Civic Engagement and Civic Technology

Introduction

Hollie Russon Gilman, *Columbia University, School of International and Public Affairs*

For many scholars and practitioners of civic engagement, the 2016 elections made manifest the deeper symptoms of declining civic engagement and institutional trust. Along several indices are alarming signs about American democracy—from declining participation in membership based civic organizations to a record low level of trust in government and turnout in elections, especially local elections.

Embedded within these trends is an existential concern that American civic life is becoming more stratified by place, politics, and identity. Many digital tools are accelerating identity politics, enabling people to live within their own online and offline echo chambers. What is American democracy without robust civic associations, the equal opportunity to participate in civic life, and interaction with someone who disagrees with you? As Hannah Arendt describes in *The Promise of Politics* (2005, 116): "[T]he organized polis is the highest form of human communal life and thus something specifically human." There is a theoretical tradition, starting with Aristotle, of civic life in the *polis* as a form of freedom.

Partly in response to citizens' growing disaffection, however, a wave of participatory policy reform has emerged, capitalizing on new technologies and democratic experiments that aim to improve democracy. This includes local, place-based, community-driven interventions occurring both inside and outside of government. One example of this emergent phenomenon is civic technology (civic tech), an estimated $6.3 billion dollar industry (Howard 2015). Government, industry, civil society, academia, and philanthropy are increasingly part of a multi-sector network leveraging digital tools to enhance civic life and support innovative approaches to civic engagement. Digital platforms and partnerships are being designed at all scales of governance, local, national, and within an international context. As a result, there is a diversity of novel approaches to enhance civic engagement.

The scholars of this symposium tackle various dimensions of civic engagement, offering innovative approaches to civic action, which is a critical component of democratic health. Each article offers a contribution towards an ecosystem of motivations, mechanisms, and tools for impact. Taken together, these articles suggest a more robust role for citizens in decision making than simply advisory or consultative. Instead, they offer a model for more robust participation in civic life and democratic governance—driven by citizens for citizens. Demand-driven civic engagement pushes scholars to expand the traditional boundaries that delineate what is and is not civic action in contemporary politics and work towards more rigorous empirical research to understand what works best under which conditions (see Rajani 2010).

One critical aspect of civic engagement is the opportunity offered to work more directly with public officials, especially on the local level. There are opportunities to leverage the tools of civic technology for more collaborative governance. In my article, I outline three cases of civic tech effectively fostering collaborative governance in US cities: innovation units, open data, and civic crowdfunding. These types of engagement require dedicated staff support and a commitment from local officials who recognize the importance and value of inclusive community engagement. This idea is based upon a model of collaboration where public officials work directly with civil society and citizens towards government outcomes, such as in the case of participatory budgeting.

Rahman's piece discusses an effective model of citizen audits, which leverages "the organized strategic use of participatory monitoring techniques to hold government actors accountable." In this model, citizens are autonomous from government officials. Rahman further discusses cases in which this model has been implemented, including copwatching in Ferguson, MO, where neighborhood residents monitor police activity and internationally where affiliates of Slumdwellers International (SDI) collect data on housing conditions to hold government accountable. In Ferguson, copwatching is not simply a spontaneous activity. Rather, a person using technology to capture police activity is a component of a broader strategic and organized effort at community organizing. Unlike traditional accounts of transparency or crowdsourcing citizen data, citizen audits mobilize and organize civil society to achieve collective voice and power. Citizen audits function by catalyzing the mobilization and organization of civil society actors; they are "not about a utopian or idealistic appeal of civic engagement;

rather they are realistic and urgent responses to fundamental failures of governance and disparities of power" (Rahman this issue). Citizen audits offer a mechanism for citizens to influence governance and regulatory systems beyond the traditional avenues such as legislative lobbying or election reform.

Meeting model, Text, Talk Act participants text a number to receive messages that will guide them through an in-person conversation, during which they text responses to other Text, Talk, Act groups as well as to policy makers. Text, Talk, Act has been part of a comprehensive effort to engage

With shrinking budgets, many public officials are being asked to do more with less; civic engagement and digital tools should offer structured opportunities to build institutional trust.

While the Rahman piece speaks about using technology as part of a strategic lever for building civic voice and power to address governance failures, the Gastil and Richards piece invites us to re-conceptualize and extend the normative boundaries about *how* citizens engage with their digital civic life. Their piece "The Democracy Machine" addresses the problem that civic life takes place both everywhere and nowhere specific—particularly with regard to digital spaces. Despite the proliferation of digital spaces for engagement and social media outlets, there is no centralized location for engagement with dedicated feedback loops to transform how citizens and government interface. Instead of the current highly fragmentized civic space, Gastil and Richards propose an integrative platform that would interconnect "complementary forms of civic learning, engagement, and influence" to "improve the quality of public input, the responsiveness of policies shaped by it, and the legitimacy of government itself."

Combining a central feedback loop and gamification, the Democracy Machine offers "levels" corresponding to different civic acts including attending a public deliberation and higher status for being a registered voter. "The greatest credit rewards go to those players who forge coalitions that span diverse alliances and encourage their members to deliberate across those alliances" (Gastil and Richards this issue).

While Gastil and Richards invite the reader to think creatively about how precisely citizens could engage with digital technology, the Lukensmeyer piece offers specific tools for public deliberation and dialogue. The article discusses the opportunity to blend face-to-face discussion with online components to enhance, not replace, human interaction. One paradigm offered is the *AmericaSpeaks* 21st Century Town Meeting, which has been used to engage over 200,000 people for "substantive and interactive participation" and pioneered the incorporation of technology into a participatory process (Lukensmeyer this issue). This includes leveraging computers and human "theming" to bring real-time input to large group decision-making, hand-held polling, and video conferencing to knit together geographically distant deliberation locations. Recently, this model was used to engage large numbers of citizens to help set budget and policy priorities for the incoming New York City Mayor de Blasio and Washington, DC Mayor Bowser. Another model discussed is "Text, Talk, Act" which allows people anywhere in the world to engage in a small group dialogue and deliberation connected to a broader policy concern. Evolving from the 21st Century Town

citizens on mental health, in partnership with the federal government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

While the Lukensmeyer piece offers novel ways to integrate online and in-person deliberation, the Spada and Ryan piece argues that while innovation within the field of democratic innovations is critical, we need more rigorous research into what works and why. According to these authors, the field would benefit from more research into "failures" in order to evolve. They demonstrate that the vast majority of articles, 64%, focus on best practices, while only 18% of empirical articles explore the quality of implementation, leading to only seven studies of deliberative initiatives self-describing themselves as a failure. Instead of demonstrating resounding successes, Spada and Ryan argue that this data suggests, "the sub-discipline lacks a clear grasp on what might count as failure which could be used to systematically explore the success rate of democratic innovations." For example, is survival over time the most basic criteria for a successful democratic innovation? In participatory budgeting in Brazil, one of the most famous democratic innovations, on average only half of these processes survive four years of implementation: "Without a comparison of success and failure, our models for successful outcomes will be chronically overdetermined, which ultimately reduces their chances of adoption in practice" (Spada and Ryan this issue). Moving towards more rigorous impact and evaluation can help generate understanding about democratic improvements that, in turn, can benefit both researchers and practitioners seeking to enhance democratic governance. Spada and Ryan also describe how the failure to reach out across sub-disciplinary fields has led to a lack of sufficient energy from journal editors about the high political stakes of democratic innovations.

It is incumbent upon those working to re-engage citizens in civic life to re-frame the debate in terms of the high stakes and the impact of civic engagement on public policy. Digital tools, from SMS to social media, offer potential for new civic channels and pathways to streamline the barriers to entry for engagement. Yet, the last decade has also demonstrated that technology will amplify the existing bias, discrimination, and structural inequities across political engagement and access. Intentional deployment of channel and tool is necessary to empower citizens as more active, responsive, and engaged participants. Decision makers need demonstrable proof that more engaged citizenry leads to better, not more confused,

policy outcomes. With shrinking budgets, many public officials are being asked to do more with less; civic engagement and digital tools should offer structured opportunities to build institutional trust. Building external civic voice needs a complementary campaign to develop internal institutional capacity of public officials to offer multiple entry points for civic participation. This will require visionary leadership, bureaucratic structures, and support from a range of multi-sector actors from philanthropy to academia. The next generation of practitioners and scholars can create more nimble interfaces for civic voice; it will require sustained and deliberate effort,

rigorous research, and long-term vision combined with short-term strategy. ■

REFERENCES

Howard, Alex. 2015. "Civic Tech in 2015: $6.4 Billion to Connect Citizens to Services, and to One Another." *Tech Republic*, February 6. http://www.techrepublic.com/article/civic-tech-in-2015-6-9-billion-to-connect-citizens-to-services-and-to-one-another/.

Rajani, Rakesh. 2010. "Capacity in Political, Not Technological: The Case of HakiElimu in Promoting Accountability in Education in Tanzania." in *Public Accountability in 'Capacity Development in Practice,'* ed. Jan Ubels, Naa-Aku Acquaye-Badoo and Alan Fowler. London: Earthscan.

SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTORS

John Gastil *is professor in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences and Political Science at the Pennsylvania State University, where he is a senior scholar at the McCourtney Institute for Democracy. Gastil's research focuses on the theory and practice of deliberative democracy. His most recent books include* The Jury and Democracy *and a second edition of* Democracy in Small Groups. *He may be reached at jgastil@psu.edu.*

Hollie Russon Gilman *is lecturer and postdoctoral research scholar at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs as well as a fellow at New America and Georgetown's Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation. She recently published the first academic book of participatory budgeting in the United States:* Democracy Reinvented: Participatory Budgeting and Civic Innovation in America *and served as the White House Open Government and Innovation Policy Advisor under President Obama. Her research interests include the impact of technology on government transparency and accountability, citizen engagement, and implementing democratic innovations. She may be reached at hr2377@columbia.edu.*

Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer *is the executive director at the National Institute for Civil Discourse, University of Arizona, an organization that works to reduce political dysfunction and incivility in our political system. As a leader in the field of deliberative democracy, she works to restore our democracy to reflect the intended vision of our founders. She can be reached at cjlukensmeyer@email.arizona.edu.*

K. Sabeel Rahman *is assistant professor of law at Brooklyn Law School, a Schmidt Family Fellow at New America, and a Fellow at the Roosevelt Institute. His research focuses on the themes of democracy, inequality, and power. His book,* Democracy Against Domination *(Oxford University Press, 2017) explores how democratic ideals must be revived in the face of new forms of economic power following the 2008 financial crisis. In addition to his academic writings in law, political theory, and political science, he has written for a variety of including* The Atlantic, The New Republic, Boston Review, Dissent, The Nation, *and others. He may be reached at* sabeel.rahman@brooklaw.edu.

Robert C. Richards, Jr. *is a postdoctoral teaching fellow in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at the Pennsylvania State University. He studies political and legal communication, deliberative and participatory democracy, and legal information systems. He is most recently the coauthor, with John Gastil, of "Symbolic-Cognitive Proceduralism: A Model of Deliberative Legitimacy,"* Journal of Public Deliberation *(2015). He may be reached at robert.c.richards@psu.edu.*

Matt Ryan *is lecturer in Governance and Public Policy at the University of Southampton, UK. His research interests include participatory governance, institutional design in democracies, as well as methodology and relevance of social science. His publications appear in* Political Studies Review, Politics, *and* Revista Internacional de Sociologia. *He may be reached at m.g.ryan@soton.ac.uk.*

Paolo Spada *has been a fellow in the leading research centres dedicated to public participation at Harvard, the University of British Columbia, and the University of Southampton. He is currently based at the Centre for Social Studies in Portugal working with a consortium of universities and firms on the development and evaluation of a digital platform for public participation (Empatia). His recent work has been published in* News, Media and Society, Political Science & Politics, *the* Journal of Information Technology & Politics, *and* Foreign Affairs. *He may be reached at spadayale@gmail.com. More info is available on Paolo's website: http://www.spadap.com.*