

Local Civic Leaders: Facing Threats to Democracy in Communities

Democracy
Innovation



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The [National Civic League](#) aims to advance civic engagement to create equitable, thriving communities. We achieve this by inspiring, supporting and recognizing inclusive approaches to community decision-making. Founded in 1894 by a group of civic leaders that included Theodore Roosevelt and Louis Brandeis, the National Civic League is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization.

The [Center for Democracy Innovation](#) works to understand, test, and disseminate innovations that can make democracy more participatory, equitable, and productive. With long-time partners and new ones, we are exploring ways to scale, sustain, and measure democracy.

Executive Summary

By examining the work of local civic leaders, we can get a better sense of what is happening to American democracy, including the threats we face and what we might do about them.

Local civic leaders include government officials and staff as well as many other kinds of traditional and nontraditional leaders who are mobilizing, organizing, and facilitating democratic activities in both urban and rural places. They work on a wide range of issues, including housing affordability, precarious employment, inflation and costs of living, accessible transportation, good education and learning environments, quality public and recreation spaces, access to emergency services, and healthy food options. Local civic leaders strive for equitable inclusion in decision-making.

Based on our interviews and other research, we believe that local civic leaders are:

- A diverse set of people, representing different professions and walks of life, spread out all over the country, and looking for better connections with their counterparts in other communities;
- Showing tremendous creativity and resilience in the face of many threats to democracy;
- Able to operate in a time of political polarization by working with diverse groups/viewpoints;
- Wanting to collect more data and measure the impact of their work more effectively, but in most cases lacking the tools, access, staffing, and skills to do so;
- Increasingly focused on advancing racial equity, but taking different tacks on how they reach underrepresented groups, approach political institutions and measure success;
- Adept at understanding the daily needs and direct motivations of potential participants (rather than just appealing to residents' sense of civic duty), but doing this based on immediate relationships, and lacking the support to do this in more scalable, sustainable ways; and
- Wanting to engage larger, more diverse numbers of people, on a more regular basis, in order to spread the individual benefits and political power of their work.

Recommendations that might help support and advance the work of local civic leaders:

- Greater collaboration: locally, between leaders trying to engage residents in different settings and issue areas, and at the state and national levels;
- More [support from local institutions](#), given that engagement requires time and skill, and there seldom seems to be enough people (paid or unpaid) to carry out the work;
- More concerted efforts to take stock of the [civic infrastructure](#) - networks, organizations, grassroots groups, past history of engagement, local online spaces - of their communities;
- Tools and processes that will help them [measure](#) processes, outcomes, and attitudes;
- More effective, scalable tools and approaches for reaching out to community members, particularly among [under-represented groups](#);
- More [versatile engagement processes](#) that can help them interact with people 'where they are,' especially in hyperlocal online spaces, homes, and workplaces.

Introduction

“Everyday politics rests on the conviction that creative civic experiments can renew democracy through negotiation and collaboration, focusing energy on solving problems and creating public goods. This is rooted in local cultures where people encounter each other on a regular basis, not owned or controlled by professional politicians. Community-rooted politics is an alternative to politics as usual and reconnects citizens and public life. To highlight the creative, educative, and productive dimensions of politics, public work can be defined as sustained effort by a mix of people who solve public problems or create goods, material or cultural, of general benefit. Public work is visible, open, and carried out by multiple people. Practices of public work profoundly impact political culture.”

Harry C. Boyte. 2004. *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

This report shines a spotlight on the capacities that local civic leaders demonstrate, and the challenges they face, as they support public work in communities across the United States.

David D. Chrislip and Ed O’Mally in [*For the Common Good: Redefining Civic Leadership*](#) remind us that civic leaders are not only government officials or staff working with members of the public, they also include many other kinds of traditional and nontraditional leaders. Local civic leaders include faith leaders, librarians, nonprofit directors, community development workers, community activists, and business leaders, among others.

In [*Four Threats: Recurring Crises in American Democracy*](#), Suzanne Mettler and Robert Lieberman use the plight of local leaders for part of their analysis of the four threats they name: political polarization, economic inequality, conflict over “who belongs” in the polity, and excessive executive power. Building on Carolyn Hendriks, Selen Ercan and John Boswell’s [*Mending Democracy: Democratic Repair in Disconnected Times*](#) (2020), we consider local civic leaders crucial for understanding how everyday civic engagement can renew democratic life in America.

The work of local civic leaders involves different issues and places. They are up-close observers of political polarization, racism, and economic inequality, and they are on the front lines of many efforts to address these challenges. Local civic leaders are witnesses to whether and how these threats impact local decision-making, and how they intersect with other trends like technological changes and the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Our research consisted of 15 semi-structured interviews with a diverse array of local civic leaders. One of the main threads across these conversations was that they have a wealth of lived and professional experiences that help them engage with harder-to-reach populations and across political divides. Local civic leaders thus have different types of expertise to draw from in identifying the

motivations people bring to public life, and they know how to describe public issues in ways that will bring a range of residents to the table.

Some of the reasons for the success of local civic leaders are that they are very clear about serving all people regardless of their political attachments. By being clear that they are non-partisan, local civic leaders can build trust with cross-sections of members of the public they engage. Local civic leaders create open as well as intimate spaces to provide room for deep conversations that encourage multiple perspectives. Moreover, local civic leaders strive to uplift people and communities through training opportunities and providing access to important resources and services. While striving to bring people into government processes is a focus of some, there are others that commonly focus on systemic issues by mobilizing people, notably youth, around issues of race and equity.

The contexts in which these leaders work differ; they include providing public services to broader populations as part of governments, supporting equity-seeking communities on the ground through non-profits and engaged residents, and bridging networks that bring organizations together under one roof. Only in some cases do these efforts align. In many other instances there is a lack of awareness of each other. We found that in many cases, local civic leaders are:

- Wanting to collect more data and measure the impact of their work more effectively, but in most cases lacking the tools, access, staffing, and skills to do this;
- Increasingly focused on achieving equity in outcomes, not just processes, but struggle with connecting racial, ethnic and linguistic groups to sustainable public resources;
- Adept at understanding the daily needs and direct motivations of potential participants (rather than just appealing to residents' sense of civic duty), but doing this intuitively and on the basis of immediate relationships, and lacking the capacity to take a more scientific or scalable approach;
- Wanting to engage larger, more diverse numbers of people, on a more regular basis, in order to spread the individual benefits and political power of their work, but in most cases lacking the tools, staffing, and skills to do this.

The democracy-saving and enhancing capacities of these leaders - as well as the weaknesses and limitations they face - can be instructive for all kinds of efforts to make democracy more inclusive, participatory, and equitable. This report examines how local leaders are defending democracy in five ways: advancing social justice and systemic change; building bridging networks; plugging people into public services; augmenting civic participation in institutions and processes; and deepening civic conversations.

Methodology

We wanted to explore questions related to how local civic leaders are faring, during a global pandemic, a more polarized political environment, and a changing technological landscape. How do they understand their role in their community? What barriers do they face? In what ways are they succeeding, and do they provide unique lessons for others to learn from?

We conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews, ranging from 30-60 minutes, with a wide range of local civic leaders from across the United States. For a list of the participants and the questions we asked them, see Appendix A and B. We used a combination of drawing upon National Civic League network partners and a snowball approach to find a suitable series of contacts to interview. For example, the Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation provided the contact details of two of their fellows from the Love Your Block program, the International City/County Management Association directed us to two city managers, and the Institute for Citizens and Scholars introduced us to three of their youth leaders.

Overall, the pool of interviewees represented a broad range of demographic diversity, including age, gender, race, and geography. They included civic leaders from Tukwila, Washington, Oakland, California, Montevallo, Alabama, North Port, Florida, West Chicago, Illinois, Erie, Pennsylvania, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Albany, New York. The group included eleven women, four young adults, and six people of color.

In addition to geography and demographic diversity, we selected people based on their broad range of experiences. Their different contextual and professional experiences led to a set of overlapping themes that capture how civic leaders work to enhance democracy. The profiles of the local civic leaders we interviewed reminds us of the ecosystem of democratic practices that make up civic life - and which are in some cases left out of the discourse in democratic theory and analysis, which tends to prioritize single models and practices.

Depending on their context, each of these leaders offers their own lens on civic opportunities and challenges. We spoke with librarians because libraries are at the front line of democracy, particularly because they provide services to all members of a community, including those who are homeless. We interviewed social advocacy organizations because they place an emphasis on lived experience and people who are mobilizing to elevate historically marginalized communities. We interviewed elected officials and city managers because of their formal authority, policymaking responsibilities, and management of public services. We also spoke with faith leaders because their organizations can offer important avenues for people to come together to build community.

Creative Forms of Civic Leadership

The people we interviewed demonstrate many different forms of public work and creative civic leadership. They vary in the issues they work on, the populations they work with, the assumptions they make about the political system, and the ways they blend dialogue and action.

Some of these leaders are mobilizing civic participation to make progress on a particular issue, such as intergenerational engagement between seniors and young people, equal accessibility of services to rural and urban communities, and encouraging voter participation. Others are addressing multiple issues at the same time or trying to set up ongoing opportunities for communities to address one issue after another, as they arise.

In some cases, these leaders are working proactively to engage sectors of the population that have been marginalized in local decision-making. Other leaders are trying to serve the whole population in all its diversity. Either way, these leaders are pushing back against efforts to “limit who belongs in the political community” like the ones Mettler and Lieberman describe in *Four Threats*.

Assumptions and attitudes about the system are another difference among the local civic leaders we interviewed. Some describe their work as collective action that builds on social justice movements opposing traditional powerbrokers. Others are focused on building bridges between different viewpoints and groups of people. Some are more explicit about trying to create new systems of governance that are more inclusive and participatory. Finally, some are trying to get more people involved in traditional forms of civic participation.

Most of the leaders we spoke with believe in “thick” forms of engagement (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015) that prioritize learning, listening, and deep conversation in small groups though some also use “thin” forms of engagement providing civic opportunities for individuals (like voting, signing petitions, or rating and ranking ideas online). A few of the interviewees characterize their work as being about dialogue and deliberation, and a few emphasize the importance of acting (through policy change and actions by citizens), but the largest number say that both talk and action are critical.

The table below is a snapshot of the ways in which these leaders carry out their work based on five themes:

1. Advancing Social justice and Systemic Change
2. Building Bridging Networks
3. Plugging People into the Public Services
4. Augmenting Civic Participation in Formal Institutions and Processes
5. Deepening Civic Conversations

Table 1: The Work of Local Civic Leaders

Themes	Organizations	Example Initiatives
Advancing Social justice and Systemic Change	BAY Peace, Oakland, CA Kentucky Student Voice Team Philly BOLT	Community-based art School (race/ethnic) climate surveys Community leadership training
Building Bridging Networks	Bridge Alliance - local affiliates Future Coalition Oak Valley Baptist Church	Citizen Connect Youth Direct Action Fund Community Covenant
Plugging People into the Public Services	Love Your Block Program- Albany, NY and Erie, PA Topeka Public Library	Undocumented Volunteer recognition Rural MiFi
Augmenting Civic Participation in Formal Institutions and Processes	League of Women Voters of Illinois Equity Policy in Tukwila, WA	Voter Service Intergenerational Program
Deepening Civic Conversations	All	Healing Circulos Living Room Conversations Civic awareness series Neighborhood association and library dialogues on community diversity Co-designing youth programming Strategic planning public engagement Equity policy public engagement Candidate forums

Pivoting During the Pandemic

Every organization that conducts civic and community activities was forced to pivot during the pandemic. Much of this shift entailed introducing digital forms of communications. The forced and abrupt transition to digital activities was a double-edged sword: in some instances, it created barriers to bringing people together for work that is best done in person, and in other instances it opened opportunities to restructure core missions and create more accessibility and inclusion.

The Oak Valley Baptist Church took the pandemic as an opportunity to revisit what it meant to be a 'Church,' and to provide service when in-person conglomerations were no longer available. On one hand, they reminded the community that religious service can be replicated at the individual level, such that no external force, including a pandemic, can reduce the ability of worship to take place. On the other hand, the Church took the opportunity to rework its own space and make it more digitally accessible. For example, they now have Zoom rooms with 72-inch screens that allow for hybrid meetings and public service. More than this they took the opportunity to make changes to their space and operations in ways that they wouldn't have been able to do prior to the health crisis. Some things that were previously deemed critical to their operations became less important, and the Church took the time to ask questions about how best to operate (Interview, Pastor, Oak Valley Baptist Church/ City Council Member, City of Oakridge, TN).

At the same time, the reality is that in-person work is vital to many civic participation organizations. In the case of Future Coalition, the inability to assemble hindered their ability to do the type of work that requires bringing people together in shared, public spaces to collectively operate at their best capacity. Before the pandemic, there was a lot of work put into planning in-person mobilizations. This kind of foundational work was much more based on direct action. Therefore, while there were certain positives that came from the pandemic, not being able to meet in person kind of derailed the momentum, and in some ways, they haven't recovered (Interview, Emanuelle Sippy, Partnerships Coordinator, Future Coalition).

While in-person civic action did take a step back, some organizations like the Kentucky Student Voice Team took the dilemma of not being able to mobilize on the ground as an opportunity to expand the reach of their membership across significantly larger areas than they had managed to focus on prior to the pandemic. "The pandemic provided an opportunity for us to kind of double down on something we had always valued but hadn't quite succeeded in being fully statewide [...] It really did allow us to be more representative across geography" (Interview, Rachel Belin, Managing Partner, Kentucky Student Voice, KS).

These attempts to extend geographic representation encountered some hurdles. One was the need to provide library services in an accessible way to all residents regardless of their location. However, one of the unique forms of bridging this accessibility gap specifically in Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library was to provide residents with personal MiFi devices for internet service.

“I think the biggest challenge we have right now, and this certainly happened with the pandemic, is that access to high-speed Internet [is vitally important]. There’s not necessarily a business case for the cable companies to go out to rural communities, because they’re just not going to have a huge number of customers. We’ve been circulating now for a little over 18 months, MiFi devices and we never thought we’d have to do that. But with everything shutting down and school having to happen online, we just really felt like that was a service we needed to provide.”
Marie Pyko, Director, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, KS

For local civic leaders, the challenges brought by the pandemic are not going away quickly. “Some campuses in our network say that students got so disengaged during the pandemic that they’re struggling to get them back - the numbers aren’t what they used to be,” said Leslie Garvin of North Carolina Campus Engagement. “Campuses are also struggling to rebuild the partnerships they had with community organizations.” There are also types of local leaders who haven’t adjusted to working online. “The majority of public officials just still aren’t comfortable with social media,” said Hollie Cost, the former mayor of Montevallo, Alabama.

The pandemic thus hindered civic leadership in certain ways, but it enabled it in others. Local civic leaders learned to be resilient in the face of exigent circumstances. The work never stopped even at the height of Covid-19 because leaders, community members and the broader public found new ways of building out teams across space, focusing on digital transitions, including but beyond the active use of Zoom, and the realignment of internal missions. If new ways to provide civic services were carried forward in a rapidly changing social and economic climate, then there was also a need to take a step back and apply a more measured and dialogical approach to prioritize how best to move forward.

At the Local Level, Process Beats Polarization

At the national level there is notable concern about the state of political polarization in the United States. While this is certainly something that local civic leaders highlighted in the interviews, they have very different experiences with how, or if, polarization factors heavily in their work. Some local civic leaders work in settings where despite political diversity, they do not allow deep ideological differences to enter how they work in their communities. Instead, they remind everyone that they are not partisan, and are expressly focused on uplifting the voices of new immigrant communities or other underserved populations. Where others are actively able to deal with political polarization, it’s because they focus their energy on thick civic engagement processes that emphasize listening and respectful dialogue across positions. It also seems that while local civic leaders can reach across divides, they are certainly aware of more extreme voices - what Jerome Fletcher, city manager in North Port, Florida, called the “keyboard cowboys” - in the public square.

Even before the sessions begin, the way that processes are planned can make them better able to incorporate diverse viewpoints. Rachel Belin of the Kentucky Student Voice Team emphasizes the importance of collaboration and design thinking in their research, ideation, and implementation phases of their work.

“Co-design is everything in this work. The process is the product. If we're promoting more justice in democratic public institutions like public schools, co-creation and co-design is a way to model democratic practices that we want to see in the world internally. It's hard and hyper collaborative, and it's sometimes very messy, but you know, there's a big element of going slow to go fast in this work and putting a lot of attention and intentionality around thinking through our processes and our community, and culture we want to create around this work.”
Rachel Belin, Managing Partner, Kentucky Student Voice, KS

There is a priority placed on thick participation, by initially going slow and delving deep into controversial topics via deliberation, but also going to spaces where people tend to be left out. In the instance of Tukwila City, their equity policy included deliberative forums as part of their Teen and Senior Program. The goal was to build an intergenerational space for youth and older people to be connected. “We put in a lot of money and resources in this effort for over six months. During COVID, in a small community of 22,000 people, we had over 78 interactions with different groups [...] This is the key part, we purposely went to those places where people had not been heard” (Interview David Cline, City Administrator, Tukwila, WA).

In a related way, the notion of opening spaces for civic leaders as well as other people to listen and to learn, is to bring awareness to issues, even if they are difficult to work through. In the case of Highland Park Public Library, deliberative dialogue was a key mechanism for understanding how a community can come together to define what community means to residents in a context of rapidly changing demographics. As part of their strategic planning processes, they sought public involvement in three sets of community conversations (Interview, Nancy Kranich, Board of Trustees, Highland Park Public Library, IL).

Other instances of dealing with diversity in a community started with neighborhood initiatives that could then draw in larger numbers of people to bridge cultural divides. The West Hill Neighborhood Association started a bike program to bring children together, just so that they could learn a little bit about different cultures and ethnicities of the kids that were migrating into the community. There were a lot of things that they came to realize from having conversations with people. Through the bike program, the neighborhood association observed that many parents couldn't afford to buy bikes or skateboards. As a result, they wanted to help them out, as well as give family members comfort that they weren't alone in the issues they were facing (Interview, Tabora Marcus, Love Your Block / West Hill Neighborhood Association, Albany, NY).

In instances where there are heightened senses of polarization, specifically when connected to formal political institutions, there was a focus on not bringing ideology into play, taking a principled middle ground. In a context of various protests, the City of North Port, FL has made it a point to engage people in a sensitive political climate in ways that avoid taking stances and allows for variegated ideas to be heard and exchanged. City staff responsible for public engagement realize that “when people are so passionate, they deserve an authentic listening ear and not just one who says, well, I can check a box and then say I did it and move on” (Interview, Jerome Fletcher II, City Manager, North Port, FL).

This approach is embodied in a variety of networks and practices that were noted by civic leaders, including the Listen First Project and the National Week of Conversation. Of particular interest are the living room conversations in which multiple organizations participate in hosting a safe space for people to talk about controversial topics. The League of Women Voters host conversations connected to living room conversations as well as a civic awareness series. These events are currently hybrid, with key guidelines that ensure people respect everybody’s right to an opinion, along with other important norms of inclusion and reciprocity. Leading up to the holidays, one topic was on forgiveness: how do you forgive those people who have feelings and beliefs that are different from yours, and how to not internalize and label people (Barbara Laimins, League of Women Voters, West Chicago, IL).

Featuring the term “bridge-building” in the description of an initiative is not always helpful, however. “When we just reach out to the bridge-building people, we’re singing to the choir,” says Leslie Garvin of North Carolina Campus Engagement. “We don’t end up with a diversity of viewpoints in the room.” In order to attract more conservative voices to their events, many of which occur on college campuses, Garvin and her colleagues have worked with service clubs like the Elks, Rotary, and Knights of Columbus.

What these experiences tell us is that processes that help people listen authentically to one another can help them learn from different experiences and backgrounds. As a result of this approach, polarization is not always a daily challenge that civic leaders encounter; other aspects of their work tend to take on more importance, including addressing immediate needs as well as scaling their work to better serve their communities.

Equity in Processes, Outcomes, and Meeting People’s Needs

All the local civic leaders we interviewed embrace racial and economic equity as core goals of their work. There are, however, variations in how they think about equity and act on these goals: some are focused on creating equitable processes for public decision-making and problem-solving; others go beyond that focus and want to ensure that the outcomes of processes are themselves equitable; and

some believe that meeting the daily needs of marginalized groups is essential for allowing them to participate in the first place.

Local civic leaders who recognize that there are systemic barriers to civic participation are able to bring new voices to policymaking tables. By using a school race and ethnicity climate survey, the Kentucky Student Voice team was able to utilize student action research to help youth contribute directly to framing public conversations surrounding incoming legislation on how race and slavery were taught in classrooms. “Over 13,000 people responded. And middle and high school students suddenly were able to essentially speak youth to power. We had numbers and data that others didn't have in the space, and that was an important leveraging point for our team” (Interview, Rachel Belin, Managing Partner, Kentucky Student Voice, KS). The stories and the data were collected in a report called Race to Learn.

Some civic leaders think of their work as going beyond a focus on equity, toward racial and social justice. Tabora Marcus, the President of the West Hill Neighborhood Association in Albany, NY, is fighting so that certain things come to the community to have a fair shot at becoming sustainable. Tabora is focused on housing affordability and living conditions. The ability to engage with a lot of residents is because of her lived experience. She has developed certain tools and know-how when it comes to accessing specific resources. As a result, Tabora can teach members of the community how hope and drive can elevate people's living circumstances (Interview, Tabora Marcus, Love Your Block / West Hill Neighborhood Association, Albany, NY).

Some leaders feel that meeting the daily needs of residents is essential for their participation. Philly BOLT develops new leaders by providing not only training but access to resources. In their case, there are local community members who pay out of pocket and give significant amounts of time to support their neighbors in being more civically engaged. In addition, there are others that can't give up paid work to participate in community activities or non-profit programs. Philly BOLT strives to make sure that those working on the ground can do their work sustainably and to also serve more people, and not have to work multiple jobs and use their own money to make their initiatives work (Interview, Hillary Do, Founder/Executive Director, BOLT, Philadelphia, PA).

Two other notable approaches we heard about, particularly for engaging young people, are arts and wellness programming and civic education with a focus on experiential learning and capacity building. The core mission of the BAY-Peace organization is integrating community-based art advocacy, participatory action research, political education, and healing and transformation work. Their work involves both intimate and large community gatherings. One of the interesting approaches they use is called ‘arts healing circulos’ with ‘art’ being an acronym for ‘addressing real trauma and solutions. The healing circulos prioritize systems-impacted youth, or youth who are working with organizations that deal directly with young people who struggle with trauma and violence in their lives. The reasoning for their focus on healing circulos is because they are spaces for authentic, creative, self-expression. From this perspective, imagination is critical to

transformation and justice because “we have to be able to imagine the possibilities and realities that go beyond what we’ve already seen or what we are experiencing” (Interview, Leilani Salvador, Director, Bay-Peace, Oakland, CA).

Civic education for young people is key to a partnership between local schools in Illinois and the League of Women Voters. Because of the decline in community newspapers, the League of Women Voters works with journalism students to observe and report on local governmental bodies. In addition, they have students interview candidates and elected officials and then put the recordings on our YouTube channel and our website. “The hope is that if we can get these journalism students reporting what’s going on in school newspapers - what does their local school board do, what does their city government do - that they’ll encourage young people to vote and show up at the polls.” (Interview, Barbara Laimins, League of Women Voters, West Chicago, IL).

In these interviews, we heard about local civic leaders addressing equity in several ways. The strategies included:

- Developing arts-based forms of engagement to inspire new visions of change;
- Providing grants and training opportunities for community members to engage in civic activities with the necessary tools and resources;
- Educating youth and members of the public on political ideas and campaign initiatives;
- Engaging the public in formal consultative processes in connection with equity policies.

Several people also mentioned changes within their organizations, such as new hiring practices using blind admissions (meaning removing key demographic and educational indicators) or ensuring language diversity within the staff in order to work more effectively in the community.

All the leaders we interviewed seemed to have an authentic desire to make progress toward racial and economic equity. Though the approaches they use are different, they seemed to see these efforts as part of a family of strategies rather than competing or mutually exclusive ideas for change. What was missing from many of these conversations was a concrete sense of how to measure equity, whether in process or outcomes. Hollie Cost described many ways they have worked toward equity in Montevallo; she feels confident they are getting somewhere - she points to the fact that more African Americans are running for office locally than ever before - but she doesn’t have access to more specific data. More of that kind of information might help local civic leaders measure their progress, compare the results of different kinds of initiatives, and decide on a case-by-case basis how best to achieve their goals.

Humility in Leadership - Resulting in a Lack of Recognition?

The local civic leaders we interviewed work in democratic ways: rather than using information or relationships to exert power over others, they are creating spaces for citizens and new leaders to step forward. This humble approach is effective - and it may mean that their contributions are overlooked and undervalued. They see their work as democratizing access to knowledge because if people have access to more resources, they can serve more people.

“I’ll say for BOLT and for me it’s less about us doing all the direct work, it’s more so we’re more of the enablement piece. We’re there to empower because the hope is for BOLT one day to not exist. In that world, it would mean that every neighborhood is thriving, led by the people living there. We really want to empower people with lived experience to be at the helm of change and then it goes on from there.”

Hillary Do, Founder/Executive Director, Philly BOLT, Philadelphia, PA

The notion of democratizing access to knowledge and resources is common to other civic leaders as well. In the case of the Love Your Block program in Erie, PA, one neighborhood mobilizes on-the-ground relationships to their integrated office at City Hall to connect residents to services. Karen Reyes recognized in the first year of the program that a lot of residents want to get engaged but don't know how and where to go. Moreover, some of the people that want to volunteer and get involved are undocumented, and as a result are hesitant to get involved. “So, I look at myself as the middleman to build that gap, and build that bridge, to bring those residents to local government. Oftentimes, local government, including some of the people that I work with at city hall, also want to engage people, they want to reach out, but they don't know how” (Interview, Karen Reyes, Love Your Block VISTA, Erie, PA). Love Your Block in Erie is particularly trying to support undocumented residents by offering what they call ‘block champions’ and ‘superstar volunteers’ commendations from the Mayor’s office that recognize their volunteer service. This formal recognition can help with their citizenship applications by showcasing how they are civically involved.

Civic leaders can often apply their positions in unique ways when they hold multiple roles that serve their communities. In Oak Valley, Derrick Hammond is both a pastor and a city council member, and these roles are not mutually exclusive. Derrick Hammond has been intentional about how he’s perceived in both roles. “People don't see me as some religious zealot on council. They see me as a council member and they afford me the moral credibility of a pastor [...] Likewise as a pastor, I'm very intentional about my role so that they don't see me as a politician who's willing to say anything to get votes” (Interview, Derrick Hammond, Pastor, Oak Valley Baptist Church/ City Council Member, City of Oakridge, TN).

Libraries featured in our interviews because they are embedded in communities and have deep connections to a wide range of people. We spoke with two libraries which operate as anchor

institutions that everybody is comfortable working with. In Topeka and Shawnee County, library staff go beyond the building and spend at least half of their time out in the community, in a school, community center, or at a community table. One of the reasons that people like partnering with libraries is because they are viewed by many as being an ‘honest broker’, by not ‘having a horse in the race’, and so being perceived as solely having a vested interest in seeing the community succeed (Interview, Marie Pyko, Director, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, KS / Nancy Kranich, Board of Trustees, Highland Park Public Library, IL).

Two further ways in which civic leaders see their roles is to a) augment the ecosystem of civic engagement and associations, by bringing people together creating bridging networks and b) to connect people to resources and funding so that they can provide grants to people doing work within variegated initiatives.

The former example includes the Bridge Alliance civic engagement network and one of their flagship initiatives called Citizen Connect.

“Where we come into play is connecting (people and organizations) to each other to amplify and scale what they were otherwise doing separately [...] We really need to start creating some infrastructure, some communications processes, some mutually reinforcing activities to create more dramatic change [...] At Citizen Connect a citizen can find out what they can do to get involved in their state or nationally. So, it's a database that now has over 400 organizations to help citizens connect to what they are passionate about. We don't tell them what to do or be interested in. We provide them with information so that they can make those choices.”
David L. Nevins, Co-Founder/Chairman of the Board, Bridge Alliance

The latter example of connecting people to resources can be found in the Future Coalition's Youth Direct Action Fund that sponsors youth groups. What's powerful about youth-led spaces that are independent of something like school or more formal spaces is that people have a lot of freedom to structure how they work in a way that's conducive to community building. Oftentimes they prioritize different metrics from spaces that are ‘adult-led’ or differ from standard kinds of civic efforts that might be more invested in things that are quantified. Future Coalition has this initiative called the Youth Direct Action Fund, where they provide grants to groups of young people that suddenly want to do a direct action, or to support for example, those in partnership with Indigenous communities (Interview, Emanuelle Sippy, Partnerships Coordinator, Future Coalition).

Local civic leaders are enablers of civic agency in a variety of ways. In one sense this revolves around building awareness of other organizations that exist, and that members of the public are more readily able to reach out to and get involved. In another sense, civic leaders build awareness of how different types of processes and systems operate at an institutional level. Learning new and efficient ways to navigate bureaucratic and funding processes for further building up the capacity of civic participation can go a long way in removing barriers to entry, and to getting to the next level of

expanding the remit and scope of work. As a result, local civic leaders and their organizations strive to use their established positions and networks to insert people into more opportunities and to bring people together that might lead to further collaboration that might not otherwise be readily or easily available. It is not easy work, but for the most part, the interviewees seem energized by it. As Hollie Cost put it, “I like untangling knots!”

Scaling and Evaluating Civic Leadership Activities

Civic leaders have a common desire to build better and more effective processes. This includes evaluating programs and measuring key indicators. It also includes devising operating procedures, removing inefficiencies and duplicate efforts across organizations, to connect people in ways that make their work easier and more effective. In this way, engagement might be done in replicable but less expensive and resource-intensive ways.

Civic leaders and organizations working to augment existing political institutions and processes, such as voter registration, voting in elections and encouraging people to run for office, have had challenges between the combination of a growing political divide and the pandemic. For the League of Women’s Voters, this has pushed organizers to utilize multiple, overlapping processes that feed into each other. For instance, the organization runs an initiative called ‘voter service’ that empowers voters through education and unbiased information about candidates. Initially, these were run as in-person forums, but as a notable political divide has grown, candidates have been less willing to participate. They now have candidates record short videos responding to public questions for voters to view. As a result, they’ve found that there has been ten times more viewership. The pandemic, polarization and social media have made them adjust their digital strategy to continue to encourage participation, but this makes the pivot something that needs to be evaluated, which is not an easy thing to do. They’re trying to find ways to evaluate what they’re doing to see if it’s effective or needing to shift again (Interview, Barbara Laimins, League of Women Voters, West Chicago, IL).

Measuring and evaluating forms of civic engagement also connects to community development work. For the Love Your Block grant program sponsored by a grant from Cities of Service, an initiative of the Bloomberg Centre for Public Innovation at Johns Hopkins University, ‘Block Champions’ and ‘superstar volunteers’ steward home renovations in select neighborhood blocks, helping much needed renovations to people’s homes. This can raise challenges when trying to track data and evaluate their progress when people are less inclined to provide personal information, fill out surveys, sign-in sheets, take pictures, due to their citizenship status. If it wasn’t for the personal, on-the-ground connections, it would be difficult to recruit and connect to various members of the community (Interview, Karen Reyes, Love Your Block VISTA, Erie, PA).

The pandemic and the extent of the work that is being done by civic leaders has required contending with significant challenges, like internally reorganizing operating processes and finances to deliver

core services, along with maintaining the energy and focus in the face of apathetic publics, family members and people that feel powerless. For instance, the BAY-Peace organization was forced to shut down for two months, and for a year and a half it had just one staff member.

“It really pushed me as a leader to think more strategically, implement stronger foundational systems and practices for how we train young people as staff leaders, and sustain our budget [...] The pandemic really forced me to think about more long term sustainability and building out those types of things as well as program models that can be repeated, refined, or improved [...] There is fatigue and burnout because there's so much work to be done. We have so many people in the movement who are passionate and devoted to the work, but there's a feeling of powerlessness where members of the community don't care to vote, or pay attention to what's happening locally, regionally statewide [...] We're hoping to contend with this by expanding the audience to families and not just youth or students, and have young leaders invite their families into conversations about healing, systemic change and transformation.”

Leilani Salvador, Director, BAY-Peace, Oakland, CA

Related to these ongoing pressures of civic work are the challenges associated with securing stable funding, along with securing partners, be it simply by having their calls answered, receiving time and staff in support of collective work. “We kind of just started calling out ‘barrier’ every time we were being told ‘no’, and when we weren't even receiving a response. We actually started a tab to keep track” (Interview, Karen Reyes, Love Your Block VISTA, Erie, PA).

Given these challenges, civic leaders think about long-term sustainability in terms of:

- Embedding their work;
- Handling discrepancies within internal and external systems;
- Aiming for their and other organizations to be ‘organically’ better able to mobilize, lead, and do civic work.

One blueprint provided by Derrick Hammond is to think about the effective processes and networks that can create sustainability. He is working on the idea of developing a ‘community covenant’ where organizations and people can leverage each other's processes for efficient and effective ways to serve the community. For Derrick, developing a network that involves pieces interacting in a way that builds sustainability requires understanding who the actors are, including: citizens or members of the community that you’re trying to serve; leaders in the community that you’re trying to serve, those are people who have established relationships with the people, can articulate what the needs are and the history of the community, the history of those needs, there are civic leaders, of course, who play a particular role in serving and supporting; faith-based, as well as non-profit groups; the business community; and the educational community or board depending. Potential breakdown in sustainability happens when one or more of those pieces are missing, they lack the relationship to develop, or a connection is in the wrong place. As Derrick understands it from his ‘50,000-foot view,’ observing many organizations doing great but similar work, there's still

room for efficiency with regards to how we are serving the community collectively (Interview, Derrick Hammond, Pastor, Oak Valley Baptist Church/ City Council Member, City of Oakridge, TN).

Scaling and evaluating civic engagement activities is at the heart of broader aims that local civic leaders strive for. The ability to expand the remit and scope of civic activity along with measuring and evaluating their impact continues to be an ongoing process that comes up against a variety of difficulties, including: the types of skills and time required to conduct data gathering and reporting on top of running programming; having connections to people and other organizations in positions of power and authority (political, bureaucratic, or philanthropic); building capacity for expansive outreach both digitally and in-person, and doing so with an eye to equity-seeking communities.

Conclusion

Looking at the threats to democracy through the eyes of local civic leaders is a somewhat surprising exercise. The national media coverage of political polarization might make you think that American communities, particularly in red states, are overrun with the kinds of “keyboard cowboys” mentioned by Jerome Fletcher. But most of the local civic leaders we interviewed seemed supportive of how their fellow community members are navigating various challenges in a collective way and are confident that they can overcome divisive issues if they can get people of different viewpoints into the same process.

In addition to their skills in working with groups that have diverse viewpoints, the common strengths of local civic leaders include their ability to attract people who are simply disengaged rather than the people with the most strident opinions, and the variety of approaches they are taking to advance racial equity. They also tend to be adept at understanding the daily needs and direct motivations of potential partners and participants.

As we’ve seen, the lessons provided by local civic leaders includes placing an emphasis on wellness and healing, forgiving the other side, educating people about political ideas and processes, elevating youth voices, creating better living conditions through civic action, plugging the undocumented into services and recognizing their contributions to community, establishing common intergenerational spaces, focusing on equity and social justice to advance systemic change, and providing training and resources to community members.

On questions of racial and economic equity, the discussion and work at the local level seems more like a matter of fact than the national debate. Local civic leaders address equity in various ways, some more focused on process and some on outcomes, but without obvious disagreements with one another or obvious opposition from other community members.

Many local civic leaders also face some common challenges and gaps that keep them from getting to the next phase in their work. These include garnering sustainable resources, having to restructure internal operations during times of crisis, conducting more effective outreach to marginalized populations, and finding better ways to collect, evaluate and share information and research. To surmount these challenges, local civic leaders and their national allies should consider new ways of connecting more powerfully with political and policy processes, advancing documentation and measurement, adding new tools to existing practices, and better connecting with one another. Strengthening these areas can help us find better ways to both understand and defend democracy.

More specifically, local civic leaders would benefit from:

- Greater collaboration - at the local level, cooperation between leaders trying to engage residents in different settings and issue areas, and at the state and national levels, connections between leaders working in different places;
- More [support from local institutions](#), given that engagement requires time and skill, and there seldom seems to be enough people (paid or unpaid) to meet the challenge;
- More concerted efforts to take stock of the [civic infrastructure](#) - networks, organizations, grassroots groups, past history of engagement, local online spaces - of their communities;
- Tools and processes that will help them [measure](#) processes, outcomes, and attitudes;
- More effective, scalable tools and approaches for reaching out to community members, particularly among [under-represented groups](#);
- More [versatile engagement processes](#) that can help them interact with people ‘where they are,’ especially in hyperlocal online spaces, homes, and workplaces.

On all these threats and defenses, we need more data. “The logic model for citizenship is not fully formed,” says Leslie Garvin, and more data would help us understand how and why people participate in democracy, and how that may be changing over time. If we could gather information more consistently, in ways that allow better comparisons between initiatives and between communities, we could deepen the discussion about representation, bridge-building, and equity in processes and outcomes. We would provide local civic leaders more resources to both improve their work and advocate for its value. We might also help scale their work by understanding where new tools might be most helpful, and by showing the common basic elements of programs in different communities led by people from different backgrounds and professions.

Beyond the data, the stories told by local civic leaders deserve more attention and dissemination. They can disrupt some of our assumptions about democracy, make us think more carefully about what kinds of communities we want, and give us hope that progress is possible even in difficult times.

Interview Contributors

Rachel Belin is the Managing Partner of the Kentucky Student Voice Team, a non-profit based in Kentucky. The Kentucky Student Voice Team focuses on engaging youth in democracy, co-creation, and advocacy.

David Cline is the City Administrator of Tukwila, Washington. David works closely with city staff and elected officials on issues of equity, diversity, and intergenerational community engagement.

Hollie Cost is the former mayor of Montevallo, and Professor of Special Education at the University of Montevallo, Alabama. As former mayor, Hollie promoted an active lifestyle for community members of all ages and ability levels through establishing unique arts, recreation, sustainability, and youth initiatives.

Hillary Do is the Founder and Executive Director of BOLT (Build Our Lives Together) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. BOLT is a nonprofit that empowers grassroots leaders to bring change to their neighborhoods by providing training in strategic management and community organizing.

Jerome Fletcher II is the City Manager of North Port, Florida. Jerome has worked to establish a "Community of Unity" in North Port through broad citizen engagement and has an extensive history working in economic development.

Leslie Garvin is the Executive Director of North Carolina Campus Engagement based at Elon University, North Carolina. North Carolina Campus Engagement is a collaborative network of colleges and universities committed to educating students for civic and social responsibility, partnering with communities for positive change, and strengthening democracy.

Derrick Hammond is the Pastor of Oak Valley Baptist Church, located in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Derrick also serves as a City Council Member of the City of Oakridge. Derrick is heavily involved in local and surrounding community affairs.

Nancy Kranich is a former librarian, currently on the Board of Trustees for Highland Park Public Library, and Professor at the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University, New Jersey.

Barbara Laimins is former high school teacher and current board member of the League of Women Voters in West Chicago, Illinois. The local chapter promotes civic engagement through a Civic Awareness Series and Living Room Conversations.

Tabora Marcus is part of the Love Your Block program and president of the West Hill Neighborhood Association in Albany, New York. Tabora helps empower citizens to take action in

their communities, and works on issues of homelessness, food insecurity, and neighborhood violence.

David L. Nevins is a former business leader, the Co-Founder and Chairman of the Board of the non-profit Bridge Alliance based in State College, Pennsylvania. The Bridge Alliance is a coalition of 100 organizations working together to promote healthy self-governance in our democratic republic that spans the ideological spectrum.

Marie Pyko is the Director of Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library in Kansas. The library has partnered with organizations such as the Kettering Foundation and the Kansas Leadership Center in its efforts to improve civic life in their community.

Karen Reyes is part of the AmeriCorps VISTA program, as well as the Love Your Block program in Erie, Pennsylvania. Karen works out of Erie City Hall and the program helps provide mini-grants to citizens for home repairs and community projects.

Leilani Salvador is the Director of Bay-Peace, a non-profit in Oakland, California. Bay-Peace is a youth social justice and leadership organization that runs youth development programs, including art advocacy.

Emanuelle Sippy is a Partnerships Coordinator at Future Coalition, a non-profit in Kentucky. Future Coalition is a national youth-led organization with a focus on supporting BIPOC and queer young people in creating community change.

Appendix A: Local Civic Leader Interview Questions

1. What is your role in the community you're most involved in?
2. Tell me a little about your experiences as a local leader – how did you get started and what motivates you (was it voting, volunteering, local meetings, activism, etc.), as well as how has your thinking and planning changed over time?
3. What are some positive experiences, projects or initiatives, or connections that you could highlight as contributing to democratic life in your community?
4. How do you involve members of the public and what draws them to the things you're doing?
 - Is it to make a difference on a problem, have influence on a decision, meet new people, enjoy food/music/kids/sports, belong to a community (or some combination)?
5. Are there significant barriers that you have previously or currently face? How do you overcome challenges, and what could help your leadership become more effective?
6. In what ways have changes in technology affected your work – how has it made things easier, and/or more difficult?
7. Building on that, how has the pandemic affected your work?
8. How does racial equity figure in your work – what have you learned, especially in the last few years, about race, equity, and diversity that has been helpful to you?
9. How has political polarization affected your work?
10. When you want to help your community address a particular problem or opportunity, how do you name or explain that issue so that people understand it and why it is important to them? How do you 'frame' it so that they understand the different options for what the community could do?
11. As a leader, what is the main thing you think you are doing - is it perhaps facilitating good dialogue, helping people take action, helping the community make decisions, connecting people across spaces, or are these all connected to your work in some way?
12. Thoughts on how your approach or organization might be unique or offer other leaders or types of process working on civically engaged work can benefit?