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From the Editor

Andrew P. Lokie
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This editorial is my final one for the *eJournal of Public Affairs*, having announced my retirement as of March 1, 2022. I feel so privileged to have been part of this effort formulating and overseeing such a special scholarly resource. There is so much to say, but I will focus on three main points.

From the beginning, it felt strategic to create an opportunity for faculty to gain **legitimate academic credit** for their work related to civic engagement. By providing a scholarly venue that included a double-blind peer-review process, as requested by our provost, the *eJournal* allowed authors' work to be recognized as research rather than assigned or credited as service. We aimed to be part of a significant change for the growing number of institutions active in programs involving civic engagement. Thus, the *eJournal* has invited scholarship reflecting theory and practice, encouraging the publication of relevant and insightful quantitative and qualitative data and inquiry.

Second, we evolved our **process** in such a way that many of the articles were noticeably improved after going through rigorous review and copyediting. We received emails from faculty acknowledging their appreciation for the extra efforts the *eJournal* implemented. No doubt this was the result of the exceptional work by our managing and guest editors as well as our copyeditor.

The *eJournal* adopted approaches that account for this success, and our methods relate directly to why we maintained a lower rejection rate than many journals. Many times, our founding managing editor, Marc Cooper, offered to work with authors who were willing to commit to improving an article subject to rejection and revise it into a publishable piece. This commitment was continued by our second managing editor, Darrell Hamlin, and this way of approaching the work just felt right. In addition, higher quality submissions resulted from recruiting guest editors to develop special-topic issues. We learned and benefited from these guest editors, and our yearly issues would average one open-submission issue and two special-topic issues per year. Special-topic guest editors solicited submissions from their colleagues, providing consistently high-quality, thematically coherent submissions for the review process. These two practices supported our capacity to produce more materials, with fewer reasons to reject outright the work we reviewed. The *eJournal* has remained committed to representing "engagement" through our work with authors willing to take on deep revision efforts.

Lastly, **collaborations**—my favorite part of this venture! For me, this began after a conversation with Dr. Rachell Darabi, to whom I had been assigned to report. Rachell focused her interest on restarting a publication around Missouri State University's public affairs mission, and she shared her vision of collaboration with the American Democracy Project. Some 12 years later, I am thankful that this smart and dedicated professional turned out to be one of the best administrators with whom I had the good fortune to work. My dear friend Marc Cooper, who took the reigns as managing editor, had formative influence in shaping our methodology and high academic standards. Our current managing editor, Darrell Hamlin, is another good friend who established himself with several issues as a guest editor. Darrell continued and enhanced what Marc had started. I am so grateful to our associate editor, Charlie Whitaker, whose talent supported the website, publishing process, design, and strategies. Copyeditor Brad Arndt's work has been consistently first-rate, complimented by many authors. Our editorial board members instilled great insight and broader thinking; they truly epitomized engagement and academic excellence. And the work of students, administrative assistants, and colleagues brought immeasurable benefit to the development and production of our ideas and publications.

I will cherish my work at MSU, particularly with the *eJournal of Public Affairs*. In the list that follows this editorial, readers can appreciate the number of topics the journal addressed that were related to the University's mission statement. On a personal note, this editorial is bittersweet since it is my last—but I encourage MSU to continue this important venture. After all, our work is not done: Serious issues face us and our nation's future. Recent events have challenged democratic practice, confronting us with the need for more focused, constructive, and productive dialogue. Continued efforts are necessary to address important issues, including affordable healthcare, voter restrictions, campaign finance, gerrymandering, accountability for public officials, reform of the justice system, tax fairness, student debt, and the balance between environmental protection and fair business practices. These are only a few critical matters known to us now; undoubtedly, the future holds difficulties we do not yet perceive. As citizens, we must be a beacon for democracy, and this requires attention and work to stay the course. With so much left to do, I want to feel hopeful for our future and therefore want to recall the following words.

Oren Lyons, Chief of the Onondaga Nation, wrote, "We are looking ahead, as it is one of the first mandates given us as chiefs, to make sure and to make every decision that we make relate to the welfare and well-being of the seventh generation to come."

Law 28 of the Constitution of the Iroquois Nation, of the Six Nations of the historic [Haudenosaunee Confederacy](#), reads,

"We now do crown you with the sacred emblem of the deer's antlers, the emblem of your Lordship. You shall now become a mentor of the people of the Five Nations. The thickness of your skin shall be seven spans—which is to say that you shall be proof against anger, offensive actions, and criticism.... Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground—the unborn of the future Nation."

The Great Law of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy is also credited with influencing the composition of the U.S. Constitution, due to Benjamin Franklin's great respect for the Haudenosaunee system of government—which is notable considering that the United States formed its Constitution not on the principles of European governments, but rather on those of a people considered "savages."

In closing, I cannot express enough gratitude to all those who have been a part of this venture, for their ideas, labor, and dedication to our mission, as the *eJournal* has remained dedicated to the research, education, and civic mission of the University. It has been such a pleasure working on this project. My time with the journal will always be with me, and for that I am deeply grateful.

Andrew P. Lokie, Jr [Retired]

Associate Professor, Executive Editor of *eJournal of Public Affairs*

and Director of Special Projects

Missouri State University

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Author



Andrew P. Lokie, Jr. As of March 1, 2022, his updated bio is Retired Associate Professor! His career spans across five institutions pursuing a purpose to better the educational opportunities with students and faculty, with a particular intention to develop lifelong learners and well-rounded contributing individuals. A favorite MSU slogan, and perhaps a more relevant intention for students is “Follow Your Passion and Find Your Place”. Complimenting his work in education was to coach wrestling, including youth, high school, and college, “Focused-Sustained-Intensity”. Now retired, he will devote more time to pursue his passion to interact with nature, including gardening- “Tickle the mother in the spring and watch her laugh at harvest”, and other activities involving being in the woods or around the ocean shores. With this in mind, he intends to continue more encouragement for greater respect, awareness and care for our environment. Also, to emphasize the value of quality education and experience. Finally, commit more of his new available time for the practice of yoga and tai chi, and to spread more compassion, better thinking, and good spirits.

Career Experience: Media Specialist, (1986–1988) Education Division, The Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Cleveland, Ohio; Media/ Multimedia Producer for IMTS, (1988–1996) Alden Library, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio; Director of Instructional Media Services, (1996–1999) Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA; Director of Learning Resources Center, Library & Media Services, (1999–2001) Broome Community College, Broome, NY; Director of Educational Technology Center, LIS Faculty, (2001–2010) Missouri State University, Springfield, MO; Editor for the eJournal of Public Affairs, LIS Faculty, (2010–2022) Missouri State University, Springfield, MO

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Introductory Essay | Civic Engagement in an Era of Divisive Politics and Civil Unrest

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On January 6, 2021, a joint session of the U.S. Congress met to certify the electoral votes from the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Some members of the House and Senate challenged the votes from several states. As the two chambers convened separately to consider the first of these challenges, an unruly mob stormed the Capitol, overwhelmed police, broke into offices, destroyed property, and threatened the lives of Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Mike Pence. The mob conducted this action in support of President Donald J. Trump, who repeatedly and erroneously claimed that there had been widespread election fraud. One week later, the House of Representatives voted to impeach President Trump for inciting an insurrection. A bipartisan Senate report found that at least seven people had lost their lives in connection with the insurrection, including at least four police officers who died by suicide in the months after they responded to the attack.

Although the culmination of years, if not decades, of priming by various actors, January 6, 2021, represents the most dramatic and violent manifestation of an increasingly divisive political climate and escalating attacks on the legitimacy of electoral outcomes. While no one should be shocked by what occurred on January 6th, the causes and consequences of an assault on a co-equal branch of government by a sitting U.S. president and his supporters raise many questions about civic engagement and civic education. Make no mistake: The insurrection poses serious threats to American democracy which must not be whitewashed or swept under the rug. “These people were minutes, seconds, feet away from hanging the Vice President. Just sit with that,” said Capitol Police Officer Harry Dunn in an interview. “People are trying to rewrite history right in front of us.... Terrorism is what they did that day. In my mind, they’re coming back.”

Recognizing the critical role of higher education in strengthening democracy and enhancing the well-being of communities, members of the [Civic Engagement Section of the American Political Science Association](https://bit.ly/apsacivic) (<https://bit.ly/apsacivic>) contributed research articles, essays, book reviews, and multimedia practice sources for this special issue of the *eJournal of Public Affairs*. I encourage readers, as they explore these contributions, to consider what the January 6th insurrection means for civic education and civic engagement in this era of divisive politics; what accountability and justice for the insurrection look like; and what might be done at systemic and individual levels to address the most pressing issues facing democracy.

The [public has become deeply cynical of institutions of representative democracy](#), resulting in increased isolation and extremism rather than nuanced public debate and democratic involvement (Pew Research Center, 2021). While the public has routinely been told to express their feelings, they have been blocked from meaningful engagement by procedural rules that encourage expression of outrage without deliberative discussion (e.g., open-comments period, public sentiment feedback, etc.). In this journal issue, Kevin Lorentz of Saginaw Valley State University and Kim Saks McManaway of the University of Michigan at Flint outline a theory of how democratic isolation was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, exploited by populist politicians, and ultimately led to the January 6th insurrection.

Despite the attempted coup and insurrection, Kevin Kosar and Elayne Allen of the American Enterprise Institute highlight the surprising development that Congress, in 2021, twice affirmed the norm that it should not overturn a state-certified election. The first time occurred on January 6th with the state electoral slates. Then, in April 2021, the House Committee on Administration refused to vote to overturn the results of the Iowa second district based both on the sheer lack of evidence of election mishandling and on the undesirable optics of unseating a

state-verified election winner. Kosar and Allen conclude that democratic norms can be upheld based upon member-level and party calculations and are not entirely dependent on moralistic actors behaving against their self-interest.

"This is our country; this is our house," one rioter told a reporter while storming the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. How does one understand the role that the securitization of space may play in the public's perception of democratic institutions? Alisa Rosenthal and Lauren Bell of Randolph-Macon College show how the U.S. Capitol complex was made less accessible to the public in response to security threats in the late 1990s and early 2000s through a series of security upgrades, including an expansion of the Capitol Police force, new visitor registration programs, and the construction and implementation of physical barriers both in and around the Capitol building itself. The increased safety for members of Congress and staff had consequences for the important symbolic representation that the Capitol building itself provides for the public. By prioritizing public displays of security over public access over an extended period, Congress has inadvertently contributed to the alienation Americans feel from their government, with implications for January 6th and beyond.

The vast majority of insurrectionists were not only White people, but White men. Karen Kedrowski of Iowa State University explores the role of gender in the Capitol riot and argues that those participating in the riot performed a type of toxic masculinity. According to its classic definition, toxic masculinity refers to men's attitudes that lead to violence against women. In this case, toxic masculinity led to violence against democracy and liberty, concepts that are often depicted as metaphorically female. In addition, very real violence was targeted against the female Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, and other women members of Congress.

With much at stake in the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, the religious right was prevalent in post-election rallies, marches, and protests leading up to January 6, 2021. How did the January 6th insurrection become an event of significance in the ongoing narrative of Christian nationalism? Andrea Hatcher of Sewanee: The University of the South analyzes the religious imagery and narratives used by participants and leaders during the insurrection and afterwards, comparing the language of members of Trump's evangelical advisory board with other religious elites. Hatcher finds that appeals to religion were an evident stimulus and response to the insurrection.

A student taking a course I taught at James Madison University in the fall of 2021 stated, "If the university doesn't do more [to teach diversity, equity, justice and inclusion], it will be responsible for the next January 6th." Yet, considering the risk-averse nature of higher education, this work is increasingly difficult as legislators in state houses across the country attempt to dictate curriculum. Colleges and universities have a critical responsibility to prepare students to reimagine and realize a more just and inclusive democracy as part of higher education's longstanding public mission. Even before January 6th and the responses to it, Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk (2016) [found that young people have become jaded and cynical](#) about the value of democracy as a political system. In their article, Kenneth R. Meyer, Nathan J. Carpenter, and Steve Hunt of Illinois State University propose that civic engagement education must take a critical turn, focusing on antiracism and anti-extremism as well as digital literacies. They argue that higher education must do more than it has ever done before in leading the fight to realize a truly multicultural and multiracial democracy.

I hope the contributions to this special issue will encourage readers to deliberate on the different lenses through which they might view the January 6, 2021, insurrection as a symptom of longstanding inequities in access, voice, and participation in democratic institutions, and to use it as a teachable moment for reimagining a more just and inclusive democracy.

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Author



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Democratic Isolation, Thin Citizenship, and Insurrection: A Theory

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Abstract

Citizens are deeply cynical of the institutions and practice of representative democracy, resulting in increased isolation and extremism rather than nuanced public debate and democratic involvement. Three interrelated background conditions have led to this inevitable cynicism: the erasure of political citizenship by neoliberalism, the ability of technology (especially social media) to provide perfect information filtering, and the resulting fragmentation of civic experience. In this article, the authors outline a theory of democratic isolation that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, exploited by populist politicians, and ultimately led to the January 6th insurrection.

Keywords: January 6th, democratic isolation, neoliberalism, perfect filtering, civic engagement, populism, COVID-19

American cynicism has grown in recent years. This cynicism has both been precipitated by and caused recent events, most notably the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021, when a combination of isolation, distrust, and emotion culminated in violence. The events of January 6th were not entirely unexpected. Three interrelated background conditions led to this inevitable point: the erasure of political citizenship by neoliberalism, the ability of technology to provide perfect filtering, and the resulting fragmentation of civic experience. These conditions were exploited by populist politicians and exacerbated by a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic that not only set the stage for January 6th, but also opened the door for future unrest due to a lack of connection among citizens, the state, and each other.

Many Americans have become deeply cynical of political power and the institutions where it is vested in a representative democracy (e.g., Lawless & Fox, 2015). Instead of nuanced public debate and democratic involvement, the new norm is increased isolation, deep cynicism, and political extremism. Citizens are routinely told that they alone hold the power to express the political will of the nation while also being stripped of economic opportunities that would allow them to exercise that power and the political skills to do so effectively in favor of a thin description of citizenship under neoliberalism. The resulting resentment is reinforced by dismissal of the importance of a common set of civic experiences, leading to distrust of institutions and intermediaries alike, and breeding deep cynicism and conspiratorial thinking.¹ Finally, the market rules that have come to dominate political discourse means not only that all discourse is equally valued and amplified, but also that it is both easy and wise for citizens to filter out anything but those views that reinforce and sometimes radicalize their own beliefs.

In this article, we offer a theory of democratic isolation that was building long before January 6, 2021. Neoliberalism has shifted the expectations that citizens have of both their own civic involvement and the legitimacy of the state and political processes more broadly. Technology has allowed the remaining civic conversation to move online and into the shadows, eliminating the possibility of any marketplace of ideas to filter out more extreme and violent viewpoints. The COVID-19 pandemic further isolated people physically while radicalizing many through online platforms in unprecedented ways. Moreover, populist politicians and pundits seized the moment and exploited the isolation, despair, and deepening distrust in intellect, science, and democratic norms that ultimately led to insurrection.

Neoliberalism and the Lament of the Individual Left Behind

The marketization of all facets of life has been ongoing throughout a major portion of the American experiment, especially in the last 100 years. Neoliberalism has, in sum, marketized every part of our lives, from education to healthcare and from war to charity. As Foucault (2010) posited, neoliberalism is distinct in that it works by “taking the formal principles of a market economy and referring and relating them to, projecting them on to a general art of government” (p. 131). This mode of governance reaches into all facets of life, pushing out the civic engagement of citizens not just in governmental activities, but in the general way of being, working, learning, and existing within society. For our purposes here, the most important

¹ Data on political and social trust is readily available from both the Pew Research Center and the General Social Survey (GSS; available at <https://gssdataexplorer.norc.ohio-state.edu/home>). In particular, the Pew Research Center offers an overview of Americans’ declining trust in government since the 1950s (Pew Research Center, 2021) and a more recent take on political trust and governmental performance during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2020). The GSS and Pew Research Center (Rainie et al., 2019) have also noted a parallel decline in social trust, or trust Americans have toward their fellow citizens, over the past several decades.

marketization has been that of democracy. When democratic citizenship falls victim to the rise of *homo economicus*, extremism becomes mistaken for patriotism, and distrust in institutions becomes mistaken for liberty. This has had two important effects on civic participation. First, individuals who do not or cannot invest in themselves as capital through education and experience become left behind and disenchanting with society, including its institutions and those in power. Second, neoliberal rhetoric has diminished the role of citizen for individuals, making it a lower order concern that often falls to the wayside for more market-driven activities.

Neoliberalism has made it so individuals have to compete in new ways to maintain the ability to earn and provide for themselves and their families. Classical liberalism holds that individuals should be free actors to make choices within the marketplace. Neoliberalism inverts that. A neoliberal subject “is human capital for itself and the state” and as such is at constant risk of becoming redundant and abandoned—a fear driving much of the political discourse in populist movements (Brown, 2015, p. 110). *Homo politicus*, the political citizen, ceases to exist in favor of a streamlined *homo economicus*, who not only is focused on their own market value as capital, but who, over time, loses the skills necessary to be a political actor. The American experiment relies on democratic values no longer practiced in neoliberal times. The philosophical tenets relied on at the Founding—from Aristotle to Locke and Rousseau—presuppose not just market forces that necessitate a state to mediate them but a citizenry “simultaneously rooted in individual sovereignty and [signaling] the promise of social, political, and legal respect for it” (Brown, 2015, p. 109). With the contemporary state now governed by neoliberal rationality, citizenship today is a thin facsimile of what the Founders expected would be needed to make such an experiment work. In an era when there is no room for regular civic order and individuals are forced to prioritize economic growth and self-investment over collective well-being, the modern citizen is an economic actor first and foremost. Any attempt to act as *homo politicus* is met with fierce opposition from the neoliberal order, which requires individuals to invest in their own capital, valued in market terms, leaving behind democratic participation that simply cannot be measured in terms of return on investment. The problem is that democracy cannot ever measure up under market terms.

The metrics of the market in neoliberalism, coupled with an animosity over sanctioning by growing social justice movements, have created a great deal of anxiety, particularly among those who have either not sought to improve themselves as capital in the new neoliberal order or have been or are at dire risk of being deemed useless in the neoliberal marketplace. Factory workers, coal miners, and blue-collar workers truly *are* feeling the pressure of the neoliberal rhetoric that has come to dominate both market and polis. The result is new fissures in society that are often aimed at those in power, those appearing to escape immediate market concerns, as well as state institutions that presumptively allowed or abetted their situation to deteriorate. When commentators underscore “economic anxiety” as a root cause of populist tendencies, it is code for not only racial resentment, but also a visceral fear of being left behind in neoliberal society. This fear is often consciously and subconsciously coupled with racist and xenophobic rhetoric.

It is impossible to fully disentangle these two strains of thought, as they so often work hand in hand with the misogyny that runs deep within them (Bracewell, 2021). In fact, these two anxieties co-create a sense of loss that encompasses both lost market and social capital. While the market loss may be real, the perceived social loss is often molded by racial resentment and those who evoke populist rhetoric to undermine a presumed set of elites. These elites,

particularly those with specialized expertise or experience, along with communities of color are framed as receiving an unjust economic or social advantage. Aggrieved individuals caught up in these populist movements—right-wing or left-wing—are “effectively saying that neoliberalism isn’t working, that there’s something deeply wrong with the present way of organizing life and doing business, and that we need to replace it with something dramatically different” (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 194), but they are doing so by undermining civil society.

In recent years, this has led to a great deal of distrust not only in state actors, but also in the idea of civil society itself. Under neoliberalism, state institutions are not worthy of trust because they fail to act like the marketplace and seemingly violate the rules of society. The more extreme versions of this kind of thought convert distrust into a form of patriotism. No longer is the goal rehabilitation of the state or society but rather an active campaign to undermine both as illegitimate. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the Q-Anon movement, in which conspiracists have latched on to this pervasive sense of distrust to create a narrative about a government overrun by a cabal of unsavory establishment politicians who are, quite literally, trying to steal children and prevent the rise of the “true patriot.”

Neoliberalism, the State, and Political Liberty

Democratic values in the 21st century seem incapable of finding merit on their own as part of a larger common good, instead needing to be justified as requiring some additional market value at best and not being worth the return on investment in market terms at worst. Neoliberalism “governs as sophisticated common sense, a reality principle remaking institutions and human beings everywhere it settles, nestles, and gains affirmation” (Brown, 2015, p. 35). While liberal democracy may not be perfect and may “fall short of [its] promise and at times cruelly invert it,” still, “liberal democratic principles hold, and hold out, ideals of both freedom and equality universally shared and of political rule by and for the people” (p. 18). Neoliberalism erases the shared ideals of freedom and equality and, in their place, substitutes a notion of market governance—a notion that necessarily eschews civic engagement in any traditional sense in favor of a thin form of citizenship and a conceptualization of freedom as market freedom, not political freedom.

Neoliberalism and its rationality are omnipresent throughout the course of one’s life, economizing previously “noneconomic spheres and practices ... [that] may not always involve monetization” (Koray et al., 2009, as cited in Brown, 2015, pp. 30–31). Formal education—a cornerstone of developing a democratically-minded citizenry—has shifted in purpose from a normative good that can provide for better citizens and skilled workers to one that can only be justified by the production of skilled workers, and any attempts to revitalize the civic component of education are met with great resistance as being futile, unworthy, or unsound. In fact, the post-World War II United States undertook one of the largest public education projects of its kind, reaching all social strata but especially making available a quality liberal arts education to the middle class for the first time in history, largely at the cost of the state (e.g., Newfield, 2008). However, individuals now bear that cost, and a liberal arts education is increasingly out of reach, undervalued, and shunned in favor of pure job-training programs (Brown, 2015, p. 180). The resulting resistance to formal and informal education forecloses an important route to imbuing citizens with democratic skills and values.

In this way, outward hostility to democratic activity—not just benign neglect—is at the heart of the movement behind January 6th. A schism between those who appear from the outside

to be doing well under neoliberalism (i.e., the educated, the white collar, the “elites”) and those who have visibly suffered at its hands becomes the defining political fault line. The lack of trust on either side of the equation results in increased isolation and the labeling of those most immediately left behind by neoliberalism as unsavory, angry, and unworthy of having a voice. This reinforced the conspiratorial thinking that ultimately sparked the Capitol insurrection. The insurrectionists saw their activity as patriotism come to life.

Technology and “Perfect Filtering”

The dominance of *homo economicus* and market governance reinforces and is bolstered by the advent of hyper-filtering technology, or what some scholars have termed the “daily me.” As Sunstein (2018) noted, the “daily me” provides citizens the opportunity to filter out (or “narrow”) information they do not wish to be exposed to—and it goes far beyond just social media posts from annoying friends or family members. Indeed, today’s technology provides precise filtering that extends into our civic, public lives, too. The ability to filter gives rise to group polarization, especially among those who are more sophisticated in their ideological identities and partisan affiliations. Today’s filtering infrastructure makes it “easier for people to surround themselves (virtually) with the opinions of like-minded others and insulate themselves from competing views” (Sunstein, 2018, p. 71). While such enclave deliberation (or deliberation within groups with a shared identity) is not necessarily a bad thing on a societal scale (i.e., groups deliberating within a larger sea of different groups), it can, individually, give rise to extreme thinking. If enough people are simply looking to confirm their preexisting beliefs and views, they can likely do so by walling themselves off to anything critical or different.

Filtering endangers social capital development. Democracies without sufficient bonding and bridging social capital are destined to fail—or at least have serious civic acrimony, making political deliberation, decision making, and societal harmony more difficult (Putnam, 2000). Intense filtering undercuts individual and collective abilities to generate social capital, including bridging capital, or connections with “outside” groups that are not one’s own. In a sea of groups that emphasize internal identity over shared societal values, policy problems are often interpreted differently, with definitions using differing facts, ultimately rendering them incapable of easy or complete resolution. On January 6th, the facts between those inside the U.S. Capitol and the insurrectionists outside (with notable exceptions) were largely at odds, making any potential attempt to find a mutually satisfactory solution impossible. More than that, it bred complete incivility to the point of violence.

Violence does not appear from nothing but is the result of repeated gaps in politeness and civility in public discourse. Politeness and civility are how individuals demonstrate their respect for opposing viewpoints (Mutz, 2006b). However, the media’s (and individuals’) increasing need to highlight incivility and extreme emotional expressions of politics undermines any mutual respect. This makes for compelling political drama on televisions and elsewhere, but it also reinforces negative feelings toward political opponents—and this effect cuts across partisan and ideological divides (Mutz, 2006b, 2015). The turn to anger triggers a physiological response that makes it extremely difficult for a person to deliberate since they get too worked up to engage in a civil exchange (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016, 2018; Mutz, 2015; Webster, 2020). It is much easier to retreat to an echo chamber, especially when one feels like the terms of the game have been rigged against them and their ideas, which is exactly what many who ultimately participated in or supported the January 6th insurrection did.

Pertinent to our discussion is the lack of these cross-cutting political conversations, or discussions that challenge existing political beliefs and opinions through exposure to the “other side.” Such conversations are critically important for democratic deliberation, although they come with a cost of their own: greater ambivalence and decreased political participation (Mutz, 2006a). However, *not* having cross-exposure to competing ideas and groups may be worse. Homophily on social media, spurred by filtering, means that those persons more ideologically charged are less likely to “see” information from the other side, let alone share differing viewpoints within their community or echo chamber (e.g., Colleoni et al., 2014; Himelboim et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2014). The result is constant exposure to one set of opinions, inducing greater confirmation bias, permitting falsehoods to spread more easily, promoting extremism in viewpoint and action, and making cooperation on shared problems more difficult (Sunstein, 2018).

Inability to hold cross-cutting conversations, especially when one can filter them out, may permit individuals to avoid feeling uncomfortable, but it comes with significant civic penalties and reinforces political polarization. On the one hand, those who are walled off may actually be the more politically engaged, given their strongly held beliefs (i.e., lack of ambivalence), emotive energy (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Mutz, 2006b; Webster, 2020), and increasing compartment between social identities and partisan identification (Mason, 2015, 2018). As Abramowitz and Webster (2016) noted, though, anger is not irrational; disagreement with another’s ideological and policy orientations can result in an emotional response. Yet, that dynamic between anger and engagement among the most polarized or ideologically extreme is what precisely is animating American political discourse and elections, with explosive effect. Webster (2020) noted that politicians and candidates seek to reinforce anger in voters—through claims that are precisely directed at “stoking anger” among supporters—because it wins elections: An angry voter is a loyal (partisan) voter. The logical conclusion for addressing anger is to deal with its source. In electoral terms, this means the opposing party. Thus, voters are increasingly making political decisions not on merits but rather on who they dislike more (thus, “negative” partisanship; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). Coupled with an environment that emphasizes incivility and homogeneity of information, it becomes quite easy for extreme beliefs, falsehoods, and conspiracies to breed and influence political debates.² In fact, recent evidence has demonstrated that cross-cutting conversations on topics of policy do work to lessen hyper-partisan tension (Fishkin et al., 2021). These conversations, however, are hard to coordinate and no longer happen without intense intervention.

Lack of Common Experiences

A third compounding issue concerns the lack of shared experiences—political and social—that unite individuals. A polity requires points of common experience to serve as a defense against factional divides. True, there are still many experiences common to all Americans. We celebrate national holidays, presidential elections have not lost their ability to command the nation’s attention, and the COVID-19 pandemic certainly has provided a basis for shared struggle. However, these events are increasingly becoming common in the simplest sense: experienced by many. Shared meaning or effect from these common experiences is fleeting.

² This is despite Americans holding relatively moderate issue positions (Fiorina et al., 2011). Nonetheless, there is increasing ideological partying sorting in the American electorate (Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Levendusky, 2009; Mason, 2015), and it is especially pronounced amongst the more extreme elements of American society (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018).

Worse, some shared experiences have become, much like social identities, intricately linked with political identities (Mason, 2018).

Disagreement is a hallmark of all democratic societies, and it would be a nonstarter to seek to end political disagreement (one is reminded of Madison's thoughts in *Federalist 10* regarding innate factional spirits). Arguably, these common experiences help promote societal trust and reciprocity, vital ingredients needed for a functional society that allows for such political debate by an engaged citizenry (Hetherington, 2005; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). Collective decision making relies on a measure of trust and a sense of shared outcomes. Sociopolitical, cultural, and crisis events on a national, or societal, scale can provide these common enterprises that serve catalysts for not only serendipitous exposure to cross-cutting information (Sunstein, 2018), but also conversations about shared societal problems.

There is another, perhaps more important, common experience that has atrophied to the point of catastrophe: civil society. Common civic experiences have become another means of emphasizing disagreements rather than appreciating the commonality of the event. Indeed, most Americans prefer democracy by "stealth"—"Let politicians and, even better, independent experts make decisions so long as I do not" (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002)—although people certainly want these decisionmakers to be egalitarian and empathetic to their interests. Similarly, many have stopped learning the habits of democracy through participation in civil organizations that not only teach civic skills but also provide common experience and forums for cross-cutting conversations.

As Applebaum (2018) and Putnam (2000) described recently (in stark contrast to what de Tocqueville saw back in the 1830s; see also Almond & Verba, 1963; Skocpol, 1996), the United States is no longer a nation of joiners or participants in civil society groups. Through these civic engagements, Americans internalized norms of democratic governance: the importance of rule of law, deliberation, participation, and exposure to differing viewpoints. While not easy, democratic governance's value lies in "harmonizing discordant interests and empowering (citizens)" (Applebaum, 2018). Neoliberal subjects coming together to act politically no longer do so as democratic actors but instead as a discordant symphony of lost souls. Without any social impetus to create and maintain shared civic values outside of the market, individuals become increasingly isolated. With perfect filtering, isolated individuals become increasingly dangerous to a system built on republican values and imbued with liberalism's goals of equality and justice.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores this point. This commonly shared national (indeed, global) experience does not mean universal agreement in its effect. Shared experiences—even negative ones—have been known to foster interactions that permit mutual understanding, building coalition, and even limiting animosity between opposing groups. With COVID-19, though, it appears that this shared experience is another means of fostering partisan anger, exploiting filtered information streams for political gain, and any discussion of shared problems related to COVID-19 breakdown, predictably and unfortunately, along partisan lines. Scientific consensus was already in a state of declining trust pre-pandemic and has suffered more with the shifting guidance due to better understanding of COVID-19. To an already distrusting individual, these shifts appear chaotic and provide evidence of fallibility. Moreover, the policy determinations based on scientific consensus, from masking to stay-at-home orders, feel intrusive, buttressing any preexisting notion that government cannot be trusted in Americans' personal affairs. They also often have real economic consequences to those more vulnerable to market failure—those who have already been sidelined by neoliberalism. Despite sharing the

world with COVID-19 and its effects, the experience has only served to create division rather than unity.³

Americans are still experiencing common events, but they are not *sharing* them in the proper sense of the concept. In fact, the rise of *homo economicus* has meant that the “sharing” around common experiences is often based on rational, self-interested, and zero-sum definitions. Competition being the norm of the marketplace turns these shared experiences into acrimonious ones rather than allowing them to reinforce a sense of shared destiny. Lost is the commonality of the event; all experience it, and all should take meaning from it. As a result, the public’s involvement in politics, from pandemics to local government, is more minimalist than many democratic theorists would prefer or admit (for a review, see Collins, 2021, pp. 790–791). Elections, despite being perhaps *the* most common experience in a democratic polity, have become just another event to prime the populace along sociopolitical fault lines. The citizenship that results is increasingly devoid of any depth of discussion or debate, and this thin citizenship is easily broken under the weight of crisis, conspiracy, and partisan politics. “A nation of passive observers,” argued Applebaum (2018), “watching others make decisions is a nation that will succumb to anger and resentment—witness the United States.”

Anger and resentment are certainly the net effect here. As Webster (2020) noted, anger may motivate partisan voters, but it produces significant *distrust* in voters, too. This distrust permeates not only in social relationships, but also in terms of governmental institutions. Trust in government has declined significantly since the 1950s, dropping from 73% in 1958 to 17% in 2019.⁴ Likewise, resentment is widespread in American political debate, exacerbated by the rise of populist rhetoric that divides society into “us versus them” (Mudde, 2004). Indeed, diversity is considered a barrier to the “good life,” both politically and personally. Otherwise, democratic-based populist movements still “deemphasize differences among the group on whose behalf they claim to speak, depicting group members as wholly equivalent with each other and utterly different than those outside the collective identity” (Lowndes, 2017, p. 242), a tactic not unlike what Donald Trump weaponized during his presidential campaigns (Mason et al., 2021). Not surprisingly, such “othering” of ethnic and racial minorities serves a twofold partisan purpose: It induces resentment and stokes anger.

Significant societal and political strife is boiling over. Relying on governmental institutions to “hold” is wishful thinking, too, given the decline in trust that builds up such institutions (Hetherington, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Shared experiences once provided the means of creating sociopolitical bonds between diverse segments of society in order to transcend policy disagreements. Previously, Americans’ engagement in civil society groups attempted to foster at least a degree of mutual respect and democratic norms—however imperfect—for sustaining civic society. Deliberation over shared governance problems provided some minimal guardrails to keep American politics on track. As we describe in the next section, though, a long-festering decay in American society became acute due to an unprecedented public health crisis breaking

³ While the pandemic did bring isolation, it was still a shared experience, and surrounding messaging emphasized both a united front and a common experience in the same way that previous unifying events have. We are grateful for an anonymous reviewer’s comment making this observation.

⁴ Trust somewhat recovered in 2021, with about a quarter (24%) of Americans saying they trust the federal government to do what is right *always* or *most of the time*, but nonetheless remains historically low (Pew Research Center, 2021).

out at the moment when American society was least equipped to come together around a shared experience in the face of adversity.

The Ultimate Inflection Point

The lost language of democratic values, the perfect filtering of dissenting opinions, and the lack of common experiences to create shared values led to January 6, 2021. The reliance on the marketplace of ideas to filter out the “bad ideas” failed because competition necessarily has to give equal hearing to every potential opinion and, like any market, is subject to market failure. A “crisis of inequality” (Vermeiren, 2021) that follows the neoliberal subject intensified the feeling of isolation and distrust already felt by those who see institutions and elites as newly found enemies. Forced to echo chambers and message boards, there was no check on the extreme nature of the claims, and a sense of being left behind reinforced the feeling that these things could be true.

Throughout most of 2020, COVID-19 removed people from their daily lives outside of the home—often the only place where their filtering was not perfectly attuned—and forced them to stay home with ample time to see not only the government but COVID-19 itself as a conspiracy to undo any safety they had left. In fact, COVID-19 became a sort of training ground for anti-government armed protest. State capitols across the country were faced with armed persons who lacked trust in the science and the government, demanding the reopening of businesses, schools, and more in the face of growing infections and death. These protests were not all armed and high-tension, but the frequency with which guns and violent rhetoric appeared was not coincidental. In many ways, the COVID-19 protests in state capitols honed the performative and dangerous rage that would soon be in the nation’s capital. More than that, it helped build the online and word-of-mouth networks that would be key to facilitating an unprecedented breach of the U.S. Capitol building.

Civic values fall prey to the economization of all facets of life and can only survive if they produce measurable benefits in the marketplace. Currently, there is no reward for being a good citizen of the like that Madison and the other Founders envisioned. Instead, there is ample incentive to rely on anger and division since they, at the very least, provide an outlet for growing resentment and antagonism. The aggrieved are aggrieved for a reason—and their anger spilled over on January 6th into bloodshed. The intense feeling of being ignored has been happening for quite some time as the state has worked to support the market while “democratic commitments to equality, liberty, inclusion, and constitutionalism are now subordinate to the project of economic growth, competitive positioning, and capital enhancement” (Brown, 2015, p. 263). This competition that has left them behind seems coordinated as the attack that was carried out on January 6th through their anger and lack of connection.

On January 6, 2021, the individuals who would soon become insurrectionists—now trained and well-connected from 8 months at home dealing with anti-governmental protests over COVID-19—were gathered in person and face-to-face to grieve their case of government corruption and fraudulent election results. The anger that led them there is not simple to understand. While former President Trump himself had a role to play, the fact is that he was more symptom than disease. Capitol insurrectionists were convinced that the 2020 presidential election was being stolen, making Trump’s rhetoric a call to action rather than political hyperbole. Trump’s unwillingness to concede and his battle cry for others to confront Congress in person was just the match that lit the kindling and stoked the fuel that had saturated it.

Confronted with the belief that the election and the state governments across the country that conducted it—the very state governments that were already deemed to be inept and overbearing throughout the pandemic—were in coordination was not a far leap to make when the deck already seemed so stacked by the same actors. Pushed to isolation, these actors were armed with little to help imagine, let alone attain, a robust democratic life where their concerns are heard by system actors and reflected by public policy. In many ways, January 6th was not only predictable but almost inevitable.

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A Democratic Norm Endures January 6th: Congress and Deference to States' Election Certifications

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Abstract

The U.S. Congress rarely overturns elections to either of its chambers. Legislators tend to follow a norm of deference to election results lawfully submitted by states. This longstanding norm is the product of the Constitution, federal law, and habit. Yet, on January 6, 2021, the national legislature flirted with violating that norm and denying the presidency to Joseph Biden based on spurious claims of electoral fraud. Fortunately, legislators from both parties forged strong majorities to uphold the norm and subsequently reaffirmed it during Congress's review of a disputed Iowa congressional election. Viewing these events closely reveals both that those who sought to discard or uphold a norm argued from within the American democratic tradition and that partisan calculations were paramount.

Keywords: Congress, Electoral Count Act, election, presidency, transition of power

The siege of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, and the effort to subvert the counting of all states' lawfully submitted electoral slates appeared to validate the narrative of democracy's impending demise. The incident sent shock waves through all three branches of government, and the day will live in infamy.

Yet, for all the awfulness of January 6th, the day ended positively: The democratic norm of Congress respecting states' certified elections endured. Remarkably, this norm of deference was subsequently upheld a few months later when the House of Representatives chose to let the result of a disputed Iowa election stand, despite an obvious partisan incentive to overrule it.

In recounting the January 6th and Iowa election incidents, this article focuses on legislators' words and interests. The rationale for doing so is straightforward: Each legislator had a preferred outcome, and each of them had to consciously present themselves to external audiences (i.e., media, partisans, and voters generally) for validation in these highly salient, high-stakes phenomena.

Congress and the Dispute Over the 2020 Presidential Election

Concerns that U.S. government may slide into despotism date back to the nation's earliest days. Early Americans feared the collapse of self-governance due to weakening moral fiber and virtue (see Vetterli & Bryner, 1997). In crafting the Constitution, James Madison and others grappled with how to prevent the Polybian devolution from healthy governance to degenerate tyranny and the like.¹ Indeed, anxiety that America and its governance system is becoming debauched is a recurrent theme throughout American history (Murphy, 2009).

However, the events of January 6, 2021—and the long build-up thereto—appear almost inevitable in retrospect. For years, scholars, media, and other observers have warned about the erosion of American democracy, pointing to the increase in political polarization and hostility between citizens which goes beyond policy disagreement to matters of personal identity (see Iyengar et al., 2019). They have documented the ebbing of political forbearance and the concomitant rise of political and constitutional hardball, in which partisans stretch the legal and institutional rules to the utmost in pursuit of political wins (see Bright Line Watch, 2017; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Journalists and social scientists have warned that half-truths and outright lies are flooding Americans' minds, leaving them incapable of discerning political reality from fantasy (Rauch, 2021). Observers have also warned that democratic norms, the unwritten, fragile “shared expectations of appropriate political action” are being shattered, which is both symptomatic of political mistrust and a source of it (Deitz, 2021).

Those who climbed the ramparts in defense of democracy also cautioned that democratic decline was occurring globally, not just in America. Whether it was the youngest democracies in the Middle East or post-Soviet republics in Eastern Europe, autocracy was rising. Even in older, more established parliamentary nations, like France, far-right parties were gaining political power and popularity (Huq & Ginsberg, 2018; World Justice Project, 2020).

January 6, 2021, the infamous day when armed protestors breached the U.S. Capitol building in defiance of the 2020 election results, was the culmination of many peculiar factors. First, then-President Donald Trump, long before Election Day 2020, fomented doubt about the

¹ On the Founders and the cycle of *ankylosis*, see Chinard (1940) and, more broadly, Richard (1994, pp. 53–168).

upcoming election's legitimacy, claiming that "fraud" would be inevitable.² President Trump demonstrated a willingness to go to extraordinary lengths to maintain power, rendering him relatively anomalous in American presidential politics. Second, Trump's most loyal supporters were consistently dissatisfied with America's political institutions, thus prone to doubt the efficacy of the electoral process.³ Third, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic more than doubled mail-in voting rates from 2016 levels, with many states expanding vote-by-mail options and modifying their election administration practices (Stewart, n.d.). This significant change in voting procedure enabled already skeptical Trump supporters to perceive evidence of corruption.

Yet, despite these powerful dynamics in the Republican Party, Congress affirmed its longstanding and hitherto unbroken tradition of certifying presidential and vice-presidential election results. For both Pennsylvania and Arizona, states where results faced objection, Senate Republicans overwhelmingly voted to affirm the state-certified election outcomes. House Republicans were more divided, but, nonetheless, many opposed the objections.

The significance of congressional Republicans defying inner-party trends suggests that, in moments of institutional crisis, norms are sometimes the controlling factors in partisan action. That is, norms still carry weight in American political institutions by influencing party action even when incentives seem to point elsewhere.

To understand how institutional norms prevailed on January 6th, we examine the rhetoric of congressional Republicans on both sides of the certification question and draw out some general themes and norms referenced. As we highlight, Republicans who objected to the Arizona and Pennsylvania electoral results cited alternative norms as higher reasons to discount those states' electoral votes in disregard of the longstanding interpretation of the roles and procedures dictated by the Electoral Count Act (ECA; 3 U.S.C. §§3–21).

Congressional Republicans' Rhetoric Around the Election Results

The ECA of 1887 was enacted in response to the disputed Hayes–Tilden election of 1876. That contest was marred by confusion over what to do when four states submitted two conflicting slates of electors. The statute built upon the Constitution's 12th Amendment and Article II, Section 1. The ECA provides that, during a joint session of Congress, the sitting vice president preside over the chamber, open the official electoral slates submitted by states, and tally them to determine which candidate receives "a majority of the whole number of electors appointed." The statute requires that, should one representative and one senator jointly object to the counting of a state's electoral slate, the joint session pause; each chamber must then vote on the objection (Congressional Research Service, 2020). In theory, Congress could vote to reject a state's electoral slate—but that has never actually occurred.

Before the armed rioters breached the Capitol building, there were reports that GOP senators would object to perhaps six states' electoral slates, all of which went for Biden (Haberman & Karnie, 2021). Were Congress to vote to reject those slates, or were Vice President Mike Pence to refuse to count those slates, President Trump would win reelection.

² For example, in August 2020, Trump tweeted, "The fraud and abuse [of the 2020 election] will be an embarrassment to our Country" (Parks, 2020).

³ To a degree, Trump as a 2016 candidate was a protest vote against the GOP, to say nothing of the Democratic Party.

Ultimately, all Democrats and most Senate Republicans opposed the objections to the Arizona and Pennsylvania results raised by Senators Ted Cruz (R-TX) and Josh Hawley (R-MO). After the Capitol was breached, even fewer Republican senators supported raising objections, and votes were taken only on two states' electoral slates. In neither chamber was the vote close (Table 1).

Table 1

Final Vote Count on Objections to the 2020 Election Results

Count Description	Yea	Nay
Senate vote totals on objecting Arizona election results	6 (all Republicans)	93 (45 Republicans, 46 Democrats, 2 Independents)
House vote totals on objecting Arizona election results	121 (all Republicans)	303 (83 Republicans, 220 Democrats)
Senate vote totals on objecting Pennsylvania election results	7 (all Republicans)	92 (44 Republicans, 46 Democrats, 2 Independents)
House vote totals on objecting Arizona election results	138 (all Republicans)	282 (64 Republicans, 218 Democrats)

The legislators who debated whether to respect states' certified electoral results endeavored to prove that their positions were the right ones according to American governance traditions. This was the case whether they argued for or against the norm of deference.

Regardless of their positions, Republicans tended to justify their stance by invoking norms fundamental to America's democratic process. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's remarks warned that democracy was imperiled by Congress's flirtation with discounting legitimately cast votes:

Mr. President, we are debating a step that has never been taken in American history: whether Congress should overrule the voters and overturn a Presidential election. I have served 36 years in the Senate. This will be the most important vote I have ever cast.... If this election were overturned by mere allegations from the losing side, our democracy would enter a death spiral. (167 Cong. Rec. S14, 2021)

Notably, both pro-objection and anti-objection Republicans channeled rhetoric about democratic integrity being at stake. Republicans who supported certification tended to evoke principles of federalism, noting that the Constitution assigns a narrow role to Congress in the presidential election process:

- Senator Pat Toomey said, “Does Congress have the constitutional authority to decide which States’ electoral college votes should be counted and which should not based on how well we think they ran their elections?... The answer, Mr. President, is no, there is no such authority under the Constitution. The Constitution assigns to the States the responsibility to conduct elections. It is clear in article II, section 1” (167 Cong. Rec. S16, 2021).
- Senator Rand Paul said, “The vote we are about to cast is incredibly important. Now more than ever, the question is, Should Congress override the certified results from the States and nullify the States’ rights to conduct elections? The vote today is not a protest; the vote today is literally to overturn elections.... It is about whether to seat the electors certified by a State.... This is about overturning a State certified election. If you vote to overturn these elections, wouldn’t it be the opposite of States’ rights Republicans have always advocated for?” (167 Cong. Rec. S24, 2021).

Republicans who favored objections frequently framed the issue as a matter of democracy: Because a high percentage of voters doubted the legitimacy of the results, as trustees of constituent opinions, members of Congress are obligated to raise these concerns on the floor:

- Senator Ted Cruz said, “Recent polling shows that 39 percent of Americans believe the election that just occurred ‘was rigged.’ You may not agree with that assessment, but it is, nonetheless, a reality for nearly half the country.... Even if you do not share that conviction, it is the responsibility, I believe, of this office to acknowledge that is a profound threat to this country and to the legitimacy of any administrations that will come in the future” (167 Cong. Rec. S15, 2021).
- Representative Jim Jordan said, “Eighty million Americans, 80 million of our fellow citizens, Republicans and Democrats, have doubts about this election; and 60 million people, 60 million Americans think it was stolen” (167 Cong. Rec. H79, 2021).
- Representative Lauren Boebert said, “Madam Speaker, I have constituents outside of this building right now. I promised my voters to be their voice. In this branch of government in which I now serve, it is my separate but equal obligation to weigh in on this election and object. Are we not a government of, by, and for the people? They know that this election is not right; and as their Representative, I am sent here to represent them. I will not allow the people to be ignored” (167 Cong. Rec. H83, 2021).

Proponents of objecting also cited concerns about whether states, Pennsylvania particularly, violated their own constitutions and election administration laws:

- Senator Josh Hawley said, “I say to Pennsylvania, quite apart from allegations of any fraud, you have a State constitution that has been interpreted for over a century to say that there is no mail-in balloting permitted except for in very narrow circumstances, which is also provided for in the law. Yet, last year, Pennsylvania’s elected officials passed a whole new law that allowed for universal mail-in balloting, and they did it,

irregardless [*sic*] of what the Pennsylvania Constitution said” (167 Cong. Rec. S25, 2021).

- Congressman Steve Scalise said, “Madam Speaker, I rise today to object to a number of States that did not follow the constitutional requirement for selecting electors.... [E]ach State has a process for selecting their electors and sending them to Washington. Madam Speaker, in a number of those States, that constitutional process was not followed, and that is why we are here to object” (167 Cong. Rec. H77, 2021).

Both proponents and opponents of certification invoked constitutional concerns, claiming that the document and pertinent law supported their position:

- Senator Mike Lee, who favored certification, said, “You see, because in our system of government, Presidents are not directly elected. They are chosen by Presidential electors, and the Constitution makes very clear, under article II, section 1, that the States shall appoint Presidential electors according to procedures that their legislatures develop. Then comes the 12th Amendment. It explains what we are doing here today in the Capitol. It explains that the President of the Senate—the Vice President of the United States—shall open the ballots, ‘and the votes shall then be counted.’ It is those words that confine, define, and constrain every scrap of authority that we have in this process” (167 Cong. Rec. S20, 2021).
- Representative Mike Johnson, who objected to certifying the election results, said, “Since we are convinced that the election laws in Arizona and some other key States were changed in this unconstitutional manner, we have a responsibility today. The slates of electors produced under those modified laws are thus unconstitutional. They are not ‘regularly given’ or ‘lawfully certified,’ as required by the Electoral Count Act, and they are invalid on their face.... Look, in our unique system, Congress is positioned as the last bulwark in a Presidential election to ensure the Constitution has been followed.... Madam Speaker, I urge my colleagues today to look at the facts, to follow the law, and to follow our congressional oath. We are supposed to support and defend the Constitution. That is what we do here today. I urge everyone to do the right thing” (167 Cong. Rec. H84, 2021).

On January 6th, then, Republicans presented democracy, federalism, deference to public opinion, rule of law, and constitutional sovereignty as higher norms to be protected. Higher principle, then, made it appropriate to ignore a plain reading of the ECA’s requirement to count votes lawfully submitted.

Observers may dismiss the various GOP arguments as self-serving tartuffery that aimed to do no more than advance partisan goals or the ambitions of individual legislators.⁴ The absence of any evidence that any GOP legislator attempted to amend and improve the ECA in the months or years preceding January 6th is damning on this count. Debating a more than century-old statute the very day it applies gives amounts to trying to change the rules to alter the outcome.

Nonetheless, scholars have long recognized that the ECA does contain ambiguities, and some have argued that certain provisions are unconstitutional (Foley, 2019; Kesavan, 2002). The

⁴ Senators Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley are widely thought to be considering their own runs for the Republican nomination for president.

statute demands a legislature, which is free to debate anything it likes, to bind itself to perform a ministerial function. The shortcomings of the ECA, and the 2005 incident wherein Democrats objected to Ohio's electoral slate, made it easier for some GOP legislators to attack the normative consensus on deference and do so in a way that some Americans—most obviously the January 6th rioters—found persuasive (Congressional Research Service, 2020).

In the end, however, the norm endured as strong majorities refused to vote against dismissing states' electoral slates. Principle and partisan interests aligned perfectly for Democrats, who voted unanimously against the challenges. Some Republicans defected from the norm, yet many did not, despite the possible reward of reclaiming the presidency. They might have been restrained by belief in the norm, their calculations that their own constituencies would respond poorly, or fear of tit-for-tat wherein a Democratic vice president and Congress could thwart a GOP president-elect from assuming office. Still other Republican legislators were horrified by the storming of the Capitol and realized it was exceedingly damaging to the GOP brand.

Congress and the Disputed Iowa Election

The events of January 6th left the House of Representatives' Committee on House Administration (CHA) with much to do. Its jurisdiction includes much of the chamber's internal operations, which necessitated that it review the performance of the Capitol Hill Police during the invasion of the Capitol and work with the Architect of the Capitol regarding repairs from the rioters and new security protocols.

However, the committee's responsibilities also extend to the "election of the President, Vice President, Members, Senators, Delegates, or the Resident Commissioner; corrupt practices; contested elections; credentials and qualifications; and Federal elections generally" (Johnson, 2021, p. 8). This meant that CHA also had to report the "For the People" elections reform act, an extraordinarily ambitious piece of legislation that congressional Democrats and President Biden wanted to be voted upon (Biden, 2021; For the People Act, 2021).

Additionally, the CHA had to review a disputed election in Iowa's 2nd congressional district, wherein Democrat Rita Hart lost to Republican Mariannette Miller-Meeks. The initial vote tabulation showed that Miller-Meeks had defeated Hart by 282 votes out of nearly 400,000 cast on November 3, 2020. After the outstanding mail-in ballots were counted, the lead shrank to 47. A subsequent recount found that Miller-Meeks had won by a mere six votes, and Hart alleged that 22 voters—most of whom who supported her—had their ballots thrown out (Smith & Pfannenstiel, 2020).

In early December 2020, Hart announced she would appeal her defeat to the committee under the Federal Contested Elections Act (FCEA) and filed her complaint with the CHA on December 22 (Ferris & Mutnick, 2020; Hart, 2020). The statute was enacted in 1969 to set the ground rules for Congress's review of complaints about the results of general elections to the House of Representatives (FCEA, 1969).

Republicans and observers on the right quickly raised the prospect that Democrats might overturn Miller-Meeks' victory (Zito, 2020). In a crude sense, it would be a rational partisan power play that could augment House Democrats' thin majority (222 to 213), and it would be easy to do, since they held six of nine seats on the CHA. Democrats would simply need to vote in committee and on a floor resolution.

These fears were not baseless. In 1985, a Democratic majority refused to seat a Republican who was the certified victor in Indiana's eighth district. Congress then proceeded to review the election results and had the General Accounting Office (as it was then called) recount the votes. The CHA and the House reversed the State of Indiana's determination and awarded the seat to the Democrat. This precedent was well known to the committee's minority (CHA, 1985; Zelizer, 2018).

Representative Rodney Davis (R-IN), ranking member of the CHA, publicly denounced the complaint before Hart filed it, emphasizing that Indiana had certified Miller-Meeks as the winner and accusing "national Democrats [of] trying to sidestep Iowans by filing a federal objection to maximize Speaker Pelosi's currently razor-thin majority" (Davis, 2020a). Davis also delivered a floor speech reminding legislators and any media or public onlookers that Democrats "stole a seat" in 1985 and could do it again (Davis, 2020b). He warned that overruling the Iowa election could result in retribution should the GOP regain the majority. Davis also wrote an op-ed with this same theme which was published in a highly trafficked news website the same day as his speech and which framed the issue as either respecting Iowans' votes or not (Davis, 2020c).

Iowa's two Republican senators and its incoming Republican House members sent a letter to Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) criticizing Hart for failing to file suit in Iowa's court and urged the CHA to reject Hart's plea (Barton, 2020). Senator Joni Ernst (R-IA) tweeted about the issue repeatedly. On December 2, she wrote,

Iowans elected, and the state officially certified, @millermeeks as the winner of #IA02. Instead of going through Iowa's process—letting our courts have a say—Rita Hart has decided to go to Nancy Pelosi and a Democratic House to reject Iowans' votes and voices. (Ernst, 2020)

Speaker Pelosi agreed to seat Miller-Meeks, but her spokesperson described it as provisional (Ferris et al., 2020). Although any Democratic legislator could have objected to the swearing in of Miller-Meeks, none did. Doing so would have come with the cost of forcing a vote on an issue that the Speaker clearly wanted considered by the CHA.⁵

The very nature of the Iowa election dispute made it a highly salient event for both political parties and for the media, and the parties' battle lines were drawn before the end of December. The GOP wanted Hart's petition rejected, and the Democrats urged the CHA to hear the appeal.

Shortly after the CHA received the petition,⁶ Miller-Meeks filed a motion to dismiss with the committee (Miller-Meeks, 2021b). Her brief argued that the votes were counted in accordance with Iowa law, that a recount had occurred, and that the bipartisan State Board of Canvas had reviewed the matter; in each instance, the process showed that Hart had lost. In short, the brief argued that the process was fair and according to state law, and Hart knew she would lose in Iowa's nonpartisan contest court and chose to shop the dispute to a partisan venue.

⁵ This stands in stark contrast to the 1985 effort to swear in Rick McIntyre, the Republican who was certified as the winner of Indiana's eighth district. Representative Jim Wright (D-TX) objected, and majority Democrats voted to not seat McIntyre pending CHA review (Committee on House Administration Republicans, 2020; Zelizer, 2018).

⁶ All filings for the dispute may be found at <https://cha.house.gov/Contested-Elections>.

Hart responded to the motion to dismiss on February 2 and returned to the main argument of her initial brief: 22 votes had not been counted due to election administrators' errors, which she contended violated Iowa election law. If counted, those votes would have produced a net gain of 15 votes for Hart, making her the victor. Hart again argued that the U.S. Constitution's Article I, Section 5, clause 1 empowers the House of Representatives as the judge of "the Elections, returns, and Qualifications of its own Members." Accordingly, it was absolutely appropriate for the CHA to review the matter—especially since it involved disenfranchisement of voters (Hart, 2021).

From January through early March, the two parties filed responses to each other's contentions. The conversation between the two briefs centered largely on a constitutional question: Should Congress fault Iowa's election administrators and overrule it, or should it defer to the state's judgment?

This framing of the problem was very much in keeping with the facts of the dispute and fit within Congress's modern norm of handling elections disputes within the confines of the FCEA. By law, "the burden is upon the contestant [i.e., election loser] to prove that the election results entitle him to a contestee's [i.e., election winner's] seat" (FCEA, 1969, §385). The House's precedents also declare that a state-issued election certificate "constitutes evidence of a prima facie right to a congressional seat in the House" (Deschler's Precedents of the United States House of Representatives, 1994, ch. 8, sc. 15, p. 946). This position of deferral to state certifications helps explain why the House rarely overturns elections and seats the contestant. There have been only three such incidents since 1933 (Congressional Research Service, 2011).

If Democrats wished to overcome this norm of deference, they needed to make a case for action that was sufficiently persuasive that all Democrats would be willing to vote to remove Miller-Meeks and install Hart. This would prove challenging for an array of reasons.

As soon as the dispute broke, Representative Cindy Axne of Iowa's third district found herself in a difficult position. Partisan loyalty obligated her to support Hart's challenge. Yet, her own political well-being offered a contrary incentive. Axne is the lone Iowa Democratic House, and had a very narrow victory in November 2020. Full-throatedly supporting the Hart challenge would have put her crosswise to Iowa's other representatives and senators and risked alienating any Republicans or independents who had supported her. Very quickly, Axne disassociated herself from the issue.⁷ In December, she issued a single press release on the matter, noting that Hart had a legal right to pursue her protest and that all Iowans' votes should be counted. Axne spoke little of the matter subsequently (Axne, 2020). Any floor vote to remove Miller-Meeks could be used against Axne, and Democratic chamber leadership may have calculated that she could not be expected to vote yes. That was no minor problem since Republicans were all but guaranteed to stay united and Democrats' margin in the chamber was so slim.

The Committee on Administration held one public hearing on Hart v. Miller-Meeks on March 10. Chairperson Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) emphasized the CHA's constitutional and statutory responsibility to examine contested elections. She also emphasized how close the race had been and stated that Hart had raised "specific, credible allegations" that not every valid vote had been tallied (CHA, Majority, 2021, 12:31 to 14:27).

⁷ Axne won by 6,208 of the 447,947 (1.3%) of votes cast (Ballotpedia, n.d.).

Ranking Member Davis responded to Lofgren by first complaining that the majority had violated the committee's rules by failing to give adequate notice. Davis called for bipartisan fairness in addressing all contested elections before the committee and emphasized the fairness and bipartisan nature of the Iowa electoral processes. Davis reiterated the minority's request to dismiss Hart's complaint and decried that the majority was fueling intra-chamber and public partisanship by "jamming through" the "For the People Act" along party lines and "moving forward to overturn the election of one of our Republican colleagues" (CHA, Majority, 2021, 14:28 to 18:28).

Chairperson Lofgren then introduced a resolution in response to Miller-Meeks's motion to dismiss Hart's complaint. That resolution declared that the committee would postpone the possible dismissal, and Lofgren argued that doing so would give the committee more time to study the facts of the matter (CHA, 2021; CHA, Majority, 2021, 19:48 to 23:52).

Ranking Member Davis countered with an amendment to strike the text of Lofgren's resolution and replace it with text dismissing Hart's complaint (Davis, 2021a). The CHA voted on party lines to reject the amendment and approve the resolution.

The CHA's refusal to dismiss the complaint meant its investigation would commence, and it might impose a remedy. The next day, Speaker Pelosi said it was possible the CHA could remove Miller-Meeks (Grayer, 2021). Rita Hart called for the CHA to conduct a hand recount of all the votes, a request that, if honored, would have pulled the committee deeper into the issue for months (Olson, 2021). In response, the CHA minority and the GOP went public with its criticisms, focusing on major media and also on Iowa voters.

The minority continued to argue that Democrats were trying to steal the Iowa race and raised concerns that the firm representing Hart had a conflict of interest—and perhaps so did the HCA majority:

Not only is Elias, and his firm Perkins Coie, representing Rita Hart in this case, but they also represent Chairperson Zoe Lofgren and committee members, Reps. Pete Aguilar and Mary Gay Scanlon, which account for half of all the Democrats charged with deciding this case before the Committee on House Administration. (Davis et al., 2021)

The minority further contended that the resolution adopted in the March 10 proceeding violated congressional tradition by deviating from acceptable practice (Davis, 2021b).

The GOP's campaign arm also ran advertisements against Democrats in swing districts, goading them to call for a stop to the CHA inquiry (Grayer, 2021). Nine of the GOP House members who voted to impeach Trump sent a letter to Speaker Pelosi and asked that the CHA desist from the inquiry. Iowa Senator Joni Ernst called out Axne and tried to show a gulf between her and Iowa voters: "Where is Cindy Axne saying, 'This is an outrage and the Iowa voters have spoken?'" (Rogers & Raju, 2021). House Republicans, led by Iowa's Representative Ashley Hinson, sent a letter signed by 124 House members to Speaker Pelosi excoriating her for "hypocrisy" for supporting "an investigation into this free and fair election while simultaneously claiming voter fraud does not exist nationally" and "election security claims are unwarranted" (Hinson et al., 2021). Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy also visited Iowa with Miller-Meeks and demanded the Speaker and Democrats "put their faith in democracy" and end the CHA investigation (Zanona, 2021). The Republican National Committee also released a video

attacking Axne for ignoring “the will of Iowa voters” and abetting a “Pelosi power play” to “steal an election here in Iowa” (NRCC Communications, 2021).

Simultaneously, some Democrats publicly voiced their concerns about the possibility of rejecting a state-certified election when the party had been decrying the GOP for doing just that on January 6th. Representative Lou Correa (D-A) said he wanted to see “compelling reasons [for] the feds to get involved in this” (Rogers & Raju, 2021). Representative Dean Phillips (D-MN), tweeted on March 22, “Losing a House election by six votes is painful for Democrats. But overturning it in the House would be even more painful for America. Just because a majority can, does not mean a majority should” (Phillips, 2021). His statement came in response to a media claim that a source close to the CHA process had said House leadership supported the inquiry. Representative Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ), a leader of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus, expressed “deep reservations” about the CHA investigation, and Michigan Representative Dan Kildee said the CHA would need to present “a really compelling case” to earn his vote (Mutnick et al., 2021).

Susan Wild (D-PA) summed up the dilemma for Democrats who had been faulting the GOP for their votes on January 6th:

As I have said before in connection with the 2020 presidential election, legislators should be heeding states' certifications of their elections. Unless there is rampant error and substantial evidence thereof, I do not believe it is the role of House members to dictate the outcome of elections. (Mutnick et al., 2021)

At least half a dozen Democrats signaled they were willing to defect if a vote was called to remove Miller-Meeks. This was a problem as the majority was only 219 to 211 in late March due to five vacancies.

On March 31, Rita Hart announced she was withdrawing her contestation of the election results, thereby saving the CHA and Democrats from taking votes that were deemed more costly than beneficial. She condemned the entire process. “The reality is that the toxic campaign of political disinformation to attack this constitutional review of the closest congressional contest in 100 years has effectively silenced the votes of Iowans” (Barton, 2021).

From the start, overcoming the norm of deference to state certificates was a significant challenge for the Democrats. It required them to make a strong case that Congress had to step in because the Iowa election grossly disenfranchised voters and/or that Miller-Meeks was an egregious person who deserved to be drummed from Congress. They did not accomplish either of these goals, for a number of reasons.

Iowa has a lengthy history of competent election administration, and its processes are difficult to fault. The state held the election, had each county conduct a recount with representatives of Hart’s and Miller-Meeks’s campaigns involvement, and conducted a final bipartisan review of the results. Ostensibly, this looked like sound process, not easily faulted as partisan or suspicious. Additionally, the optics of Hart’s complaint were weakened by her simultaneous assertion that Iowa election administrators had broken the law but refusal to seek judgment on this legal claim before the state’s bipartisan elections tribunal. Indeed, to a degree, she was a candidate running to represent Iowa while complaining that Iowa’s government had cheated her. There is little evidence that this message had great resonance in Iowa.

Nor was it workable to characterize Miller-Meeks as loathsome and hence worthy of rejection. There was no evidence that her campaign had cheated. Once she arrived in Washington, DC, Miller-Meeks did nothing to elicit enmity from House Democrats. In fact, on January 6th she voted with Democrats to accept the electoral slates submitted (and against Trump) and issued a press release explaining her position as consistent with the Constitution (Miller-Meeks, 2021a). She stood in sharp contrast to Representatives Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) and Madison Cawthorn (R-NC), both of whom attracted the ire of Democrats over their insistence that Trump won the election and their propagation of peculiar theories (Castronuovo, 2021; R. Williams, 2021).⁸

For Democrats to consider voting to overturn the Iowa election, they also would have needed to clarify why doing so would be qualitatively different from the GOP's protests against state electoral slates on January 6th. This was no easy task as Democrats had been shaming the GOP for attempting to steal the 2020 presidential election.

Lastly, making a case to remove Miller-Meeks also carried the peril of retribution. As noted earlier, Representative Davis, very early in the CHA's process, cautioned that tit-for-tat might come. Certainly, House Democrats had paid a price for seating McCloskey over McIntyre in 1985 (Zelizer, 2018). The GOP shut the chamber down for 3 days and tarred the Democrats in the media. The incident also helped unify Republicans in their belief that working with Democrats was a fool's errand and that the smart course was to do as Representative Newt Gingrich had advised—aggressively confront Democrats and fight to win a majority in the chamber. Going back further still, busting the norm of respecting election results risked plunging the House back into the seating wars it experienced between 1875 and 1905, when the House replaced 59 apparent victors with their defeated opponents (Rove, 2021). Whatever the complex stew of motivations, the result was that the CHA affirmed the norm of deference to states' certified electoral determinations.

Concluding Observations

January 6th was a terrible day when an alarming number of Republican legislators acted contrary to a longstanding democratic norm. The two-century-old stability of peaceful presidential succession was imperiled.

Yet, as this article suggests, for all the badness, there was a noteworthy and positive upshot. The norm of deference endured on January 6th and was subsequently reaffirmed by the Committee on House Administration by Republicans and Democrats.⁹ In both instances, there were legislators who did not follow the obvious incentive to support their party's candidate.¹⁰ The article also underscores the critical role of norms in governance. In this instance, the norm of deference restrains legislators from acting in ways that destabilize governance. Deference

⁸ Ironically, Taylor Greene's frequently incendiary comments and behavior provoked majority Democrats to remove her from two committees, which was a violation of a longstanding norm (D. Williams, 2021).

⁹ Notably, in spring 2021, CHA Republicans joined CHA Democrats in turning down a GOP complaint to overturn an Illinois election (Pearson, 2021).

¹⁰ Remarkably, the CHA's decision might have added an additional component to the norm: the requirement that aggrieved candidates first exhaust their challenges in state courts before appealing it to the CHA. The FCEA does not require this, but the CHA minority relentlessly flagged Hart's appeal on this count, and this contention was frequently mentioned by other elected officials and media.

functions as a tacit treaty among political actors to forebear a certain pernicious option in the political struggle.

For those who are concerned about the crumbling of democratic norms, this article also suggests that norms are upheld by a multiplicity of forces. Neither case can be reduced to a story of good guys acting purely on principles and bad guys motivated by anti-democratic impulses. Motives low and high led individual legislators to calculate their courses of action and either affirm or challenge the norm of deference. To be clear, however, those who challenged the norm of deference were indubitably in the wrong no matter their motivations.

A final takeaway from recounting these instances is the recognition that the endurance of an institutional norm does not rest wholly or perhaps even mostly on the shoulders of political paladins. Political actors can have selfish, partisan, or other unattractive rationales for upholding institutional norms. Additionally, this article illustrates the ease with which legislators can draw upon democratic principles while subverting a critical governing norm. This latter phenomenon is especially troublesome and presents a significant challenge to those who wish to protect the democratic norms essential to preserving the constitutional democratic republic.

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Performing Toxic Masculinity During the January 6th Insurrection

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Abstract

This article examines the events of the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol through the theoretical lens of toxic masculinity. While toxic masculinity was not the sole cause of the attack, it does explain many of the day's events, including the large percentage of men in the mob, their militaristic dress and demeanor, and the targeting of constitutional officers. Moreover, the author argues that the concepts of democracy, liberty, and the peaceful transfer of power are gendered female, further explaining the violence fueled by the myths behind toxic masculinity.

Keywords: toxic masculinity, U.S. Capitol insurrection, democracy

The images from the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021, are compelling and burned into Americans' collective memories. Richard Barnett puts his feet on a desk in Nancy Pelosi's office (Bella, 2021). Doug Jensen, sporting a QAnon t-shirt, yells at a police officer (Hsu, 2021). Shirtless and tattooed, Jacob Chansley sports patriotic face paint and a fur cap with horns (Cohen, 2021). Kevin Seefried carries a Confederate battle flag through the Capitol (Higgins, 2021). Josiah Colt hangs by one hand from the Senate balcony wearing a gas mask and helmet (Williams, 2021). As of February 2022, more than 750 individuals have been charged in connection with the insurrection (National Public Radio, 2022)

As Judith Butler (1988) expressed three decades ago, gender is performative. Social norms demand that individuals act in certain ways based upon their biological sex. In the preceding cases, the men not only performed their gender roles, but also enacted a particularly dangerous and violent form of masculinity: toxic masculinity. This article explores how toxic masculinity can be used to understand and interpret the actions of those who attacked the Capitol during the January 6th insurrection.

What Is Toxic Masculinity?

Michael Kimmel, a well-known scholar of masculinity, recognized that masculinity takes many forms, some of which are benign and even beneficial. In his work, Kimmel documented the emergence of the model, or storyline, of the self-made man. In this masculinity narrative, cis-gendered, White men achieve material success and personal happiness through their entrepreneurial drive and economic success. They meet their obligations to their families by being the breadwinner. In return, their wives and children recognize the man's unchallenged authority in the home (e.g., Kimmel & Wade, 2018).

According to Kimmel and Wade (2018), toxic masculinity arises when this storyline falls apart. The researchers described an asymmetry in feminist critiques of male privilege:

Feminism basically offered women a symmetry between the social and the individual. The social observation was women as a group are not in power. And individually, women did not feel powerful. So feminism basically said, let's address both of those: the individual powerlessness and the social powerlessness. When you apply that same syllogism to men, men *are* in power, everyone agrees, but when you say therefore men must feel powerful, they look at you cross-eyed. They say, "What are you talking about? I have no power. My wife bosses me around. My kids boss me around. My boss bosses me around." (p. 236)

This asymmetry is particularly profound for White, working-class men, many of whom were raised to be the dominant minority in American society. Yet, as the United States moved to a knowledge and service economy and well-paying industrial jobs disappeared, working-class men were unable to provide for their families as their fathers had. At the same time, women's rights, civil rights, and LGBTQ+ movements gained traction. Men are socialized to expect they will succeed financially, politically, and socially; when they do not, they become resentful and look for scapegoats. Social movements seeking to empower historically marginalized communities—racial and ethnic minorities, women, immigrants—become convenient targets. These groups appear to be achieving the respect and upward mobility that seems to elude them as working-class White men.

According to Carol Harrington (2021), Shepherd Bliss coined the term *toxic masculinity* “to characterize his father’s militarized, authoritarian masculinity” (p. 348). In its most extreme form, toxic masculinity disdains any displays of emotion as weak and effeminate, objectifies women and treats them as inferiors, and advocates violence to resolve conflict. Toxic masculinity is also characterized by misogyny and violence against women (Harrington, 2021). In addition, toxic masculinity has been used to explain political extremism (Pearson, 2019), mass shootings (Marcotte, 2018; Scott-Coe 2020), the misogynistic “incel” (involuntarily celibate) movement (Haenfler 2020), domestic violence (Scott-Coe, 2020), sexual assault (Kimmel & Wade, 2018), and misogyny in the gaming community (Gray et al., 2017). In 2018, the Southern Poverty Law Center classified two male supremacy groups—A Voice for Men and Return of the Kings—as hate groups and began tracking their activities, noting that male supremacy groups are a “gateway” to alt-right white supremacy organizations (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018; see also Johnson, 2019).

Former President Donald Trump’s personal narrative fits the prototype of Kimmel’s masculine storyline (Kimmel & Wade, 2018)—even if the truth includes some inconsistencies. As Trump tells it, he is a cis-gendered, self-made man who achieved wealth through his business success. He dominates all who work for him, enjoys the loyalty of his adult children, and is accompanied by his beautiful young wife who rarely speaks her mind or speaks at all.

In addition, the masculine narrative was enhanced by Trump’s behavior in the 2016 presidential campaign, when he belittled opponents; attacked female candidates Hillary Clinton and Carly Fiorina, and the reporter Megan Kelly, using sexist language; and was caught bragging about sexual assault. His campaign rhetoric was full of hyper-masculine language, especially his promises to be “tough” on crime and on the United States’ international rivals (e.g., Boatright & Sperling, 2020; Finley & Johnson, 2018; Harp, 2019). Moreover, Trump displayed his toxic masculinity without serious consequence. Not only did he win the Electoral College vote in 2016, but in both 2016 and 2020, Trump received a majority of votes cast by men of all races (52% in 2016 and 51% in 2020) and a supermajority of votes cast by White men (61%; Center for American Women and Politics, 2020). Similarly, White college graduates favor the Democratic Party (53%), while those with some or no college experience favor the Republican Party (58%; Pew Research Center, 2018).

Gender and American Ideals

While English nouns are not gendered like those in German or romance languages, in many respects, the United States is gendered female. For instance, many of the statues that represent the nation are allegorical females, including the Statue of Liberty, the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol building, and Justice, who is blindfolded and holds scales (see Fox, 2021; McIntire, 2011). According to historian Sara Day (2001), between 1500 and 1800, the New World—and later the United States—was depicted as female, at times Indigenous and at times European. Before “Uncle Sam” became popular culture’s depiction of the United States, the country was represented by “Columbia,” another metaphorical female (Franke-Ruta, 2013; Women at the Center, 2018).

While the New World and the embodiment of its ideals of liberty and justice may be feminine, Jane Mansbridge (2000) noted that political theorists have defined democratic processes in masculine terms. The dominant frame was one of self-interested actors working to achieve their personal goals. Deliberation is a zero-sum game in which one person or faction

wins (i.e., over a competitor). Rather, Mansbridge argued that feminism and its emphasis on “win-win” scenarios, altruism, and common good is another means of understanding deliberation and democratic processes. Thus, by extension, compromise, the rule of law, and respect for the will of the voters, even if one does not agree with the majority, are also gendered feminine, especially since they contribute to peaceful governance.

Moreover, Laura Van Berkel and her colleagues (2017) found that men and women alike saw masculinity as a more “American” or patriotic trait than femininity and that men were more likely to be identified as examples of “Americans.” In addition, the more that men identified with their gender, the more they identified themselves as Americans or patriots. Building upon this work, Deckman and Cassese (2019) reported that 45% of American voters agreed that American society is “too soft and feminine” (p. 285). This opinion was correlated with identification with the Republican Party, being male, and lacking a college degree. Fully 80% of Republican men without college degrees agreed that the United States is too soft and feminine, compared to 57% of Republican women, irrespective of their educational attainment.

Toxic Masculinity and the January 6th Insurrection

The January 6th insurrection was an expression of toxic masculinity in several ways. First, the democratic ritual of counting Electoral College votes is a masculine, zero-sum game, since it is based upon majoritarian principles and (usually) results in the declaration of one winner and at least one loser. However, it is also the ritual that results in the peaceful transfer of power between political factions. Peace—the opposite of masculine warfare—is often gendered feminine, with the proliferation of women’s peace organizations as a case in point.

Second, the Capitol building not only is adorned with symbols of American democracy but is itself a symbol of it. Moreover, a democratic ritual, the peaceful transfer of power between political factions, was underway on January 6th. If democracy and peace are seen as “soft” or “feminine,” then toxic masculinity would demand obedience as it demands obedience from women. Thus, as long as democratic traditions yield the desired result, they are not challenged; otherwise, toxic masculinity advocates using violence to achieve one’s ends. Ironically, the January 6th insurrectionists considered themselves patriots. However, arguably, their patriotic fervor was more inspired by President Trump’s authoritarian proclivities and the myth of American dominance and exceptionalism than its (feminine) democratic ideals.

Third, many of the insurrectionists were dressed in pseudo military or law enforcement gear, and others sported clothing that glorified Trump or the debunked conspiracy theorist “Q.” Not only does attire denote group membership, but military and police uniforms are the literal physical embodiment of the state and the power of its weaponry (Kedrowski et al., 2021). Moreover, the mob used items, like flag poles, as weapons and to break into the building. The “Trump 2020” flags denoted group membership and loyalty to their leader. The U.S. flags symbolized their purported patriotism, apparently without irony; and the Confederate flag carried by Seefried has been widely adopted by white supremacist groups.

Fourth, the insurrectionists sought out and threatened Speaker Nancy Pelosi as she was carrying out her constitutional responsibilities. The ire directed at Pelosi was particularly intense. Her staff barricaded themselves in a conference room to escape the mob. The office was ransacked, a laptop was stolen, protesters left threatening messages, and Mr. Barnett was photographed with his feet on a desk. Speaker Pelosi is a female, a liberal, and a feminist. She is the physical embodiment of what toxic masculinity despises most: She is a woman who

unapologetically holds a position of power and authority over other men. Moreover, she is the only woman to serve as Speaker, making her open to the charge that she “took” the position from a deserving male, and she openly exercises her powers of office. Pelosi stood up to their hero, President Trump (Ball, 2020; Page, 2021) on several well-publicized occasions. For all these reasons, Pelosi became a *bête noir* to the far right and received death threats during the insurrection (Gardiner, 2021).

Sixth, men raised within the toxic masculinity paradigm too often avoid punishment for their misdeeds. The oft-repeated phrase “boys will be boys” excuses the excesses of males’ behavior and shields them from consequences. So, too, with the January 6th insurrectionists, many of whom see themselves as victims within the criminal justice system and have expressed dismay that they are facing consequences for their actions. According to Dan Zak and Karen Heller (2021), who analyzed legal documents submitted by the defendants’ attorneys, “Lawyers blame Donald Trump, the media, naïveté, trauma, unemployment, the pandemic, Washington elites, their clients’ childhoods, and the singular nature of the event itself.... The mob mentality made them do it.” Others have expressed outrage at their treatment by the criminal justice system. Richard Barnett claimed that “it’s not fair” that he was still in custody while others had been released. As quoted by Zak and Heller, “QAnon Shaman” Jacob Chesney’s attorney stated that Chesney “struggles to cling on to and salvage his mental health”—“as if the Capitol breach was something that happened to Chesney, and not the other way around,” the authors concluded.

Finally, even some anomalies lend credence to my thesis that the January 6th insurrection was an exercise in toxic masculinity. One is the unusually large percentage of women who have been arrested for their roles in the insurrection. As of January 2022, 13% of the individuals arrested were women, more than doubling the percentage of women who typically participate in violent extremist groups (Miller-Idriss, 2022). Some of these women were leaders in the QAnon movement and at least two, Ashli Babbitt and Jessica Watkins, were military veterans (Anti-Defamation League, 2021). While the notion of toxic masculinity is usually used to analyze men’s behaviors, women can adopt the same values. For instance, women too may believe that they—or their male partners—have been displaced by less deserving groups. They too may espouse violence to resolve conflict and see masculinity as more patriotic than femininity. In fact, joining the military, storming the Capitol, or demonizing others is a means of “performing” masculinity in the Butlerian tradition and of assuming some of the power usually reserved for White men.

At first blush, the death threats against then-Vice President Mike Pence also appear anomalous. After all, Pence is a conservative White male. Yet, Pence was a soft-spoken and loyal vice president, and during his 4 years in office, he did not upstage his flamboyant boss and readily defended administration policies. Pence values his marriage and “never dines alone with a woman other than [his wife] Karen,” whom he refers to as “Mother” (Kruzel, 2018). Indeed, Pence appears to be an example of healthy masculinity.

Ultimately, Pence maintained that he did not have the authority to overturn the Electoral College vote, despite an intense lobbying campaign by then-President Trump and his allies. This stance led Trump to respond in a typically toxic way. He repeatedly criticized Pence for lacking “courage” (Helderman & Dawsey, 2021). By implication, then, Pence was cowardly and weak—two characteristics that are unacceptable to those who embrace toxic masculinity. Trump’s public condemnations of Pence further inflamed the crowd and led them to seek out Pence

during the insurrection. Thus, the crowd's targeting of Vice President Pence is not anomalous at all.

Conclusion

Arguably, the roots of toxic masculinity run deep and extend to the violence of the earliest days of the Republic—with the violence of slavery, the violent displacement of Indigenous peoples, and the complete subjugation of European women. The problem was exacerbated by the rise of the various civil rights movements that sought to end discrimination against women, people of color, and LGBTQ persons. All these groups, and any successes they might have achieved, appeared to displace the working-class White male from his economic success and his position of power in the family.

The seeds of this problem were fertilized in the 1980s, when the Reagan Administration rescinded the Fairness Doctrine, thereby allowing for the rise of conservative talk radio and cable news networks with a decided ideological bent. Scholars decried the tendency of people to stay in partisan “echo chambers.” Social media only accelerated these trends and led to the proliferation of conspiracy theories and blatant falsehoods. Yet, toxic masculinity helps explain the *response* of the insurrectionists who mobbed the Capitol on January 6th. Toxic masculinity explains not only violence against women, misogyny, and authoritarianism, but also violence against democracy herself.

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The Temple of Liberty as Fort Knox: The Securitization of Democratic Space in the U.S. Capitol

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Abstract

In response to security threats in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the U.S. Capitol was made less accessible to the public through a series of security upgrades, including an expansion of the Capitol Police force, new visitor registration programs, and the construction and implementation of physical barriers in and around the Capitol building. However, increased safety for members and staff has had consequences for the Capitol building's important symbolic representation. Previous inquiries into the design and use of capital cities have revealed that these places are symbolically important as embodiments of public values. In this article, the authors argue that by repeatedly prioritizing public displays of security over public access, Congress has inadvertently contributed to the alienation Americans feel from their government, with implications for January 6th and beyond.

Keywords: democratic space, U.S. Capitol, securitization, insurrection

We have built no national temples but the Capitol; we consult no common oracle but the Constitution.

—Representative Rufus Choate, 1833

Previous studies and observer reflections have identified the U.S. Capitol building as both the physical embodiment of the Republic, a place in which representatives from geographic subdivisions within every state come together to debate public policy issues and make national laws, and as the symbolic representation of democracy itself. Examples abound: The Library of Congress’s online exhibit about the Capitol building describes it as a “temple of liberty,”¹ as does historian Pamela Scott (1995) in her book of the same name. Mueller et al. (2017) wrote, “The U.S. Capitol Dome is one of the most recognizable structures in the world and stands as a symbol of democracy” (p. 46). On May 14, 2021, Speaker of the U.S House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi wrote to her Democratic Party colleagues, “The Capitol of the United States has always been a welcoming beacon of democracy for the American people and to the world.”² The website of the Architect of the Capitol (n.d.), whose office is charged with the preservation and upkeep of the Capitol and its surrounding environment, describes the building as “a monument not only to its builders but also to the American people and their government” (para. 3).

The notion of the Capitol building as both the physical and symbolic locus of American democracy exists for good reason. Pierre L’Enfant’s plan for the City of Washington, whether by design (Young, 1966) or by happenstance (Berg, 2007), enshrined the major principles of the U.S. Constitution—specifically federalism and separation of powers—in the design of the nation’s capital, with the Capitol building occupying the highest point in the city. As Berg (2007), wrote, “In L’Enfant’s plan the home of Congress took center stage” (p. 112), just as the Constitution’s framers intended Congress to be the first branch of government.

Much has been written about the Capitol as both a physical and symbolic embodiment of American democratic principles. The ways the building has been physically changed over time to accommodate a growing nation have also been well documented (e.g., Allen, 2005). Some recent scholarship has begun telling the story of the *anti*-democratic elements (Goldman-Petri, 2021) of the Capitol’s foreboding architecture and how the construction and adornment of the building depended nearly entirely on the labor of enslaved people (Monteiro, 2020). These accounts make clear that the design, construction, expansion, and work within the Capitol have always reflected the sociopolitical circumstances in the United States at large.

Thus, it is surprising that little attention has been given to how changes to the Capitol’s security apparatus over the last quarter century have shaped the public’s orientation to its most visible and public symbol of democracy and to the work that occurs within it. This is true even as scholars in fields as diverse as architecture, philosophy, history, and sociology have considered how both physical structures and the domestic security state can affect individuals’ orientations toward government and toward one another (Geenens & Tinnevelt, 2009). The Capitol building has been given short shrift, too, in analyses of the impact of enhanced security throughout the nation’s capital more broadly, which have tended to focus on the geographic area closest to the White House. For example, in her study of the National Mall, Benton-Short (2007) noted that “the

¹ <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/uscapitol/>

² <https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/51421-2>

nation's capital has become a fortress city peppered with bollards, bunkers, and barriers" (p. 433), and Hoffman et al. (2002) derided the closure of Pennsylvania Avenue in the mid-1990s as being "at odds with the core values of an open and democratic society" (p. 43). Yet, there has been little academic discussion of the impact of an increasingly militarized and securitized Capitol complex on the ability of citizens to engage in the work of democracy or on the capacity of Congress to serve the function of connecting citizens to their government.

In this article, we discuss the ways the physical space and symbolic meaning of the U.S. Capitol have changed as a consequence of an increased focus on security, and consider how these changes may have contributed to the events of January 6, 2021. Ramped up security at the Capitol—which began in earnest in 1998 after two U.S. Capitol Police officers were killed by a mentally ill gunman who opened fire at a security checkpoint and made his way into the corridor housing the Majority Whip's office suite—has intended to prevent incursions into the building and, by extension, to protect the building, those who work within it, and even democracy itself from harm. Here, however, we suggest the possibility that these changes have further contributed to putting "government at a distance and out of sight" (Young, 1996, p. 13) from the public that the institution is intended to serve. Using theories of democratic space as the foundation of our analysis, we chronicle the changes over time to the Capitol security apparatus, consider the ways a more secure Capitol is also a less democratic space, and discuss the implications both for the January 6, 2021, insurrection and for restoring the public's sense of political efficacy and civic community.

The Concept of Democratic Space

Although political theorists have long considered issues of space and place, policy scholars have largely avoided wading into normative questions about the connection between space and political outcomes. John Parkinson, a British political theorist and policy scholar, is an exception. His recent work has considered the importance of public space and the implications of trading openness for elite safety. As Parkinson (2009a) noted,

Issues of public space in general matter for many reasons: it is important for people to have space in which to interact with their elected representatives, for one, and the present climate in which security concerns override almost all other values has seen a significant decrease in the accessibility of public space and public officials. (p. 5)

However, what constitutes *public space* has been contested. Goodsell (2003) identified three primary disciplinary sources of the divergent meanings of the concept of public space: political and moral philosophers, urban planners, and architectural analysts. Political philosophers and democratic theorists, following Arendt (1958) and Habermas (1989), have conceptualized public space (often described as the "public sphere") as a social realm for essential public discourse, the threats to which are the primary focus of their analyses. More recently, scholars have considered the democratic potential of internet space and the ways the architecture, boundaries, rules, and processes of online communities enhance and inhibit opportunities for democratic discourse (Forrestal, 2017). The potential consequences of technology for public space are significant enough that some scholars have gone so far as to advocate a "farewell to the old model of a monumental public space" (Hénaff & Strong, 2001, p. 230). By contrast, urban planners often speak of physical (i.e., non-metaphoric) public space, usually referring to urban sites intended for public use and for the development of interpersonal connection and opportunity for expression. For these scholars, the transformation of traditional

public spaces into commercial and privately owned gathering sites, such as shopping malls, threatens the capacity of these spaces to perform their social function, one that cannot be simply moved online without deleterious effects. For architectural interpreters, the unit of analysis is, most frequently, specific buildings, usually explicitly identified with the state. These scholars pay particular attention to how the building or structure they are studying “expresses historical or regime values, affects the conduct of contemporary users, and projects images for consumption by passing viewers” (Goodsell, 2003, pp. 367–368). Although these bodies of literature glance off one another occasionally, we find that there has been little integration of their different approaches and little attention to the concerns they have raised.

Seeking to provide a unified definition of public space, Parkinson (2013) focused on the ways a space can be public, identifying three nonexclusive possibilities: Space can be openly accessible; it can be a space of common concern, either through use of resources or effects; or it can be used for “performing public, political roles” (p. 440). This third category perhaps best describes the U.S. Capitol, within which legislators perform their essential democratic roles through the making of claims and decisions, the representation of multiple perspectives, and debate and deliberation about matters of common concern. However, these acts alone do not *per se* make the Capitol or other legislatures democratic spaces; insofar as they occur in the absence of attentive publics, a fundamental democratic element is unfulfilled. Thus, democratic space requires both the performance of these public roles and access to that performance by the nonperformers (i.e., the nonpoliticians), whose ability to engage with legislators in their work, not merely through symbols, is essential. As Parkinson (2009b) explained, “On this account, public space matters because of the *functional necessity* of physical arenas for democratic action” (p. 102), among which action is the crucial role of the audience witnessing the making of public claims and collective decisions as well as observing the decision makers (p. 111). Thus, democratic space requires not only the presence of the audience, but also “an encouragement of access, a muting of authority, a minimization of barriers, unofficial as well as official staging, and an attempt to create conditions favorable to deliberation” (Goodsell, 2003, p. 22)

The Capitol Security Apparatus: Then and Now

Democratic space inside the legislature thus requires both the opportunity for such an audience to fulfill its role in the performance of democracy as well as meaningful access to the building, galleries, and committee rooms where the work of legislating—and democracy—occurs. Put more succinctly, in order for public spaces to be democratic spaces, they must be open and accessible to the people. The ability of the public to access the Capitol building and the national legislature it houses is the root of the building’s symbolic power. As Strand and Lang (2013) wrote, “Congress has traditionally been the branch of government nearest to the people, and the building has been relatively open to reflect that.” Yet, when the public space in question is also the forum for the creation of law, as is the case with the U.S. Capitol complex, questions of access are inextricably intertwined with perceptions of influence. Thus, when the Capitol building and the U.S. Congress are inaccessible to the public, there are consequences both for public perception of the representative nature of government and for the actual practice of representation. Notably, at the time of this writing, in September 2021, the U.S. Capitol has been closed to visitors for 18 months as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing worries of violence against the building and its members (Mascaro, 2021).

Even when the Capitol is fully open to the public, access is tightly regulated, with visitors subject to scanning, searches, and limitations on items that can be carried into the building (U.S.

Capitol Visitors Center, n.d.). This has been true at least since 1998, in the aftermath of the killing of the two U.S. Capitol Police officers. As Figure 1 reveals, the events of September 11, 2001, accelerated the fortification of the Capitol building; the terrorists who hijacked United Flight 93 almost certainly planned to strike the Capitol's dome (U.S. Senate, n.d.). As Strand and Lang (2013) explained, "As time has gone on, the institution has added additional security measures in response to attacks and threats."

Figure 1

A Security Checkpoint at the U.S. Capitol Building Following the September 11, 2001, Terrorist Attacks

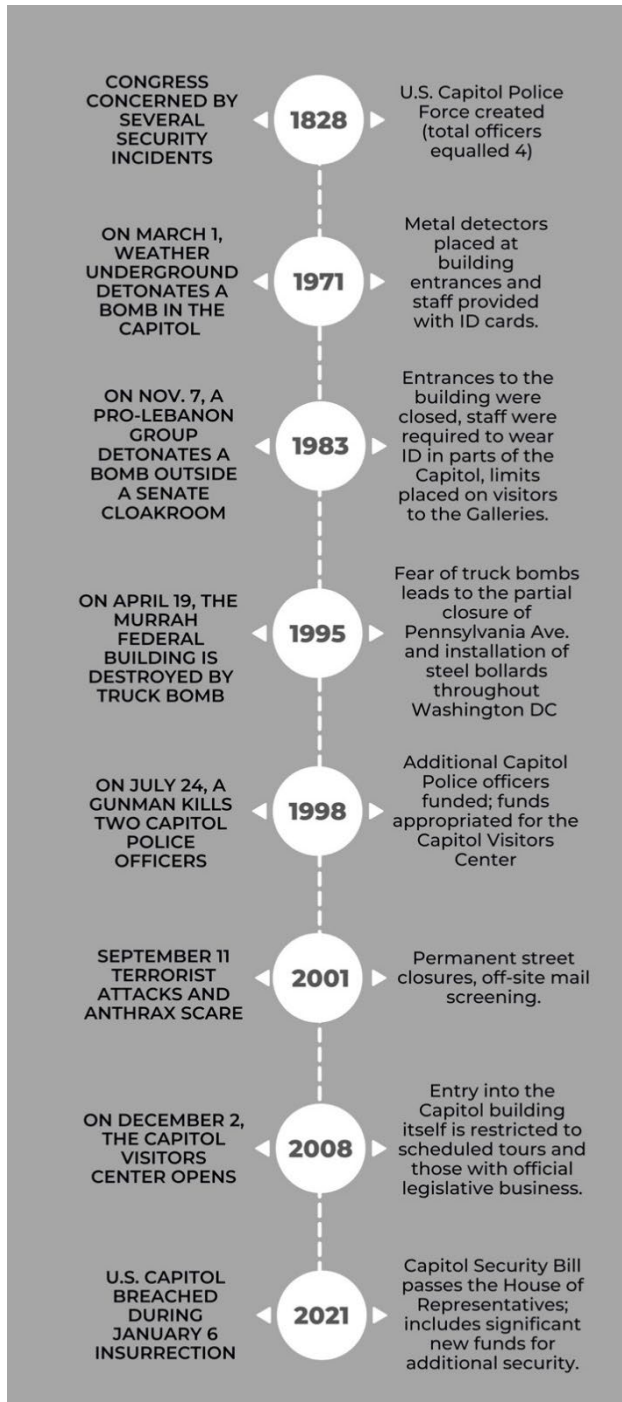


Note. Source: CQ Roll Call Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC 20540. (Scott J. Ferrell, photographer.) No restrictions on use. Available online at <https://www.loc.gov/item/2019645821/>.

Figure 2 briefly summarizes the major security threats and reactions that have affected the U.S. Capitol building in the last quarter century. Rather than offering an exhaustive list of every incident that has occurred at the Capitol, the figure identifies and briefly describes those events that led to substantive changes in the security measures used to protect the Capitol. Of note, it was not until the early 1970s that entry to the Capitol required undergoing security screening and not until more than a decade later that staff members began to be required to wear identification.

Figure 2

Significant Security Events and Substantive Changes at the U.S. Capitol



Note. Sources: CNN.com (1998), Strand & Lang (2013), Tully-McManiss & McKinless (2018), Grisales (2021), U.S. Capitol Police (n.d.) website.

Perhaps no timeframe was more important to the Capitol's security apparatus than the period between 1995 and 2001, when in the aftermath of the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P.

Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the National Park Service, Secret Service, and U.S. Capitol Police all took steps to limit vehicle access to government buildings and national monuments. As Forgey (2005) wrote,

Make no mistake, it is the possibility of truck bomb attacks such as [Timothy] McVeigh's [on the Murrah Federal Building], and not other potential terrorist weapons, that is primarily responsible for the concrete barriers, construction fences, and other stuff that today make Washington's monumental core so ugly and unfriendly. (p. 146)

"Out of Sight and at a Distance"

It has not only been specific security threats that have led to a reduction in access to the Capitol. Architectural historian Richard Guy Wilson (2000) described the "historicization" of the Capitol that began in the 1950s and shifted the building from a "structure capable of extension and remodeling" to "a venerable historical landmark that must be preserved" (p. 139). For Wilson, the effect of this has been to make the work of Congress recede from view. Whether one agrees with Wilson that seeing the Capitol symbolically leads people to have difficulty seeing it as an active workplace, or with Parkinson (2012) that the Capitol becoming a less active workspace has led the public to see it as primarily a historic and symbolic site, the consequences are clear. If "it is easier to think of the building in terms of tourism and less in terms of democratic citizenship [this] makes the securitization of the building easier" (Parkinson, 2012, p. 115).

Security planning inevitably begins with an implicit assessment of both the "what" and "whom" of the threat to be guarded against. While the securitization of the U.S. Capitol (and other federal buildings in Washington, DC) did not start with the Oklahoma City bombing, it did transform that assessment by shifting its focus to be "increasingly directed at American citizens" (Upton, 2021). The implications of the resulting "landscape of fear" extend far beyond aesthetic objections to Jersey barriers or concerns about convenience. Rather, the reconfiguration of the nation's capital city and its Capitol building has effectively situated the citizenry as a threat to the democratic process rather than as the collective on whose behalf it operates and whose active presence is essential to its operation.

Take, for example, the process of entering the U.S. Capitol as a visitor in the years prior to 2008. Although bag checks and magnetometers were present at every door, one had many options for entering the building, including the possibility of climbing the west steps to "an entrance once carefully designed to convey that this monument to democracy was indeed open and accessible to all" (Vale, 2005, p. 41). If the House or the Senate were in session and one wanted to observe the proceedings, they would seek a Gallery pass from their representative or senator, or from the visitor's desk located on the first floor of the building and follow signage to the entrances to the galleries.

Today, however, "a visitor's experience of the building starts not with the debating chambers, but with an exhibition and things to consume. It is a tourism experience" (Parkinson, 2013, p. 445). Entrance to the building is severely restricted. Visitors enter underground below the east front plaza, far from the building's intended portal. They check all backpacks, large bags, and metal jewelry, submit to a scan of all remaining items, queue to obtain the required sticker needed for entry, then queue again to wait to be admitted to see the required video presentation. If visitors are too early to line up for their assigned admission time, the Visitor Center's website instructs them to "begin [their] Capitol experience ... by visiting our temporary

exhibits, perusing our Gift Shops or dining in our Restaurant.”³ Following the video presentation, visitors are handed headsets and are asked to choose one of five queues, each of which becomes a tour group so large that the headsets are required to be worn in order to ensure that the guide can be heard. Tours are restricted to the historic areas such as the Crypt, the Old Supreme Court chamber, the Rotunda, and National Statuary Hall. Visiting either the House or Senate Gallery still requires obtaining separate passes, but now those passes must be obtained through request to one’s representative or senator. The Gallery pass itself admits visitors to view floor proceedings but only after they submit again to supplemental security measures and check all cameras, phones, and other recording devices. Visitors are then reminded of the strict rules of behavior expected while in the Gallery, which include not talking, reacting to speeches or votes, or otherwise making sounds that could be disruptive to the business taking place below. Thus, “acting as a public citizen in a public gallery is dealt with severely ... with the lower status cues reinforced by the strict access and behaviour controls enforced by guards, physical barriers, more subtle design elements, or all three” (Parkinson, 2013, p. 446).

Tourists, by definition, are guests, visitors whose continued presence is contingent on their compliance with the rules of the sites they visit. Casting the Capitol as first and foremost a site for tourists (e.g., restricting access by requiring tickets, entry through a single, highly controlled portal), means that citizens wishing to observe and engage the work of legislating are reminded that they are only contingently present, without any *right* to presence or participation. This tourist model of access privileges individuals acting as consumers over “purposive publics—people and groups of people with certain kinds of public purposes” (Parkinson, 2013, p. 447), thus subordinating the democratic values of accessibility, participation, and accountability to that of security. Importantly, by casting the Capitol as a monument and historical site rather than as a functioning representative forum, it has become possible to inhibit, if not outright prevent, citizens from engaging in essential democratic functions in that space.

Of course, while unfettered access to legislators and legislative proceedings is impractical if the work of Congress is to occur, the significant barriers to the presence and participation of those being represented signal that the work occurring in the “people’s branch” is best accomplished with those people kept at a distance. Revealingly, at a September 10, 2002, hearing on post-9/11 security, Representative Steny Hoyer acknowledged that the post-9/11 security measures rendered the Capitol “a little less open, a little less hospitable to those who own this Capitol” but added that these measures were necessary to “protect the people who come to this building to participate in democracy here in their Capitol” (House Committee on Administration, 2002). Implied in Representative Hoyer’s statement is the notion that only certain credentialed participants are deserving of full access rights to the building: representatives and senators, staff members, lobbyists, and the media. Implicit as well in Hoyer’s observation is the idea that restricting rank-and-file members of the public from entering the Capitol is somehow not a restriction on public participation in the democratic process. Hoyer’s sentiments support Vale’s (2005) conclusion that, “all too often, ‘securing public space’ means securing space from the public, rather than for it” (p. 41).

Conclusion

Nearly a half century ago, Marcus Raskin (1976) argued that the U.S. national security state is inimical to the rule of law because it sets up national security agencies in opposition to

³ <https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/plan-visit>

citizens. A similar dynamic is at work here. Having relegated the public to outsider status in the lawmaking process and having imposed stringent security measures to ensure that the public cannot do harm to those who are entitled to be in the Capitol building, Capitol complex security measures have ensured that Congress and the public are both literally and metaphorically opposed to one another. After all, “national symbols are constructed by patterns of use and habit as much as deliberate association” (Parkinson, 2012, p. 195). Therefore, it becomes all the more essential to consider those patterns of use and habit and the purposes they serve.

To the degree that the securitization of the Capitol has meaningfully increased actual security of the complex, one might consider the trade-off between preserving democratic space and protecting the building and the people within it worth the cost. However, it is profoundly unclear that the ever-more-severe ratcheting up of security measures has, in fact, resulted in greater safety. On the contrary, many of these measures appear to be “security theater,” a term coined by Bruce Schneier (2009) to describe “the security measures that make people feel more secure without doing anything to actually improve their security.” Yet, this description implies that security theater is essentially benign, neither contributing to security, nor causing harm. If, however, the security measures taken are more than falsely reassuring, if they are both reflective and constructive of a legislature and a public deeply alienated from one another, the effects are far more significant. Consider, for example, the Task Force 1-6 Capitol Security Review (U.S. Speaker, 2021) commissioned by Nancy Pelosi. The report recommends more than 850 additions to the Capitol Police force (which is already larger than the municipal police departments in Atlanta, St. Louis, New Orleans, or Denver), the re-establishment of a mounted unit and increased numbers of explosive detecting dogs, the creation of dedicated Civil Disturbance Units to surveil and respond to First Amendment-related activities, additional screening vestibules for the north and south entrances, and a “hardening” (p. 10) of all Capitol entrances.

The implications of this are bleak. There is no indication that the events of January 6th are likely to spur a reckoning about the ways a more open and accessible Capitol building would encourage more constructively engaged and appropriate civic participation. On the contrary, “each incident, then, justifies an increase in the control of public use of ostensibly public spaces” (Upton, 2021). Indeed, in a January 26, 2021, House hearing on the storming of the Capitol, Yogananda D. Pittman, the acting head of the Capitol Police, told representatives,

I do not believe there was any preparations that would have allowed for an open campus in which lawful protesters could exercise their First Amendment right to free speech and at the same time prevented the attack on Capitol grounds that day. (as cited in Upton, 2021)

She argued instead that “to prevent a similar incursion in the future, lawmakers will have to sacrifice public access to the building to bolster security measures.” Yet, as it sacrifices public access to the Capitol in the name of security, Congress must begin to take seriously the possibility that the profound alienation such measures engender is as much a threat to the practice of democracy as the attacks they seek to prevent.

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Framing an Insurrection: A Typology of Responses by Evangelical Leaders

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Abstract

As the January 6th insurrection unfolded, religious leaders who had supported Donald Trump were set on a behavioral process of response or silence. Some religious leaders offered statements that largely condemned the violence, others promoted conspiracy theories about the actors involved, and still others responded defensively. In this article, the author presents Twitter data of religious leaders from January 1 through the insurrection's 6-month anniversary on July 6, 2021, and argues that their responses form a typology from the conciliatory to the antagonistic. This typology offers a useful framework for assessing their immediate and changing responses in the contestation of January 6th. The insurrection represents a potential rally event in an ongoing narrative of Christian nationalism, and how religious leaders frame it has significant implications for the civic education and engagement of their followers.

Keywords: religion, communication, insurrection, clergy, social media, Christian nationalism

On January 6, 2021, a mob broke into the U.S. Capitol building as the Senate was carrying out its constitutionally prescribed duty to tally Electoral College votes. Representatives and senators either fled or huddled for safety as the situation grew increasingly violent. Offices and chambers were ransacked, and five people died in the melee. As the scene unfolded live on national television, political leaders of all stripes decried what was quickly termed an “insurrection,” the first ever of its kind in American politics in which a band of citizens used violence to attempt to stop the certification of a presidential election. Finally, at about 9:00 p.m., the Senate and House resumed the process of counting state electoral votes, and Joe Biden was certified as president-elect at 3:32 a.m. on January 7, 2021.

These events were the culmination of months, years, and perhaps decades of priming by various actors who cast doubt on electoral legitimacy, demonized the political opposition, or otherwise created or exploited divisions in the social fabric for political gain. The role of religious actors in this complex brew merits examination. The emergence of the New Christian Right and its Culture War in the 1970s aided partisan realignment, leaving a party system in which religious affiliation remains a dominant cleavage. In 2016, 77% of White evangelical Protestants and 64% of White Catholics voted for Donald Trump (Pew Research Center, 2018). In 2020, even with a slight drop among White Catholics, the share of the White evangelical vote for Trump increased to 84% (Igielnik et al., 2021). With a third of the electorate (33%) made up of White evangelicals and Catholics, and with Trump securing such a lopsided share of their votes, it is fair to say that the Christian Right is a strong base of Trump support (Igielnik et al., 2021).

From the beginning, Donald Trump sought religious support, bringing religious leaders into his inner circle and using them to reach the rank-and-file. In June 2016, candidate Trump released a list of 26 names that would form his “evangelical executive advisory board” (Gass, 2021). Throughout his presidency, these individuals would appear at White House events, offer public support for the president and his policies, and generally enjoy unprecedented access to the Oval Office. Having been such ardent supporters of this president and his administration, the Christian Right had much at stake in the outcome of the 2020 election and was prevalent in post-election rallies, marches, and protests leading up to January 6, 2021. How religious leaders responded (and respond) to the insurrection is important for how that shapes the civic education and engagement of the Christian Right going forward.

This research represents a preliminary effort to assess how leaders in the Christian Right framed the January 6th insurrection.¹ From the rhetoric used at post-election rallies, to the religious symbolism displayed that day, to the subsequent reactions of religious leaders, it is evident that appeals to religion were both a stimulus for and response to the insurrection. Relying on reports of the day as well as original searches of Twitter accounts of prominent Christian Right leaders, I found that although most condemned the violence, there was variation in the framing by religious elites, forming a typology ranging from the apologetic to the conspiratorial. I argue that this spectrum gives religious leaders leeway in the ongoing contestation of January 6th, and the frame they adopt is crucial to the opinion formation of their followers and to the civic learning that is essential to a healthy democracy.

¹ By *Christian Right*, I mean religious elites and rank-and-file, mostly evangelical, who represent the confluence of conservative Christianity and politics.

Literature Review

It has been well-established that opinions can change depending on how issues are framed (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Chong and Druckman (2007) defined *framing* as “the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue” (p. 104). When an issue is new, “the public is uncertain of its stakes and of how competing positions relate to their values” (p. 113). This heightens the importance of framing by trusted elites such as clerical leaders. Furthermore, frames can be mimicked by other actors, which is a significant reinforcement mechanism. The events of January 6, 2021, are still fresh in the minds of the public, and frames are still being contested (Zhao, 2021). This contestation heightens the importance of evangelical leaders, whose cues were key in generating support for President Trump among their followers and in framing the insurrection.

There is evidence that messaging by religious elites can affect public opinion (Djupe & Calfano, 2014). Religious communication primes values—either inclusive or exclusive—by which individuals process events and issues, and Djupe and Calfano (2014) found that evangelicals are more likely to express exclusive values, those that emphasize in/out-group boundaries. This priming activates social identity boundaries among listeners and shapes political attitudes (Djupe & Calfano, 2014). This process is contingent on variables, such as exposure, the political sophistication of listeners, and the credibility of the speaker, but the overall effect is powerful because religious elites can speak across both religious and public domains (Djupe & Calfano, 2014). “The efficacy of elite cues may depend on the congruence of their message, how their expertise is assessed, and the validity of their representational claim” (p. 212). In the case of framing the insurrection, evangelical leaders can implicitly draw on their past access to the Trump Administration (many in this study were members of his evangelical advisory board) to establish their credibility, but as this typology demonstrates, there is still variation in how they talk about January 6th. A single frame has yet to be established.

The pervasive influence of Christian nationalism raises the stakes of framing the insurrection. “As a collection of narratives, traditions, myths, value systems and symbols, Christian nationalism expresses the belief that America is distinctly 'Christian,' and that this should be reflected in its public policies, sacred symbols, and national identity” (Baker et al., 2020). Scholars have shown that these views, especially among Trump supporters (Baker et al., 2020; Whitehead et al., 2018), and the presence of Christian symbols and language at the marches and in the breach of the Capitol certainly represent Christian nationalism in action. Moreover, through their responses, evangelical leaders are positioned to influence whether the insurrection becomes a “rally event” in the narrative of Christian nationalism (Edwards & Swenson, 1997; Newman & Forcehimes, 2010).

Culminating on January 6th

Beginning the day after the election on November 3, 2020, pro-Trump protests formed at state capitols around the United States. Many of these were loosely organized under “Stop the Steal,” a Facebook group that amassed upwards of 300,000 members before it was banned from the platform, and many were led or joined by white supremacist or militia groups (Kelly, 2020; Lang et al., 2020). In fact, as multiple groups formed, connected on social media, and showed up at the same place on the same day, it was hard to draw lines around individual groups. Among these was the Jericho March, whose name borrowed from an Old Testament story and whose members marched around state capitols soliciting divine intervention to overturn the election

results.² Adherents drew heavily from Judeo-Christian symbolism, especially the shofar, a ram's horn used by ancient Jews as a trumpet in battle. However, Jericho March was not founded by established religious elites but by Rob Weaver, a health-care executive whose nomination for head of the Indian Health Service in the Trump Administration fell under scrutiny of his record, and Arina Grossu, a staffer at the Family Research Council. In interviews, both Weaver and Grossu described supernatural visions as the impetus for founding the group: "God told me to let the church roar" ("Jericho March Co-Founder," 2020).

At a rally in Washington, DC, on December 12, 2020, the emcee for the event was Eric Metaxas, a radio talk-show host who has described himself as "an ambassador for faith in public life" (Metaxas Media, 2021). Also featured were Alex Jones, head of InfoWars, a media platform specializing in conspiracy theories; disgraced former General Michael Flynn, who was convicted for lying to the FBI, later pardoned by President Trump, and now pledged allegiance to QAnon; and Mike Lindell, CEO of MyPillow. In addition to these main speakers, there were also religious leaders, including Catholic Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, Jonathan Cahn, a Messianic Jewish minister known among Charismatic evangelicals for his apocalyptic focus, and Mark Burns, a South Carolina pastor and member of Trump's evangelical advisory board. The 4-hour event was live-streamed, culminating in a fly-over by Marine One (Cheney, 2020). Rhetoric was on a war-footing, with a shofar sounding a battle cry and calling listeners to "fight" for Donald Trump (Cheney, 2020).

This Jericho March was repeated a month later, on January 5, 2021, and once again, the event fused religious worship and political protest as participants marched around the Capitol singing hymns. Over the course of several days, there were multiple rallies sponsored by different groups, but as before, events and participants overlapped. At the Jericho March, Tennessee Pastor Greg Locke prayed explicitly for Enrique Tarrio, the leader of the white supremacist group the Proud Boys, who had been arrested the day before for tearing down a Black Lives Matter banner during that group's rally: "We just thank God that we can lock shields, and we can come shoulder to shoulder with people that still stand up for this nation" (Jenkins, 2021a). Permits suggest that the largest organized gathering planned for January 6, 2021, was the all-day "Save America" rally, organized by individuals with direct connections to the Trump campaign (Beaujon, 2021; Lardner & Smith, 2021).

Featuring President Trump's associates, like Roger Stone and Michael Flynn, and members of Congress, such as Representative Mo Brooks (R-AL), the rally on January 6th had broad-based appeal to the variety of Trump supporters there, including evangelicals. Paula White, Trump's personal spiritual advisor whom he appointed to head of his Faith and Opportunity Initiative, gave an invocation: "Let every adversary against democracy, against freedom, against life, against liberty, against justice, against peace, against righteousness be overturned right now in the name of Jesus" (Posner, 2021).

Christian symbolism was readily visible among the crowd. One person carried a sign depicting Jesus and a caption that read, "I saw what you did with those ballots" ("Supporters," 2021), suggesting that Jesus himself acknowledged election fraud. Others carried signs, banners, and flags reading, "Jesus Saves" or "Jesus 2020" (Farley, 2021). One of these was positioned

² Their website (<https://jerichomarch.org/>) has now been scrubbed of all identifying information except for two statements, dated January 8 and January 14, 2021, denouncing the violence of January 6th and claiming that all Jericho Marches were peaceful.

next to a gallows that had been built, presumably in preparation to act on the rally-goers' cries, "Hang Mike Pence!" (Schor, 2021). Pictures and videos revealed several life-sized crosses in the crowd, in addition to those that adorned apparel (Farley, 2021). Carrying over from the previous day's events, many participants knelt in prayer or raised their hands in worship (Farley, 2021). Under the banner of prayer, storming the Capitol became a religious act. Such conflation of loyalties was established in other ways. "Shout if you love Jesus!" one group yelled, to which another responded, "Shout if you love Trump!" (Green, 2021) Elsewhere the chant was, "Give it up if you believe in Jesus!" to which another group responded, "Give it up if you believe in Donald Trump!" (Goldberg, 2021).

Upon breaching the Senate chamber, rioters gathered on the dais to offer a prayer. To a chorus of "Amen," one person shouted, "Jesus Christ, we invoke your name!" (Jenkins, 2021b). At this point, one of the most memorable figures, known as "the Shaman," called for "a prayer in this sacred space" (Jenkins, 2021b). Through a bullhorn, his prayer relied on familiar evangelical language, even as it harkened to a generic spirituality by invoking a "divine, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent creator God" (Jenkins, 2021b). He offered thanksgiving for the opportunity to "exercise our rights, to allow us to send a message to all the tyrants, the communists and the globalists that this is our nation, not theirs" and for "filling this chamber with patriots that love you and that love Christ" and for "allowing the United States of America to be reborn" (Jenkins, 2021b). Some around him knelt; others raised their hands in praise. One in the room later described it as a moment when the Senate was "consecrated to Jesus" and called the prayer the "ultimate statement of where we are at with this movement" (Jenkins, 2021b). Police officers testified before Congress that the crowds tried to evangelize the officers, even as the rioters battered them (Sharlet, 2021).

Measuring Responses

As all this unfolded on January 6th, it was obvious to participants and observers alike that this was an insurrection infused with Christianity. Religious leaders were pressed to respond, and these responses form a typology indicating what the insurrection means to the Christian Right and how it might be used in an ongoing narrative of Christian nationalism. To examine the responses of religious leaders, I first relied on media reports of the day. Reporters from both national and international media sought comments from religious figures, especially those who had had an obvious presence in the Trump Administration.

To these reports, I added results from original searches of the Twitter accounts of prominent religious supporters of Donald Trump. Twitter is an appropriate social medium to measure because, as Trump relied on it as his primary form of direct public communication, so too have many of these religious leaders used it to extend their platform beyond the pulpit. It is a vehicle by which they transition from the religious to the public domain (Djupe & Calfano 2014). I conducted both word/phrase searches (e.g., "Capitol," "protest," "rally") as well as date searches (from January 1 to July 6, 2021) to capture relevant responses. I began my searches with the names on Trump's evangelical advisory board and then added other individuals (e.g., Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne) and groups (e.g., Charisma Media) who distinguished themselves for their public support of President Trump. Not all of these maintain an active Twitter presence, but at the time of this writing, I concluded searches of 31 accounts.³

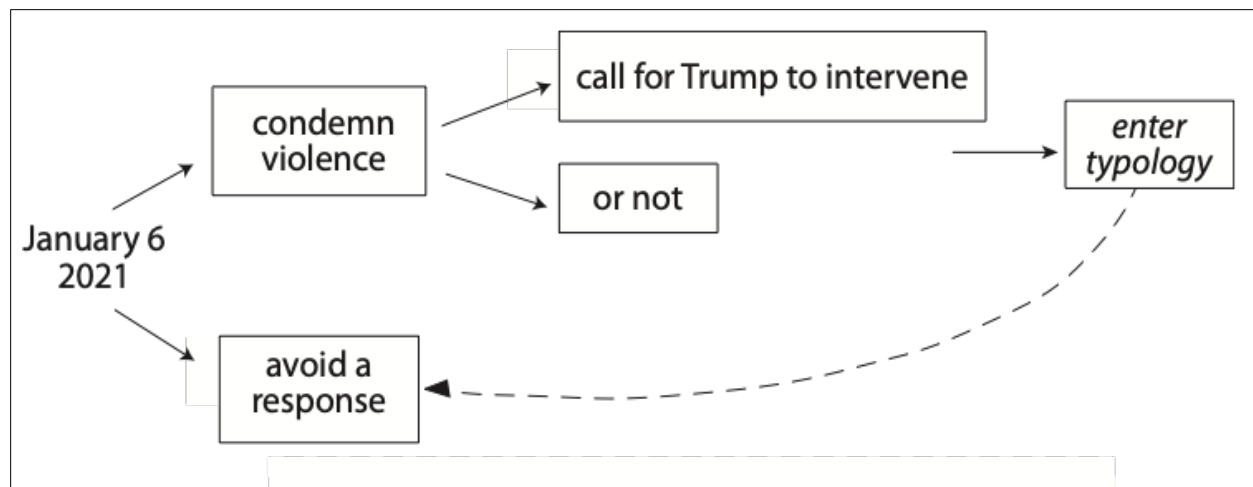
³ Search terms and names of accounts are available as an appendix.

A Process and a Typology of Responses

Beginning on January 6th, Christian Right leaders entered a behavioral process, as presented in Figure 1, starting with their decision to respond or not respond to the event.

Figure 1

A Process of Response



Those religious leaders who avoided a response either did not have an active Twitter presence or bided their time in silence, perhaps waiting for a consensus to form, to be led by broader denominational statements, or to distance themselves from potential condemnation. Of those who chose to respond, the initial and almost universal response was to condemn the violence. Some leaders explicitly called on President Trump to intervene by telling his supporters to stand down. This was an implicit recognition that the violence was being carried out by Trump supporters—an idea that some would contest. In a now-deleted tweet, megachurch pastor and author Rick Warren strongly criticized what he saw: “Armed breaching of capitol security behind a confederate flag is anarchy, unAmerican, criminal treason and domestic terrorism. President Trump must clearly tell his supporters ‘We lost. Go home now’” (“Faith Leaders,” 2021). Russell Moore (2021), then-head of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the public policy arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, tweeted at 1:36 p.m.: “President @realDonaldTrump, you have a moral responsibility to call on these mobs to stop this dangerous and anti-constitutional anarchy. Please do so.” Then-president of the SBC J.D. Greear (2021) soon followed:

Peaceable transitions of power have marked our Republic since the beginning. It is part of honoring and submitting to God’s ordained leaders whether they were our choice or not. We need you, @POTUS to condemn this mob. Let’s move forward together. Praying for safety.

Most, of course, did not mention President Trump, but in a joint statement issued on January 6th, Reverend Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Leadership Conference and Reverend Johnnie Moore, both members of Trump’s evangelical advisory board, credited Trump’s intervention: “We are relieved that both the President-Elect and President

Trump have now spoken directly to the issue telling protesters in DC to go home, calling for peace” (“Faith Leaders,” 2021).

Evangelicals were clearly set apart among religious leaders in their responses to January 6th. Rabbi Jack Moline of the Interfaith Alliance described a “sickening sight of rioters,” while the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church Michael Curry said, “We believe the actions of armed protestors represent a coup attempt” (“Faith Leaders” 2021). As the dust settled, these and other religious leaders remained strong and vocal in their condemnation of events; only evangelical leaders tried to calibrate a response that would offend neither President Trump nor their followers.

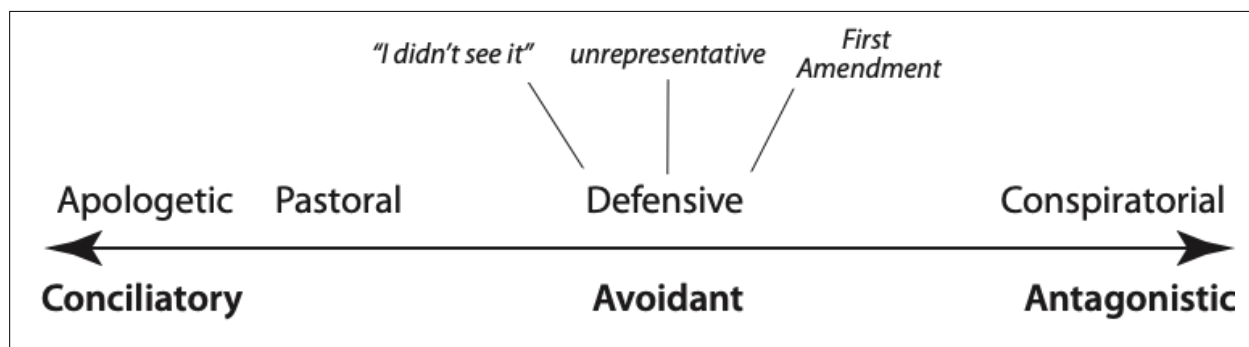
Whether the response called on President Trump to intervene or not, the variance lies in how the leader framed the violence and in what actions they subsequently called for or took themselves.

Figure 2 illustrates a spectrum—from conciliatory to antagonistic—on which individual responses may be categorized as *pastoral*, *defensive*, or *conspiratorial*. Pastoral responses were those which called for prayer, offered a biblical verse, or some other statement of counsel. These I labeled as conciliatory in that they were meant to appease or offer guidance to followers. In their calls for prayer, most responses demonstrated some sense of the pastoral. After tweeting two separate calls for President Trump to denounce the mob and “follow the Constitution,” Reverend Ed Litton (2021), current president of the SBC, followed with a series of pastoral messages:

In this hour, when all seems to be coming unhinged, turn your heart to the Lord. Find your peace and rest in Him. All who trust in Him today, find healing in His sacrifice. I will wait for you Lord.

Figure 2

A Typology of Responses



At the other end of the spectrum, some responses were conspiratorial in that they fomented skepticism or doubt about what happened on January 6th. They trafficked in conspiracy theories—for instance, that the breach of the Capitol was a false flag operation by antifa. These responses were, of course, antagonistic because they fueled anger and distrust toward the political system. A statement by Franklin Graham fed this conspiracy:

They have a right to protest. To tell people to go home, it's not for me to decide that. The people who broke the windows in the Capitol did not look like the people out there demonstrating. Most likely it was antifa. ("Faith Leaders," 2021)

Reverend Robert Jeffress (2021a), pastor of First Baptist Dallas and frequent guest on the Fox News Channel, tweeted, "Disobeying and assaulting police is a sin whether it's done by Antifa or angry Republicans." This message equivocated between antifa, which featured—sometimes with violent outcomes—in nationwide protests and counter-protests during the summer of 2020, and the current assault on the Capitol. Jeffress's statement also contributed to the emerging myth that, despite their appearances, the insurrectionists were not Trump supporters but antifa in disguise to perpetuate violence.

Between these poles lie defensive responses. Defensiveness can assume different forms, including mere disbelief. Reverend Tony Suarez (2021), vice president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference and member of Trump's evangelical advisory board, tweeted, "I never thought I would see such a scene like this in the United States. This is the kind of stuff that happens in Venezuela but not here." Defensiveness also occurred when the individual either claimed not to have seen any violence from their vantage point or implied that the actions did not reflect the identity of the actors. In a thread on the evening of January 6th, Ché Ahn (2021b), a Charismatic pastor, tweeted, "I can say the gatherings were 99% peaceful and marked by alot [*sic*] of prayer and worship." In his sermon the following Sunday, Ahn elaborated: "I want to give full disclosure: I was not at the Capitol. I was at the rally hearing President Trump." He continued to describe the large crowd size that he said had him stuck for four hours "with a small bladder," and to laughs explained how after finding a restroom, he returned to his hotel room for a "power nap" but "ended up sleeping through the whole rioting" (Ahn, 2021a). Ralph Reed (2021), a political consultant who arguably was the founder of the Christian Right as director of the Christian Coalition in the 1990s, tweeted:

The violence at the U.S. Capitol is an assault on democracy and representative government. Resort to mob violence has no place in the life of our nation, and I condemn and repudiate it. It does not represent our movement or the cause of Christ.

There also was a subgroup of defensive responses that loosely referenced the First Amendment—either as justification for the free association of groups that day or for the common complaint during the Trump presidency that social media de-platformed conservative or pro-Trump voices (Shepardson, 2019). Of course, that idea only gained credence in the days following January 6th when Twitter and Facebook suspended Trump's accounts, which caused many evangelical leaders to join other conservatives in seeking out other platforms like Parler and Telegram (Dzhanova, 2021). After offering a prayer at the "Save America" rally earlier in the day, Paula White (2021a) tweeted the following at 3:55 p.m.:

I always have and will denounce violence, lawlessness, and anarchy in any and all forms. I have deep convictions for all people to have protection over the 1st Amendment and freedom of speech. We should be able to do this without becoming violent. I ask all to continue praying.

After avoiding a response on January 6th, Gary Bauer (2021), former president of the Family Research Council, tweeted the following on January 9 amid the social media purges of QAnon accounts: "We are at a dangerous moment in our country. Silencing speech is what is done in communist China, Iran and North Korea. It must not be allowed in America." Others, including

Jordan Easley, an SBC pastor and member of Trump's Faith Leadership Initiative, Samuel Rodriguez, and Ché Ahn issued tweets criticizing Twitter censorship and/or calling for their followers to join them on Parler.

Some leaders were directly challenged as instigators of the insurrection and defended themselves with fury. In a since-deleted tweet, Representative Adam Kinzinger (R-MO), one of the few GOP critics of Trump, called out certain evangelical leaders for their role in perpetuating the "Big Lie" that was a catalyst for the insurrection. Jeffress (2021b) responded, "Adam, you need to get your facts straight. I've never once claimed the election was 'stolen.' If anyone needs to 'admit their mistake,' it's YOU. Will be awaiting your apology." Kinzinger (2021) apologized to Jeffress but maintained his overall criticism:

You know sir? You are absolutely correct. You did act honorably, and while my point remains about the Church and the need for pastors to lead, you did not press those stolen election conspiracies. I am sorry for including you in that.

Similarly, Jordan Easley (2021) tweeted this on January 11: "I just received an email from an angry viewer stating that the insurrection at the capital [*sic*] last week was MY flt.—people—stop looking for someone to blame."

Contrary to that tone, the most conciliatory response was the *apologetic*. Apologies were rare; in fact, I could only find one example among my searches. On the night of January 6th, Cindy Jacobs (2021a), a self-described teacher and prophet with a following among Charismatic evangelicals, tweeted a link to a *Washington Times* article: "Facial recognition firm claims antifa infiltrated Trump protesters who stormed Capitol." Two days later, Jacobs' (2021b) response had changed from the conspiratorial to the apologetic: "Questions I am asking myself tonight: 1. Was my heart centered on Jesus or politics? 2. Did I love my brother as myself? Confession! My heart was more centered on politics. So sorry, Lord!" Her tweet was met with some criticism by followers but also some support by fellow evangelical leader Tony Suarez.

Since that day, evangelical leaders have mostly looped back to avoidant behavior. Twitter feeds resumed daily devotionals or sermon clips. Some turned their attention to defending President Trump, who faced a second impeachment effort for his role in instigating what happened on January 6th. Franklin Graham (2021) tweeted,

I hope President @JoeBiden will stand up to those on Capitol Hill who want to impeach Donald Trump and tell them to put this behind us. If he wants to unite the country, this would be a huge step forward. I encourage everyone to pray for him.

On February 13, when the Senate voted to acquit Donald Trump, Paula White (2021b) issued an apparently celebratory tweet with the results of the vote and a list of Republicans who voted to convict. On July 6, 2021, the 6-month anniversary of the attack, neither Franklin Graham nor Paula White made mention of the events that had transpired.

Analysis

The varying responses among leaders reflect the sense of confusion in the moment. After having supported Trump so fully throughout his 4-year term, including explaining away his personal moral failings so obviously at odds with what they expect of their followers, these leaders were left flailing to respond when national institutions that many have imbued with providential significance were attacked. That many of these attackers likely had attended the prayer rallies and services they led the day before only added to the ambivalence. Thus, the

motivations for responses in the aftermath of January 6th are a complex brew of disbelief, self-preservation, and perhaps some remorse.

This process model is a useful framework for assessing responses—both past and future—of evangelical leaders. Just 6 months later, some political figures were seeking to change the narrative of January 6th. Senator Ron Johnson (R-WI) explained, “It’s extremely important to create an accurate historical record of exactly what happened so the false narrative—that there were thousands of armed insurrectionists—doesn’t last” (Zhao, 2021). Representative Andrew Clyde (R-GA), who is seen on video barricading the door of the House chamber against incursion, described in a congressional hearing the behavior of insurrectionists that day as “a normal tourist visit” (Itkowitz, 2021). Perhaps the most startling reversion came from Representative Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), minority leader in the House, who, as insurrectionists were breaking into Capitol offices, phoned President Trump to ask him to call off his supporters; when Trump refused, McCarthy furiously shouted, “Who the f---k do you think you’re talking to?” (Gangel et al., 2021). Just 6 months later, McCarthy actively thwarted congressional attempts to investigate events of the day (Rupar, 2021).

It will be worth watching to see whether evangelical leaders follow suit and form an echo chamber around Republicans seeking to reframe the insurrection. For example, individual leaders might move from an initial pastoral response to a defensive or even conspiratorial frame. A revision by a few key leaders, such as Graham or White, might provide the impetus for others to join the bandwagon and create coherent messaging that increases the efficacy of their frame (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Djupe & Calfano, 2014). This might be expected if Republicans succeed in reframing events and if Donald Trump remains a viable political figure, leveraging his transactional relationship with evangelicals once again.

It is telling that Republicans, and some evangelical leaders, did not just downplay the scope of events but created an alternative construction that blamed antifa for what happened. This suggests that January 6th could be used as a rally event in an ongoing narrative of Christian nationalism that justifies a culture—and perhaps literal—war to reclaim America as a Christian nation against secularism and an evolving set of threats (Baker et al., 2020; Newman & Forcehimes, 2010).

Above all, evangelicals have created flexibility for themselves in their responses to January 6th. By offering, say, a conciliatory initial response and then engaging in avoidant behavior, they have leeway to move more antagonistically as political conditions change. Leeway presents a “time for choosing.”

With the emergence of this typology from my preliminary research, I plan to refine my sample by enlarging my list of leaders and the range of dates to capture any response, or none. Utilizing this dataset, future research will enable me to categorize all responses via this typology and use descriptive and analytical statistics to view trends and patterns. However, there is a caveat: Although researchers can measure the public statements of evangelical leaders from their press releases, social media, and journalists’ inquiries, they may respond differently in sermons, newsletters, or specialized outlets that primarily target their congregation or adherents. Many of these fora are best described as semi-public because they are indirectly accessible to those outside the target population, but it is these forms of communication that could have maximum influence due to their direct reach to their target audience (Djupe & Calfano, 2014).

Another area of future research is the assessment of responses according to the varieties of evangelical leaders. For example, I would expect that institutional leaders who are heads of established denominations would have a more measured response than media leaders who appeal to a different constituency. Moreover, this focus could be expanded to study how these messages are received by adherents. After all, communication is a feedback loop, and it is likely that these responses by leaders were shaped by the anticipated reception of their followers. For instance, those leaders who quickly located themselves in the conspiratorial likely knew that messaging would resonate with their followers.

Certain stimuli, such as the release of a report from the congressional select committee investigating the events of January 6, 2021, or future anniversaries, present opportunities for evangelical leaders to respond. What type of response they offer bears implications for democracy and civic learning. Research findings have clearly indicated that religious leaders are thought leaders with a special influence because of the level of trust followers place in them. Moreover, religious leaders can connect a moral frame to a political issue or event, elevating the attitude formation of their followers to the spiritual realm (Chong & Druckman, 2007). These traits have important implications for the civic knowledge and engagement of their adherents. With declining levels of trust in governmental actors, religious figures hold the public trust, and evangelical leaders, especially those who had access to the Trump Administration, leveraged this to become sources of political knowledge for their followers. Thus, how they interpret January 6th stands to effect whether their followers view it as an insurrection or acceptable political behavior. The latter is how political violence becomes normalized as civic engagement.

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Promoting Critical Reasoning: Civic Engagement in an Era of Divisive Politics and Civil Unrest

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Abstract

In this article, the authors advocate that civic engagement education must focus on antiracism, anti-extremism, and digital literacy in the wake of the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021. This critical turn is necessary to stabilize democracy, restore trust in institutions, and address the problems presented by the post-truth era.

Keywords: civic engagement, antiracism, anti-extremism, digital literacy, post-truth

Out of the scree of the January 6th Capital insurrection, Simon (2021) anticipated two possible outcomes: The first posited that “the fever has broken and the United States is now on a path to recovery. Republicans are looking at the carnage and doubting whether it was worth it. A new pattern of cooperation will emerge,” and the second depicted a “far grimmer scenario ... [whereby] the country remains in a state of civil instability, on the verge of a decisive breakdown in consensual government” (p. 13). Simon gave more credence to the second scenario. Online communication platforms will increasingly “fuel conspiracy-driven paranoia,” while “tensions pulsating through society and politics will make it harder to manage the challenges of climate change and the pandemic, and to rationally allocate national resources to cope with their effects. Divisions are likely to sharpen” (pp. 13–14).

The select committee investigating the Capitol attack held its first hearing on July 27, 2021. The nearly 4-hour hearing featured testimony from four police officers who recounted their experiences that day, relaying how an angry mob hurled racial slurs, attacked them with metal pipes and other objects, and showered them with mace and bear spray. Further, a DC police officer, Michael Fanone, described how he was beaten unconsciousness and suffered a heart attack. Another officer, Daniel Hodges, characterized the attack as a “white-nationalist insurrection” (Givhan, 2021, para. 8). Meanwhile, on the same day of the hearing, six congressional Republicans marched to the Department of Justice to protest the “political prisoners” there awaiting trial for their role in the Capitol attack, blaming the events “not on the seditionists but on Capitol Police, and particularly, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi” (Milbank, 2021, para. 7).

As the Capitol insurrection and subsequent reactions of congressional Republications affirm, American democracy is more fragile now than ever—which is evident to college students. Data from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE; 2019) indicate that young people’s faith in democracy has been shaken. America is deeply divided over election fraud, COVID-19, and systematic racism, divisions that have been exacerbated and perpetuated by the media ecosystem. The “Big Lie” that ex-President Trump and Republican adherents continue to tell is spread through traditional and social media. Thus, instruction in media literacy is crucial, as is restoring students’ faith in the democratic process. Moreover, civic engagement education is critically important at this moment because it provides an avenue to become involved in the processes for positive change and can provide students with a sense of control over a situation that might feel beyond their control, thereby guarding against feelings of political apathy.

We propose that civic engagement education must take a critical turn, focusing on antiracism and anti-extremism as well as digital literacies. To advance pedagogies of antiracism and anti-extremism, educators must encourage students to grapple with big issues through civic engagement via emergent digital literacies, rather than smaller and more localized issues, to help them understand how local issues are tied to broader societal issues and affect wider audiences. Given the current threats to democracy, higher education urgently needs to focus on teaching civic engagement at the macro level, which is now digital and online, rather than micro-level civic engagement, which is community- and service-learning-based. Educators must develop emergent literacies to include functional, critical, and rhetorical competencies (Damasceno, 2021). Carr et al. (2018) argued,

If the role of education is to create informed, creative, global citizens, then media literacy for a critically aware populace, one that strives to build a more cogent, socially just,

engaged, and critical democracy—must also be incorporated into the teaching and learning process. (p. 80)

Reimagining Civic Engagement

Teaching students to be civically engaged is not an apolitical endeavor—nor is civic engagement itself. After all, higher education’s primary objective is to help students become democratic citizens. While that objective ought not be political, it certainly is in the current political climate—and perhaps it always has been. Outcries that the 2020 presidential election was stolen and fraudulent have turned the very idea of democracy into a political issue. Yet, universities must persist in promoting democratic efforts, even if that is seen as political. “Democracies are fragile,” Bennett (2021) wrote. “They require both citizens and elected officials who understand how a democracy works and who actually want to keep it. Most Americans would fail the first test, and an alarming number would fail the second” (para. 11). Disturbingly, the threat is not in the nation’s rearview mirror. Recent “armed events appear to have been orchestrated, carefully planned, masterminded actions building toward an insurrectional strategy,” meaning that

Next time—and if this is trivialized there is a 100% chance of a next time—lawmakers could be held hostage or killed, and insurrections could take place simultaneously at state and local levels in a progression resembling previous fascist takeovers in other countries. (Morabia, 2021, p. 538)

Social media appear to be key conduits in the struggle over democracy. As Van Dijcke and Wright (2021) noted, “Socio-political isolation, proximity to a prominent hate group, the Proud Boys, as well as the intensity of local misinformation posts on social media are robustly associated with participation” (para. 2) in the Capitol insurrection.

Educators must ask if institutions of higher education are doing their part to foster democratic ideals and reduce threats to the fabric of democracy. Honestly, our answer is that they must redouble their efforts and rethink their approach. There is an entirely different path to civic education, one that recognizes that student involvement in their communities is not enough. Rather, a critical approach to civic engagement embraces the notion that educators are instilling democratic values in students and inspiring them to raise their voices to affect positive social change while calling out systems of oppression. Hess (2021) wrote,

It too often seems that our schools and colleges—which should play an outsized role in teaching the responsibilities of citizens and the discipline of democracy—have instead opted to focus on teaching those things that instructors find more gratifying or students find more appealing. (para. 11)

Rather than avoiding difficult conversations, civic educators should help students value diversity and dialogue. Though it might seem unfair to blame higher education, the latter has an obligation to help preserve democracy. “The challenge is bigger than the right or the left. It’s our national problem. And our schools, colleges, and commitment to civic education have a crucial role to play in tackling it” (Hess, 2021, para. 15). If America “suffers from a pandemic of civic ignorance and a deep deficit of civic respect” (Davenport, 2021, p. 84)—which it does—then higher education has a responsibility to combat that ignorance and lack of respect.

The Post-Truth Era

Political polarization, dissemination of disinformation in social media echo chambers, racism, and extremism are just a few of the obstacles that must be confronted to heighten civic engagement among college students. Higher education does not operate in a vacuum; thus, promoting civic engagement among students is not a mission that can be accomplished without addressing the challenges of the post-truth era. If educators are to help students become savvy navigators in the post-truth era, they must help students recognize the difficult conversations in which they need to become advocates. Students need to become advocates for democracy and for those whose rights are threatened. Along the way, students will need to know how to advocate in an environment that is vastly different from that which existed even 5 years ago. Thus, higher education should embrace critical civic engagement education—critical in the sense of advocating for social change. Students need to be aware of and question structures and underlying systemic power imbalances that entrench oppression and disenfranchise citizens. In the post-truth era, students cannot expect facts and science alone to convince all audiences; rather, they must turn to narratives, emotional appeals, and personal connections, and use social media and digital technologies to advocate for social change while interrogating the part those very tools play in furthering inequalities and diminishing democratic rights.

Polarization

Polarization contributes to America's current predicament. Kydd (2021) noted, "Conservative radicalization was driven by partisan polarization, media polarization, the emergence of social media and associated conspiracy theories, and the formation of armed right-wing groups," adding that the "structural conditions generating the attack are unlikely to ameliorate, so the potential for political violence will remain" (p. 3). Social media structures deepen problems and, thus, must be called out by civically engaged students, but these platforms might also provide tools through which students advocate for social change. "The bottom-up market nature of mass self-indoctrination became even clearer with the advent of social media. Social media companies, driven by the profit motive, further segmented the media market, tailoring their information to the individual consumer" (Kydd, 2021, p. 11), while algorithms aligned provocative content, devoid of truth and context, with preexisting preferences, creating echo chambers where those skilled at manipulating social media could crank out viral fake news. Social media fanned the flames of conspiracy theories. "With the rise of social media in the 2000s, conspiracy theories" accelerated while social media destroyed the previous hierarchy of the media world since "individuals with little or no organizational backing could put out information that would travel as far as a news broadcast" reaching enormous audiences (Kydd, 2021, pp. 11–12).

Disinformation

Though civic engagement education has already begun to address ways of preparing students to recognize misinformation, there is a great deal more to accomplish. Recognizing misinformation is a start, but students also need training to counter *disinformation* in various traditional and online media environments as well as within their personal networks. Overcoming disinformation will increasingly be necessary for civic engagement campaigns and activities to be successful. Rational thinking and appreciation for objective facts—not "alternative facts"—that are verifiable should become the overarching learning outcome for students. Benkler et al. (2018) noted that a "shared means of defining what facts or beliefs are off the wall and are plausibly open to reasoned debate is necessary to maintain a democracy" (p. 5). They also contended that "as a public we have lost our capacity to agree on shared modes of

validation as to what is going on and what is just plain whacky” (p. 6). Thus, students must learn to call out lies, irrational thinking, and crazy opinions or beliefs for what they are.

Given the present media ecosystem, however, the ability to do so requires digital literacy. “People usually hear what they want to hear because they get their news exclusively from sources whose bias they agree with” (Gregor & Mlejnkova, 2021, p. 34) and trust sources that provide them with facts that they find likeable. An additional problem is that “disinformation and lies spread faster and to a broader audience than truth” (Gregor & Mlejnkova, 2021, p. 34). Without digital literacy competency, citizens are susceptible to manipulation and propaganda. Some people use social media “to knowingly and unknowingly spread misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy and partisan talking points” (Mercieca, 2021, para. 15), conditioning them to communicate like propagandists, expressing outrage. This new propaganda model, capitalizing on social media and characterized by much fighting but little discussion, manufactures dissent (Mercieca, 2021). Thus, digital literacy competency should be a point of emphasis in civic engagement pedagogy.

Pedagogical Pathways Forward

We recommend three pathways for civic engagement pedagogy to take a critical turn. First, civic education must explore systemic inequalities and racism. Second, preparing students to be civically engaged necessitates countering extremism. Third, engaged students must be digitally literate to navigate media. Each of these foci ought to inform the content of students’ engagement topics as well as methods of instruction and course material.

Antiracism

Those in the civic engagement movement in higher education should embrace pedagogies of antiracism. Research has suggested that students are interested in engaging in conversations about racism. For example, recent research by CIRCLE (2021) suggests that concerns about systematic racism drove youth to vote in the 2020 election in record numbers. However, despite student interest in the topic, McCoy (2021) noted that most students, faculty, and staff in higher education have had few opportunities to engage in conversations about racism. Yet, McCoy argued “college campuses are frequent flashpoints for broader polarization around issues of race and provide unique opportunities for diverse conversations in the midst of complex, painful, and conflictual challenges on college campuses” (para. 13).

Robinson (2019) argued that foundational civic engagement theory fails to account for “inequality as the cornerstone of American society” (p. 3). Specifically, systematic inequality results in the exclusion of Black Americans and other persons of color from many forms of civic engagement. As Robinson maintained, “Black people were omitted from American democracy in its founding documents and therefore were barred from traditional notions of American civic engagement that continue today” (p. 4). Given this historical marginalization, educators and researchers have an obligation to fundamentally reconsider and critique theories around and pedagogical strategies for civic engagement.

Further, Dancy et al.’s (2019) research demonstrated that those in higher education can create meaningful pathways to civic engagement for historically marginalized individuals. Specifically, they found a strong link between higher education and civic engagement for Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgendered (LGBT) people and showed that connectedness to LGBT communities facilitated civic engagement. They concluded that conversations about race,

gender, and sexual orientation must happen in higher education to provide a “fuller learning experience for all students in the classroom” (Dancy et al., 2019, p. 21). Similarly, research by Bañales et al. (2020) revealed that providing an opportunity for Latinx and Black students to reflect on systematic racial marginalization created pathways to civic and political engagement. They noted that the positive relationships between critical reflection and civic engagement “among both ethnic/racial groups suggest that such reflections on inequality might be a stimulus for young adults’ of color involvement in the sociopolitical system” (p. 186).

Leath and Chavous (2017) examined the interactions between Black students’ civic engagement and their sense of belonging and perceptions of campus racial climate at predominately White institutions. They found that Black students’ “sociopolitical beliefs and sense of political agency interact with their college racial contexts to influence their engagement within these settings” (p. 232). Leath and Chavous recommended that courses be developed to support students of color “but also require participation from White students and institutional agents to encourage groups to work together across differences” (p. 233). They also contended that students of color need support when dealing with the emotions they experience when encountering racism and violence against Black bodies on the internet and social media.

Zembylas (2012) observed that discussions of antiracism in higher education are often marked by strong and discomfiting emotions by faculty and students. To facilitate meaningful conversations about race, Zembylas advocated for a pedagogy of strategic empathy whereby faculty are willing to use empathy “strategically to engage in in-depth critical inquiry of troubled knowledge, that is, an emotional willingness to engage in the difficult work of empathizing with views that one may find unacceptable or offensive” (p. 122). Importantly, this does not mean unacceptable or offensive views should be accepted or viewed as meritorious. Instead, the focus is on creating a classroom climate that facilitates the development of “affective connections without dismissing the critical interrogation of past emotional histories, knowledges, and experiences” (p. 123).

Anti-Extremism

Democratic learning and civic engagement efforts are impeded by extremism and radicalization spurred in social media echo chambers. This is especially important considering the challenges facing democracy in the wake of the January 6th insurrection. For example, a U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS; 2020) report found that white supremacist extremists now pose the most significant threat to America. Further, a Homeland Security Academic Advisory Council (2017) report urged the DHS to establish partnerships with colleges and universities to raise awareness of instructional strategies that counter extremism. At a minimum, civic engagement education should provide a blanket of protection for students, equipping them with knowledge and skills to avoid becoming radicalized or veering toward extremism. Thus, a critical approach to civic engagement should simultaneously protect students from future radicalization and extremism, and provide a means of countering such behavior among other populations.

Scholars and educators have developed and tested numerous models for teaching anti-extremism. For example, Aly et al. (2014) described a program designed to activate students’ moral agency and immunize them against social pressure that might otherwise cause them to embrace violent extremism. Qualitative evaluations of this program have shown that it helps students view violent extremism as inhumane, facilitates empathy with victims, and aids them in

developing “self-efficacy in resisting violent extremism influences and responding to influences in positive, productive ways” (Aly et al., 2014, p. 383).

Sklad et al.’s (2020) research evaluated a pedagogical model designed to combat extremism called the Universal Curriculum Against Radicalization in Europe (UCARE). The UCARE model addresses factors contributing to radicalization, facilitates the development of positive attitudes about the utility of prosocial civic engagement, and helps participants develop empathy toward others. Sklad et al. confirmed that “schools may effectively engage in fostering civic and social competencies with the intention to prevent processes that contribute to radicalization” (para. 52).

Similarly, Brown et al. (2021) argued that interviews with former extremists suggest that education efforts should include exposure to diverse races, cultures, and religions as well as skill development related to empathy, critical thinking, and media literacy. Ultimately, when it comes to pedagogies of anti-extremism, we agree with Davies (2014) that it is the job of educators to combat the forces “which too often lead to extremism or violence, and to foster the orientations, plural social relations and horizontal social networks, and skill sets which can provoke young people to take positive action for equity and just peace” (p. 466).

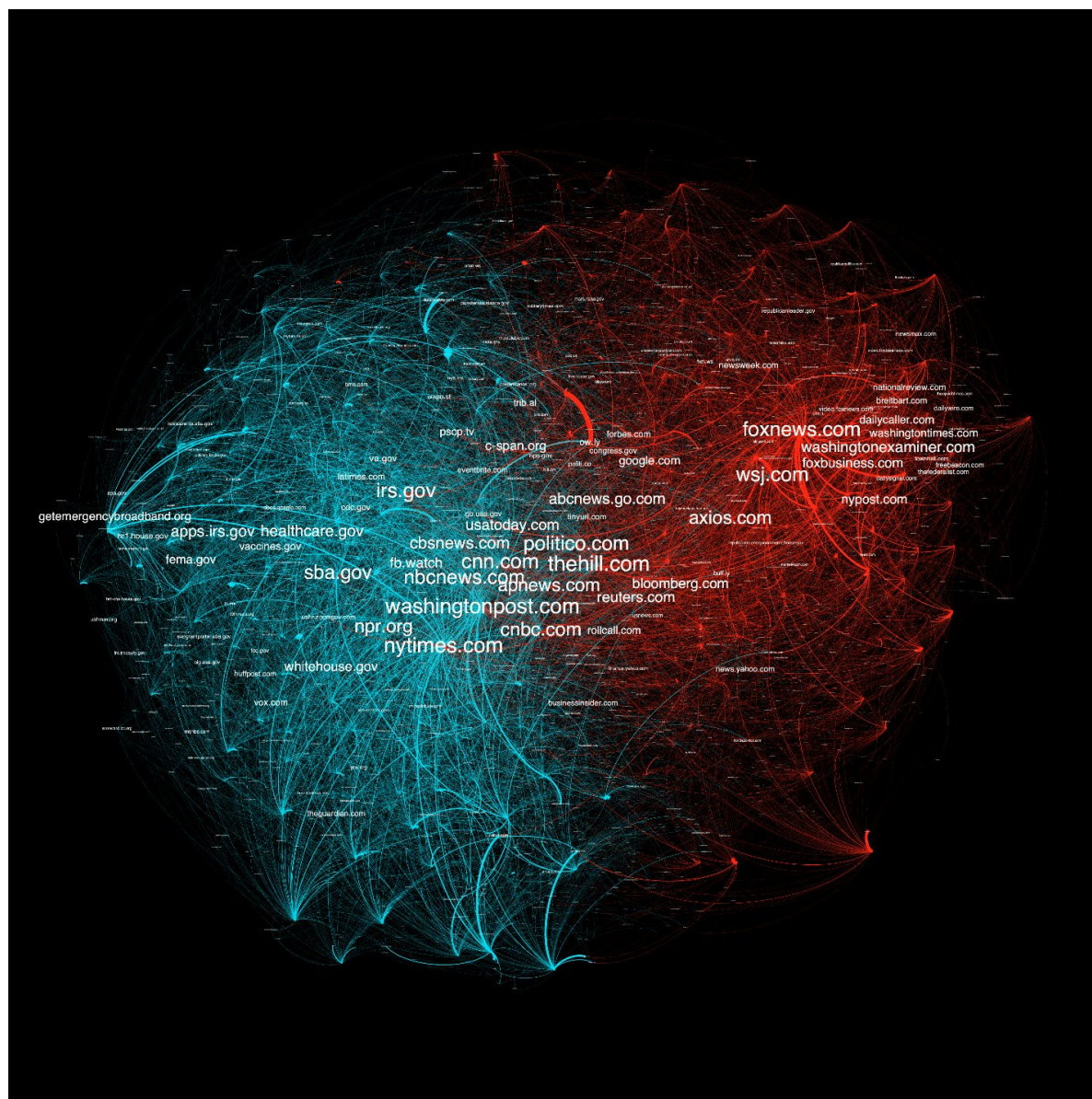
Emergent Digital Literacies

Social media and digital technologies present obstacles that are problematic for civic engagement. For example, social media offer extremists the means of fulfilling their self-worth, and, as Bail (2021) argued, the social media prism fuels radicalization by normalizing extremism and exaggerating the perceived extremism of those on the other side. “Unfortunately, these two types of distortion combine to create feedback loops of extremism. While the prism makes one’s own extremism seem reasonable—or even normal—it makes the other side seem more aggressive, extreme, and uncivil” (Bail, 2021, p. 67). As a result, educators need to teach students digital literacy and how to use social media and technology generally to engage for the common good.

Faculty can utilize social media analytics to teach students how to identify misinformation and extremism, thus creating a pathway for future civic engagement. For example, social network analysis can reveal how social media can inherently polarize through algorithms that create echo chambers (Gregor & Mlejnkova, 2021). To further illustrate the role of social media in amplifying this asymmetric ecosystem, we used the R package “rtweet” (Kearney, 2019) to collect tweets from all current members of Congress from January 20–June 10, 2021, and isolated the URLs used in each tweet. Using Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009), an open-source network graphing tool, we mapped the relationships between lawmakers’ Twitter accounts and the URLs they used. These network graphs (see Figures 1 and 2) reveal an asymmetrical network consisting of traditional news publications shared at the center by members of all parties, and a separate network of right-wing media shared almost exclusively by congressional Republicans.

Figure 1

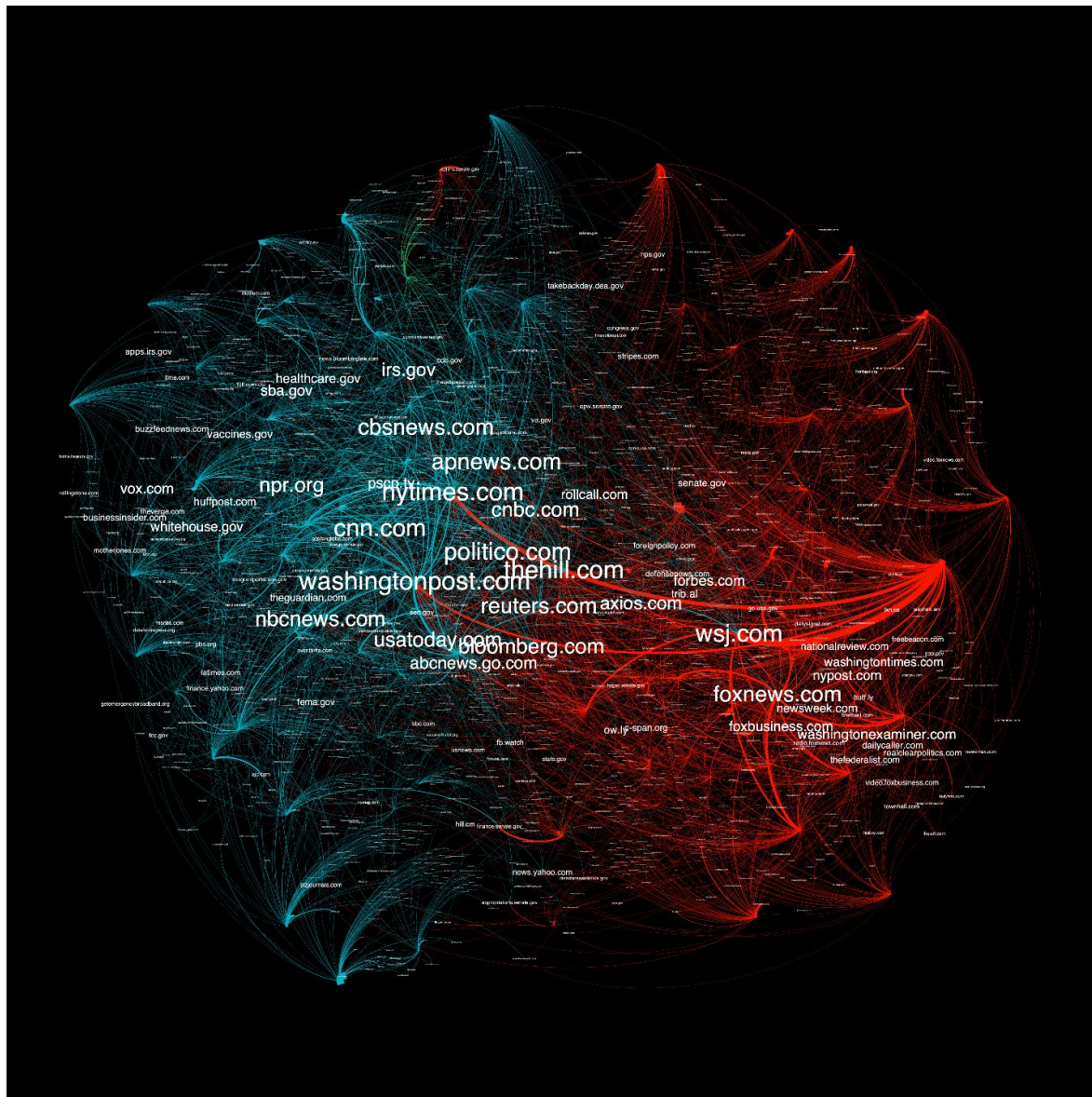
Network Graph of URLs Used in Tweets by Members of the U.S. House of Representatives, January 20–June 10, 2021



Note. In this network graph, larger URLs are used more frequently. The color of each line corresponds to the party of the congressional member tweeting the URL (red = Republican, blue = Democratic, green = Independent).

Figure 2

Network Graph of URLs Used in Tweets by Members of the U.S. Senate, January 20–June 10, 2021



Note. In this network graph, larger URLs are used more frequently. The color of each line corresponds to the party of the congressional member tweeting the URL (red = Republican, blue = Democratic, green = Independent).

Galloway and Thacker (2007) offered yet another way of thinking about extremism which educators could use to help students understand how power is exerted in social media. They theorized power as a struggle between asymmetrical power blocs: those that are highly centralized and those that are distributed across networks. In this theoretical diagram, we might consider the American traditional political and media landscape as a type of centralized power, and the January 6th insurrectionists and their media ecosystem as a group of networked actors struggling against this centralized power. This asymmetrical struggle leads to the discovery of an

“exploit,” which Galloway and Thacker defined as “a resonant flaw designed to resist, threaten, and ultimately desert the dominant political diagram” (p. 21). Using this theory of asymmetrical network struggle, educators might identify the exploits used by extremist groups in social media contexts. Additionally, as the tactics of the far right potentially become normal and centralize their own power blocs, educators might encourage students to find the emerging exploits in these systems in order to undermine them.

Xenos et al.’s (2014) study of social media use and youth political engagement found that digital civic education experiences, “which mix digital media literacy with civic or political discussion topics” (p. 31), were significantly and positively related to individual and collective political engagement. In fact, they argued that if “one were seeking an efficient single indicator of political engagement among young people in the countries studied here, social media use would appear to be as good as, or better than” (p. 33) income. This is consistent with Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) argument that younger citizens relate differently to politics by seeking digitally networked action that includes choice in contributing content and interaction through digital media. However, because social media tend to “promote self-focused values, interests and talking about personal rather than public life,” educators need to help students embrace a commitment to the common good as they encourage digital political engagement (Ekström et al., 2014, p. 55).

Beyond an exclusive focus on social media, Ryland (2018) argued that education for digital citizenship must “combine media literacy, digital literacy, and citizenship education to teach the skills necessary to create the digital world as a political space” (p. 61). Importantly, Ryland maintained that “curriculum that fails to include these elements pursues an agenda that emphasizes individual virtues and neglects collective public goods” (p. 61). Carr et al. (2018) argued that having students create their own media, “especially within the age of YouTube, blogs, and social media, is also an effective way of seeking insight into media construction, messaging, and bias” (p. 78).

Mellor’s (2014) study of a digital citizenship model in Australian schools revealed that combining digital literacy and civic education enhanced student learning, strengthened their sense of intrinsic value, and increased their civic skills. Mellor concluded that when “creatively and extensively utilised by all stakeholders, Web 2.0 and social networking can be powerful factors in developing student independence, in students having a positive view of the world, their place in it and their capacity to engage with it” (p. 126). Further, Damasceno (2021) proposed a multiliteracies framework that equips students with the skills to identify misinformation and understand the factors that contribute to the spread of misinformation as a strategy to combat information disorder. Damasceno concluded that students must have such skills to “ethically participate in civic debate and dialogue” (p. 8).

Taken together, it is clear that training in emergent digital literacies helps students advance the causes they are interested in, equips them to identify propaganda, and offers them insights into how networks form and how (dis)information spreads online.

Conclusion

The events of the Capitol insurrection make clear that much work is needed to stabilize democracy. Packer (2021) argued that the survival of democracy “depends on what happens inside our skulls, where anything is possible. The destruction of a shared reality does more damage than the economic decline or impeachable acts” (p. 32). Packer’s remarks were made in

the context of a failed response to COVID-19, declining trust in democracy following the insurrection, and the rise of post-truth. Given current and ongoing threats to democracy, we believe that civic engagement education must take a critical turn to prepare students to be democratic citizens who advocate for positive social change. Specifically, civic engagement efforts need to focus on antiracism, anti-extremism, and digital literacy.

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Bent but Not Broken: The Constitutional, Legal, and Procedural Issues in the 2020 Electoral College Vote Certification

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Abstract

After the raw votes in the 2016 U.S. presidential election were tallied and showed Donald Trump to be the Electoral College victor, Democrats protested in Trump-won states, asking Electoral College members to vote with their conscience and against their state's popular vote. On January 6, 2021, supporters of President Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol demanding that the certification of the Electoral College vote in favor of Joe Biden not move forward. Are the laws, court decisions, and the Constitution itself set up to cause such an uproar around a routine item? Was the 2021 iteration of counting the Electoral College votes an aberration, or is this the new normal? This article examines the constitutional, legal, and procedural issues around the Electoral College certification vote. The author investigates the constitutional beginnings of the system for electing the U.S. president and discusses "faithless electors" and the power that 538 individuals have in the presidential selection process every 4 years. The author concludes with a discussion of the 2021 Electoral College vote certification and the mob that attempted to stop it.

Keywords: Electoral College, Trump, Biden, Congress, Pence, Constitution, Chiafalo, Federalist Papers, Hamilton, hyper-partisanship

America's Founding Parents were geniuses, but, if one uses history as a measure of their predictions, they did not always get things right. In "Federalist No. 9," Alexander Hamilton stated, "A Firm Union will be of the utmost moment to the peace and liberty of the States as a barrier against domestic faction and insurrection" (Bailyn, 1993, p. 339). Perhaps the Union is not as firm as Americans once thought.

In 2016, supporters of presidential candidate Hillary Clinton protested, disrupting votes of the Electoral College taking place in state capitals across the country. They pleaded with electors to vote with their conscience, even if it was against their state's popular vote winner. Four years later, on January 6, 2021, a violent mob stormed the U.S. Capitol with the intent to somehow halt the certification of the Electoral College vote that would make Joe Biden the official president-elect.

Early on January 6th, Trump encouraged rioters, "I know that everyone here will soon be marching over to the Capitol building to peacefully and patriotically make your voices heard" (Naylor, 2021, para. 5). However, the rioters listening to the president had a much more violent protest in mind. Trump had incited these people over the course of 4 years of divisive and hurtful rhetoric, and he lost control of their actions on a day that would see the largest attack on the Capitol in over 200 years.

After the rioters had spent hours in the Capitol building (some engaging in hand-to-hand combat with Capitol Police), President Trump reluctantly released a Twitter video instructing the mob "to go home" while continuing to make baseless claims about a fraudulent election:

We had an election stolen from us. It was a landslide election and everyone knows it. Especially the other side. But you have to go home now. We have to have peace. We have to have law and order. We have to respect our people in law and order. We don't want anyone hurt. (ABC News, 2021)

Due to his involvement and his encouragement of the rioters in the January 6th insurrection, Trump was impeached—for a second time—by the Democratic-led House of Representatives. Trump is the only president to hold the distinction of being twice-impeached. After Trump left office and the Democrats regained control of the Senate (albeit by the tie-breaking vote of Vice President Kamala Harris), the Senate took up the second impeachment trial of President Trump. With an even political split in the Senate, the two-thirds vote needed to convict Trump was not achieved.

The attack on the Capitol and the vitriolic hyper-partisanship that it highlights have divided the United States even further and raised many questions: Is the protesting of Electoral College votes the new normal? What is the procedure for counting Electoral College votes, and should that procedure be changed to avoid future protests and attacks? Can the United States get back to a place where most members of the political party that loses a free and fair presidential election accept the results?

On January 6, 2021, the Constitution and the general rule of law came under attack. The Constitution almost broke, but ultimately it did not, and the Union stands firm—though perhaps not as securely as it should. This article examines the constitutional, legal, and procedural issues surrounding the counting of the 2020 Electoral College votes and discusses the future of accepting the results of American presidential elections in a hyperpolarized environment.

Electoral College Certification Vote

The main event on January 6th was the official counting of Electoral College votes in the House chamber before a joint session of Congress presided over by President of the Senate and Vice President Mike Pence and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. The rioters had been convinced by President Trump that stopping this count would halt the formal processing of the election and allow him to stay in power (Mascaro et al., 2021). Moreover, the rioters believed that the election had truly been stolen through fraudulent and conspiratorial voting practices in several states (Bort, 2021). How did this official ritual begin? Where did the Electoral College come from, and what is its purpose?

Constitutional Foundations of the Electoral College

Although the Founders knew that George Washington would be the first president of the United States, what lay beyond was a mystery. The creation of the Electoral College at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 seemed to represent a compromise that would preserve the superiority of the large states (Amar, 2006, pp. 149–151). However, in light of the three-fifths compromise and the economic inferiority of the South, James Madison knew that the Electoral College was really meant to preserve the opportunity for the Southern states to have a say in who became president (Amar, 2006, p. 150). In the final analysis, though the large states might have thought they had won, they had not.

Article II, Section 1 (and subsequently the Twelfth Amendment) of the Constitution devolves the choice of president to the House of Representatives in event that one candidate does not achieve a majority in the Electoral College (National Archives, 2021). Many of the Founders believed that the Electoral College would be a place for the nomination of candidates, not their election. There would be so many candidates that a majority would be difficult to achieve, and eventually the president would be chosen in the House and the vice president in the Senate (Rakove, 1996, pp. 265–270). This would even further dilute the power of the large states and strengthen the power of the Southern states. Now, a minority of the Southern states with a few Northern allies could install a president of their choosing, regardless of the state's size.

Even though the Framers knew that George Washington, as the first president, would “fill in” Article II to the best of his ability, they had unknowingly laid the foundation for political parties to erupt in the future. As Rakove (1996) noted,

No feature of the Constitution stimulated the organization of political parties more than the recognition that control of the national government depended on control of the presidency. That was hardly the result the framers intended, nor was it even an outcome that they could plausibly imagine. (p. 268)

Hamilton Defends

In “Federalist No. 68,” Hamilton lauded the establishment of the method for choosing a president. The creation of a body for this specific purpose insulates its members from corruption and coercion according to Hamilton (1787):

It was desirable that the sense of the people should operate in the choice of the person to whom so important a trust was to be confided. This end will be answered by committing the right of making it, not to any preestablished body, but to men chosen by the people for the special purpose, and at the particular conjuncture. (para. 2)

This stroke of genius, according to Hamilton, allows the president to be chosen by the people through their electoral representatives, perhaps by the House, but, in any case, less desirable candidates will be filtered out through this process. History, however, did not agree with Alexander Hamilton.

The Election of 1800 and the Twelfth Amendment

After the first two successful elections of George Washington and the successful, albeit close, election of John Adams as president in 1796, the Election of 1800 would emerge as one of the first major constitutional stress tests for Article II. Political parties were beginning to take hold in significant ways, enough to affect national politics: “Although party politics was still in its infancy, the techniques, strategies and machinery that became commonplace in later years could already be found in embryo in various states” (Witcover, 2003, p. 67). Vice President Thomas Jefferson faced off against President John Adams in a 1796 rematch. Unfortunately, the coordination of the nascent Democratic-Republicans was disorganized, and the election ended in a tie: 73 electors each for Jefferson and his Democratic-Republican running mate Aaron Burr. According to Article II, electors cast votes for president and vice president without designating which vote was for whom.

The election was thrown into the House of Representatives to choose the president. Up to and including the 35th ballot, Jefferson could not command a majority of states since he was consistently one short. On the 36th ballot, Jefferson did win, with two states switching their votes in his favor. The Senate then elected Burr as vice president (Witcover, 2003).

This election spurred the passage of the Twelfth Amendment. The presidential selection scheme derived by the Founders had flaws from the beginning. One of the major flaws was that the second-place finisher in the Electoral College automatically became vice president. After passage of the Twelfth Amendment, and in time for the Election of 1804, electors would denote specifically their vote for president and for vice president. After the razor-thin and contentious Election of 1876, many of the statutes relating to the counting of votes in the Electoral College were changed, and some of those remain today (Amar, 2006).

Faithless Electors

Throughout U.S. history, electors have either abstained from voting as a member of the Electoral College or voted for someone else (Engel, 2021). More recently, an elector from the District of Columbia abstained from voting for Al Gore in the 2000 Electoral College over Washington, DC’s lack of representation in Congress, and in 2004, a Minnesota elector cast a vote for John Edwards for president and vice president—allegedly by mistake (Engel, 2021). However, in 2016, there was great consternation from Democrats alleging that the election results just could not possibly be true. The Democratic National Committee filed a lawsuit in 2018 against the Trump campaign, the Russian government, and WikiLeaks accusing them of conspiring to disrupt the 2016 Election (Mangan, 2018). The judge in the case subsequently threw it out (Thomsen, 2019). Hillary Clinton herself decried Trump’s presidency:

No, it doesn’t kill me because he knows he’s an illegitimate president. I believe he understands that the many varying tactics they used, from voter suppression and voter purging to hacking to the false stories—he knows that—there were just a bunch of different reasons why the election turned out like it did. (Itkowitz, 2019, para. 4)

Sinclair et al. (2018) found a “winner effect” in presidential elections: “Voters who cast ballots for winners are more likely than voters on the losing side to believe their vote was counted correctly” (p. 854). Clinton showed this in 2016, and in 2020 the winner effect was on exhaustive display by January 6th rioters and some Republican elected officials.

Democrats and party-aligned activists attempted to derail the workings of the Electoral College by denying Trump a majority and throwing the contest into the House of Representatives, where, presumably, Trump would have still been elected president with a House and state delegations controlled by Republicans (Cheney, 2016). Hillary Clinton had won the popular vote by millions of votes, but the method of selection of the U.S. president denied her the presidency.

In the Electoral College balloting of 2016, three Washington State electors—pledged to Clinton by virtue of her winning Washington’s popular vote—voted for former Secretary of State Colin Powell. Two Texas electors who should have voted for Donald Trump voted instead for former Texas Congressman Ron Paul and former Ohio Governor and 2016 presidential contender John Kasich, respectively. One Hawaii elector voted for Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), and another Washington elector voted for Faith Spotted Eagle, the first Native American to receive a vote in the Electoral College and only the second woman behind Hillary Clinton (Whittington, 2017). Some electors wanted to make it known that they were taking part in an outdated system. Peter Chiafalo was one of them.

Chiafalo v. Washington

Chiafalo, citing “Federalist No. 68,” was a lead agitator in attempting to convince enough Republican electors to abstain or vote for another candidate, thereby denying Trump the majority in the Electoral College—an effort that failed spectacularly. His motives were not only to deny Trump the presidency, but also to show the inefficiencies of the Electoral College. However, Chiafalo still had his own vote to cast as a member of the Electoral College representing Washington State. Chiafalo voted for Colin Powell instead of Hillary Clinton, for whom, by law, he was pledged to vote. Under state statute, Chiafalo was fined \$1,000 for not voting for Clinton. He and two other electors from Washington who voted for Powell filed suit against Washington, and the Washington Supreme Court upheld these fines (*Chiafalo v. Washington*, 2020).

In *Baca v. Colorado Department of State* (2019), the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals reversed a district court decision stating that the fine imposed on the three Colorado electors for voting for someone other than the winner of the popular vote of their state was unconstitutional—an opposite outcome from *Chiafalo*. The Supreme Court agreed to hear these two cases, and they were consolidated into *Chiafalo*; thus, the Court had to resolve the different court split. On July 6, 2020, as the nation was preparing to vote for a new president, the Court unanimously found that Washington’s law was valid, and electors had to vote for whom their state’s popular vote directed them to vote. The Constitution, according to Justice Kagan’s majority opinion, “gives States broad power over electors, and gives electors themselves no rights” (*Chiafalo v. Washington*, 2020).

States could also pass constitutional laws removing electors who would not vote for the candidate who won the state’s popular vote and seat a replacement (*Chiafalo v. Washington*, 2020). This precedent now meant that although the nation would have to wait until the counting and certification of the Electoral College vote on January 6 to officially have a president-elect and vice president-elect, the map colored in on election night was all but final.

Procedural

Congress is sworn in on January 3 of each odd-numbered year, and the president and vice president take office on January 20, both according to the Twentieth Amendment. Originating from the Electoral Count Act of 1887, 3 U.S.C. § 15 (U.S. House, 2014) sets the date when a joint session of Congress, presided over by the president of the Senate (vice president) must open the official certificates from the chief executive of each state and announce the electoral votes thereof. January 6, then, is an ideal date for the counting of the Electoral College votes because it is the new Congress that elects the president in the case that one candidate cannot reach an Electoral College majority. In the Election of 1800, the balloting for president in the House began before the new Congress was sworn in. This meant that the Congress that was elected in 1798—full of Federalists who had just lost their seats to a Democratic-Republican wave—would elect the new president (Witcover, 2003). The timing was altered by the Twentieth Amendment; now, should the vote for president need to be decided by the House, the newly elected House will decide on the new president, not the potentially electorally defeated House.

Historical Objections to the Counting of Electoral Votes

3 U.S.C. § 15 (U.S. House, 2014) also allows for a member of the Senate and a member of the House of Representatives to object to counting a certain state's electoral votes if the objection is written, specific in nature, and signed by both members. Before 2020, there had been two times in U.S. history when both chambers of Congress debated rejecting electoral votes. The first was in 1969 when a North Carolina elector, pledged to incoming President Richard Nixon, voted for segregationist George Wallace in the Electoral College. Representative O'Hara (D-MI) and Senator Ed Muskie (D-ME) objected to the counting of North Carolina's electoral votes on the grounds of this faithless elector's vote. Democrats were attempting to set up the debate to reform the Electoral College in the upcoming Congress. The objection was defeated 33-58 in the Senate and 170-228 in the House, with opposition led by Southern Democrats (U.S. House, 2020).

The second attempt occurred in 2005 when Representative Stephanie Tubbs-Jones (D-OH) and Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) jointly objected to the counting of Ohio's electoral votes during George W. Bush's reelection. Their aim was not to change the election outcome but to bring to light "irregularities" they perceived in Ohio's balloting and general inequities in voting laws (Neuman, 2005). Boxer and Tubbs-Jones's objection was defeated 31-267 in the House (109th Cong., 151 Cong. Rec. H127, 2005) and 1-74 in the Senate, with Boxer the only member voting in favor (109th Cong., Cong. Rec. S56, 2005).

The 2020 iteration of this process was unlike the two preceding instances. In 2020, Republicans in Congress wanted to weaponize the Electoral College Act to change the outcome of the election. This was not the goal in 1969 or 2005. The infrequency of objections to the Electoral College votes show that members of Congress typically put their faith in state elections officials. Unfortunately, due to the hyperpolarized nature of modern American politics and the distrust sowed by ostensible leaders of the country in recent years, this is now not the case.

Objections to Counting Electoral Votes From the 2020 Election

President Trump put public pressure on Vice President Pence to "be the hero" and, in some way, halt or alter the official counting of the Electoral College votes, thereby not certifying

Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 Election. In his speech on the morning of January 6th, President Trump made his views about Vice President Pence evident:

I hope Mike is going to do the right thing. I hope so. I hope so. Because if Mike Pence does the right thing, we win the election. All he has to do, all this is, this is from the number one, or certainly one of the top, Constitutional lawyers in our country. He has the absolute right to do it. We're supposed to protect our country, support our country, support our Constitution, and protect our constitution. States want to revoke. The states got defrauded. They were given false information. They voted on it. Now they want to recertify. They want it back. All Vice President Pence has to do is send it back to the states to recertify and we become president and you are the happiest people. (Naylor, 2021)

Vice President Pence issued a press release at the exact moment he was walking to the House chamber to convene the joint session according to law. In the release, he stated,

As a student of history who loves the Constitution and reveres its Framers, I do not believe that the Founders of our country intended to invest the Vice President with unilateral authority to decide which electoral votes should be counted during the Joint Session of Congress, and no Vice President in American history has ever asserted such authority. (Pence, 2021, para. 8)

Despite much posturing by congressional Republicans and even President Trump goading his supporters to lobby Pence to “do what is right,” the vice president had made his stance known. Pence knew that history would judge this critical moment in American democracy, and his actions on this day would be scrutinized. Pence gaveled the joint session in and began the process of counting the electoral votes—and almost immediately received an objection. To applause from their Republican colleagues, Representative Paul Gosar (R-AZ) and Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) objected to the counting of Arizona’s Electoral College votes. The Senate retired to their chamber while the House debated the objection in the House chamber.

While Senator Lankford (R-OK) was speaking on the Senate floor about the Arizona objection, Senate President Pro Tempore Senator Chuck Grassley (R-IA) recessed the Senate, and Vice President Pence was whisked away as rioters were only dozens of feet away from him. Speaker Pelosi and House members were also brought deep inside the Capitol as rioters infiltrated the building. Chaos ensued, people died, and a mob attempted to stage a coup of the U.S. government.

After the deadly mob that attacked the Capitol was quelled, order was restored in both chambers. The House and Senate voted on the objection, and it was not sustained in the Senate by a vote of 6-93 (117th Cong., Cong. Rec. S31-32, 2021) and in the House by a vote of 121-303 (117th Cong., Cong. Rec. H93, 2021). The joint session of Congress then reconvened shortly before midnight, with a determined Vice President Pence presiding and visibly shaken but equally determined Speaker Pelosi standing stoically next to him. There were 47 states and the District of Columbia left to tally.

After several more states were called, the electoral votes of Pennsylvania were called to be tallied. Even after a violent attack on the Capitol, when their colleagues’ lives were put in danger, Representative Scott Perry (R-PA) and strongly conservative (and 2024 presidential contender) Senator Josh Hawley (R-MO) rose to object to the counting of Pennsylvania’s

electoral votes. The Senate withdrew from the House chamber and did not sustain the objection by a vote of 7-94. Senator Rick Scott (R-FL), another potential 2024 Republican presidential primary contender, voted to sustain this objection and voted against sustaining the objection of counting Arizona's electoral votes. The objection was further not sustained by the House by a 138-282 vote.

Notably, in both chambers after the violent riotous mob ensnarled the seat of U.S. government, the number of those voting to sustain the objection of counting the electoral votes of a free and fair election increased in both chambers. All Democrats present and voting voted to not sustain the objections. Even after a potential coup and overthrowing of the government, members of Congress got back to work immediately. Their decision to continue the joint session of Congress after the harrowing day showed the country's resolve.

President Trump's Second Impeachment and Trial

Before Donald Trump, only two presidents had been formally impeached: Andrew Johnson, for being a Southern sympathizer after the Civil War, and Bill Clinton, for lying under oath during the Lewinsky scandal. Nixon was sure to be impeached and removed but resigned before that could happen. Trump was twice impeached by the U.S. House of Representatives. His first impeachment centered on his alleged attempt to use the Ukrainian government to investigate conspiracy theories surrounding Joe Biden and his son, Hunter Biden. The House impeached Trump on two articles: abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. The Republican-controlled Senate acquitted Trump of all articles of impeachment.

After Trump's incitement of the mob on January 6th, the House again impeached Trump on one article: incitement of insurrection. Ten Republicans joined all Democrats in voting to impeach the president—the most bipartisan presidential impeachment vote ever. After a long, brutal trial, the Senate acquitted Trump by not reaching the necessary constitutional two-thirds vote needed to convict him. Seven Republicans, including conservative stalwarts Senators Cassidy (R-LA) and Burr (R-NC), joined all 50 Democrats in voting to convict Trump. The final vote was 57 to convict and 43 to acquit. If the Senate had convicted Trump, they could have also exercised the option to not allow him to run for federal office ever again.

Where Are We Now?

In the public debates about the ratification of the Constitution, "Cato"—the pseudonymous author of a series of anti-Federalist papers written between 1777 and 1778—took the position that the Constitution was a direct overreach of state governments and that the Founders were setting up a new monarchy. Cato wrote that one national government for a growing country would never work because the federal government would not be able to govern such a large geographic region and further that a government would not be able to quell insurrections across such a large nation. In "Americanus IV," John Stevens, Jr., countered:

Cato insinuates that a large Republic is less capable of suppressing domestic insurrections than a small one. From what causes do insurrections generally arise? Some turbulent individual infuses jealousy and discontent into the minds of the people. *But the personal influence of an individual cannot extend far.* The contagion therefore must spread progressively, if it spreads at all; indeed, it can never happen but from some gross error in Government, that the great body of the people, spread over a large extent of country, can

all be infected with this spirit of discontent at one and the same time. (Bailyn, 1993, p. 459)

Unfortunately, in this instance, an author opposed to the ratification of the Constitution argued more effectively than someone in favor. Many people across the country were infected with the vitriol spewed by President Trump during his term in office. His candidacy announcement comparing Mexicans to rapists set the tone for the entirety of Trump's two presidential campaigns and presidency. The culmination of the rage that Trump incited was the attack on the nation's seat of government on January 6th.

For the first time since the Civil War, American troops slept in the halls of one of the government's most sacred buildings to protect it from potential rioters. American soldiers had to physically protect democracy from Trump's mob. People stormed the Capitol because they believed the election had been "stolen" and that Trump had to remain president of the United States. Their brazen and violent attempt to halt the counting of electoral votes needlessly cost people their lives. Watching this horrid act unfold in real-time was devastating. At that moment, I felt despair and sorrow for the country. How could the nation come back from this?

Since Trump supporters stormed vote counting centers in swing states and attacked the Capitol, misinformation campaigns have infected every part of the republic. Issues pop up every day, and each side hardens almost immediately. Americans are broken down into a country of "wear a mask" versus "don't wear a mask," "get the vaccine" versus "don't get the vaccine," pro-life versus pro-choice—the list is endless. Although such disagreements have been present since the country's inception, the personal nature of those disagreements has become scary.

One hears of congresspeople in the 1970s and 1980s who would take each other to task in floor speeches and debates and then go out for a drink to get to know each other, or of bipartisan cajoling on family vacations and in recreational activities. However, the middle is gone. Rarely does one side talk to the other in a meaningful way on the big issues of the day.

Conclusion

The January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol should not have happened. A free and fair election took place. The tallying of the votes of the members of the Electoral College should have occurred peacefully and without death. Unfortunately, that did not happen because of a rageful mob incited by Donald Trump. The Founders attempted to put into place safeguards against despotic leaders trying to take over the country. Yet perhaps the mechanism they set up to choose the national executive has outlived its use. To award the highest office in the land to a candidate who does not receive the most votes seems quite antithetical to democratic government. Although the Constitution may have bent to its limit, as it has done time and time again, it did not break.

If nothing else, Americans must learn from the events that occurred on January 6th and try to better understand where their fellow citizens are coming from. It is the job of citizens to live with one another, work with one another, and above all, respect one another. Without this, they have nothing, and the country will be suspended in perpetual peril.

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Book Review: I Alone Can Fix It: Donald J. Trump's Catastrophic Final Year, by Carol Leonig and Philip Rucker

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Discussed in this review:

I Alone can Fix It: Donald J. Trump's Catastrophic Final Year. By Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker. Penguin Press. July 2021. ISBN 978-0593298947. 592 pages. Hardcover, \$30.00.

Written by highly distinguished journalists Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker, *I Alone Can Fix It: Donald J. Trump's Catastrophic Final Year in Office* is a wide-ranging and exhaustively documented historical account of the varying events that occurred during the last year of Donald Trump's presidency. While any compelling work on the events of a presidency is significant, this book provides groundbreaking details about important recent historical events. These events included the beginning and progression of the COVID-19 pandemic, protests related to racial injustice in the United States in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, the 2020 presidential election campaign, and the many ways Trump attempted to overturn the outcome of that election.

Part One of the book examines the origin and first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. One theme that becomes clear from the authors' analysis is that Trump quickly enacted a travel ban from China (in January 2020) but was, by contrast, slower to do so with Europe and other countries. This pattern was consistent with his enacted foreign policy, as China was viewed as a rival in many respects relative to other nation-states since the day he announced his run for the presidency in 2015 (e.g., see Trump, 2015).

Leonnig and Rucker provide an array of evidence that Trump sluggishly announced concrete steps to slow the pandemic, downplaying the significance of COVID-19 when substantial action would have saved lives. Among other statements, Trump maintained that COVID-19 was totally under control, that the travel ban from China would soon eradicate the few remaining COVID-19 cases, and that this virus was just like the flu (Doggett, 2020). None of these statements was true, of course; in fact, in a February 2020 interview with Bob Woodward, Trump conceded that COVID-19 was far deadlier than more common illnesses like the flu. With one notable exception—the development of COVID-19 vaccines—the U.S. government's response to what would become a pandemic lagged far behind other countries around the world. A significant amount of expert advice was not followed initially but, instead, was eventually and selectively adopted. The implications of these delayed decisions would become—and are still becoming—clear, with the United States surpassing over 835,000 deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

In Part Two of the book, the authors examine the ways Trump and his administration responded to the protests related to racial injustice in the United States after George Floyd's murder in May 2020. As the authors note, Trump wanted to hold legally responsible the police officers who either caused or did not prevent Floyd's death. Simultaneously, though, the authors offer substantial evidence that Trump reacted strongly and negatively to those who protested, especially violent protesters. In fact, Leonnig and Rucker provide convincing evidence from multiple interviews that Trump wanted to use armed U.S. soldiers to stop the protests to "show strength." However, General Mark Milley, then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper, then-Attorney General Bill Barr, and others persuaded Trump that doing so would be unwise since this action would create more problems than it would solve. While Milley participated in the infamous, ill-advised photo-op of Trump holding a Bible in front of St. John's Church after protestors were

forcibly cleared, he learned from his judgment error and applied that lesson in the aftermath of the November 2020 election.

Part Three contains a fascinating insider account of the last months of Trump's reelection campaign. In particular, the authors marshal an impressive array of interview evidence of varying missteps by then-President Trump and his reelection campaign, including insufficient responses to trends in underlying polling data which would ultimately be the campaign's undoing, his comments about the Proud Boys and similar groups during the first presidential debate, and the spread of COVID-19 traced to the largely unmasked and non-socially distanced crowd at the event where he announced Amy Coney Barrett's nomination to the Supreme Court. These missteps occurred amid notable policy successes from the Trump Administration during this time, including the Abraham Accords to further peace in the Middle East and the successful, soon-to-be-revealed development of both the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines. The authors imply that due to his mistakes, Trump could not capitalize on these policy successes.

The last chapter of Part Three previews the way Trump's presidency would end: by articulating an increasingly bombastic series of election-related grievances that culminated in the January 6, 2021, insurrection. Not coincidentally, this provides a seamless segue into the final part of the book—an exhaustive investigation of the legal and other ways Trump tried unsuccessfully to overturn the results of the 2020 election. These efforts were predicated upon a single premise, that Trump would have won had the election not been stolen. This narrative originated from Trump's attorney at the time, Rudy Giuliani, when the latter saw the election results unfolding on the night of Election Day. Giuliani advised Trump to simply claim that he had won Arizona, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan without any evidence that he was victorious. These were all states that Trump narrowly lost.

His efforts progressed from there through over 60 ultimately failed legal challenges that he filed in various courts in the weeks following the election (Cummings et al., 2021). However, his attempts to overturn the election went beyond lawsuits, including a phone call to the Georgia Secretary of State's office in which Trump badgered the secretary to find him enough votes to change the election outcome and attempts to persuade state legislatures to override the outcomes of free and fair elections in their states. These efforts were ultimately unsuccessful.

Leonnig and Rucker are at their best in the last part of the book, where they provide vast interview evidence of all the White House and campaign staffers who knew Trump's claims of a stolen election were false. Moreover, the authors painstakingly document how these staffers tried to persuade Trump to accept his election loss, concede, and move on from the stolen election narrative. When Trump could not be persuaded to drop the false narrative, he tried to persuade then-Vice President Mike Pence to refuse to certify the election results on January 6 before the House and the Senate. Pence refused to do so on January 5, as there was no legal basis for such an action.

On January 6, Trump held a rally approximately two miles from the Capitol in which Giuliani called for "trial by combat" and Trump encouraged those in attendance to march to the Capitol building. Many attendees and others took Giuliani and Trump's advice, with some marching peacefully toward the Capitol and others storming the Capitol complex shortly after arriving. Leonnig and Rucker elaborate on attempts by White House staffers, Chris Christie, Alyssa Farah, members of Congress, and others to persuade Trump, as the insurrection unfolded,

to call on the rioters to leave the Capitol building. He did so, but only hours after the insurrection began.

The authors document clearly the wide-ranging actions that General Mark Milley and others undertook to prevent the U.S. military from becoming involved in overturning the 2020 election. Milley believed that “we [the military] don’t determine the outcome of the election” (Leonnig & Rucker, 2021, p. 434), and he and others worked behind the scenes to collaborate with key members of Congress to ensure a peaceful transition of power, secure the January 20 inauguration of Joe Biden as president, and more. (These and other efforts are detailed in the just-released book *Peril*, by Bob Woodward and Robert Costa.) In this respect, Milley applied the lesson he had learned a little over 6 months prior by not involving the military in any way or appearing in uniform with respect to political processes.

Leonnig and Rucker spectacularly and exhaustively describe the events of the last year of Trump’s presidency while providing substantial evidence supporting a key theme: Trump cared more about his own reelection and political prospects than he did about the country. This comes through in the way the authors impressively detail Trump’s reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, the protests related to racial injustice, his campaign, and his grievances about the outcome of the 2020 election.

Though expansive, their analysis left me wanting more in two places. First, I would like to have read more about the aftermath of Trump’s first impeachment. Leonnig and Rucker do elaborate on some of this in Chapter Three (“Seeking Revenge”), but I perceived that there was a lot more here that needed to be described. This would have served as supplemental evidence strengthening the book’s central theme. In fairness to the authors, though, COVID-19 fast became the dominant story, and in this respect, the choice to focus more on the pandemic is understandable.

Second, Leonnig and Rucker excelled at detailing the progression of the pandemic and the Trump Administration’s varying responses to it until Election Day 2020. Yet, after that day, COVID-19 is conspicuously absent from their storyline. While Trump was obsessively focused on overturning the 2020 election results, another wave of COVID-19 cases and deaths had begun in earnest. The minimized attention on COVID-19 in their narrative represents a missed opportunity by the authors to highlight that the limited presence of a national COVID-19 mitigation strategy by that time was further evidence supporting their thesis.

These two issues do not detract from the excellence of *I Alone Can Fix It*; rather, they allow room for scholars and historians to infill the missing pieces. This book speaks to the ways Trump tried to enhance his political prospects and reelection efforts while some of his actions ultimately inhibited him from doing so. This volume is essential to academics and non-academics alike who want to better understand the last year of Trump’s presidency. The book should be of particular interest to presidency scholars, as some of Trump’s actions (attempted or fulfilled) implicate the imperial presidency (Schlesinger, 1973) and unitary executive theories (e.g., see Delahunty & Yoo, 2002). This volume is also valuable to undergraduate students since the authors illuminate many issues that political institutions and scholars regularly study, including interbranch relations and the nature of presidential power. The book will undoubtedly sit alongside many other important works on individual presidents and their terms, or parts thereof, in office.

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Book Review: Operation Chaos: The Trump Coups Attempt and the Campaign to Erode Democracy, by Kevin James Shay

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Discussed in this review:

Operation Chaos: The Trump Coup Attempt and the Campaign to Erode Democracy. By Kevin James Shay. Random Publishers. December 2021. ISBN 978-1881365587. 296 pages. Paperback, \$14.95.

On January 6, 2021, a feat that could not be accomplished by Confederate soldiers during the Civil War was pulled off by an insurrectionist. That day, a man marched through the Capitol building carrying the Confederate battle flag over his shoulder. In an utterly disappointing moment for American history, his photo was captured as he stood in front of two paintings of men who held very different beliefs: Charles Sumner, the abolitionist senator from Massachusetts, and John C. Calhoun, the former vice president who fought for the preservation of the institution of slavery. The hopes, dreams, and ideals of the confederacy stormed the Capitol that day, all because of a U.S. president who could not understand one of the most sacred traditions of American democracy: the peaceful transfer of power. It is difficult to understand how some individuals choose to dismiss this attack on democracy and to ignore or misunderstand election administration processes and election results. *Operation Chaos: The Trump Coup Attempt and the Campaign to Erode Democracy* by Kevin James Shay takes on the question of why some individuals would go so far as to breach the U.S. Capitol in support of a president who seemingly had very little regard for democratic norms, practices, and institutions.

Shay has worked as a journalist for more than four decades, and *Operation Chaos* was one of the first investigative books to examine the January 6, 2021, insurrection. Shay's in-depth analysis includes numerous law enforcement documents, news articles, reports, social media posts, videos, and witness interviews. The author guides readers down a long dark road, showing them how we, as a nation, got to this place, drawing comparisons to other historical events, and he concludes with recommendations about what can be done to restore the guardrails of democracy.

Operation Chaos challenges readers to reframe their thinking about the events of January 6, 2021. Shay argues that while there remains a generally held belief that Trump supporters were the main culprits and should therefore bear most of the blame, the people at the top—President Trump, his aides, and other members of the Republican Party—were the true perpetrators of the insurrection. Shay points out that Trump's ploy to stay in power can be traced as far back as before the 2016 election, when Trump questioned the legitimacy of the election if he were to lose. Through scheming, dirty tricks, coded social media messages, and even overt calls for violence, Donald Trump orchestrated one of the most violent attacks on the American government in centuries.

The book opens on January 6, 2021, when Trump supporters gathered at a rally where they heeded cries from their leader and then marched down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the Capitol, soon transforming from citizens to insurrectionists. How did they get there, and who told them to go? Who told them to fight? These are some of the questions that Shay explores throughout *Operation Chaos*.

Shay places January 6, 2021, in context by describing other coup attempts in American history, though none quite compares. The most notable lesson from past moments of injustice against the government—such as incidents during the Civil War, assassination attempts against presidents, and Richard Nixon's abuse of power—most of the perpetrators were White men who

were not held accountable for their actions. Pardons, immunity, and commuted sentences have been undeservedly gifted to those in power, and these practices continued throughout the Trump era.

Shay lays out the numerous ways Trump and his cronies attempted to sway the 2020 election in their favor, painting a clear picture for readers as the tensions ratcheted up until they boiled over. The normalization of violent rallies, attacks on political opponents, crooked political schemes, and coded social media messages were all tactics used to legitimize the feelings and actions of Trump's supporters while instilling fear. Schemes such as blackmailing Ukraine into releasing information to negatively impact his main political opponent, using Rush Limbaugh's "Operation Chaos" ploy to encourage Republicans to vote in Democratic primaries for the weaker political candidate, and making bogus voter-fraud claims to increase voter suppression during the COVID-19 pandemic. When these tactics proved insufficient, Trump knew he had to do something big. Through the spread of disinformation and blatant lies, he sowed doubt about the outcome of the 2020 U.S. election. As it turned out, that was just enough to make things boil over.

Despite continued doubt surrounding the election, Election Day itself went smoothly, with the real chaos beginning after the polls closed. Shay makes clear that when one tactic for staying in power failed, Trump simply moved on to the next one—and his next move was to work tirelessly, both in the court system and on Twitter, to have the results of the free and fair election thrown out. Failed lawsuits, failed phone calls to state offices, and failed intimidation of Vice President Mike Pence were just some of the tactics Trump will be remembered for during the last months of his presidency. When all else failed, the only option left was his cryptic messaging on Twitter which continued to embolden his supporters in the lead-up to the Stop the Steal Rally.

The plans for the January 6, 2021, rally had been in the works for months prior. On the day Congress would carry out its constitutional duty of certifying the election results, some people believed they could stop that democratic process in its tracks—and even attempt to reverse it to allow Trump to hold onto power. Many of the Trump supporters who showed up that day had a strategic plan in mind. Encouraged and emboldened by their leader for months before, they knew what he expected of them. Shay explains how "Trump had truly made them believe that their election had been stolen and that it was their patriotic duty to fight to steal it back" (p. 167). Some people wore normal street clothes with MAGA hats; others with military-grade vests and gear were more clearly prepared for violent conflict. Once they began marching toward the Capitol building—upon their leader's instructions—Trump and his team retreated, with some even leaving DC altogether, to watch the chaos unfold from a distance. This was the most crucial part of the plan. Acting as his foot soldiers, the insurrectionists stormed the Capitol, beating Capitol police officers bloody in the process. Once in the building, they searched the hallways for members of Congress, many of them shouting to kill anyone they saw and to find Mike Pence and hang him. As Shay notes,

The decentralized, leaderless system worked to keep most leaders from being prosecuted by law enforcement. They were free to pursue their power-mad goals that were often hidden in patriotic rhetoric. The foot-soldiers, even the most loyal sergeants, were replaceable cogs. The leaders, not so much. (p. 180)

The next step is justice and accountability, Shay notes. Many Americans have moved on with their lives; they have forgotten about Trump, and they have forgotten about one of the most violent attacks on democracy in U.S. history. Shay argues that though foot soldiers should be brought to justice, the ones at the top should be, too. They were the ones who incited the violence, released cryptic messages, and had put this plan in place from the start. He recommends that the legal definition of *incitement* should include cryptic and coded messages, like the ones issued by Trump months before. The January 6th Committee is a good first step toward accountability, but the main outcomes should center on prosecuting planners of the attack.

Shay also includes statements from prominent political figures outlining their recommendations for preventing similar attacks on democracy in the future. Most notable among these solutions are introducing bills that protect voting rights and that would prevent future presidential corruption, creating the January 6th Committee, and even abolishing the Electoral College. These recommendations could have a positive impact on American democracy in general. Some suggestions in the book, like the passage of the For the People Act and the formation of the January 6th Committee, did advance; however, the For the People Act, which would have introduced sweeping election reform, was killed by the Senate. Most of the recommendations in the book would help decrease corruption and make the American political system fairer. For instance, the abolition of the Electoral College would allow for direct elections and eliminate the antiquated tradition—rooted in racism—that has too often awarded the presidency to the candidate with fewer votes.

In *Operation Chaos*, Shay presents readers with the story of January 6th in a way that people most likely have not seen before. He does not just take readers through what occurred that day; he offers a complete timeline of events throughout the Trump presidency, demonstrating how January 6th was allowed to happen. Readers need to see the insurrection as part of a larger plot by a president to completely disrupt American democracy. This was not planned in a day; it was the culmination of more than 4 years of the normalization of corruption, collusion, and plotting. Shay draws comparisons with other moments in American history—moments that most believed would never happen again—and forces readers to see that these events are occurring again, and that true justice and accountability must be enforced to prevent it. Instead of creating another chronological list of events, Shay clearly and convincingly presents the January 6th insurrection in the context of American history and forces readers to grapple with the idea that it is no shock that this happened—could happen again.

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Book Review: Everything You Love Will Burn: Inside the Rebirth of White Nationalism in America, by Vegas Tenold

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Discussed in this review:

Everything You Love Will Burn: Inside the Rebirth of White Nationalism in America. By Vegas Tenold. Bold Type Books. February 2018. ISBN: 978-1568589947. 336 pages. Hardcover, \$27.00.

“Sometimes what we do is embarrassing.” This quote, from a KKK member who appears in *Everything You Love Will Burn* by Norwegian journalist Vegas Tenold, is an understatement that stands in juxtaposition to the murderous hatred of the far-right groups Tenold frequented during the years leading up to America’s most infamous far-right Administration, that of former President Donald Trump.

The title of Tenold’s book comes from a text message, ending with a smiley face, that was sent to the author by a jubilant neo-Nazi on the night of Trump’s election. The book’s introduction was written one day after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, that resulted in the death of Heather Heyer, who was counter-protesting the Nazis that day.

The book is an amalgamation of several storylines that follow various white nationalist figures and groups. It begins with Matthew Heimbach, from Paoli, Indiana, whom the reader sees going to KFC with his kids then ranting with colleagues about Jewish communism. Before Tenold first met Matthew, the author received an email from Duke Schneider of the National Socialist Movement (NSM) of America. Schneider wanted to show Tenold day-to-day activities of the party and discuss his views and ideology. As a result, Tenold ended up in Trenton, New Jersey, where he witnessed a street fight between Schneider’s group and antifascist and leftist activists—the first private attack on a private meeting of the NSM. The police arrived, but no arrests were made, and in the eyes of the NSM, the “commie scum” had been defeated. Yet, this would mark the beginning of a decade-long street war between white nationalist and far-right groups, and antifascist activists, colloquially known as “antifa.”

The language in *Everything You Love Will Burn* is crude, and violence and danger are palpable everywhere. To be sure, reading the book is a tense and uncomfortable experience, like watching a horror film. However, it also provides a tremendous amount of important material about the history of the American far-right and neo-Nazi movements. Tenold goes as far back as the Dixiecrat movement of the 1940s in elaborating on the history of the political activities of these groups.

The book ends with a detailed account of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville on August 12, 2017. Reading the excerpt, one experiences the sheer horror of the hatred expressed that day. What also becomes apparent is that the hatred and vitriol has accelerated decade by decade since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, with Charlottesville symbolizing the apex of the far-right movement since the 1920s KKK, which boasted 6 million members.

Living through the previous Administration encouraged me to search deeper into my own family history to understand what had happened—and was happening—in America. I am of half-Italian and half-Jewish ancestry, from my father’s and mother’s side, respectively. The anti-Semitic dog whistles of “globalists” and “America First” were easily identifiable to me and those around me as virulently anti-Semitic, but Trump and his movement stirred racist passions that had already existed within America’s deep far-right movement.

The diatribes against Jews and African Americans espoused by the Klansmen and neo-Nazis whom Tenold encountered were neither new nor shocking to me. Yet, the moments of

clarity, insight, and humor in the book made me read deeper than the ideologies of the individuals in the volume. The nation that “beat” Nazism had now descended into it. But how?

Matthew’s story serves as a stark contrast to the gross racism of his compatriots. Originally, while attending Towson University, Matthew was a socialist:

He had also been reading about how immigration was really no more than a tool developed by capitalists to further their own agenda, so it frustrated him when his socialist friends took up issues such as immigration reform when it seemed so clear that immigration and socialism were mutually exclusive. As he saw it, immigrants from developing countries provided cheap labor for the fat-cat capitalists, and he was flabbergasted that his fellow socialists couldn’t see that.

Matthew’s anti-capitalism echoed the doctrine of “proletarian nationalism” (Corner, 2012, p. 16.), Mussolini’s version of socialism in Italy. Indeed, the intersection of Mussolini’s fascism and Trump’s is quite direct. Both men used anti-globalist, capitalist sentiment mixed with xenophobia and ultranationalism to lead far-right groups to the polls in large numbers while drawing masses of relatively indifferent moderates toward a national cause to beat “cosmopolitans.” Arguably, the intellectual development of conservatives like Mathew drove Trump to the top. The alt-right, a contemporary movement of young national socialists who rely on internet memes to spread their ideology, used clever dog whistles the KKK is too violent and disorganized to ever execute. Now some Nazis have graduated from para-military garb to suits and ties. However, this is primarily in formal, quasi-academic settings where far-right lecturers add a veneer of intellectualism to their racism. The men on the street are very much still in military garb.

At one point in *Everything You Love Will Burn*, Tenold describes being held at gunpoint before a KKK cross burning. It is one of the most intense moments of danger that Tenold put himself in to interact with the subjects of the book. Tenold foresaw the reemergence of the far-right half a decade earlier and knew he had to observe these movements up close and in person to understand the severity of the threat posed by these groups and where it was ultimately headed.

And we know where it was headed. On January 6, 2021, a mob of Trump supporters, many of them avowed white supremacists and neo-Nazis, stormed the Capitol, seeking to hang the vice president, kill the speaker of the House, and violently protect their president, indefinitely. They almost pulled off their stunt, which included bringing the Confederate flag into the Capitol—which had not come close to happening during the Civil War. Tenold notes how absurd such a notion would have been even 5 or 6 years ago:

This was almost certainly nonsense. The idea of a vast cabal of secret Klansmen bidding their time in the wings until such a time when the white race was in its darkest hour belonged with theories of the Illuminati, secretive Zionist occupation governments, and other cast members of Dan Brown books. Still, Karl [one of the more vocal NSM members with whom Tenold interacted] seemed convinced.

Who would have thought that Karl would eventually be proven correct?

In the United States, Neo-fascism-as-Trumpism is here and must be reckoned with; their leader remains at large and could easily pull a Grover Cleveland and reassume office in January 2025. As someone whose family history saw both sides of fascism, all I can say is, it ended in disaster for both: starvation until being saved by the Allies for my Italian family, horrific

extermination among my Jewish family. Far-right ideology, fascism, and ethnic-based ultranationalism led to ruin for nations and the world.

Amid all the darkness, though, there remains light. My great uncle, when talking to him for this review, told me about his brother Peter throwing an egg at a fascist marcher during a Mussolini rally in Porto Empedocle, Sicily. His mother had to beg the local authorities to not punish him. Breaking through the alienation of the modern condition and reestablishing social bonds is the key to countering political extremism, and Tenold saw those years before America's descent. Moreover, his journalistic experience covering Russia, which under Putin has seen a resurgence in neo-fascism, and other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and Central Africa uniquely qualified him to examine America's far-right extremist movement. He tried and failed in the moment, but in writing this account, he has given readers a guide for how the far-right operates and how to counteract and neutralize them.

Everything You Love Will Burn is essential reading for anyone trying to understand America's far-right on a more visceral level, beyond academic analysis alone. In interacting with this now burgeoning movement, Tenold offers a kind of template for how to approach people and ideologies as we encounter them, and how to do so with grace and bravery. In doing so, perhaps one might convince at least one neo-Nazi that what they do is embarrassing, just like the one KKK member realized in a moment of clarity. Hopefully, many more of those moments will come around before there is more violence—and more damage to democracy.

Dedicated to my beloved mother. Rest in peace.

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Book Review: How Spaces Become Places: Place Makers Tell Their Stories, Edited by John F. Forester

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Discussed in this review:

How Spaces Become Places: Place Makers Tell Their Stories. Edited by John F. Forester. New Village Press. October 2021. ISBN: 978-1613321423. 320 pages. Paperback, \$30.00.

In this age of media overload, education flows, globalization, and transnational capitalism, it is refreshing to get a perspective on how businesses and the professional sector can incorporate community inclusion and emersion into projects to produce a more qualitative approach to meeting humanity's needs (Friedman, 2016; Phillips, 2018). *How Spaces Become Places: Place Makers Tell Their Stories*, edited by John F. Forester, directly acknowledges the need for humanity- and ecology-focused education programs. As conveyed eloquently and honestly in the book, developers and space makers often do not take time to learn about culture or community.

Each place maker in the book describes experiences that revealed to them the transactional nature of many initiatives in the United States. Even in communities and neighborhoods where people wanted social equity, many programs and projects were still transactional, with most people willing to give money but rarely time or energy. One of the recurring themes among the stories in the book is the need to know one's audience. Moreover, the volume centers on community inclusion as crucial for transforming society into a world of rich and meaningful connections instead of cold transactions. Indeed, the book exposes how such rich and meaningful experiences can go beyond the transactional. In the modern digital age, with everyone wanting to be included and share their stories—made apparent, for instance, by the extensive use of social media platforms and the explosion of reality TV shows—*How Spaces Become Places* shows that it is possible to translate the desire for inclusivity to the professional sector in an effort to create rich, connected communities by creating places instead of spaces.

The experiences of the place makers in the book are not necessarily unique. However, the stories they tell so endearingly are noteworthy because of the sense of community and purpose their work has fostered through inclusion and immersion, and through an understanding of the community's desires. This point is solidified by the stories of each place maker who had full and meaningful experiences through their community inclusion or emersion projects.

The one flaw of this book is its stated intention to be a layman's read; the repetitiveness of the content, particularly in the introduction, is typical of a dissertation or scholarly article and comes off as exasperating at times. Yet, ultimately, *How Spaces Become Places: Place Makers Tell Their Stories* would be a fantastic addition to any university's architecture, business, or administration programs to incorporate a sense of culture and humanity into the curriculum. It also offers a clear message for future professionals that their ventures should always go beyond the transactional to involve some degree of community inclusion or emersion. The stories in this book express how meaningful society can be when it considers community. These lessons are essential, especially considering the current momentum around socially conscious trends and businesses.

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Promoting Civic and Community-Based Teaching Practices: An Exploratory Study of Collaborations Between Faculty Development

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Abstract

The study discussed in this article explored collaborative efforts between faculty development centers and civic and community engagement centers related to the promotion of civic and community-based teaching practices. The authors surveyed chief academic officers of public institutions supportive of civic and community engagement and found initial evidence that such collaborations do exist and can be effective. However, the partnerships may often be episodic and informal. The authors also discuss implications for practice and future research.

Keywords: faculty, community engagement, institutionalization

A key recommendation of the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) outlined in *A Crucible Moment* nearly a decade ago centers on sustainably integrating civic learning into the academic curriculum of colleges and universities. Though there is mounting evidence of progress around this integration at various institutions (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2016; Campus Compact, 2014), there are grounds for doubt when considering whether democratic engagement and civic learning have moved from peripheral to pervasive across the broader landscape of higher education (Barnhardt, 2015). Despite the commitment of individual faculty members and supportive administrators, civic learning and democratic engagement are too often neither institutionalized nor sustainable. Consequently, activities associated with civic learning may become episodic and marginalized.

Faculty adoption on an individual level is imperative to the success of almost any higher education initiative (Kezar, 2013), including the integration of civic engagement within the academic curriculum (Cole et al., 2016). However, individuals are less likely to adopt an action they do not understand (Johnson-Laird, 2004; Kezar, 2013) and do not perceive as valued and rewarded by an organization (Kurtessis et al., 2017). Institutional environments best equipped to encourage faculty adoption clearly communicate the benefits of engagement while also removing common obstacles to participation, namely a lack of training in teaching political engagement and individual perceptions that institutional reward systems do not value civic engagement beyond the category of service (Bloomgarden & O'Meara, 2007; Bringle et al., 2006).

Many institutions have thus developed stand-alone workshops and dedicated centers for civic engagement to provide both professional development for faculty members and indicators of institutional support (Surak et al., 2017). A professional development-centered approach led by offices associated with civic engagement appears promising in encouraging both the frequency and effectiveness of faculty engagement in civically based teaching strategies. A similar approach has been utilized by centers for faculty development (e.g., centers for faculty excellence, centers for teaching and learning) in introducing and training faculty members during the rapid expansion of online and technology-enhanced learning (Lieberman, 2018). As centers for teaching and learning now transition toward the broader goal of enhancing student experiences and success through faculty innovation (Kelley et al., 2017), faculty development professionals are potential partners in efforts to promote faculty involvement in civic learning and democratic engagement.

Faculty development centers are often highly visible administrative units with broad areas of focus related to quality instruction (Kelley et al., 2017). In contrast to centers for civic engagement, which may potentially present an unfamiliar niche focus to many faculty members, the emphasis of faculty development centers provides a unique catalyst for promoting civic learning and democratic engagement as an example of innovative and effective teaching. Changing the understanding of civic learning and democratic engagement from the category of service to teaching excellence (Cress, 2012; Rowe et al., 2015; Simonet, 2008) in the minds of faculty members, especially those hesitant to adopt, is key to widespread integration of civic learning into the curriculum. Faculty development centers offer a visible platform for this effort.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine potential collaborations between community engagement structures and faculty development structures on campuses supportive of civic and community engagement. There is currently scarce literature discussing such an organizational effort, and this project comprises an initial exploration as part of an initiative supported by a national organization committed to facilitating civic and community engagement

in higher education. The aim of the study was to appropriately frame and further promote investigations into potential collaborative practices. Findings and subsequent research could support the integration of civically based teaching practices into the scope of faculty development centers and, in turn, enhance the perception of civic and community engagement as exemplary teaching.

Theoretical Framework

Institutions provide indicators of importance to employees (i.e., faculty and staff) through processes, hierarchical structures, and various incentives to implement organizational initiatives (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2013). However, as stated previously, organizational change efforts that are inadequately understood and conceptualized by all parties are less likely to succeed. Therefore, two primary theoretical frameworks scaffolded this study: organizational support theory and signaling theory.

Organizational support theory (OST) holds that the relationship between an employee and the organization is based on reciprocity of value perception (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Shore & Shore, 1995). According to OST, employees are more likely to engage in practices they perceive as important to the organization when they also perceive that the organization supports their individual needs and values their professional contributions. Faculty members elect to adopt civic and community engagement due to a variety of individual factors, such as teaching goals (O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009; Parkins, 2008) and individual affinities to community engagement in general (Jaeger & Thornton, 2006; Lewing & York, 2017). However, the organizational value placed on civically based teaching practices, or simply the perception, serves as the limiting factor for engagement and can supersede individual motivations and deter participation (Colbeck & Weaver, 2008; Colbeck & Wharton-Michael, 2006; Jaeger & Thornton, 2006; O'Meara, 2003, 2013). Clearly framing and adequately recognizing civic and community-based teaching within the framework of teaching excellence can provide evident institutional support for faculty engagement.

Signaling theory centers on overcoming asymmetries of knowledge between constituencies via observable signals (Spence, 1973, 2002). For example, as Connelly et al. (2011) noted, organizations can demonstrate a commitment to diversity by ensuring a heterogeneous board (Miller & Triana, 2009) or economic potential of their firms to prospective investors through financial statements (Zhang & Wiersema, 2009). Similarly, colleges and universities often demonstrate a commitment to civic and community engagement through the creation of professional development programs to support faculty understanding of appropriate implementation strategies (Chism et al., 2013; Lewing, 2020). Such programs may be administered by various organizational structures (e.g., center for service-learning), but intentionally incorporating the support of a larger faculty development structure (e.g., center for teaching excellence) could provide not only a source of professional development, but also a clear institutional signal of civic and community engagement as teaching excellence.

Methodology

Study Overview

This exploratory study utilized a mixed-methods, cross-sectional survey design to examine the presence of collaborations between civic and community engagement structures and faculty development centers at public institutions. The project was developed as part of an

initiative to expand faculty development opportunities within the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' American Democracy Project, and the survey was distributed to chief academic officers of member institutions. The instrument was developed in partnership with the association's leadership group and was piloted by a group of five nationally recognized scholars in the field.

Participants

The study utilized purposeful sampling, and chief academic officers of public institutions who were members of the American Democracy Project were invited to participate. Of the 293 invitations sent, seven did not have publicly accessible email addresses for the chief academic officer, and six were returned as undeliverable.

Fourteen participants fully completed the survey, and respondents represented a diverse range of enrollments and institutional classifications. Three participants reported that their respective institution's combined undergraduate and graduate enrollments was less than 5,000, five reported enrollments of between 5,000 and 10,000, one between 10,000 and 20,000, two between 20,000 and 30,000, and one greater than 40,000. Regarding institutional classifications, one administrator identified their institution as Doctoral-R1, two as Doctoral R-2, two as Doctoral-Doctoral/Professional, three as Masters-M1, one as Masters-M2, two as Masters-M3, and one as a Baccalaureate institution. Three institutions were identified as Minority Serving Institutions (Hispanic Serving Institution, Historically Black College or University, Tribal College or University, and Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institution). Two administrators self-identified their institution as a Hispanic Serving Institutions, and one identified as a Historically Black College or University. Seven participants indicated that their institutions had been awarded the Carnegie Foundation's Elective Community Engagement Classification during the 2015 and/or 2020 review cycle.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected via a confidential web-based survey using a secure online survey platform. Institutional Review Board approval was granted prior to starting the research, and participants gave informed consent prior to accessing the survey. The survey instrument was constructed within the Qualtrics survey platform and reviewed by a group of five nationally recognized scholars and the administrators of a national organization with a mission to support the civic and community engagement of higher education. The survey questions used for this project centered on (1) the presence and function of a faculty development center, (2) the presence and function of a civic and community engagement center, (3) any collaborations between the two units, and (4) institutional information. (The Appendix includes the survey questions.) The survey invitation and link were initially shared three times via the collaborating organization's regular newsletter. The invitation was then sent directly to the email address of the chief academic officer posted on the respective institutional website.

Limitations

The study's primary limitation was the low response rate. Aside from general commonality of an individual's decision not to participate in surveys, the researchers speculated that a contributing factor could have been administrators opting out if their institution did not house either a coordinating structure for faculty development or civic and community

engagement. Regardless, inferential statistics were not utilized in this exploratory study since the sample size would not have provided adequate statistical power.

Results

The overall completion rate for this survey was quite low, as was the total participant number. As a result, the data are not representative and cannot be used to draw any correlational inferences (Sivo et al., 2006). However, we did collect a set of 14 responses from a range of institutional types which provide insights into the presence of collaborations between civic and community engagement structures and faculty development structures at a variety of public institutions. The quantitative portion of this study, although brief, was straightforward and established that discrete structures are in place for each unit at most responding institutions. In addition, the responses indicate collaboration between the two units or some shared faculty development function (Table 1). The qualitative responses provided a more nuanced description of the degree and nature of the collaboration, revealing more informal co-development of resources and workshops than formal partnerships, and often work of a more limited scope or episodic timeframe than ongoing initiatives. Respondent comments also emphasized the desire for continued growth and development of collaborative efforts, increased funding to support the work, and recognition of the value of engaged scholarship (Table 2).

Table 1

Selected Results of the Presence and Function of Units

Unit Characteristics	Yes (n)	No (n)	Unsure (n)	Total Responses (n)
Teaching Excellence and Faculty Development				
Discrete structure	12	2	0	14
In place 5+ years	11	0	0	11
Promote civic and community engagement as examples of teaching excellence	8	2	1	11
Civic and Community Engagement				
Discrete structure	12	0	0	12
In place 5+ years	7	3	2	12
Provide professional development to faculty members	5	6	1	12

Note. There were 14 total responses to the survey (n = responses to individual questions). Due to the low response rate (5%) and low participant numbers, results are limited to total numbers rather than percentages or statistical analysis (Sivo et al., 2006).

Table 2*Integrated Results of the Collaboration of Units*

Source	Results
Quantitative Summary	<p>Respondents indicated discrete structures for teaching excellence and faculty development and for civic and community engagement at most reporting institutions.</p> <p>Respondents indicated some degree of shared focus among the units. Of 11 responses, eight reported that the faculty development unit promotes civic and community engagement as teaching excellence. Of the 12 responses focused on the civic and community engagement unit, five reported that it provides professional development for faculty.</p>
Qualitative Summary	<p>Respondents referenced informal and formal partnerships with the other unit, external partnerships (AAC&U), and institutional approaches (QEP and other limited-duration initiatives) to guide collaboration.</p> <p>When asked to describe collaborative efforts, respondents emphasized informal co-development of resources and workshops. They also described limited timeframe collaboration (e.g., election 2020) to develop curricular and co-curricular support materials.</p>
Representative Samples	<p>“Community based learning is rooted in faculty development practices.”</p> <p>“We would be interested in doing more.”</p> <p>“The Center [for Service Learning] offers a wide array of resources for faculty and staff related to curriculum development, civic learning, public scholarship, etc.”</p> <p>“We have a small campus and there is a fair amount of informal interaction, but the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment does not have any formal connections to offices overseeing.”</p>

Note. We integrated quantitative data (i.e., responses to survey questions about the presence and function of centers) and qualitative data (i.e., open-text responses) to provide a more comprehensive description of the nature of the work and collaborations between the two units.

Three of the open-text questions provided opportunities for respondents to elaborate on collaborative efforts between the structures focused on teaching excellence and those for community engagement. Several themes emerged from the combined participant responses to those questions: the duration of the collaboration, the nature of the unit relationships, and concerns regarding collaborative activities (Table 3). Although the number of total responses limited our ability to draw conclusions, the participants provided insights that will be useful in developing future qualitative investigation.

Table 3*Qualitative Response Themes*

Themes	Subthemes	Excerpted Exemplar Responses
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Duration (15)	Episodic (8)	“Leading up to the 2020 election, the two groups worked together to provide support for faculty with curricular and co-curricular political topics.”
	Ongoing (7)	“The CSL is part of the Institute for Engaged Learning, but works closely with the Division of Student Affairs, the Office of Community Engagement, and the Center for Teaching and Learning.”
Nature (12)	Informal (7)	“The Center for Faculty Innovation has a range of workshops, trainings and other opportunities to support faculty. It works with the Center for Civic Engagement to develop some trainings.”
	Formal (5)	“Our QEP was focused on Civic and Community Engagement. As such, the Center works directly with our Director for the project and assists in providing training on designing classes for CCE.”
Concerns (3)	Financial (1)	“The Provost seeks funding to support this work and the university’s Budget Team authorizes funding in line with strategic priorities.”
	Faculty Impact (1)	“In regard to promotion and tenure, it is important for civically engaged scholarship to be respected and ‘counted’ toward scholarship and teaching excellence.”
	Relationship Building (1)	“I have worked on connecting these two [units] at prior institutions and will do the same at my present institution.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore collaborative efforts between faculty development centers and civic and community engagement centers at institutions supportive of civic and community engagement. The findings offer initial evidence that civic and community engagement represents a viable partner as faculty development centers reconceptualize their respective areas of emphasis. In addition, though contextualized through a small sample size, there was also evidence that faculty development centers may be best positioned to offer professional development for faculty in comparison to independent efforts of civic and community engagement centers, regardless of positioning within academic affairs.

Implications for Practice

One implication for academic administrators from the current study is that faculty development centers and civic and community engagement centers can collaboratively promote civically based teaching practices at institutions where both structures are present and effective. Eight of 11 chief academic officers affirmed that their faculty development structure promoted civic and community engagement as examples of teaching excellence, thus providing baseline evidence that civically based teaching is an appropriate area of emphasis for similar units.

However, the minority (five of 12) of chief academic officers affirmed that their civic and community engagement structures provided faculty development programming. Civically engaged teaching practices are counter-normative for many faculty members, and professional development is an important aspect of institutionalization (Chism et al., 2013; Lewing, 2020). Therefore, actionable steps for senior-level academic leadership could include facilitating regular interactions between the two parties as part of a long-term and deliberate process of developing jointly led faculty development initiatives. The partnerships from this study appeared to manifest through episodic and/or informal efforts; strategic action emphasizing faculty development (e.g., fellowships, course releases) may be more sustainable and effective with institutionalization efforts.

Most institutions in the study included both a faculty development center and a civic and community engagement center; however, this is not necessarily applicable for other institutions that value civic and community engagement as teaching yet lack dedicated resources. The institutionalization of civic and community engagement is often associated with the development of dedicated structures and processes such as service-learning coordinating centers and professional development programming (Furco & Holland, 2013; Jacoby, 2015), but in environments where human and fiscal resources are scarce, an integrative, rather than specified, approach may be the most efficient route to sustaining civically based teaching. An integrative approach could entail the establishment of a single support structure within academic affairs under the umbrella term of *integrative learning* (or another analogous title) to encourage the conceptualization of civic and community engagement explicitly within the scope of promoting exemplary instruction.

Implications for Future Research

As an exploratory project, this study raises several opportunities for future research. The survey could be refined and extended to validate concepts that emerged from the limited sample. For example, questions could include:

- Is there a statistical correlation between the size of an institution and the existence of formal collaboration on civically based teaching practice initiatives?
- Is there a statistical correlation between the reporting structure of unit leadership and the financial support for unit collaborations on civically based teaching practice initiatives?

In addition, a more intensive qualitative exploration of the practices of faculty development centers effectively integrating civically based teaching practices into their scope of work could add to the existing body of literature regarding the institutionalization of civic and community engagement. This approach offers the opportunity to further explore the themes that emerged in the limited sample data, as well as the potential for synthesizing strategies for effective practice, assessment, and sustainability of collaborative efforts between faculty development centers and civic and community engagement centers related to the promotion of civic and community-based teaching practices.

Conclusion

The institutionalization of civic and community engagement represents an organizational change process with the telos of more fully meeting the public mission of educating informed and engaged citizens. Faculty members are key constituents in related efforts, and promoting

their perception of civic and community-based teaching practices as exemplary instruction, rather than simply service, is critical to sustainably integrating the work within the curricular experiences of students. The results of the current study provided initial evidence that partnerships between faculty development centers and civic and community engagement centers can serve as a conduit for curricular integration of civic and community engagement. However, findings indicated that such partnerships may be more effective if they intentionally pool human, fiscal, and intellectual resources to provide faculty development and incentives.

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Appendix

Q1 Does your institution have a structure focused specifically on teaching excellence and faculty development (e.g., Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence, Office of Teaching & Learning)?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Unsure (3)

Q2 Does the structure report directly to the Chief Academic Officer?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Unsure (3)

Q3 Who does the structure report to?

To the best of your knowledge, has this structure been in existence for greater than five years?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Unsure (3)

Q4 Does the structure promote civic and community engagement as examples of teaching excellence?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Unsure (3)

Q5 Please elaborate.

Q6 Please elaborate.

Q7 Is it likely there will be such a structure developed in the next three years?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q8 Does your institution have a structure focused specifically on supporting civic and community engagement?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Unsure (3)

Q9 Does the structure report within Academic Affairs or Student Affairs?

- ☐ Academic Affairs (1)

o Student Affairs (2)

o Other (3)

Q10 Please elaborate.

Q11 To the best of your knowledge, has this structure been in existence for greater than five years?

o Yes (1)

o No (2)

o Unsure (3)

Q12 Does the structure provide professional development to faculty members?

o Yes (1)

o No (2)

o Unsure (3)

Q13 Please elaborate.

Q14 Is it likely there will be such a structure developed in the next three years?

o Yes (1)

o No (2)

o Unsure (3)

Q15 Please describe any collaborative efforts between the structures focused on teaching excellence and community engagement.

Q16 Has your institution received the Carnegie Foundation's Elective Classification for Community Engagement in the last two review cycles (2015, 2020)?

o Yes (1)

o No (2)

Q17 Approximate student enrollment (combined undergraduate and graduate headcount)

o Less than 5,000 (1)

o 5,000-10,000 (2)

o 10,000-20,000 (3)

o 20,000-30,000 (4)

o 30,000-40,000 (5)

o More than 40,000 (6)

Q18 Institutional classifications (check all that apply)

☐ Doctoral-R1 (1)

☐ Doctoral-R2 (2)

PROMOTING CIVIC AND COMMUNITY-BASED TEACHING PRACTICES

- ☐ Doctoral-Doctoral/Professional (3)
- ☐ Masters-M1 (4)
- ☐ Master-M2 (5)
- ☐ Masters-M3 (6)
- ☐ Baccalaureate (7)
- ☐ MSI- Hispanic Serving Institution (8)
- ☐ MSI- Historically Black College or University (9)
- ☐ MSI- Tribal College or University (10)
- ☐ MSI- Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institution (11)

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The Praxis of Realizing Election Imperatives in Trump's America

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Abstract

American democracy and higher education were not developed under—nor are they guided by—the principle of equality for all. However, the sociopolitical history of the United States does not negate the responsibility to equality and equity that educators, university administrators, and policymakers have today. As a means of advancing the praxis of civic engagement within higher education vis-à-vis the *Election Imperatives* call to action, this ethnographic action research study set out to (a) establish a nonpartisan higher education coalition in the state of Tennessee and (b) institutionalize student political learning and engagement at Vanderbilt University, Tennessee's premier research university. Tennessee is a voting-restrictive state with poor educational outcomes for historically marginalized populations, and this current reality reflects longstanding civil rights violations and educational inequities that are especially prevalent in the American South. Given the sociopolitical context in which this work developed, the action research study informs best student political learning and engagement policies and practices for voting-restrictive and hyper-partisan states.

Keywords: civic engagement, civic education, higher education, action research, election imperatives

For the last two centuries, American society has understood a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” to represent the foundation of its democracy (Schwartz, 2000; Wilentz, 2006). In this spirit, four key elements must take place to materialize a democratic government: a political system that enables people to choose their representatives through free and fair elections; the active participation of people in political and civic life; the protection of human rights; and equal rule of law (Diamond, 1997, 2016). Active participation in civic life and the protection of human rights are central components of American democracy. Tied inextricably to these components are the mission and purpose of higher education—teaching, research, and service—which by definition establish the preparation of a civically engaged student body as a public good (Domonkos, 1977; Ehrlich, 2000; Scott, 2006). Student political learning¹ and democratic participation² serve democracy and help actualize higher education learning outcomes (Kimball, 1986; Thomas, 2000; Westbrook, 2015). These concepts are neither partisan nor part of a hubristic liberal agenda.

However, to understand the role of higher education within a democracy, one must examine critically the consequences of sociopolitical histories that have engendered prohibitive governing systems and processes. This critical examination informs how democracy is compromised and highlights the roles and responsibilities that today’s educators, university administrators, and policymakers must espouse. Canonically, the ecology of higher education must recognize that the U.S. government and higher education were not conceptualized or developed for the participation of all members of society. The genocide of native peoples, the institutionalization of enslaved peoples, and imposed voting barriers were formative sociopolitical events that defined American notions of “citizenship,” “free and fair elections,” “equal rule of law,” and the “protection of human rights” (Du Bois, 1935/2014; Hunt, 2008; Mills, 2014; Tillet, 2012; Wunder & Hu-DeHart, 1992). This history also reflects who was allowed to receive a postsecondary education, what was taught, and how racial and social hierarchies became more deeply embedded in society and impeded American democracy (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Solomon, 1985; Wilder, 2014).

While American democracy and higher education were not developed under the principles of equality for all, the sociopolitical history of higher education does not negate the responsibility that higher education actors have today. When these actors fail to uphold the foundations of democracy, they fail the principles of shared humanity. If society is to achieve democracy and champion commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion, then educators and policymakers need to reimagine their participation in civic education³ and actively interrogate voting barriers within and beyond higher education (Crittenden & Levine, 2018; Thomas & Brower, 2017b). The ability to facilitate civic education and engagement⁴ is situated at the

¹ *Political learning* represents the student’s experience of understanding systems of power that shape society. This learning experience occurs within and outside the classroom and affirms a student’s agency in shaping systems of power, particularly in regard to political and economic power structures (Thomas & Brower, 2017b).

² *Political participation* in a democracy refers to engagement with government systems and processes and includes a broad range of activities such as engagement in the electoral process, community organizing for the betterment of society, advocating for causes, convening as a community to discuss shared concerns, etc. (Thomas & Brower, 2017b).

³ *Civic education* refers to the learning process that impacts people’s beliefs, actions, and capabilities as members of society and within their communities. Civic education includes the theoretical, political, and practical meaning making of citizenship and democracy (Crittenden & Levine, 2018; Thomas & Brower, 2017b).

⁴ *Civic engagement* refers to the individual and collective ability to support the quality of life in a community by identifying societal problems and generating solutions for the betterment of society. Advancing the quality of life in

intersection of shared human dignity, rights, and citizenship regardless of legal status (Ehrlich, 2000).

Perhaps there is no more poignant time in history to do this work. The Trump Administration bred bold, overt, and violent forms of racism, and its predestination ideology further cast away historically excluded populations (Giroux, 2017; Parker, 2013). While the administration was particularly defined by its human rights violations (Human Rights Watch, 2018), it also illustrated the current state of democracy and the pressing need to interrogate structures and systems that prohibit equitable democratic participation. What emerged were restated commitments among higher education stakeholders to support historically excluded populations and promote, within their respective institutions, inclusive and supportive learning environments (DeRosa, 2016; Lynch, 2017). However, the praxis of student political learning and democratic participation was absent from dominant narratives in higher education.

Guided by the Institute of Democracy and Higher Education's *Election Imperatives* call for action, this ethnographic action research⁵ study set out to (a) establish a nonpartisan higher education coalition in the state of Tennessee and (b) institutionalize student political learning and engagement at Vanderbilt University, Tennessee's premier research university. Presently, Tennessee is the third most voting-restrictive state in the United States and ranks in the bottom half of the nation regarding education access and achievement⁶ (U.S. News & World Report, 2018). Disparate voting rights and educational opportunities reflect longstanding civil rights violations that perpetuate educational inequities (Li et al., 2018; Underhill, 2019). Given the state's sociopolitical history and the political climate in which this work was developed, the outcomes of the action research help inform best student political learning and engagement policies and practices in voting-restrictive and hyper-partisan states.

a community can occur in numerous ways (e.g., volunteering, participating in elections, raising awareness), and these forms of engagement can be political and nonpolitical processes for change (Ehrlich, 2000).

⁵ As developed by Tacchi et al. (2003), an ethnographic approach informs generative actions as a result of understanding sociopolitical contexts and systemic inequality. The standpoint or on-the-scene learning (ethnography) regarding civic engagement is linked to *Election Imperatives*, and findings are generative from action research.

⁶ The U.S. News & World Report's (2019) education scoring measures higher education attainment, graduation rates, college debt, and tuition costs as well as pre-K–12 enrollment, standardized test scores, and graduation rates.

Literature Review

The Democratization of Higher Education

The mission and purpose of higher education have transformed since the institutionalization of the modern university. However, the concept of *service* interlocks the role of higher education throughout its history, as colleges and universities have always been social institutions designed to provide service to various organizations and members of society (Domonkos, 1977; Scott, 2006). Whether services were for government, the church, or the broader public, postsecondary institutions were designed to support teaching and research. For example, the formation of U.S. colleges and universities during the early 19th century was regarded as a service to the nation-state (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Domonkos, 1977; Scott, 2006; Thelin, 2011).

Educators have heralded democratic engagement as higher education's service to a democratic society (Jacoby, 2009). This point of reference is philosophized within a humanistic school of thought and implicitly ascribes the principles of democracy; concepts such as equality, liberty, and human agency both define the democratization of higher education and regard its service as a public good (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2010; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Stephens, 2003; Crittenden & Levine, 2018; Westbrook, 2015). Yet, the role of higher education in U.S. democracy has transformed over time, aligning with the nation's sociopolitical history and debates about the status of American democracy (Thomas & Benenson, 2017). For instance, students' civic agency has at times been understood as their ability to think critically and respond to societal challenges and at other times as their capacity to participate in national political discourse and the election of political candidates (Thomas & Benenson, 2017).

The preparation of an informed citizenry is a goal articulated in many university mission and vision statements. These statements further assert the importance of civic engagement and often declare the significance of student political learning and social engagement (Campus Compact, 2019; Harward, 2012, 2013; Jacoby, 2009). In addition, the 1998 reauthorization of the U.S. Higher Education Act of 1965 required postsecondary institutions to provide students with voter registration forms before local registration deadlines (Bennion & Nickerson, 2016). However, beyond university mission statements and student voting outcomes, if postsecondary institutions seek to educate for a better democratic society, student political learning and engagement must be embedded in curricular and co-curricular systems and processes 365 days a year (Morgan & Orphan, 2016; Thomas, 2004). Research has indicated that best practices require institutions to foster comprehensive and integrated approaches so that civic engagement and education occur within various capacities (e.g., service learning, global and multicultural studies, deliberative dialogue, etc.) and throughout students' postsecondary education (Morgan & Orphan, 2016; Thomas, 2004; Thomas & Brower, 2017b). Educators and policymakers need to spearhead civic engagement efforts to institutionalize a culture reflecting the importance of preparing citizens for society (Harward, 2012, 2013; Jacoby, 2009; Lewis, 2014; Thomas & Brower, 2017a). Colleges and universities that institutionalize civic engagement policies and practices intentionally develop a campus climate that fosters civic responsibility (Thomas et al., 2018; Thomas & Brower, 2017a, 2017b).

Campus climate reflects attitudes, behaviors, and standards the academic community demonstrates toward individuals, and individuals toward other individuals (Rankin & Reason, 2008). Embedded within the campus climate experience is the extent to which attitudes,

behaviors, and standards support student political learning and engagement (Thomas et al., 2018; Thomas & Brower, 2017a, 2017b). Therefore, the work of establishing a civically engaged campus climate is not solely confined to providing civic learning and democratic engagement but calls upon campuses to actively advance equity, diversity, and inclusion (Thomas et al., 2018; Thomas & Brower, 2017a, 2017b). Ultimately, understanding the role of democracy within higher education first necessitates an understanding of how higher education institutions and their campus climates are a microcosm of the sociopolitical state of America (Goldberg, 2016).

Any consideration of the history of higher education and the sociopolitical nature of campus climate, equity, diversity, and inclusion for student political learning and engagement must entail a critical examination of sociopolitical inequities *and* a responsive academic community that interrogates prohibitive systems and processes, both within the institution and beyond. For example, identified student voting barriers—location of polling sites, restrictive voter ID laws, changing voter registration requirements, lack of information for first-time voters, etc.—are potentially disenfranchising experiences associated with race, socioeconomic status, and place of residence (Goldberg, 2016; Hallmark & Martinez, 2017; Neri et al., 2016). Similarly, institutionalizing a campus climate that fosters shared responsibility in democracy demands recognition of personhood, belonging, and equality for historically excluded populations that have been disenfranchised by either higher education and/or American democracy. Academic excellence necessitates that diversity and democracy assume equitable participation.

Research has established the numerous ways civic engagement advances the mission and vision of higher education. Student political learning and engagement translate to promoting inclusive learning environments, improving curricula and learning outcomes, and advancing institutional commitments to diversity (Harward, 2012, 2013; Jacoby, 2009; Thomas & Brower, 2017a, 2017b). Civic engagement within higher education is invaluable. Thus, student political learning and engagement should be bound to and justified by learning outcomes, as civic engagement itself is central to the mission and purpose of higher education.

Election Imperatives

The Institute of Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE)⁷ is a leading nonpartisan organization centering on student political learning and engagement. Informed by research on college student voting and the campus climates of highly political institutions, IDHE released *Election Imperatives* (2018) as a call to action for college and university leaders. The *Election Imperatives* report outlines succinctly how postsecondary institutions can elevate democracy while strengthening a culture of discourse, inclusion, agency, and participation. The report offers 10 recommendations for increasing college student voting and improving political learning and engagement in democracy:

- Reflect on past elections and reimagine 2018 by convening a small group of institutional faculty and student leaders to examine the institution's NSLVE [i.e., National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement] report, consider previous effort, and recalibrate election goals.

⁷ The Institute of Democracy and Higher Education is part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University and serves as a leading venue for research, resources, and advocacy on college student political learning and engagement in democratic practice (IDHE, 2019).

- Remove barriers to student voting by making voter registration easy and addressing statutory and non-statutory obstacles.
- Develop informed voters by teaching the history and the current state of voting rights in the U.S., voting basics, and information literacy.
- Establish a permanent and inclusive coalition charged with ... improv[ing] campus climate for student political learning discourse, equity, agency, and participation in democracy.
- Invest in the right kind of training for coalition members and student volunteers to engage in discussions and work collaboratively across differences of social identity, political perspective, and lived experiences; strategically cluster trained volunteers.
- Talk politics across campus and discuss policy issues, social conflicts, and campus concerns with students to increase and improve skills, intergroup dialogue, and deliberation, and to advance norms of shared responsibility, equity and inclusion, and free expression.
- Involve faculty across disciplines in elections in the classroom and beyond by encouraging them to participate in activities connected to political participation more broadly.
- Increase and improve classroom issue discussion of politics and policy across disciplines, especially controversial issues.
- Encourage and support student activism and leadership on public issues and campus concerns.
- Empower students to create a buzz around the election, cultivating student agency and charging students with motivating voters by creating excitement. (Thomas et al., 2018)

These nonpartisan recommendations institutionalize political learning and rightfully address postsecondary institutions' responsibility for advancing the health and future of American democracy. The recommendations are also guided by the aforementioned best civic engagement practices and represent a timely response to the extreme partisanship in the current American political arena (Thomas et al., 2018). Per the *Election Imperatives* report, the process of reimagining and realizing highly politically engaged postsecondary institutions constitutes a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach that challenges educators and policymakers to think beyond student voting outcomes. This ethnographic action research study extends this discourse by demonstrating the praxis of actualizing *Election Imperatives* in Tennessee, a voter-restrictive state.

The National Conference of State Legislatures⁸ has identified Tennessee as a strict voting state, indicating that its voting laws and practices make it difficult for people who are eligible to vote to exercise their right to vote (Underhill, 2019). The Cost of Voting Index, a quantified measure of the "time and effort" to vote, places Tennessee as the third most voting-restrictive state (Li et al., 2018). Perpetuating its voter-restrictive status and arguably in violation of the

⁸ The National Conference of State Legislatures is a bipartisan organization that monitors, tracks, and researchers state and state-federal legislation that impacts state politics.

Fourteenth Amendment, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee recently signed a measure that fines voter registration groups for incomplete or inaccurate voter registration forms (Lockhart, 2019). The law requires voter registration groups to adhere to a list of strict requirements when registering people to vote, with non-compliance resulting potentially in civil fines or criminal punishment. Put plainly, voter registration errors are now being criminalized. Given that the praxis of realizing *Election Imperatives* assumes the current state of democracy at local, state, and federal levels *is* an inherent component of the student political learning and engagement process, this ethnographic action research study also examines how the implications of disparate voting laws were contextualized while engaging in this work.

Realizing Election Imperatives

This ethnographic action research study details how the work of realizing *Election Imperatives* was conducted during the 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 academic years in Tennessee. Specifically, it highlights how a civic engagement strategy was developed to accomplish the following: (a) bringing to fruition the first and second annual Tennessee Civic Campus Summit, a convening of colleges and universities in the state to develop institutional plans to increase student political learning and democratic engagement; (b) establishing a statewide civic engagement coalition to support Tennessee colleges and universities; (c) supporting civic engagement policy work with state legislators; and (d) ensuring that Vanderbilt University was engaged in the process in a manner that exemplified best practices and utilized its academic capital to strengthen democratic processes in the state.

It is important to note that while this study focuses on the 2017–2019 academic years, various organizations and higher education institutions in Tennessee have been engaged in this work for decades, and their hard-won efforts ultimately established a foundation from which the statewide civic engagement coalition could be realized. For example, the American Democracy Project, directed by Dr. Mary Evins at Middle Tennessee State University, provides meaningful opportunities for students to understand citizenship and democracy. Similarly, the Eastern Tennessee State University Leadership and Civic Engagement Program has been nationally recognized for implementing civic engagement practices and exponentially increasing student voting participation in the state of Tennessee. With these preceding efforts serving as a foundation for best practices in the state, educators and policymakers must first and foremost understand the civic engagement landscape to effectively bridge and build upon past and current efforts.

The opportunity for the Tennessee Scholars Strategy Network (TN-SSN) chapter to advance civic engagement efforts began when TN-SSN established a relationship with CivicTN, a nonpartisan organization that supports coalition building to increase civic participation in Tennessee. This relationship emerged from a review of The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)⁹ report for Vanderbilt University to understand how Tennessee's premier research institution was and was not leading political learning and engagement per the best practices. During this process, we¹⁰ learned that CivicTN was conceptualizing the first

⁹ The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement offers colleges and universities an opportunity to learn their student registration and voting rates and, for interested campuses, to more closely examine their campus climate for political learning and engagement and correlations between specific student learning experiences and voting (IDHE, 2016).

¹⁰ I am a former postdoctoral fellow for the Scholars Strategy Network; in this role, I worked with the Vanderbilt Office of Academic Citizenship and Service (OACS) to promote civic engagement and co-developed the first and

annual Tennessee Civic Campus Summit to support students, faculty, and staff in developing institutional plans to increase student political learning and democratic engagement at their respective institutions. Subsequently, as the TN-SSN chapter and in conversation with key stakeholders, we decided that in addition to bolstering student political learning and engagement at Vanderbilt University, we would help develop the Tennessee Civic Campus Summit and use this as an opportunity to elevate relationships with state legislators who supported civic engagement for the state of Tennessee.

Statewide Convening and Coalition Building

The ability to imagine a statewide coalition in service to student political learning and engagement requires nonpartisan leadership to first understand how local, state, and federal politics implicates civic education. From the outset, CivicTN—more specifically, Statewide Civic Engagement Director Kelley Elliott—utilized the U.S. Higher Education Act of 1965 as a tool to convene stakeholders and develop the first annual Tennessee Civic Campus Summit. The Higher Education Act requires postsecondary institutions to facilitate voter registration on their campuses, a mandate that was expanded upon to critically examine the needs of Tennessee educators and how those needs were in conversation with Tennessee’s lowest voter turnout in the 2014 national elections.

This standpoint recognizes the positioning of higher education institutions at the forefront of civic learning and citizenship and assumes that colleges and universities in Tennessee are in fact embracing their civic engagement responsibility. This frame of reference also served to guide the summit’s overarching objectives and united an interdisciplinary and diverse committee to support the inaugural summit for the state of Tennessee. Collectively, we regarded the summit as an opportunity to provide Tennessee administrators, faculty, staff, and students with skills and resources for developing institutional plans to increase student political learning and democratic engagement that addresses misunderstandings and myths about student voting, as well as for identifying which voting barriers were especially prohibitive for students in the state of Tennessee.

The inaugural Campus Civic Summit was held on April 20, 2018, at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, with 13 participating Tennessee colleges and universities developing student voting plans. The success of the first summit was largely due to the intentional bridging of the Tennessee higher education community with nonpartisan civic engagement organizations. This collaboration facilitated comprehensive training workshops for summit participants which offered local, state, and national resources, and demystified the process of developing institutional plans to increase student political learning and democratic engagement. For

second Civic TN Campus Summit—which convened 18 colleges and universities to draft campus voting plans and support youth voter access and engagement. I utilized policies and practices to author a campus voting plan for Vanderbilt University and establish coalition-based support from local, state, and national organizations, including: OACS, Division of Public Affairs, Faculty Senate, Campus Election Engagement, Civic Tennessee, Tennessee Civic Engagement Task Force, Think Tennessee, and the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. As a result of this effort, the VandyVotes Committee hosted the second annual Civic TN Campus Summit at Vanderbilt University. I use the word “we” here to establish the community nature of the work and mitigate power dynamics between self and coalition-building. This effort was also supported and facilitated by Tennessee SSN leaders Drs. Carolyn Heinrich and Nathan J. Kelly.

example, initiatives and organizations such as the American Democracy Project,¹¹ Voting is Social Work,¹² The Democracy Commitment,¹³ the Campus Vote Project,¹⁴ the ALL IN Challenge,¹⁵ the Students Learn Students Vote Coalition,¹⁶ and the Andrew Goodman Foundation¹⁷ exemplified to participants the strategies they have implemented to increase student political engagement and the various tools at their disposal. Perhaps just as importantly, the summit provided a nonpartisan space for participants to speak frankly about the challenges they encountered—conversations that cultivated a shared sense of statewide responsibility and solidarity. As the summit organizing committee, we understood that the latter was an especially significant outcome if we were going to utilize the summit as a platform for establishing a statewide civic engagement coalition and building out committee work. All too often, and particularly in hyper-partisan states, addressing longstanding voting barriers can lead to organizing burnout and feelings of isolation. We preemptively addressed these concerns by announcing our willingness to institute annual retreats to support civic engagement work and to demonstrate that rather than working in isolated silos, our collective efforts were components of a renewed state democracy in Tennessee.

On March 29, 2019, we hosted the second annual Civic Campus Summit concurrently at two different locations—the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and Vanderbilt University—with 18 colleges and universities participating. In addition to including a second location for the summit, we sought to ground institutional plans to increase student political learning and democratic engagement with the sociopolitical history of the state of Tennessee while remaining a nonpartisan space for university administrators, faculty, and students. Thus, the second annual summit at Vanderbilt University was an opportunity for participants to learn about the history of the university and the ways the summit host site had disenfranchised historically excluded

¹¹ The American Democracy Project is a network of more than 250 state colleges and universities focused on public higher education's role in preparing the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for democracy (Bowman, 2018).

¹² The Voting is Social Work campaign is grounded in the idea that nonpartisan voter engagement is legal, ethical, and professional, and central to social work values and mission. In addition, communities with high voter turnout report greater well-being and more resources and attention from elected officials.

¹³ The Democracy Commitment is a nonpartisan national organization dedicated to advancing democracy (Bowman, 2018).

¹⁴ The Campus Vote Project helps colleges and universities institutionalize reforms that empower students with the information they need to register and vote. The project provides resources and information that administrators and students can use to work together to overcome challenges students often face when voting (Campus Vote Project, 2019).

¹⁵ The ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge believes that more young people need to participate in the electoral process. By recognizing colleges and universities for their commitment to increasing student voting rates, this national awards program encourages institutions to help students form the habits of active and informed citizenship. Hundreds of colleges and universities have joined the challenge and have committed to making democratic participation a core value on their campuses. Together, they are cultivating generations of engaged citizens who are essential to a healthy democracy (Stockman, 2018).

¹⁶ The Students Learn Students Vote Coalition promotes civic learning and engagement on campuses across the United States by providing a series of key steps and information on best practices that institutions can use to create a more voter-friendly campus (Coalition Partners, 2018).

¹⁷ The Andrew Goodman Foundation (AGF) works to make young voices and votes a powerful force in democracy. The foundation partners with colleges and universities to cultivate civic leaders, remove voting barriers, and mobilize student voters to act by creating a more civic-minded campus culture. The foundation seeks to inspire more young people to pursue social change work, activate the important lessons of the past, and sustain effective social action (AGF, 2018).

populations from voting. Led by Dr. Sekou Franklin, this was a particularly powerful testament for summit participants, as it affirmed diverse sociopolitical histories and the profound meaning of participants' collective civic engagement efforts. Another noteworthy addition to the summit was a panel that allowed participants to engage with state legislators who were also committed to advancing Tennessee voter access and participation. The panel further connected student political learning and engagement with the current sociopolitical climate and the agency that participants assume in defining democracy for the state of Tennessee (see the section titled, "Political Learning and Engagement with State Policymakers").

Our ability to recognize the work accomplished by summit participants during the 2017–2018 academic year, expand upon our organizing efforts by critically examining how the summit could be a more inclusive space, and continue to cultivate relationships with nonpartisan civic engagement advocacy organizations renewed commitments to our statewide higher education coalition. What initially were aspirational commitments to increasing student political learning and engagements have become hard-earned moments to reimagine a democratic and inclusive Tennessee. The following is an excerpt from the summit objectives document which consistently reminded the organizing committee what we were working toward:

When TN's institutions of higher education make civic learning and civic engagement central, not peripheral, on their campuses, they not only help students better understand their own impacts on neighbors, society, the nation, and the world, schools also advance students' civic competencies that enrich Tennessee communities all across our state. Incorporating democratic engagement into campus life creates structures and stability for students as they explore their political beliefs and their responsibilities in our participatory democracy. Increasing student voting embeds habits of citizenship that last far beyond the collegiate experience.

The summit will continue to promote civic learning and engagement on campuses throughout TN by providing workshops and panels of local and national experts in student voting, campus organizing, and civic education. Together at the summit, we will reexamine, reaffirm, reenergize, and recommit to the best practices that build civic capacity in our students and a Tennessee Civic Campus at our home institutions.

Political Learning and Engagement With State Policymakers

Tennessee's voting-restrictive status also calls upon educators and policymakers to engage meaningfully in local and state political processes to model *and* facilitate authentic political learning and engagement for student communities. Therefore, the TN-SSN chapter developed a nonpartisan political strategy to work with state legislators who had worked toward increasing voting rights and access. Specifically, we identified state legislators, across political lines, who had proposed legislation that would increase voting participation and access. This process helped us better understand the political landscape and the nuances of voting laws that prohibited equitable voting participation, especially among disenfranchised students.

We then reached out to these state legislators via email to communicate our nonpartisan and enthusiastic support for their legislative efforts, and to invite them to participate in the 2019 summit. We used subsequent meetings with state legislators as opportunities to better understand their proposed legislation, bridge scholarly expertise with their policymaking process, and inform them about how the Civic Campus Summit could serve as a platform for them to engage students, faculty, and staff in their advocacy efforts.

At the 2019 summit, there were three state legislators in attendance— Representative Harold Love, Representative Bo Mitchell, and Senator Brenda Gilmore—as well as two legislative staff persons representing Congressman Jim Cooper and Representative London Lamar, respectively. The state legislators and staff engaged in a panel discussion on the topic of voter engagement and access which allowed students, faculty, and staff to better understand the policymaking process in the state of Tennessee and critically reflect upon their role within local and state politics. In addition, the workshops following the panel provided opportunities for participants to build upon the conversation with legislators and understand the local and state policymaking process.

Perhaps most importantly, the legislators' participation in the Civic Campus Summit demonstrated to students that they were accessible and cared about advancing civic engagement. From this experience, students were able to imagine collaborating with state legislators. Similarly, we regarded the collaboration with state legislators as the inroads to establishing a nonpartisan coalition to address voting barriers and advance democracy for Tennessee.

Political Learning and Engagement at Vanderbilt University

To realize *Election Imperatives* at Vanderbilt University, it was first necessary to understand how the university had implemented student political learning and engagement, which departments had been supportive, and how student organizations, student leaders, faculty, and staff had engaged in civic engagement efforts. Central to this process was our ability to understand what challenges Vanderbilt University students, faculty, and staff had experienced that impacted their ability to sustain and build upon this work. The TN-SSN chapter wanted to ensure that our identified process for advancing this work addressed institutional challenges.

With the help of the Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP),¹⁸ we drafted a civic engagement action plan for Vanderbilt University which sought to: increase student education and awareness; shift institutional culture so that student political education and engagement were experienced as interdisciplinary efforts and part of the Vanderbilt campus climate; institutionalize previous and newly proposed civic engagement efforts; and identify and establish a working group of faculty, students, and staff to further develop and implement a campus voting plan. As we engaged with various department and university stakeholders to discuss our proposed civic engagement action plan, it was evident that the Vanderbilt Office of Active Citizenship and Service (OACS) and the Vanderbilt Office for Public Affairs—liaison to the Vanderbilt Division of Government and Community Relations—had the ability to bottom-line aspects of this work. An important component of our approach was to first demonstrate that we understood how OACS had championed these issues in the past.¹⁹ Our proposed civic engagement action plan needed to be perceived and experienced as an effort to build capacity for

¹⁸ The Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP) is a national nonpartisan project that helps administrators, faculty, staff, and student leaders at U.S. colleges and universities engage students in federal, state, and local elections (CEEP, 2018).

¹⁹ More than 6,800 undergraduate students attend Vanderbilt University, and approximately 92% are out-of-state students. Per the NSLVE report, 31.9% of students voted by absentee ballot in the 2016 presidential election. During this time, OACS received a number of inquiries seeking clarification and resources about the voting process. To facilitate this process, OACS hosted two Absentee Ballot Request Parties and one Absentee Ballot Preparation Party during the 2018 mid-term election year. The goals of the Absentee Ballot Request and Prep parties were to: (1) increase student awareness of absentee ballot processes and deadlines, (2) simplify the vote by absentee ballot process for students, and (3) provide space for students to articulate commitment to the democratic process.

already-existing campus efforts and establish key partnerships within and beyond Vanderbilt University. Shortly after establishing a collaborative working relationship with OACS and the Vanderbilt Office for Public Affairs, we decided collectively that Vanderbilt would participate in the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge and use this as an opportunity to constitute a Vanderbilt civic engagement working group (VandyVotes), inviting the broader Vanderbilt community and state legislators to participate in the working group.

From the outset, the VandyVotes committee members sought to establish authentic relationships with one another and provide ongoing opportunities for participating students, staff, and faculty to critically reflect upon their role as they took ownership of the civic engagement plan. Two experiences were particularly formative in shaping the collective solidarity and commitment toward realizing *Election Imperatives* at Vanderbilt University. The first was a one-day retreat that gave VandyVotes committee members the opportunity to share their personal reasons and values that inspired their political learning and engagement. This discussion led to a broader examination of systems and processes that prohibited historically excluded populations from participating in the democratic process and of the role and responsibility of a premier research institution such as Vanderbilt University. The VandyVotes committee members then had the ability to engage in nonpartisan critical reflexivity throughout the academic year; the discussions were characteristically inclusive of diverse experiences that ultimately sought to interrogate voting barriers. In this spirit, the VandyVotes committee developed the VandyVotes mission and vision statement, both of which became points of reference for examining how their space was in conversation with the broader Tennessee community and for guiding political learning and engagement objectives for the 2018–2019 academic year.

As an example of the tremendous work accomplished in one academic year, the VandyVotes committee drafted a Faculty Senate resolution to ensure that student absences would not be penalized on Election Day and to encourage faculty to provide civic learning and democratic engagement opportunities in the classroom. This faculty resolution resembled similar efforts at Central Michigan and Rutgers University informed by Adam Bonica's *A Day Off for Democracy* (2018) and the *National Higher Education Pledge* (Gonzales, 2021). In addition to working with the Vanderbilt Faculty Senate, the VandyVotes committee hosted the second annual Civic Campus Summit to facilitate summit participation for middle and west Tennessee colleges and universities. Based on the outcomes of the summit, the VandyVotes committee had the opportunity to strengthen relationships with local, state, and national organizations, further modeling its civic engagement service to the broader Tennessee community. Toward the end of the 2018–2019 academic year, the VandyVotes committee was in the process of formalizing its status as a formal Vanderbilt organization and developed a recruitment strategy for increasing participation from historically excluded populations and diverse political orientations.

This work was possible because, as a change agent, I could make a case for why OACS and the Vanderbilt Public Affairs Office were already working in service to civic engagement and how collaborative efforts could be amplified. Respectively, the vision and leadership of the Office of Active Citizenship and Service—Assistant Director Meagan Smith and Vice Chancellor for Public Affairs Nathan Green—allowed for meaningful and profound engagement with the proposed civic engagement action plan. Our collaboration ultimately shifted institutional culture so that civic engagement was at the intersection of Vanderbilt's intellectual life, work ecology, and the broader Tennessee community.

The Implications of Realizing Election Imperatives

Several significant outcomes and newly established objectives emerged from the work conducted while realizing the *Election Imperatives* recommendations. First and foremost, the statewide coalition committed to expanding the 2018 and 2019 Tennessee Civic Campus Summits by developing content for a 2020 summit intended to be especially responsive to local state policies and practices. The primary objective is to instill a sense of statewide solidarity while combating voting barriers. We envision a 2020 summit that offers participants additional opportunities to learn from one another and foster cross-campus relationship building.

Through the SSN platform, the organizing collective is also establishing a faculty working group to ensure that faculty allies remain involved and continue to utilize their academic platforms to advance civic engagement. As a best practice, faculty work will not be limited to shifting institutional climates within their respective institutions; rather, collective efforts will be in conversation with local and statewide legislation. For example, the faculty group has identified the need to establish support for House Bill 554 (HB 554), which would mandate that public universities serve as polling locations. Though Vanderbilt is a private university and not directly affected by the outcome of HB 554, the university's vice chancellor for public affairs has committed to working with university leaders to advance the proposed bill. He also expressed interest in spearheading efforts with the Election Committee to start the process of establishing a polling location at Vanderbilt University. This example showcases a multidimensional approach to advancing civic engagement as well as the power that university leaders have to actualize profound changes within and beyond their institutions.

The praxis of realizing *Election Imperatives* calls upon educators and policymakers to improve campus conditions for political learning. However, the experience of doing this work from an emancipatory perspective depends upon a full participation of self. This process entails critical and intentional reflexivity (Camacho, 2019) grounded in structural humility (Camacho & Rivera-Salgado, 2020). My ability to understand how advancing student political learning and engagement is in conversation with state policies and practices and the sociopolitical history of Tennessee meant that I had to consider the following when I operationalized broad civic engagement objectives: (1) Among our established organizing coalition, who experiences additional political inequities and/or is not present to define civic engagement aspirations? (2) How has the dominant civic engagement discourse within higher education disenfranchised marginalized perspectives, and how do educational inequities prohibit political participation and engagement? (2) In what ways do postsecondary institutions in Tennessee perpetuate power dynamics and maintain a status quo? (3) Beyond discussing the sociopolitical history of Tennessee, as it relates to the experiences of disenfranchised populations, what does political equity and engagement mean for historically excluded populations? The ability to undergird *Election Imperatives* with a critical reflection process that recognizes systemic inequality allowed us to recognize our collective academic capital and project a democratic future that observed everyone's personhood.

Previous research has demonstrated that there are various reasons why educators do not feel empowered to cultivate political learning and engagement within their classrooms, and salient among those reasons is fear—that they are not sufficiently politically informed to lead classroom discussions, maintain nonpartisanship, and/or cultivate respectful learning environments (Thomas & Gismondi, 2017). While fear is certainly a reasonable response, especially during a hyper-partisan era, fear breeds ignorance. Fear also does not absolve educators from educating. A discussion about a state's sociopolitical history and its relationship

to current voting barriers is *not* partisan. A willingness to support state policies and legislation that facilitate student civic engagement is *not* partisan. The ability of educators and policymakers to shift institutional culture so student political learning and engagement advances commitments of equity, diversity, and inclusion is *not* partisan. In fact, these and other civic engagement efforts signal that those educators and policymakers understand how higher education can preserve democracy and strengthen society.

Similarly, educators and policymakers cannot champion democracy without upholding an emancipatory perspective. Recognition of personhood and equity is central to understanding and actualizing democracy. There cannot be free and fair elections if people are not free. There cannot be active participation of the people if there are systems and processes that prohibit participation. Human rights cannot be protected if racial and social hierarchies remain. There cannot be an equal rule of law if people are not treated equally. Though the sociopolitical history of the United States would have us believe that social inequities exist and will continue to exist, to accept this would be to cast away the foundation we claim to uphold as educators and be complicit in realizing Trump's America.

Conclusion

As we grapple with Tennessee's voter-restrictive status and new legislation that will make registering people to vote more difficult, the sociopolitical climate allowed us to develop an *Election Imperatives* approach that was responsive to local and state policies. The ability to meaningfully engage with one another and establish a statewide coalition, during a hyper-partisan era, demonstrates how the literal definition of democracy served to bring us all together and understand common goals formulated by the Higher Education Act of 1965. Certainly, if we can accomplish this in Tennessee, educators and policymakers can expect to accomplish much more in less voter-restrictive states. As a best practice, educators and policymakers need to ground *Election Imperatives* within local and statewide politics while examining the consequence of sociopolitical histories and present-day inequities that prohibit democratic participation. The work of realizing *Election Imperatives* for a democratic society assumes a recognition of personhood, shared democracy, and atonement for previous and current sociopolitical inequities that prohibit systemic equity.

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The Commonwealth of Kentucky Takes an Important Step in Protecting Democracy

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Abstract

In this editorial, Northern Kentucky University's president celebrates Kentucky's new bipartisan voting rights bill. Signed into law in April 2021, the legislation runs counter to trends in other states by expanding, rather than restricting, voting options in the Commonwealth. As an immigrant to the United States from India, the author brings a unique perspective on American democracy and expresses his passion about higher education's critical role in informing students about their civic responsibilities.

Keywords: voting rights, democracy, civic engagement

Springtime in Kentucky usually means March Madness and Derby days. This spring, however, we witnessed something refreshingly new—a bipartisan effort to expand voting rights. In April 2021, Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear signed into law [House Bill 574](#), which dramatically expands voting rights in what remains one of the most restrictive states in the United States.

As president of one of Kentucky’s public universities, I was delighted to see representatives of the Commonwealth collaborate in a bipartisan manner to reform its election laws. The bill passed 91-3 in the state House and 33-3 in the state Senate before moving to the governor’s desk. Given Kentucky’s legislative make-up, this meant that Republicans took the lead and Democrats, including the governor, supported the effort.

Aside from the importance of the legislation, the bill’s passage was a breath of fresh air during a time of great division and a welcome contrast to the partisan election “reforms” being enacted in other states. In fact, this bill was developed by legislative sponsors in partnership with the bipartisan State Board of Elections, the bipartisan Kentucky County Clerks Association, and the Republican Secretary of State, Michael G. Adams.

Voting is a right and a privilege all Americans enjoy, and not every place in the world allows this freedom. I believe democracy has produced more desirable results for nations than any other system of government. Kentucky’s voting-rights bill is an important step in solidifying that right for all and includes several important provisions such as no-excuse early voting for the Thursday, Friday, and Saturday before an election. It also creates a permanent online portal for voters to request absentee ballots and track them once they have been submitted.

Since 2002, Northern Kentucky University (NKU), through its Scripps Howard Center for Civic Engagement, has been preparing the next generation of informed and engaged citizens to sustain our democracy. Our “I Count Because I Vote” campaign provides an online guide for students on voting. We also welcomed freshmen to campus in the fall of 2020 with masks that read, “VOTE”—a reminder of their right (and responsibility) as 18-year-olds. Thanks to these and other efforts, NKU students register and vote at higher rates than students at peer institutions.

Because this cause is a priority in the community as well as on campus, NKU is an active partner in the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce’s “Get Out the Vote” initiative, which aims to make Northern Kentucky the top region in the state for voter turnout. The university also partners with the public library districts in Boone, Campbell, and Kenton counties to host the Northern Kentucky Forum, designed to connect our region through public discourse on local issues. Many of NKU’s faculty and staff participate in Kids Voting Northern Kentucky, which encourages parents to bring their children with them to polling places, where the kids can vote in a mock election as their parents vote in the real one. Each election cycle, NKU history majors volunteer to tabulate the Kids Voting results.

NKU is part of this cause nationally as well, through the American Democracy Project and the Campus Election Engagement Project, two networks with a combined membership of over 600 colleges and universities. Together, these institutions represent a current and continuing commitment to civic education—which only deepens our celebration of House Bill 574.

While much work remains, Kentucky’s bill represents great progress for the Commonwealth and demonstrates that bipartisanship is indeed possible in these fractious times. I

COMMONWEALTH TAKES AN IMPORTANT STEP

hope our state and all others continue the effort to expand and solidify voting rights for all citizens in the months and years ahead.

Author



Dr. Ashish Vaidya has served as Northern Kentucky University's sixth president since July 2018. Dr. Vaidya is responsible for championing the university's mission and core values, fostering a collegial and collaborative culture that capitalizes on the richness of the NKU community, and furthering its commitment to access and inclusive excellence. Dr. Vaidya continually challenges the university to become a more student-ready and regionally engaged institution. He took a unique approach to strategic planning when he launched the university's strategic framework, Success by Design, which outlines three pillars of student success: access, completion, and career and community engagement. Dr. Vaidya's extensive community work includes service on the boards of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland's Cincinnati Branch, the United Way of Greater Cincinnati, among others.

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Vaccine Hesitancy and the Apocalypse

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Abstract

Some forms of vaccine hesitancy have their roots in religious beliefs about future apocalyptic events. Such beliefs engender fear of centralized governmental authority as manifested in public health mandates involving vaccines or masks. The author's upbringing as a religious survivalist provides perspective on why some people display vaccine hesitancy. The author also discusses several ways to address these fears.

In 1972, soon after I started high school, a cryptic billboard campaign emerged in the west Texas city of Lubbock, near where my family lived. The billboards started out by saying “The END is coming.” After a few weeks, additional information was added: “The END is coming—June 19th.” People started speculating about the meaning of the advertisement. Lubbock was a somewhat religious city, and some residents subscribed to an apocalyptic tradition that assumed future violence would precede the Second Coming of Jesus. In my house, the speculation approached panic. My parents were semi-survivalists with a 10-acre plot of land outside of town which they were preparing to help us survive future disasters that were supposedly foretold in biblical texts. Although their biggest fear was an economic crash that they saw coming in the next few years, my parents were open to the possibility of other catastrophic events as well. The date of June 19th gave them a hint as to what would cause the advertised “end” described on the billboards. In Texas, June 19th has important significance to the Black population because that is the day, in 1865, when the Emancipation Proclamation was first announced in the state, in the city of Galveston. For many African Americans, it is a major day of celebration. For my parents, it seemed like the perfect day for violence. The billboards were simply ways of gathering the Black forces together for a giant race riot.

As the ominous date approached, my parents made plans to shelter in place at the little farm. They made sure there was plenty of ammunition for the motley collection of small-caliber pistols and rifles that my stepfather had collected for self-defense. They stored canned food in hidden caches around the acreage—and then waited. On June 19th, there were no obvious signs of a riot anywhere: no fires, no smoke on the horizon, no warnings on the radio. We had no television, so we could not check that news source—and this was long before the internet—so eventually my mother decided to drive into town to reconnoiter the area. Always skeptical of the race riot theory, I went with her out of curiosity. One of the billboards was only a couple miles from our house, and as we drove up to it, my mother’s face turned a bright red. In big letters, the billboard proclaimed, “The END is here ... K-E-N-D at 1590 on the end of your AM radio dial, playing the best in top 40 hits, 24 hours a day.” For once, I was discrete and did not say anything. As a matter of fact, nothing was ever said about the incident in our house—ever.

I was recently reminded of this incident during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am a professor of public health at a state university in Missouri, and I was involved in a project to find out why there was so much vaccine hesitancy in the local population. Many of the people I talked to had rational reasons for choosing to forego vaccination. Some did not want to receive the vaccine until it was approved by the FDA. Some were concerned about reports of myocarditis. These were the legitimate concerns of informed, intelligent people.

However, there were some other, surprising comments that referred to “End Times.” As I spoke with these people, I learned that some of them were convinced that the pandemic was a sign of the coming Apocalypse. One expressed a fatalistic view that what was going to happen had been predetermined, and it was inevitable that the end was coming soon. This perception was not new to me given my upbringing, but I was puzzled by how this apocalyptic vision was linked to the hesitancy to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. As I considered the comments made by these people, I was reminded of the eschatological thinking that drove my parents to abandon a relatively comfortable life in town and start their own survivalist compound on an old cotton field in west Texas.

This is the real point of this article—that this apocalyptic thinking helps drive vaccine hesitancy. It may not be a major contributor to the overall problem, but I believe it is part of it. In

this article, I try to establish a link between the Apocalypse and vaccine hesitancy through a description of my family's sojourn with survivalism.

I was 15 years old in 1972 when my parents sold their house in town and started the move to the 10 acres of barren soil south of Lubbock. In a local salvage yard, they found a large military barracks that was missing a wall on one end, then had the building moved onto the old cotton field they had recently purchased. It was the start of a venture that consumed all their time and money for many years, as well as most of their children's time. They had begun their marriage with 10 children as a mixture of previous marriages, but when they started their survivalist adventure, only four were still at home. I was the oldest.

Over the next few years, we gutted the building and rebuilt the interior, built the west wall, installed plumbing and power, planted a seven-acre garden, raised livestock and poultry, and built a solid fence around the entire acreage. My stepfather was a rather quiet man, but my mother constantly spoke about why all this work was necessary. Both agreed that an economic collapse was imminent. Their concerns about the economy came from a mishmash of religious teachings and popular books. Among their most important influences were *How to Prepare for the Coming Crash* and *The Late, Great Planet Earth*. The first was an indictment of the Federal Reserve and a prediction of economic disaster that would exceed that of the Great Depression, something both of my parents had vague memories of living through when they were children. The second book combined literalist translations of biblical apocalyptic literature with interpretations of current events in a description of an inevitable slide into End Times disaster.

Verses selected from the Bible in support of their actions were also important influences. Fundamentalist theologians have connected these scriptures to form a timeline that is important to the narrative. The timeline starts with the Great Falling Away, a corruption of the people that reduces their faith in God and that develops into a time of ever-increasing catastrophe. As a result of the demands of the people for greater governmental support to alleviate suffering from this catastrophe, a strong political figure steps forward to establish a one-world government. That leader is called the Anti-Christ in some accounts, the Son of Perdition and The Lawless One in others; according to some, he is the Beast. The one-world government leads to greater suffering and repression of God's people, eventually developing into the Great Tribulation. In the end, a triumphant Jesus conquers the Anti-Christ and his representatives on earth, establishing a thousand-year reign of prosperity and peace. This is a simplified version of the prophecy. The Second Coming initiates the great Rapture, in which all the dead but resurrected Christians and those still alive are caught up together in a flight up to the clouds to meet the returning, triumphant Jesus. These are the essential predictions of End Times theology as embraced by many Christians. The various denominations interpret the sequence and the participants differently, but this was the sequence of events that my parents believed would happen, or at least begin, while they were still alive.

This timeline and the description of future events are results of a literalist translation of certain scriptures. Probably the most famous states, "There will be famines, pestilences and earthquakes; lawlessness will abound and the love of many will grow cold" (Matthew 24:7). Another important biblical image is that of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, a vision of riders who spread war, famine, disease, and scarcity throughout the world. Most of the images come from the last book of the New Testament, usually called "The Revelation of St. John the Divine," or simply "Revelation." However, the Bible also quotes Jesus as describing a time of great trouble in the future. Matthew 24:15–21 states,

When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place (let him who readeth understand). Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains; Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house; neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes. And woe unto them that are with child, and them that give suck in those days! And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day. For then shall be great tribulation such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no nor ever shall be.

My parents were not the first to take these warnings literally or to have their fear inflamed by popular literature. Daniel Defoe's "A Journal of the Plague Year" is a fictional account of what happened during the Great Plague in London, but it is based on events from Defoe's own childhood. It tells of panic induced by London's own doomsayers during the epidemic that killed nearly one quarter of the city's residents from 1665–1666:

Books frightened them terribly; such as *Lilly's Almanac*, *Gadbury's Alogical Predictions*, *Poor Robins Almanack*.; also several pretended religious Books; one entitled, *Come out of her my people, lest you be partaker of her Plagues*; another *Fair Warning*; another *Britain's Remembrance*, and many such; all, or most Part of which, foretold directly or covertly the Ruin of the City: nay some were so Enthusiastically bold, as to run about the streets, with their Oral Predictions, pretending they were sent to preach to the City; and one in particular, who like Jonah to Ninevah, cried in the streets "yet forty Days and London shall be destroyed."

This quote demonstrates the way popular interpretations of these traditions have convinced people of the necessity of evacuating a city, for instance, or hoarding food and essentials. However, another part of Defoe's account is very important. One of the reasons for the great sense of doom was the year this catastrophe occurred: 1666—the last three numbers being "666." This symbolism still resonates today and most likely accounts for some of the vaccine hesitancy in certain religious circles.

This symbolism appears in another scriptural text from Revelation describing the Beast, a person some believe is the Anti-Christ and others believe is another individual working in the same one-world government. The Beast is depicted as having the horns of a lamb but the voice of a dragon. He does great wonders, like making fire come down from the sky in the presence of men. He develops immense power in the government—so much power that no one can take part in any commerce, including buying food, without the Beast's approval. That approval is shown by the Beast's mark on the people's hands or foreheads. The mark is the number six-hundred, three score and six: 666. This number demands fear and rapt attention from Christians raised in the apocalyptic tradition because it symbolizes a totalitarian government, in this case a world-wide government, that directs every person's actions. This government requires complete obedience and severely punishes noncompliance. No one can survive without the approval of the government run by the Beast; no one can support a family without "the Mark."

Indeed, this in some cases is the essence of vaccine hesitancy: People from this tradition often distrust any action that is mandated by government, but especially any that in any way changes or leaves marks on their bodies. In their view, the Mark of the Beast could be a brand or a tattoo, but it could also be an indelible mark only seen under a certain light: a computer chip, a scarification, an ink stamp—any mark can do. Could the mark be an insertion into the genes that

identifies who has gotten the vaccine? This question captures the extent of the fear that such mandated actions can engender.

It is worth noting that this fear of the Mark of the Beast and of totalitarian government is not limited to those who are traditionally religious; the tradition is somewhat familiar even to those who do not attend church services, even to those who may be anti-religious. Though many may not even be able to describe this tradition, it is nevertheless embedded deeply within the culture. It is a powerful fear that may not require the explicit description of its history as described here, but it is undoubtedly part of American tradition, just as it was part of the traditions of Defoe's London. It is not surprising that certain factions of society resent mandatory vaccines or mandatory masking. They resent and fear a government that states they cannot send their children to school unless every child is wearing a mask, especially when the government's advice on masking has been inconsistent. The masks even leave a mark on the face, albeit temporary, if worn for a long time, and this has been mentioned in some anti-masking writings. Opponents resent the mandatory administration of a vaccine that uses a genetic technology they see as a permanent change to their bodies. It may not matter that the technology does not actually modify the DNA; the temporary changes to the mRNA made by the new technology vaccines may be seen as threats because they do result in immunity, itself a type of mark.

For many outsiders unfamiliar with the apocalyptic tradition, this fear and resentment may merely serve as a humorous anecdote about ignorant rubes who should know better. The personal story I shared in the beginning of this article is indeed humorous in a twisted way, and I used it for that reason. However, from a public health perspective, researchers and practitioners try to understand barriers to seeking appropriate treatment or prevention, such as obtaining a vaccination. As public health professionals, we do not ridicule minority groups or other cultures for ignorant, erroneous, or naïve attitudes toward disease; rather, we try to be culturally sensitive so we can understand problematic beliefs and address them in an informed and culturally appropriate manner. There is no reason why the populations described here should be treated any differently. What can be done to address such vaccine hesitancy?

First, community leaders, public health workers, and healthcare providers should be informed about this subject and should recognize that even anti-religious people may harbor this innate fear.

Second, public health agencies should avoid *unnecessary* mandates that alienate the population. A cost-benefit analysis of public health mandates is essential, acknowledging that one of those costs may be the loss of the public trust. For example, what are the benefits of mandating vaccination for students in elementary school? What are the costs? Are the benefits great enough to balance the resentment and resistance incurred by such an inconvenient and heavy-handed mandate? Perhaps the benefits do outweigh the cost of the fear and distrust incurred in this community. Perhaps not. Is this being considered? A consultation with local clergy might be in order, but it is important to realize that there is great diversity among the clergy. Many of them do not have the background to understand this issue.

Third, be sensitive to the issue of the Mark of the Beast. Armbands or vaccine passports may be seen as marks, as might a temporary ink stamp on the back of the hand. Recently, a television news host stated that it was time to start shaming the unvaccinated and to shun these "stupid people," supposedly those who cannot display proof of vaccination. Such statements play

into the perception that popular society and big government are working together to establish a totalitarian regime.

Fourth, and very importantly, public health communicators should be able to defend new technologies, showing that mRNA vaccines do not change the genetic makeup of a vaccine recipient. They should also note that it would be impossible to implant a chip to monitor someone's presence. I still struggle to accept that anyone truly believes the chip conspiracy; nevertheless, it demonstrates the need for active rumor control.

Fifth, public health professionals must be honest about the presence of real side effects. It does no good to deny what people can see with their own eyes. They should be ready to discuss the relative risk of serious side effects due to vaccination compared to the risk of serious repercussions from the illness itself.

These actions have more application than one might think. Although COVID-19 might not be seen as one of the foretold plagues, some see it as a vivid preview of things to come. Christian scriptures state that biblical plagues of pestilence and "wild beasts of the field" will kill about one quarter of the world's population during the future's times of trouble. Anything that hastens these plagues by breaking down protective borders or increasing the size of government will be seen as simple steps toward a one-world government and the Apocalypse. The border crises of the U.S. and Europe, combined with power-grabbing emergency actions of central governments, all look like prophecy come true. The current response of the central government in Canada to the truckers' strike is a very good example of how a disregard for public sensitivities to heavy-handed government mandates can exact a high price for public trust. This explains a general distrust of globalism in part of the religious community. An awareness of this distrust is a good start to help allay unnecessary fears.

As for my family's experience with survivalism and End Times, the story is a little more predictable. The race riots and the economic collapse never happened, though I remember having a difficult time finding jobs during the recession of the 1970s. I went to college, then into the Navy for a 20-year career in medical entomology. I completed a Doctor of Public Health degree while in the military and, after my retirement from the Navy, settled into a rewarding academic career. Meanwhile, my siblings dispersed around the world into a variety of professions and lives. Our parents divorced, and my stepfather remarried into what appeared to be a happy, 20-year marriage that ended with his death in 2008. My mother remained on the farm in the home we had built so many years before. In her old age, she became even more confident in the accuracy of the apocalyptic prophecies, though she had learned not to set a date on when those prophecies would occur. Eventually, she moved into an independent living center in town, funded mostly by Social Security and the sale of the house and surrounding land. I was happy to see all the work invested in the small acreage being used for such a good purpose. Yet, if the current occupants of the old house ever open a wall void and find a few boxes of .22 shells or a shelf of 50-year-old canned food, I hope those findings do not stimulate visions of the horned Beast, forehead tattoos, and the Apocalypse. More importantly, I hope the new occupants of the house get the vaccine.



The author at the age of 16 working on the family farm.

Author



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David lives in Springfield, Missouri, with his wife and two dogs: a rat terrier and a whippet, both of whom are quite spoiled.