of leadership we have in politics is for our citizenry to determine. But there is more political democracy in America today than ever before. The politicians know it. The voters *can* determine anything about which they feel deeply enough. They can and consistently do stop anything about which even a fairly small minority feels deeply, for a small minority can change a majority to a minority.

Politics has been defined as "the art of the possible." Citizens determine in a general way what it is possible for government to do. Collectively they affect policy to the point of determining it, but they determine it in a way that is not like the determination any individual or pressure group wishes. The determinations are a composite. The determinations are most nearly made by that small number of people who, depending upon how they are persuaded, change a minority into a majority. If 12,600 voters had voted *against* Roosevelt for Governor of New York in 1928 instead of voting for him, the history of the country would have been different. Those few votes let him stand out as victor when a national landslide defeated Al Smith for the Presidency; they put him in a position to lead his party in 1932. Small bodies of voters, particularly in politically strategic political sectors, may have extraordinary influence. And there is always the possibility that new political enterprise may be able to launch a movement of great significance.

Problems of Political Leadership

For these reasons the power of leaders in high places in Washington is a power definitely limited and quite immediately determined by the bounds of a public sentiment representing an acquiescent majority and similarly limited by the position of any substantial minority which might threaten the conversion of the majority into

a minority. The ear-to-the-ground posture actually is constant with Washington officialdom, in spite of the fact that the visitor to the capital rarely sees it and sincerely doubts it. The explanation is that the visitor simply does not know the art. Interpreting ground sounds *is* an art—and a most difficult and intricate one.

The individual caller is viewed by an official as an individual caller. Requests for favors and expressions of individual or group self-interest are received as just what they are; for the most part they are taken for granted in advance. Minor officials will give them due and orderly consideration, having regard for procedures established to deal with other individuals and groups and for refining or otherwise improving those procedures. What top officials look for and listen for is the sign of a widespread reaction different from what had previously been expected. If a widespread reaction is genuine, it is given prompt and serious attention. Artificially “drummed up” expressions are quickly detected and discounted. How widespread is a sentiment? How real? How deep? How lasting? How much does it extend to others beyond those whose interest and reaction were known and weighed in advance? These are the questions top officials are continually asking. Does the person crying alarm know a wolf when he sees one? Does he cry “Wolf!” when he sees one and not otherwise? Are the sentries on the Hill crying alarm because they have seen a wolf, or are they only going through guard drill? I have seen a barrage of thousands of telegrams leave a department unimpressed and unmoved. I have seen an important group of thirty or forty members of Congress try to bring pressure on a department but leave it undisturbed. On the other hand I have seen a major policy reversed after a single phone call from a single member of Congress. And I once spent \$75,000 investigating a matter brought to my attention by an anonymous letter.

The persistence of a complaint or a sentiment gives it added weight—and should. An individual aggrieved over some specific transaction may be further offended if his first letter fails to get the type of consideration he seeks, but he will serve both himself and the government if he persists in his point and shows the depth of his sentiment. In larger movements of public opinion, persistence is one of the most definite measures of the reality and importance of a popular senti-

ment. In a democracy sentiments demonstrate their fitness by survival. Many stories are flurries of a day or of a week in American politics. The skilled politician or political administrator recognizes most of them as such, quickly and certainly. Occasionally, however, a flurry surprises him by turning into a storm. When it does, he must change his tactics, and that immediately. He dare not treat a storm as he treats a flurry.

It is a special function of government and of leadership to be foresighted. Foresight contributes greatly to success in politics. A leader fortified with reliable information can play confidently to basic popular needs, knowing that time is on his side; he can disregard a political flurry with equanimity when he knows that a heavier wind is gathering in the opposite quarter. What the public first interprets as an apparently inept political response may well turn out because of foresight to have been the soundest and the wisest politics. The amount of foresight leaders can exercise is limited only by their own capacity to see ahead; the amount they can afford not to have is limited by their popular constituency.

There are times when the power of leadership is extremely small. It is doubtful, for example, whether the course of the country would have been substantially different from 1920 to 1932 if the Democrats had been in office instead of the Republicans. The government during those years was a pretty precise expression of national sentiment and, because of the nature of that sentiment, would have been much the same with other men as Presidents or with another party in power. The classic speech of Claude Bowers nominating Al Smith in Houston in 1928 was made four years too soon for the wrong man; it was the ideal speech for presenting Roosevelt four years later.

The year 1933 was politically the direct opposite of all the 1920's. It was a time when the power of leadership was enormous. Ordinarily what is possible for leaders is sharply limited and pretty definitely determined by popular sentiments. Normally, political change is a product of grass-roots change, of education, discussion, development, and the logic of events. But there come moments in history when the logic of events causes the people to turn to a leader and to give him a broad charter. What he does must be in response to their sense of need. What he does is rooted in the opportunity they give

him and is admittedly subject to established processes of political control. But in those rare moments leadership has extraordinary discretion and scope.

Yet even these moments come because of changes in basic popular sentiments. When they have passed, the processes of refinement and adjustment begin their work and the people continue in their normal way with the development of new political sentiments.