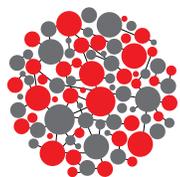


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RE-IMAGINING A 21ST CENTURY DEMOCRACY



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RE-IMAGINING A 21ST CENTURY DEMOCRACY

Introduction to the Journal

It has become in vogue to talk about how the very premise of democracy is at the precipice. We are seeing an emergence of authoritarian leaders emerge throughout the world, undercutting citizen participation as they consolidate power. Polarization has impeded individuals interacting with people who do not agree with them. The concept of a free and fair press is under question and duress, both from leaders who question the media's veracity, and citizens who increasingly accumulate news within echo chambers. The economic and political inequality that has become pervasive has caused citizens to question whether democracy is actually the best way for a country to govern itself. The result is that individuals are abdicating their ability to participate in the democratic process itself.

This is both an American and a global phenomenon. Regardless of our political opinions, we can agree that, perhaps more so than any other time in history, democracy is at risk. And this is not just from an engagement perspective: the values and behaviors that define a deep democracy, like agreeing on a set of facts and expertise, and engaging with people we disagree with, are increasingly in short supply.

When solutions are provided to combat the democratic malaise of our times, many offer top-down structural solutions. We need to combat the scourge of money in politics. We need more honorable politicians, who govern with integrity. We need to end the practice of gerrymandering, in which Congressional districts are drawn up in biased ways that allow one party to consolidate its rule.

This is all true. We do need structural reforms. But at the same time, across this country, and across the world, the fragility of democracy in the current moment has caused a proliferation of innovative, citizen-centric ideas to emerge. Communities and individuals have recognized new and innovative ways to engage in democratic practices, returning the concept to its true roots: the local level. After all, democracy is defined as a system of government in which the individual reigns supreme. If we want to learn how to re-invigorate our democracy, we need to learn from people engaging in democratic practices at the local level, rather than rely on grasstops solutions to the challenges of the day.

“Re-Imagining a 21st Century Democracy” is our attempt to highlight some of these bright-spots in democratic innovation. Over the last year, Brown University's inaugural Higher Education in Democratic Practice initiative has attempted to both discern some of the larger challenges in our democracy, while highlighting and providing specific, locally driven solutions to help rebuild the foundations of our democratic fabric. This journal, in its inaugural version, furthers this effort by showcasing a diverse array of promising democratic-focused initiatives.

In addition to our principal goal of highlighting locally sourced initiatives that successfully promote democratic participation, we also wanted the journal to encourage collaboration between unlikely

bedfellows. Often times, we hear about scholars whose research provides concrete ideas on democratic revitalization. We hear about organizations and practitioners who are doing the hard work of engaging citizens in democracy on the ground. And we hear about young people who are driving change in their community. But we rarely hear about these efforts occurring in coordination.

This journal is an attempt to bring these diverse stakeholders together. We wanted to demonstrate scholars working with students, practitioners working with students- all working together to improve democratic values and behaviors on the local level.

We sent out the call for proposals widely, asking for submissions that would promote a specific idea or practice that has promoted democratic values and behavior in an innovative local way- or a plan for such an idea. We asked for some qualitative or quantitative evaluation, or discussion for future assessment, of the intervention. And we required some sort of partnership between diverse stakeholders.

We received a diverse array of entries from around the world. Through a rigorous selection process, we found the top 12 entries. And we worked with each group of stakeholders to refine, clarify, and improve their ultimate entries.

What follows are the very best of the ideas we received. We're incredibly excited to showcase examples of what a 21st century, citizen-centric, locally-focused democracy can look like. We have examples of universities engaging their students in processes to solve local issues, communities using digital media in new ways to crowdsource common community problems, and solutions, and ideas of how museums can both honor the past, and incorporate present conflicts into their work.

The late former President George H. W. Bush once remarked, "There isn't a problem in America that isn't being solved somewhere." Paraphrasing his remarks, we can find solutions to the thorniest problems in our democracy in communities across the world.

We hope that this journal can help to catalyze a broader conversation. Not just on the challenges inherent in our modern democracy. Those conversations are omnipresent. But rather, on how we can collectively move forward. Our 21st century democracy may look a little different from the democracies of prior periods. But citizens, and communities, will be front and center. Take a look at some of the more promising ideas we have to build towards a stronger, more egalitarian, and more resilient 21st century democracy. We hope you'll be as inspired as we were in reading these entries.



THE RAMSEY COUNTY CIVIC PROJECT

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With invited critical feedback from Brett Grant, Director of Research, Voices for Racial Justice

Ramsey County, Minnesota, is at the center of the state's politics, home to its capital, Saint Paul, and thus its legislative, executive, and judiciary branches alongside countless state and local agencies. Yet Ramsey has the lowest voter-registration and voter-turnout levels in the state, due largely to three Saint Paul wards—5, 6, and 7—marked by concentrated poverty and disenchantment with government among their largely African-American, Southeast Asian-American, and Latino residents. The result is that Ramsey County receives fewer state resources than its population and needs merit, with consequences falling most heavily on poorer residents like those of Wards 5, 6, and 7.

To address this problem, concerned stakeholders have launched the Ramsey County Civic Project (RCCP): a collaboration between the County Commission and Elections Office, administrative and teaching leaders in select Saint Paul public high schools, local philanthropic and community organizations, and the University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development (CEHD). RCCP's purpose is not simply (or even primarily) to turn out voters, but rather to attack the root causes of residents' disaffection from government. Its initial organizers hope to do this by supporting residents' own efforts to make their schools and neighborhoods sites of civic inquiry and activity that compel attention from their public servants.

We plan to pursue this broad objective along two tracks. One involves linking school-based civics education more directly to students' lives, and empowering students to act on their learning in ways they devise and control. The other involves supporting and publicizing the efforts of residents to address community problems and achieve community goals, in part by facilitating non-hierarchical, face-to-face exchanges with their elected officials and other public servants.

In sum, RCCP aims to foster residents' sense of civic agency, their public visibility, and their interest in the connection between their own public work and the work of officials and institutions whom their votes could influence. In turn, we anticipate that residents will make voting a higher priority, and that officials and candidates will less frequently ignore the increased number of votes at stake. Most important, we hope to demonstrate that comparatively resource-rich institutions—whether nonprofits, universities, or arms of government—can be catalysts for civic renewal without dictating specific goals or solutions to disenfranchised communities.

What follows is our best effort, at the time of writing, to sketch a plan for RCCP that will a) attract the interest, input, and participation of the school administrators, teachers, students, and community members we hope will become our collaborators; b) meet the essential expectations of the County—which initially requested assistance with enhancing the relevance of its electoral functions for residents—and of the funders making this particular experiment possible; and c) allow for adaptation and improvisation as our knowledge is improved and our ownership diversified by the feedback, participation, and creativity of increasing numbers of residents.

Civic Learning in Schools

Civic agency is stymied across America. Major indices such as the National Conference on Citizenship's *America's Civic Health Index* and the University of Southern California's *Understanding America Study* reveal that civic skills, dispositions, opportunities, and activities are all in a state of decline. Their findings suggest that many citizens feel displaced from the center of self-government, relegated to the role of consumers rather than co-producers of public policy and political culture. Low-income communities and communities of color, such as those in Wards 5, 6, and 7, are particularly skeptical of the formal political process due to lack of attention and/or follow-through from candidates and officials. Consequently, such communities are often viewed, incorrectly, as political and civic vacuums by outsiders, who overlook the daily work of residents building shared cultural, social, and economic goods together.

Research strongly suggests that high-quality civic learning in schools is one of the best defenses against such civic decline and disenfranchisement. This is doubly fortunate, for such civic learning not only produces graduates with capacity and confidence to sustain, enhance, and advocate for their communities. It also *improves learning across all domains*, both by nurturing critical reflection and by disburdening students of fear and other negative distractions through productive confrontation of tensions and differences. In other words, high-quality civic learning augments students' personal power to influence their world *and* helps them develop the wisdom to use that power for good, by consulting and cooperating with others.

Civics in the Schools Institute

Because the quality of learning outcomes (civic or otherwise) depends on both design and delivery, two of us (Anderson and Biel) have developed an intensive five-day summer institute for Saint Paul middle and high school social studies teachers eager to enhance their standards-based civics curricula with additional student-responsive and student-guided elements. The CIS Summer Institute (Civics in the Schools) focuses on using culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally relevant topics to promote civic skills and civic agency as part of a standards-based curriculum.

The C3 Framework

Central to CIS is the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards. The C3 is the collaborative product of fifteen professional organizations committed to the advancement of social studies education across the United States.¹ Its purpose is to help communities prepare young people for the 3 C's of college, career, and civic life. As the introduction states: "Now more than ever, students need the intellectual power to recognize societal problems; ask good questions and develop robust investigations into them; consider possible

¹ Specifically, the American Bar Association, American Historical Association, Association of American Geographers, Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, Center for Civic Education, Constitutional Rights Foundation, Chicago Constitutional Rights Foundation USA, Council for Economic Education, National Council for Geographic Education, National Council for History Education, National Council for the Social Studies, National Geographic Society, National History Day, Street Law, Inc., and World History Association.

solutions and consequences; separate evidence-based claims from parochial opinions; and communicate and act upon what they learn. And most importantly, they must possess the capability and commitment to repeat that process as long as is necessary.” In response to these needs, the C3 Framework provides educators and students with “strong tools for, and methods of, clear and disciplined thinking in order to traverse successfully the worlds of college, career, and civic life.”

The C3 Framework takes the form of an *Inquiry Arc*—a set of interlocking and mutually supportive ideas that frame the ways students learn social studies content. By focusing on inquiry, the framework emphasizes the disciplinary concepts and practices that support students as they develop the capacity to know, analyze, explain, and argue about interdisciplinary challenges in our social world. The four dimensions of the Framework’s inquiry arc include:

- developing questions and planning inquiry;
- selecting and applying appropriate tools and concepts from the social-science disciplines;
- gathering, evaluating, and synthesizing sources and evidence; and
- communicating conclusions and taking informed action.

The purpose of CIS is to help participants learn how to apply the C3 Framework to MN State Standards for Social Studies and—crucially—to do so while equipping and encouraging students to relate formal politics to their everyday lives.

Respectful Conversations in Schools

To assist them in helping students make such connections, participants will be trained in the Respectful Conversations in Schools (RCS) protocol, which is designed to provide teachers and students with a model for approaching controversial public issues. The protocol—a collaboration between Minnesota Civic Youth, the Minnesota Council of Churches, and CEHD—is designed to build empathy, respect, and mutual comfort among secondary students in order to permit discussion of topics that are meaningful, interesting, and perhaps even disturbing to students, but in different ways. Frankly but safely addressing such topics not only disburdens students’ working memory to free energy for learning, but also positively enhances their acquisition of concepts and skills relevant to Minnesota grade-level benchmarks in social studies.

Experiential Education for Educators

Adult learning, like that of young people, is enhanced by real-world contextualization and application. Thus the current plan for CIS includes two main experiential components. First, participants will visit the Minnesota State Capitol and James J. Hill House, where they will learn about the civic inquiry process used to analyze, collectively, an actual public controversy and solution.

Second, during the final morning of the institute, we plan to have participants engage with local elected officials to deepen their understanding of how these positions serve their communities. Discussion questions might include:

- What is your position responsible for?
- Why should people care?
- What are you currently working on?
- What should community members know about your position?

As of now, we have reserved the final afternoon for a) synthesizing learnings from the week; and b) developing action plans for applying the four dimensions of the C3 Framework to their current curricula as well as for incorporating both the framework and the Respectful Conversations in Schools model into future classroom lessons and activities.

School-Community Voting Days

We hope the activities described above (or versions of them) will equip teachers to energize students to think of themselves as civic agents and political actors. To enhance that work and connect it to the electoral process, we plan to cooperate with one participating high school in each of Wards 5, 6, and 7 to organize school-community voting days. These are two-phase events:

1. On Election Day 2018, 2019, and 2020, faculty, staff, students—voting-eligible and not—and their parents or other known elders will be invited to the school to cast ballots as a school community. Votes will be tabulated and reported in two simultaneous ways:
 - A. Votes cast by those persons registered in the precinct will be duly reported and counted in the official election results.
 - B. All votes by participants of *any age or legal status* will be tabulated and reported to the current authors and to the principal of the school in which they were cast.
2. Following Election Day, students trained in the RCS protocol will lead a discussion of their respective school-community's election results. During year one we anticipate that these discussions will involve students only, and be run on the RCS model either during class time or after school. During year two, we anticipate enough lead time, principal buy-in, and student interest to plan an evening event at each of the three sites, open to the wider school community and including a buffet dinner. For these events (should they occur):
 - A. Student organizers—supported by RCCP and school-based personnel—will digest the school-community voting results beforehand and determine for themselves how to explain them, invite discussion about them, and recruit their fellow students and their families/elders to participate.
 - B. RCCP personnel—especially County and UMN members and their colleagues—will use their institutional clout to encourage public officials to attend the school-community digests of the election as listeners and respondents rather than as speakers.

Restorative Justice in the Wards

Despite the inherent, independent value of improved civic learning, the scope of RCCP exceeds school hours and grounds. Civic learning is learning for public work. If the design and delivery of high-quality civic learning in schools is to have its greatest effect, student participants need to believe that their wider environment is one in which their civic knowledge, skills, and creativity are valued.

Unfortunately, too few residents of Wards 5, 6, and 7 feel valued or even recognized as civic agents. In these neighborhoods, civic disengagement and civic disenfranchisement go hand in hand. The causes of these twin phenomena are multiple, but prime among them is a decades-long legacy of mistrust and misunderstanding between public officials on one hand and communities of color on the other. This mutual disaffection creates a stubborn electoral paradox: citizens don't vote when candidates don't talk to them, but candidates don't talk to citizens who don't vote. This in turn creates a second vicious circle, in which fewer public resources are devoted to meeting the needs and sustaining the achievements of low-turnout communities, whose perceived stake in the institutions controlling such resources therefore further declines—along with the time, wealth, education, and economic power to influence resource distribution.

To help break the cycle of mistrust in a manner that empowers residents without demonizing public officials—which would only drive them farther away—one of us (Throntveit) is consulting with community organizations and CEHD colleagues to facilitate a series of *restorative justice dialogues* between residents and public officials. Such dialogues, as currently conceived, are not intended to facilitate consensus or even (at least initially) trust, which must be earned through actions. Instead, their aim is to foster the *empathy* upon which collaborative, trusting relationships must rest in order to prevent their infection by cynicism and manipulation.

The plan as of this writing is for experienced facilitators, connected with the Center for Restorative Justice and Peacemaking (CRJP) at CEHD's School of Social Work, to moderate one dialogue in each ward, and to train residents in each ward—including, ideally, students participating in the school-based phase of the project—to facilitate further dialogues. It will also be incumbent upon CEHD personnel—as well as RCCP's County and nonprofit organizers—to leverage their institutional clout to augment the voice of residents in calling for the participation of public officials in the dialogic process.

That process, as CRJP staff and affiliates have practiced it for decades, utilizes a “talking circle” format (inspired by the practices of the indigenous people of Minnesota) to create a safe and respectful space for collaborative learning about self and other. Its core aspirations are *egalitarianism*, manifest in the use of a talking piece passed around the circle to flatten the hierarchies that often emerge in conversations; and *fellowship*, manifest in the sharing of a meal among participants. The exact composition of each circle will reflect the input of neighborhood partners as well the unpredictable responses of the public officials they desire to engage and, above all, the residents of Wards 5, 6, and 7.

Should residents and public officials agree to this experiment, there is reason to hope for positive results. CRJP facilitators have worked with groups including the Saint Paul NAACP, Saint Paul Black Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, and Saint Paul Police Department, and not long ago advised and designed a successful reorganization of the city's police-community relations board that removed active officers from the ostensibly neutral body. These and similar efforts led the Ramsey County Attorney's Office to enlist CRJP personnel to facilitate restorative justice dialogues between the Archdiocese of Minneapolis-Saint Paul and victims of clergy sexual abuse.

Challenges

Careful readers will notice that much of the language of this article is tentative. As of this writing, the authors have received financial commitments from the County and from one major local funder, the Saint Paul Foundation, assuring that the school-based elements of RCCP will launch. Meanwhile, however, we await the decision of another local philanthropy that has expressed deep interest in and theoretical commitment to supporting restorative justice dialogues in the wards, but has not yet committed funding.

Ironically, the fuzzy funding context crystallizes a second and larger challenge. Money is hard to come by when the people it is meant to benefit have not yet “bought in.” But asking members of disadvantaged communities to “buy in” before funding is secured smacks of tokenism. “Write this grant proposal with us! Our interracial case will be so compelling!” Even the opportunities presented by preexisting relationships can pose challenges. CEHD, for instance, is lucky to have faculty who enjoy longstanding, trusting, collaborative relationships with individuals and organizations in Wards 5, 6, and 7. But “CEHD” is not a single person. Even if it was, the plan outlined above began as a direct response by one of the authors (CEHD’s Throntveit) to the concerns of another (Mansky) and other Ramsey County officials, and has thus far evolved in conversation and collaboration with people and institutions already within Throntveit’s relational orbit. Only slowly and imperfectly are the authors earning and incorporating the input of community partners rightly skeptical of their intentions or, more generously, their ability to transcend the structural biases of their institutions.

Conclusion

The challenges described above are big ones, and they are unlikely to be the only ones the Ramsey County Civic Project faces or will face. Still, we have hope that RCCP will make a substantial and positive difference in the lives of those residing in Saint Paul Wards 5, 6, and 7. And we have at least a vague idea of what such a difference would look like.

RCCP’s main proximate goal is an increased disposition to vote *due to* increased sense of civic agency among student, teacher, and community participants. To that end, we will survey participants before and after each program element in which they participate. We will also survey longer-term participants (those closely connected to our partner schools in Wards 5, 6, and 7) before and after the entire series of activities in which they engage. We will repeat this each of the three (academic) years 2018-2021 and compare results, looking for increases in disposition to vote and sense of political efficacy, as measured by personal historical and attitudinal self-reports. In the case of voting, we hope to see indications of electoral participation move closer to the state average. Our specific targets are to see 50% of participants registering increased disposition to vote and sense of political efficacy, and to see participants collectively surpass their Wards’ 2016 voter participation rates by 10% in the 2020 elections.

Yet the ultimate goal of RCCP is not to encourage voting. Rather, it is to learn about and publicize the civic lives, aspirations, and frustrations of communities to whom the purpose and payoffs of voting are rarely obvious, and about whom public servants are often ignorant, and to build relationships that will conduct such learning and publicity into wider channels of influence. Finally, the goal of RCCP is to affirm and support Ramsey County residents, especially young people, as *citizens* in the largest, truest sense: namely, people who invest in, depend on, and co-create the communities that structure and sustain their lives.

Each video included local celebrities and leaders sharing the importance of voting. These captivating media tools have assisted us in achieving our primary goal of creating awareness about the importance of voting and fulfilling your civic duties, even for young people. To increase awareness in a community where political apathy is high, and distrust in politics prevents civic action, videos included individuals who are known and admired by youth throughout Ward 7. While many youth in the targeted communities are untrustworthy of the political system at large, they do hold the individuals featured in the videos in high regard. We were able to redirect negative narratives related to politics by infusing positive imagery into the conversation of voting and civic engagement. Examples of the individuals who made cameos including well known community activists Veda Rasheed, Maleek Sneed, and Silas Grant; retired NFL player Josh Morgan; musician and actor Anwan “Big G” Glover (who is known for his role of “Slim Charles” in the HBO TV series *The Wire*), fashion designer Malik Jarrett; entertainment entrepreneur Le’Greg O. Harrison; ANC Commissioner Ebbon Allen; and motivational speaker Ciera Hosein. Hearing directly from them has definitely helped to awaken a spirit of empowerment in the youth. After watching the videos, they became less skeptical of our political system because they began to realize their own power.

Another primary goal of the G.O.A.V. initiative is to increase youth voter registration. During the June 2016 primary election, when compared to other Wards in the District, Ward 7 had the second lowest number of total ballots cast (10.65% of the total votes cast in D.C.),⁸ and during the November 2016 general election Ward 7 had the second lowest number of total ballots cast (10.7% of the total votes cast in D.C.).⁹ We hope to see a greater increase in those numbers this June, when the 2018 primary election takes place, and in November for the general election. Thus, the next step in the G.O.A.V. initiative has been to embark on a series of civic engagement sessions at local schools, recreation centers, and clubhouses with special guests and activities for youth. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) has conducted extensive research on youth civic engagement and offered concrete solutions to increase the youth vote. One of the most vital measures that increased encourages youth to vote is by interactive contact. One of the most effective ways to turn out voters is to implement high-quality, face-to-face conversations to urge them to vote. CIRCLE proposes that connecting with youth is very important as “young people who are contacted by an organization or a campaign are more likely to vote. Additionally, those who discuss an election are more likely to vote in it.”¹⁰ This method allows organizers to have a direct, positive impact on community members, who will, in turn, take direct action at the polls.

The community kickoff event was held in February 2018 at the Richard England Boys and Girls Club #14. Veda Rasheed began by addressing the crowd and connecting with the youth. She shared with those in the audience--which included youth, their families, and local leaders--how she became involved in local issues. A couple years ago, one of her son’s started experiencing issues at school, and she was determined to be an advocate for him. She quickly learned that her advocacy skills could be used to help others around her within her community as well. As a result, she hosted her inaugural Peace Rally in Ward 7 in 2016, and the second annual event in 2017. The audience was moved by her story and was even more delighted when she introduced a poet, Ciera Hosein, who performed a piece titled “Sega Genesis” that encouraged young people to pay less attention to games, and more attention to how they can impact

⁸ DC Board of Elections
https://www.dcboe.org/election/election_info/election_results/v3/2016/June-14-Primary-Election

⁹ DC Board of Elections
https://www.dcboe.org/election/election_info/election_results/v3/2016/November-8-General-Election

¹⁰ CIRCLE <https://civicyouth.org/quick-facts/youth-voting/>