

AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF ARTS & SCIENCES

habits

of

How to Fortify
Civic Culture

heart

and

mind

AN OUR COMMON
PURPOSE PUBLICATION

AN OUR COMMON PURPOSE PUBLICATION

habits of heart and mind

How to Fortify Civic Culture

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS & SCIENCES
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Please direct inquiries to:

American Academy of Arts and Sciences
136 Irving Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138-1996
Telephone: (617) 576-5000
Facsimile: (617) 576-5050
Email: aaas@amacad.org
Visit our website at www.amacad.org

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A Letter From the president of the American Academy

July 2025

I write at a moment of extraordinary change for the institutions that govern American life. Whether considering the limits of the executive to reshape the federal bureaucracy, the role of the courts to check the other two branches, or the power of Congress to retain control of the nation's purse strings, basic assumptions about the role, reach, and purpose of our primary political institutions have been upended. For the last few months, the changes in and to these bodies have, with good reason, been the focus of conversations about restoring, repairing, and reinventing American constitutional democracy.

Yet attention to political institutions is not enough. Culture matters as much as structure. The Academy's seminal 2020 report, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, offers a transformative theory of change that casts political institutions as one part of a virtuous circle in our constitutional democracy: responsive political institutions cultivate a vibrant civic culture of participation and responsibility that, in turn, ensures our institutions remain responsive and inclusive.

The work of the Academy's Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship revealed a poignant truth of our times: amid the currents of deep-seated polarization, Americans palpably yearn for authentic opportunities to assemble, deliberate, and engage in dialogue with one another. Recognizing this, the Commission underscored the imperative not just to broaden civic bridging opportunities, but also to kindle a resilient civic faith. For American democracy to thrive, Americans have to believe that their contributions and participation in our democracy can make a difference.

Civic culture demands different things from its citizens in different eras. For many Americans today, participation in the public square is increasingly difficult. Whether in person or online, the basic rules of conversation and debate often seem no longer to apply. For many, the possibility of going viral or being publicly shamed for voicing one's views is too high a price for taking an unpopular stand. Citizens no longer feel that they can build and maintain social capital in common meeting places, and worry that such bonding relationships may actually be diminished.

From the President

Americans' experience of common life and the idea of the common good has become impoverished, and we need tools to build, and then practice being, in a robust and inclusive civic culture.

Historically, the importance of a healthy civic culture as the lifeblood of American constitutional democracy has been well acknowledged. Yet efforts to revitalize civic culture have not been as vigorous as those aimed at reforming political institutions. To address this imbalance, the Academy convened the Working Group on Defining Civic Culture. This dedicated group has produced a comprehensive and accessible publication that elucidates the “what, why, and how” of civic culture. It is a guide to the norms, values, habits, narratives, and rituals that embody a thriving civic life. Their months of thoughtful deliberation have culminated in a consensus that is not only a testament to their collective wisdom but is also a beacon that will guide our efforts to fortify our constitutional democracy.

The Academy first released *Habits of Heart and Mind* in September 2024. The report clearly struck a chord, prompting a second print run to meet demand. Amid rising interest in the health of our democracy, this report has become even more timely and relevant.

I assumed the presidency of the Academy in January 2025 and would like to echo the thanks issued by my predecessor in the letter he wrote for the first edition. Special thanks go to Eric Liu of Citizen University, who cochaired the Commission and chaired the working group, and whose leadership has been invaluable to both. Thank you to the other cochairs of the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship—Danielle Allen of Harvard University and Stephen Heintz of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund—for their leadership and support as the Academy works to advance the recommendations in *Our Common Purpose*. Thank you to Kayla DeMonte of Citizen University and Caroline Jany of the Aspen Institute for their thought partnership and collaboration on engaging civic culture practitioners during the working group's tenure. Thank you also to the Academy staff who served this working group and contributed to this publication, including Phyllis Bendell, Key Bird, Jonathan Cohen, Alison Franklin, Zachey Klinger, Abhishek Raman, Scott Raymond, Peter Robinson, Betsy Super, and Peter Walton. And thanks to my predecessor himself, Academy President Emeritus David Oxtoby, for his stewardship of the Our Common Purpose project and his commitment to the Academy's efforts to restore American democracy.

Finally, the Academy's ongoing work to advance the *Our Common Purpose* recommendations would not be possible without the generous support of the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Suzanne Nora Johnson and David G. Johnson Foundation, the Clary Family Charitable Fund, Alan and Lauren Dachs, Sara Lee Schupf and the Lubin Family Foundation, Joan and Irwin Jacobs, David M. Rubenstein, and Patti Saris.

Laurie L. Patton
Cambridge, MA

introduction

Something is broken at the heart of American civic life. Years past the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, our society is beset with widening social epidemics of loneliness, ideological polarization, conspiracy thinking, mistrust, and despair. A politics of mutual scorn has set in: while most Democrats and Republicans say they support the core values underlying American constitutional democracy, only about one-third believes members of the other party do so as well.¹ Compared to ten years ago, Americans across ideological lines report feeling less free to speak on politics, race, and current events due to fear of retaliation or public criticism.²

Explanations for this brokenness are numerous. The most commonly cited are craven political leaders, unresponsive institutions, and conflict-addicted media—in particular, social media—which have made it more difficult for Americans to find a sense of shared identity and common purpose.³

But while the media, political institutions, and individual politicians do indeed contribute to worsening disunity, they are joined by something bigger at the root of American life. That something is *civic culture*—the sum of the countless choices millions of Americans make every day as we navigate how to live together. Civic culture shapes how we treat one another, whether we care for our community, how we show up to solve common problems, and whether we are able to disagree without hating one another.

A healthy civic culture is vital to a mass, multi-racial, multifaith constitutional democracy like ours. This notion is at the heart of the Academy's *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, a report from the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship. That report argues

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that political institutions and civic culture are in a cyclical relationship. When institutions are responsive and adaptive, they feed and reward a culture of constructive citizen participation, which makes institutions much more responsive and adaptive. That is a virtuous cycle. When we have a culture that presumes the game is rigged and participation is a waste of time, our institutions become more easily corrupted and incompetent, and more people think the game is rigged. That is a vicious cycle. The latter is how too many Americans today would describe the state of our union.⁴

Introduction

The chicken-and-egg relationship between civic culture and institutional structure complicates efforts to assess which comes first. But our working group knew where we wanted to start. Democracy reformers in the United States have paid more attention in recent decades to structure and institutions—as if merely changing formal laws and rules would be sufficient to bring vitality to the body politic. We believe it is also time to focus on norms, customs, mores—what Alexis de Tocqueville

healthy civic culture in our communities and organizations.

This publication is a sampler of ingredients and recipes for creating a healthy civic culture. The aim is not to provide a generic formula or one-size-fits-all approach. We highlight nourishing recipes and methods that we enjoy and that can be enriching. And we encourage you to cook something up with your own unique blend of ingredients.

We believe it is also time to focus on **NORMS, CUSTOMS, MORES**—what Alexis de Tocqueville called “habits of the heart”—and on how to make such habits constructively contagious. These habits should resonate both emotionally, with the heart, and intellectually, with the mind.

called “habits of the heart”—and on how to make such habits constructively contagious. These habits should resonate both emotionally, with the heart, and intellectually, with the mind. Our civic culture lies somewhere between the two.

Throughout 2023, to build on the *Our Common Purpose* report, the Academy convened a diverse and distinguished interdisciplinary working group comprising scholars, philanthropists, journalists, civic leaders, activists, artists, and educators. Their mission: articulate how to improve America’s civic culture. *Habits of Heart and Mind* encapsulates the working group’s insights into *what* constitutes a healthy civic culture, *why* a healthy civic culture is central to American constitutional democracy, and *how* to foster a

Across the country, people, places, and programs are fostering civic relationships across lines of difference, building connections between neighbors, and restoring trust in one another. From Alaska to Arizona to Atlanta, communities are getting civic culture right. Each context is different, but *Habits of Heart and Mind* is designed such that anyone can take ingredients from these places to suit their specific context.

This publication focuses on ways to foster a healthy civic culture in geographically bound physical communities. We recognize that much of the culture of the internet and social media is counter to the kind of culture we seek. The online manifestation of civic culture is beyond the purview of this publication. However, understanding how to fortify civic culture in

This publication is for “civic catalysts,” whom we define as anyone who wants to make their community better. A civic catalyst believes in the promise of America and works with others to make it a reality. They might spend their energies in education, business, family and neighborhood life, politics, or philanthropy.

an analog world is a useful place to start, even for those whose work focuses on digital life.

This publication is for “civic catalysts,” whom we define as anyone who wants to make their community better. A civic catalyst believes in the promise of America and works with others to make it a reality. They might spend their energies in education, business, family and neighborhood life, politics, or philanthropy. For civic catalysts or for anyone aspiring to become one, this publication aims to provide guidance to help increase the appetite for a healthier civic culture. That is, the aim of this publication is to stimulate both a *supply* of ways to create a healthy civic culture and a *demand* among Americans for a healthier way of living together.

Habits of Heart and Mind contains five main sections. First, we define *civic culture*. Second, we step back to assess the importance of a healthy civic culture to American constitutional democracy. Third, we describe the methods that can help foster a healthy civic culture. Fourth, we offer specific case studies that showcase different combinations of these mechanisms. Fifth, we address the key issue of

measuring civic culture and offer a set of questions to evaluate the health of civic culture in different contexts.

The original version of this report was published in September 2024. What has unfolded since in national politics has often been extraordinary—although not in fact without precedent. These extraordinary times have not led us to make major changes in this updated edition. They mainly underscore our core contention that what politics upends, our culture must set right.

Whether we know it or not, all of us shape American civic culture every day with our actions and our words. Presidents and elections can poison our civic culture, but they cannot heal it. Only people can do that through our everyday choices. Fortifying that civic culture, making it less divisive, more caring, and healthier, will require all of us. Through an understanding of the challenges facing that culture today, Americans can close the gap between our creed and our deeds as citizens. Together, we can build a nation rooted in love of community and a search for common purpose.

What Is **civic culture**?

Definition

American civic culture is the set of norms, values, narratives, habits, and rituals that shape how we live together and govern ourselves in our diverse democratic society.

Norms are the mores and customs that enforce an unlegislated and ever-changing social sense of “what’s OK.” We create norms by interacting with and responding to each other’s behaviors. No law requires courtesy in social spaces or civility in disagreement. These are norms that do or do not exist depending on where we live. Springing from deeply held and action-shaping *values* such as equality or individual liberty or group loyalty, norms shape and are shaped by our experience in community.

Narratives are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves: about our past, how we fit in (or do not), how we understand the present and imagine our future, and about who we are *not*. From John Winthrop’s Puritan image of a *shining city on a hill* to the idea of America as a *nation of immigrants* to the tales of the citizen soldiers of the *Greatest Generation*, mythic narratives have always forged a sense of collective American identity. But group narratives can be cultivated in service of division as much as union. Narratives are part of a perpetual contest in civic and political life to define the “true” spirit of Americanness.

Civic **habits** are the regular, patterned behaviors of everyday life that reflect commitment to our community and the norms of civic life. When Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of the “habits of the heart” that animate democracy,

he meant not only physical acts of service but also emotional acts of forbearance, tolerance, responsibility-taking, and the like. Civic habits are often deeply ingrained in a society’s culture. Participation is one such habit. In America, it includes voting, attending civic meetings, engaging in local politics, volunteering for community organizations, and participating in public forums. Habits begin and end as choices. In between, they are powered by the momentum of routine. This is as true for a habit of apathy as it is for a habit of active participation. Nonparticipation is also a habit.

Rituals provide a rhythm to civic life. They do so by removing us from the everyday. Rituals are heightened group experiences by which people make meaning together and mark progression in time and rootedness in history. Watching fireworks on the Fourth of July, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance as schoolchildren, or standing in line to cast a ballot are all explicitly civic rituals. But not all American rituals are about our political traditions. Thanksgiving or Super Bowl Sunday can be deeply civic rituals. Ethnic, cultural, or religious celebrations—the Lunar New Year, the Haudenosaunee prayers of thanksgiving,⁵ the start of Lent and Passover, or the end of Ramadan—can also be experienced as civic rituals in a society that valorizes cross-cultural understanding and religious diversity.

Throughlines

Each nation possesses a unique civic culture shaped by its blend of norms, values, narratives, rituals, and habits. In the United States, five distinctive forces have molded our civic culture: markets, creed, place, race, and religion. While these forces have not always had a positive influence, understanding their impact is essential to recognizing how to cultivate a healthy civic culture in our society.

bang” of revolt against a tyrant but also upon an affirmative set of ideas and core beliefs that resonate across generations: *all men are created equal; life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; government of the people, by the people, for the people; equal protection under the law; I have a dream*. This creed is not about blood, soil, or a deity. The American creed starts with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and has incorporated new texts over the course of American history, including the proverbs of

When Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of the “habits of the heart” that animate democracy, he meant not only **physical acts** of service but also **emotional acts** of forbearance, tolerance, and responsibility-taking.

Markets

The United States has historically had a more dynamic, more pervasive, and less constrained market economy than most other advanced industrial societies. This has created a culture—commercial, civic, popular, and artistic—that is more consumerist, more individualistic, more tolerant of inequality, more restless and risk-tolerant, and more celebratory of “creative destruction.” These deep patterns have persisted—at least in our narratives—even as the levels of regulation or social mobility or innovation have fluctuated.

Creed

Another distinctive feature of American civic culture is that it is creedal to the core. The United States is a nation founded not only in a “big

Poor Richard’s Almanac, the poems of Walt Whitman, the parables of Zora Neale Hurston, the Gettysburg Address, and the homilies of George Bailey. Across all these documents, the American creed articulates how *we the people* uphold American ideals.

America has struggled to continuously include all the *people* in the *we*. Moments of expansion of that *we* represent two fundamental things about our civic creed: it is renewable and has been updated at crucible moments throughout our nation’s history; and it has not yet been realized. This perpetual striving is an essential feature of our civic culture.

The gap between our creed and our deeds creates the constant potential for disharmony in American civic life. This plays out every day in matters local, national, and transnational. But

What Is Civic Culture?

it also gives American civic culture its fundamentally aspirational and reformatory spirit.

Place

Every nation has its regions and villages. Not every nation has an American-level cult of local wisdom, local control, and local legitimacy. This is a result of our revolutionary origins and primordial fear of distant concentrated power, our continental scale, and the decentralizing checks and balances of the Constitution and its state counterparts. This is why Kansas has 106 counties and Washington State has 295 school districts: we mistrust least the government that is most proximate to us.

At its best, **localism** creates a relational sense of responsibility. It makes creedal concepts like “equality” human in scale.

American localism has had harmful strains, like the “states’ rights” defense of slavery and Jim Crow, both of which were enforced by local civic culture as much as by law. And places themselves are deeply shaped by exclusion, segregation, and separation on the basis of race. But pride of place and locally rooted relationships are key to a healthy civic culture. At its best, localism creates a relational sense of responsibility. It makes creedal concepts like “equality” human in scale. It creates a seedbed for the “habits of the heart”—solidarity, common purpose—at the center of democratic self-government. And the places within our places—the coffeehouses, parks, houses of worship, arts institutions, soccer leagues, and Friday night football games—are where the relationships vital to democracy are cultivated.

Nurturing a civic sense of place is critically important today. Contemporary politics have become less connected from place as a result of two forces: nationalized and polarized politics, and the growing importance of online life. Nationalization and polarization reinforce each other and create perverse incentives for Americans to lean into fearmongering and dehumanization of their neighbors. Meanwhile, as we spend increasing amounts of time in virtual spaces that profoundly distort our perception of place and relationship, creating a sense of togetherness becomes more challenging, in bad times and good. That fragmentation has serious civic consequences.

Race

The healthy and unhealthy aspects of our country’s civic culture cannot be explored without naming the role that race has played from the beginning in defining the creedal ideas of freedom, equality, justice, and Americanness itself.

This means reckoning with two truths, each of which can discomfit different people. The first is that, for large parts of this country’s history, civic culture was made by, for, and of people defined as white. That is undeniable in a nation that emerged from the dispossession and death of large Native populations, that derived much of its foundational wealth from chattel slavery of Africans, that banned from

its territory Chinese and other Asian immigrants, and that legalized segregation and the curtailment of basic civil rights until 1954 and 1964, respectively.

The second truth is that, for the entirety of this country's history, civic culture was also made by, for, and of the people who challenged this regime. The same constitutional, legal, political, and cultural tools that were used to build a regime based on white supremacy have been used to dismantle it and to renovate our democracy. Some Americans are obsessed with American failings. Others focus only on American successes. We too easily forget that both are part of our story—and that the promise of the American creed has been realized most saliently by the civic faith and strivings of the excluded, disfavored, and subjugated.

Religion

Religious language—specifically, Protestant Christian language—has shaped some of our most enduring national myths and narratives: “city on a hill,” “beloved community,” “chosen people.” The first generations of this country's existence were forged in revivalist Great Awakenings. The Social Gospel fueled Progressive Era reformers. Abolition and the civil rights movement were fired by a sense of biblical purpose, as was Prohibition a century ago, as is the religious right today.

But American religiosity—notable to foreign visitors from the beginning—has not made this a monolithic society. Our political commitment to both freedom of religion and separation of church and state has made the United States the most religiously diverse country in history and the most devout nation in the Western Hemisphere.⁶

The practice of religion—all kinds of faiths—has contributed significantly to the nation's social capital and inspires many of our most vital civic institutions. At the same time, it has fed hateful campaigns of exclusion, past and present, as well as movements to welcome the disfavored. Today, a fast-growing proportion of Americans do not consider themselves religious at all. For all of us, the challenge is to find in American *civic religion*—the creedal ideas encoded in our founding and in key moments of “refounding”—a commitment to the Constitution and to one another that can be fortified by the best that communities of worship can offer.

Civic and Political Culture

We end this section with a note to distinguish two closely related ideas. Civic culture is a capacious concept, but it is important to note what it is not. In particular, civic culture is distinct from political culture, which is more specific to the processes and institutions of self-government. The look and feel of American political campaigns (most of which are run through political parties and an industry of political professionals), the ways legislators negotiate and represent their constituents, and the operations of government agencies all constitute important components of our political culture. But civic culture is bigger than politics and government. It extends to all the facets of how we live together as citizens, behave in public, deal with common problems, relate to our neighbors, and identify with one another and our communities and nation. Political culture may influence civic culture and vice versa, but the two are not one and the same.

Every place has a civic culture. It can take healthy or unhealthy forms and be adaptive or

civic culture is bigger than politics and government. It extends to all the facets of how we live together as citizens, behave in public, deal with common problems, relate to our neighbors, and identify with one another and our communities and nation.

maladaptive for that society's development. In autocratic Russia and China, both law and civic culture discourage speaking one's mind about power, punish dissent, and foster norms of conformity. In contrast, the civic culture of democratic Germany, South Korea, or the Netherlands is far more oriented toward freedom and at the same time more communitarian than that of the United States. The same comparisons can be made of regions within countries.

In an age when electoral politics dominates so much of our attention, it is important to notice the deep layers of civic culture in the towns and neighborhoods where we live. Where the civic culture is unhealthy—where the norms are self-centered, the values nihilistic, the narratives zero-sum, the habits apathetic, and the rituals cynical—democracy wilts and withers. This—why a healthy civic culture matters—is the topic of our next section.

Why **civic culture** Matters

When it comes to political change and collective action, civic culture shapes the frame of the possible. A culture where people are used to being passive spectators will yield leaders who hoard power. A culture built around *every person for themselves* will struggle to confront long-term challenges. A culture that encourages people to dehumanize those they disagree with will yield a society better at destroying than building.

In a healthy civic culture, people feel bound to something larger than themselves—a common purpose. In times of change, a strong and vibrant civic culture provides mechanisms to manage collective anxieties about who we are. It makes it possible for people to respect differences, freely exchange ideas, shape institutions, actively engage with diversity, and build a more just society.

An unhealthy civic culture, on the other hand, feeds isolation, cynicism, zero-sum thinking, and withdrawal from common life, making institutions frozen, broken, captured, or monopolistic. Toxic civic culture amplifies power imbalances and allows problems to harden into grievances. The cynicism of citizens in an unhealthy civic culture becomes self-fulfilling, thereby empowering the already powerful and privileged in a vicious cycle. An unhealthy civic culture limits a people's capacity to foster creativity, imagine the full humanity of others, and make meaning together across worldviews. Such habits and patterns make a society atomized, helpless, and receptive to demagoguery and authoritarian appeals.

A healthy civic culture matters for constitutional democracy in the same way that clean air and water matter to human flourishing.

They are essential conditions for a thriving society. Just as a lack of clean air and water will lead to negative health outcomes that shorten lives, so does an unhealthy civic culture make our institutions less responsive, our communities fractured, and our muscles of democratic citizenship atrophied.

A healthy civic culture matters for constitutional democracy in the same way that clean air and water matter to human Flourishing. They are essential conditions for a thriving society.

In the 1830s, Tocqueville articulated in *Democracy in America* both the healthy and unhealthy patterns of civic culture in the United States—and how the two were often entwined. The promise of civic equality for white men, he observed, unleashed bottom-up energies and innovations unknown in aristocratic

Europe. It also created perpetual status anxiety, which in turn fed egotism, materialism, and a self-centeredness that eroded the social virtues of community. Similarly, the fact that the United States was born out of rejection of monarchical tyranny and mistrust of concentrated power made white Americans of the early nineteenth century freer and more independent than anyone else on earth—and also more prone to conspiracy thinking and a reflexive hatred of government.

All these patterns persist in contemporary civic life. American civic culture today often tends toward hyperindividualism, historical amnesia, and mutual mistrust. But our culture is also one where people can reinvent themselves, transcend the hatreds of their ancestors, and build new bonds of civic affection. The American-style free market economy intensifies the impulse to be unconstrained by the past.

If the animating question of civic cultures generally is, *How shall we live together?* a core question of American civic culture is *What does it mean to be free?*

In the United States, the tensions of civic culture are expressed within a framework of ideas. This is a country with no common god or ancestry. The core ideas of the American creed, articulated in the founding of the nation (*created equal; life, liberty, happiness*) and in subsequent refoundings (*government of, by, and for the people*), hold our diverse society together. They do so not by forcing consensus or orthodoxy but by enabling and requiring unending argument. America properly understood is an argument—between liberty and equality, strong national government and local control, colorblind and color-conscious approaches to law, the *pluribus* and the *unum*.

Civic culture here requires not just an awareness of these arguments but also a willingness to participate in them—and to take responsibility for the underlying circumstances that enable a perpetual argument to unfold constructively.

Civic culture's significance becomes clear when we examine the rule of law: the principle that no one is above the law, requiring leaders and citizens alike to adhere to it, and that the state itself is bound by law. This concept is crucial to a functional constitutional democracy, yet it transcends legislation; it is a pattern of norms, values, narratives, habits, and rituals—an embodiment of civic culture. It reflects a collective commitment to the principles of self-government, even when we disagree with specific outcomes.

While the rule of law is an ideal, and not without its breaches, it remains vital for individual rights and collective liberty. The alternatives—rule by force, chance, or the self-interest of autocrats or oligarchs—are antithetical to American values. Those who have endured injustices recognize that the antidote to the rule of law's corruption is its refinement.⁷

A healthy civic culture is easier to appreciate in moments of intense communal tragedy, such as natural disasters or events like September 11. During such crises, a kind of civic awakening often occurs as people step out of social isolation and into joint action with neighbors they have never known. Disasters heighten an awareness of our reliance on the natural world, the spirit of service before self, the practice of mutual aid, and the willingness to sacrifice for the common good.

But a healthy civic culture matters beyond times of emergency. A nation's civic culture

a strong civic culture promotes what Interfaith America president Eboo Patel calls “civic pluralism.” More than mere toleration of difference, civic pluralism is a mutual commitment among people of diverse backgrounds to collaborate toward shared goals.

is the aggregate of decisions every person makes regarding how to behave in the company of others and whether to treat community problems as their own. A strong civic culture promotes what Interfaith America president Eboo Patel calls “civic pluralism.”⁸ More than mere toleration of difference, civic pluralism is a mutual commitment among people of diverse backgrounds to collaborate toward shared goals.

What it means to be free, then, is not primarily a philosophical question. It is a practical quandary for communities living with the crises of homelessness, mental illness, and opioid addiction; or engaged in furious debates about gender identity, public schooling, and how we share our common natural resources; or wondering how to find purpose and cohesion when globalization has gutted the middle class.

These are our towns. And our towns are where civic culture is created, for better or worse. As this polarized moment in national politics has shown, civic culture can be poisoned from the top down. But it can be healed and unpolluted from the bottom up and the inside out. How the residents of Tulsa choose to make a civic culture will of course be different from how the people of Tacoma or Tallahassee choose to do so. What connects the people doing this work is a commitment: to being and staying in relationship with their fellow Americans and to the possibility of living together in a freedom that works for all. The American word for this is *union*.

The next section of this report is about the *how* of civic culture: methods and experiments that Americans of all kinds have devised to create better, stronger civic culture—bonds of union—in the places where they live.

How to Fortify healthy civic culture

Practice Civic Love and Joy

The cliché is true: “democracy is not a spectator sport.” In a thriving democratic society, citizenship comes with the expectation of joining. And what people join is more than electoral campaigns or policy advocacy. It is the making of public life itself.

But in every quarter of civic life today, participation is receding. At the turn of the millennium, Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* described the decades-long decline of association in American life.⁹ More recently, we have seen spikes in political burnout and apathy.¹⁰ Rates of volunteerism have fallen.¹¹ According to polls, Americans today value community involvement less than

Civic joy is a commitment to creative possibility in the face of pain and struggle. Civic love is the bond of trust and affection that turns strangers into neighbors and place into home. To practice both is to establish rituals or shared activities of play and creativity that highlight each person’s dual role as a civic catalyst and collaborator.¹³

While participation is a responsibility, it need not be a chore. Joining in civic life can and should be full of joy and full of love.

they did twenty-five years ago.¹² A toxic political climate, economic pressures, time poverty, and daily reminders of existential crises have left many Americans feeling unable to affect the state of the world. More are disengaging altogether.

Troubling as this trend is, Americans cannot be scolded into reversing it. They must be invited into something better. They must see ways of participating in civic life that speak to their deeper needs. While participation is a responsibility, it need not be a chore. Joining in civic life can and should be full of joy and full of love.

Social cohesion is forged through close friendships and so-called strong ties. It is also created through weak ties: chance encounters, conversations with strangers, casual friendships. Whether through food, music, art, dance, or sports, communal experiences that center joy move people to leave their homes and get to know their neighbors. Joyful experiences—from a neighborhood block party to witnessing a solar eclipse—bind us together. When we encounter others and share a joyful experience with them, it allows us to feel connected to something larger than

ourselves. We are reminded of our love for community.

A civic catalyst does not leave such experience to chance. Ritual is central to the practice of civic love and joy. And it is *embodied*. Online social interaction, civic or otherwise, has many benefits. But it also shatters the public into a million curated private domains lacking common reference points, common language, and common experience. It makes us, in the words of scholar Sherry Turkle, “alone together.” The more online we become, the more valuable face-to-face experiences become for sustaining a sense of shared humanity—and the greater the power of in-person civic rituals.¹⁴

traditions as diverse as New York. And their 2024 summer festival invited people in the city to sing, dance, speak, act, and drink at a pop-up speakeasy under the banner “Life, Liberty, Happiness.”

In small rural towns and big cities across the United States, another ritual, called Civic Saturday, is taking root. Civic Saturday is a civic analog to a faith gathering. Its goal is to invite people to rekindle their faith in democracy, which it accomplishes through peer-to-peer welcomes, poetry, group singing of American songs, readings of civic scripture, and a civic sermon to connect the events of the times to the needs of the community. Citizen

recipes abound for making voting feel not like a grim duty but a miraculous opportunity. *Caravans* of cars, marching musicians, and dancers bring people to the polls—sometimes in support of a candidate and sometimes simply as a celebration of democracy.

Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City recently transformed its iconic plaza into a living public stage for rituals of civic renewal. Lincoln Center has hosted a series of gatherings to encourage people to dance, love, celebrate, and reclaim what was lost during the isolation and unacknowledged sorrow of the pandemic. In one event, hundreds of community members walked alongside jazz musicians for a New Orleans–style Second Line processional to grieve and to recommit to life.¹⁵ Afterward, participants were invited for a night of dancing in the plaza. In 2023, Lincoln Center held a group wedding for seven hundred couples with backgrounds and

University created this ritual after the 2016 election and has trained hundreds of catalysts to lead Civic Saturdays that are of, by, and for the people.¹⁶

The community service corps City Year, which operates across the country, uses the same public rite of passage everywhere: a ceremony in which young people don the recognizable red City Year jacket when they join the corps.¹⁷ City Year corps members can often be seen doing jumping jacks and singing with high spirit in public squares before they disperse to serve as tutors, classroom aides, or eldercare providers.

How to Fortify Healthy Civic Culture

And though civic culture extends beyond elections, it does not exclude elections. Recipes abound for making voting feel not like a grim duty but a miraculous opportunity. Puerto Rico, for instance, has long had festive traditions of fairs, food markets, and parades on Election Day. *Caravanas* of cars, marching musicians, and dancers bring people to the polls—sometimes in support of a candidate and sometimes simply as a celebration of democracy. On the mainland, When We All Vote is a national nonpartisan initiative that works to transform the culture around voting.¹⁸ Their Party at the Polls program shows how participating in our democracy is something worth celebrating. In 2022, more than one hundred bikers with Black Bikers Vote joined When We All Vote for a motorcycle ride that stopped by drop boxes and polling places in Philadelphia.¹⁹ The community ride ended with a party featuring food, music, and entertainment to celebrate the West Philadelphia community voting together. These parties are designed to transform the voting experience into a memorable and joyful community celebration, to increase turnout, and to reinforce the importance of voting.

At the end of the day, people want to be happy. They can do so in a way that also rejuvenates communities. This is not superficial happiness. The examples above show Americans of various political persuasions coming together to face the times—and choosing hope.

Principles for practicing civic love and joy

- Bring your civic culture initiative to life by creatively using public spaces, play-making, art, and cocreation. The goal is to show, and not simply tell, Americans how to build civic love and joy, so creating an environment

that is as joyful as it is educational is critical. People want to join initiatives where they see other participants having a good time. For instance, consider participatory examples such as community heritage pride celebrations (like St. Patrick's Day parades and LGBTQIA+ Pride marches) that generate joy among those participating.

- Make your civic culture initiative fun by including food, song, dance, and other forms of expression. Delicious food and engaging entertainment can help family, friends, neighbors, and strangers come together and make your civic culture initiative a time of community. By fusing the theatrical and the civic, you can draw out people's public role as both citizen and civic catalyst.
- Provide meaningful in-person opportunities to engage across difference. Design activities that cultivate feelings of belonging and agency. Encountering someone in a physical space makes it easier to form a deeper connection with them—and harder to think of them in terms of identity categories. Take a look at the Tallahassee Village Square's Speed Dating with Local Leaders for some inspiration.²⁰

Questions to spark civic love and joy

- Think about a fun activity/experience that you participated in away from home (for instance, attending an improv show). What were the specific elements of this activity/experience (audience participation)? How were these elements used to enhance the activity's significance and enjoyment (performers relied on suggestions from the audience to initiate scenes, create characters, or explore different settings)?

acts of service, large or small, coordinated or not, are crucial for healthy civic culture. They create thicker bonds among families, neighbors, and communities, and they invest people in one another's lives.

- How might you integrate the principles of civic love and joy into your daily environment, such as your workplace, school, or community?
- Think about a place in your community that offers art, theater, music, or food. What makes this place stand out? How is this place important to your community?

Promote Habits of Service

Service has always been central to American life. From the volunteer soldiers of the Revolutionary War to participants in modern-day community service initiatives, generations of Americans have chosen to assist fellow citizens.

Americans often take for granted this deep strain of service in our civic culture. In recent years, however, service and volunteerism rates in many places have begun to decline. Now is the time to elevate anew the importance of service as a mindset and habit.²¹

Everyday acts of service are glue for communities. In *The Quest for Community*, Robert Nisbet writes about the vital importance of strong communities, including the role of local volunteer groups, in a healthy American society.²² A generation before Nisbet, philosopher John Dewey argued that when service is embedded in people's daily routines, particularly when those acts of service are connected with their own values, they

develop an enduring sense of duty and civic responsibility.

Service takes many forms, from formal national organizations to local volunteer initiatives. When we think of service, we often think of the military, which has seen over eighteen million Americans serve, including Native Americans who serve at five times the national average. Another example is AmeriCorps, a national service program launched in 1993, in which more than one million Americans have participated. Other notable entities include the Partnership for Public Service, which promotes service within the federal government, and Points of Light, a nationwide initiative that fosters a spirit of local service and volunteerism.²³ Americans also serve in much more informal ways. Picking up the trash, checking in on an elderly neighbor, building homes, sharing food with others, mentoring young people, assisting fellow passengers with luggage—all are manifestations of a positive, thriving society and culture.

Acts of service, large or small, coordinated or not, are crucial for healthy civic culture. They create thicker bonds among families, neighbors, and communities, and they invest people in one another's lives. Service can also have a snowball effect: as more people perform more acts of service, acts of service become the norm, encouraging more people to do the same and creating more opportunities to serve, all the while building a more resilient civic culture.

“I didn’t have any experience in electoral politics at all growing up or even any time before I went on the bench. When I was growing up, I don’t ever recall talking about politics at dinner or having a yard sign for a candidate. But my parents were very invested, very civic-minded. When I was a child, I don’t remember why our precinct lost its polling place, but it did, and so my parents volunteered our garage. This was in New Orleans. And so for many years our garage is where people came to vote. This wasn’t a convenient thing for my parents. But they saw a need and so they volunteered their home to fill it. . . . When [my parents] saw these needs they filled them. The elderly in my neighborhood—my mom was bringing them food, my dad was checking in on them, and they were dispatching my siblings and I to go visit them and have conversations with them so that they would not be lonely. . . . That kind of engagement in the community that’s not governmental or political but that’s rooted in our community, that’s what self-government requires. It requires working together as a community just because you’re people. You see needs and you fill them. Those are the kinds of things that knit us together as a community.”

– Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett, 2024²⁴

In an era when technology makes it easier than ever for birds of a feather to flock together, service also brings Americans out of their comfort zones. It offers opportunities to engage in a shared mission with people of different races, ethnicities, ages, backgrounds, geographies, and beliefs. In this way, service enables us to convert our differences from potential liabilities into potential strengths. Crucially, it also fosters a mindset that it is *possible* to engage across difference and indeed fruitful to do so. When people come together to accomplish shared goals, they are less likely to default to harmful stereotypes and more appreciative of our common humanity.

The power of service to bridge divides has been well-documented in studies of AmeriCorps and other national service programs.²⁵ The same is true for the robust culture of volunteer groups throughout America. In 2023,

more than eleven thousand Americans volunteered with Samaritan’s Purse, helping communities in fifteen states rebuild following wildfires, tornadoes, hurricanes, and flooding.²⁶ The United States is distinctive for its ecosystem of humanitarian aid organizations, whether faith-based like Samaritan’s Purse or not. When natural disasters strike, Americans from all walks of life—young and old, Republican and Democrat—travel to the disaster zone to help rebuild, share resources, and console those in need.

In a healthy civic culture, it does not take a crisis for people to cross lines of difference to serve. Rather, service is a deep habit. Such is the spirit of the social impact organization CoGenerate, which brings older and younger Americans together to address challenges facing their communities. “We focus on the intersection of proximity, purpose, and

problem-solving,” says CoGenerate co-CEO Eunice Lin Nichols. “We can have different identities. But there are spaces where we can feel proximate to one another and have a shared purpose to do something together. This requires seeing our challenges as shared, and the possible solutions as something we can achieve together.”²⁷

Principles for promoting habits of service

- Make sure anyone with an instinct to serve does not face obstacles to do so. Identify underused places, resources, and people within a community that can plug gaps where there is a need.
- Organize activities that give people agency. Enable people to be effective and impactful by engaging their passions, values, or communities.
- Encourage working toward a common goal. The act of building or making something together forges tighter bonds. Endeavors in which participants are held accountable for their work are optimal.

Questions to spark habits of service

- How did you last serve your community? What inspired you to engage in that act of service? How did you feel afterward?
- How is a culture of service fostered in your home, workplace, or community? How often do people volunteer acts of service without being prompted?
- How can you participate in acts of service in the coming six months? What opportunities are available to you?

Create Space for Free Exchange of Ideas and Model Being Unafraid

The United States was founded on dissent and argument. Before the American Revolution of guns and gunpowder came the revolution of ideas and ideals, as enshrined in documents such as Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* and the Declaration of Independence. Little surprise, then, that the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution enshrines a right to free expression. While many Americans have seen their rights to free expression constrained over the last two-and-a-half centuries, the ideal remains a bedrock of American life. Americans have long believed that the nation is better for its diversity of opinion and that just as debate helped birth this nation, it can also continually make it better.

Ensuring that debate is possible and meaningful, then, is vital for the future of the nation and for fostering a healthy civic culture.

Free expression and free exchange are not identical. Free *expression* is what is usually meant by *freedom of speech*: the ability to express oneself without state interference. Free *exchange* is more than expressing oneself; it is engaging with others’ viewpoints and responding to their ideas. Free expression is a necessary precursor to free exchange. But free exchange is the reason we protect free expression: to ensure that our society can benefit from the trading, testing, and sharpening of ideas. Free exchange is vital for unlocking one of America’s not-so-secret strengths: pluralism, the recognition of our differences and that we all benefit from those differences. Free exchange both requires and fosters empathetic listening.

The distinction between free expression and free exchange is not merely an academic one.

How to Fortify Healthy Civic Culture

American civic culture today valorizes free expression as its own end. And online life, especially social media, creates a habit of speaking without listening. What is shorthanded as “cancel culture” is a manifestation of a declining commitment to free exchange. What makes cancellation rather than curiosity the first reflex of so many Americans is the fact that leaders and educators across many settings have themselves stopped modeling the skills of free exchange.

our worldviews, eliminating the need to grapple with conflicting opinions. Consequently, the rising trend of quick-action advocacy often bypasses in-depth discussion.

One place to learn or relearn these skills is the Pluralist Lab at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University.²⁸ The lab brings together students of different ideological persuasions to talk about difficult topics, including immigration, guns, abortion, and health care. Par-

Free expression and free exchange are not identical.

FREE EXPRESSION is what is usually meant by freedom of speech: the ability to express oneself without state interference. **FREE EXCHANGE** is more than expressing oneself; it is engaging with others' viewpoints and responding to their ideas.

Exchanging views in a healthy manner is a learned skill. Especially in times of polarization, we cannot take for granted that people know how to disagree with one another or even to stay in the presence of people whose views discomfit them. Society is evolving in such a way that physical presence in shared spaces is no longer a necessity, at least for those with ample resources, to engage in discourse with those holding differing viewpoints. Our dependence on others for survival has been significantly reduced, becoming more transactional in nature. For instance, those with means can now have groceries delivered at the push of a button, a stark contrast to the past, when neighbors would collaborate to harvest the crops essential for winter survival. This shift has also enabled us to access information and connect with individuals who reinforce

participants commit to the principles of respect, authenticity, and curiosity outlined at the outset. Through a method known as “triadic illumination,” they learn to articulate the *what* and *why* of the views held by participants before engaging in discussion. Subsequently, participants spend time digesting what they have experienced in real time by journaling their thoughts, reactions, and sentiments to share with other participants, allowing the group to engage in introspection to develop their skills for listening and reflecting as well as listening and responding. The program is an effort to foster open-mindedness while demonstrating how to exchange ideas and co-exist across deep divides.

The Pluralist Lab program is animated in part by the idea of modest unity. Rather than

the pluralist lab program is animated in part by the idea of modest unity. Rather than setting consensus as the goal for the discussion, the lab prioritizes engagement among people of diverse identities and divergent ideologies—and teaches the power of a precommitment to such engagement.

setting consensus as the goal for the discussion, the lab prioritizes engagement among people of diverse identities and divergent ideologies—and teaches the power of a precommitment to such engagement. Once developed, the skill of constructive debate can be brought out of the lab and applied in all facets of life.

Under the leadership of Utah Governor Spencer Cox, the National Governors Association (NGA) initiated a campaign called “Disagree Better” in 2023 as a response to the increasing hyperpartisanship and polarization in America. The objective of this initiative is to equip everyone, from students and citizens to elected officials, with the tools necessary to discuss divisive issues in a civil manner. The campaign emphasizes the need for constructive disagreement, for fostering solutions and problem-solving rather than endless bickering. By showcasing governors modeling healthy conflict, public debates on college campuses, service projects, public service announcements, and various other tactics, the campaign presents a more optimistic approach to resolving problems.²⁹ In 2023–2024, the NGA organized four convenings across the country to engage governors in conversation about successful projects underway and to connect them with leading organizations to amplify such projects in their respective states.

The Better Arguments Project at the Aspen Institute similarly starts with the goal of having not fewer arguments but less stupid and destructive ones.³⁰ The Better Arguments Project teaches community members, small businesspeople, military officers, classroom teachers, faith leaders, and many others to ground their arguments in local history, emotional intelligence, and an honest reckoning with power.

Each month, the Better Arguments Project hosts workshops that reinforce five principles:

- First, **take winning off the table**. Arguments should be about the robust exchange of ideas, not defeating the other side.
- Second, always **prioritize relationships and listen passionately**. Maintain a positive rapport, even in the face of disagreement.
- Third, **pay attention to context**. Typically, the issues that divide people build up over long periods of time. The more participants can appreciate that, the better they can understand *why* a person holds their belief.
- Fourth, **embrace vulnerability**. Instead of aggression, toughness, and defensiveness, arguers should be open about their uncertainties. Doing so can turn arguments into avenues for connection.

How to Fortify Healthy Civic Culture

- Finally, **make room for transformations.** Changing someone's mind is difficult if you are not willing to have your own mind changed. The Better Arguments Project asks participants to identify their most deeply held views and then create mental space for the possibility that their mind might be changed.

The American Exchange Project (AEP) empowers young Americans to explore the diversity of their nation firsthand.³¹ The organization provides high school seniors free trips to visit another student in a community that is completely different from their own geographically, demographically, politically, and so on. By facilitating local learning experiences and cultural exchanges, AEP encourages high school seniors to step out of their comfort zones and engage directly with peers from different social and political backgrounds. This exchange of ideas requires courage, as it often involves challenging preconceived notions and embracing unfamiliar perspectives. However, this courage is more accessible when young people unite in the spirit of curiosity and mutual respect. Through these shared experiences, participants not only develop a deeper understanding of their fellow citizens, but also forge bonds that transcend geographical and ideological divides, fostering a more cohesive and empathetic society.

Across the political spectrum, PEN America notes, appetite for free expression appears to be waning.³² Indeed, PEN itself—an organization of authors and journalists that fights against repression of speech—has contended with the challenge of sustaining cross-ideological coalitions in support of free expression. Promoting free exchange of ideas should be a core civic purpose of all kinds of

organizations—in the arts, the sciences, business, and government.

Free expression is a necessary ingredient for a healthy civic culture. Of course, the First Amendment protects free speech. But Americans should have more than a legal right to speak their mind. A healthy civic culture requires a vibrant, open discourse about everything from sports to politics. The point of living in a self-governing democratic republic is that the nation is able to tap the broadest range of ideas from its diverse residents. Residents should not just be allowed to speak their piece; they should actually do so. And they should not just have an opportunity to make their voice heard; they should have the confidence that somebody might listen to them.

Principles for creating spaces of free exchange and modeling being unafraid

- Embrace modest unity. Rather than attempt to enforce uniformity, acknowledge that it is our duty to contest what it means to be American and that arguing, done well, helps us come together.
- Promote “confident pluralism.” Establish that it is OK to have different opinions and that it is OK to argue. Normalize the expectation that you will, especially in public spaces, have to engage alongside people of diverse identities and divergent ideologies.

Questions to spark the free exchange of ideas and modeling being unafraid

- Think about an argument, debate, or disagreement you had recently. What elements made it either a productive or counterproductive exchange? (Did each person have

CODESIGN is an approach to problem-solving that involves people in decision-making processes.

the ability to speak without interruption? Was a positive rapport maintained even in the face of disagreement?) How did these elements enhance or hinder the exchange?

- How might you integrate the principles of creating space for free exchange into your daily environment, such as your workplace, school, or community?
- The next time you are engaging in debate, pause and check how it feels. Are you stressed? Tense? Or is your body open and relaxed? Paying attention to your physical state can help you learn about your state of mind. When the debate is over, ask: What did I learn from this encounter? Has my understanding of this person, this issue, changed in any way?

Engage People in Codelign and Decision-Making

Americans face many practical barriers to civic participation: time, money, access to information, lack of requisite skills, competing priorities, and so forth. But a more fundamental barrier keeps Americans from participating in public life: skepticism about their ability to effect change.

Only 35 percent of young people report having people, organizations, or resources in their community that can help them take action on issues they care about.³³ This lack of access creates a vicious cycle: people disengage, which leads to fewer opportunities, which leads to even more disengagement. Every step in the process further erodes civic culture.

This cycle can be reversed. Involving community members in decision-making processes can foster a sense of ownership. This allows more people to feel they can contribute ideas and solve problems, which helps create more opportunities for more people to get engaged. Helping more people solve problems not only solves problems, but it also empowers other people to become problem solvers.

Codelign is an approach to problem-solving that involves people in decision-making processes. Proponents of codelign for public projects argue that community members should be collaborators in the development of programs or policies that will directly impact them. When community members help make decisions, studies show those decisions more closely address community concerns.³⁴ Additionally, codelign helps people develop trust in their neighbors and local institutions. And when people are encouraged to bring their skills and perspectives to the table, they are emboldened to find even more ways to contribute to civic life.

Two organizations that exemplify the benefits of building civic skills for codelign are GenUnity and the Kansas Leadership Center. With a mission to build a diverse civic leadership pipeline, GenUnity runs ten-week civic leadership programs focused on housing and health equity in Boston, Massachusetts.³⁵ For two to three hours per week, program participants meet with experts, policymakers, and practitioners to discuss how they can effect change. Since 2020, GenUnity has brought together more than two hundred people and

one hundred partner organizations. After participating in the programs, 97 percent of members felt more prepared to drive systemic change and have become more involved in their communities.

Like GenUnity, the Kansas Leadership Center (KLC) focuses on building leaders and creating a culture in which ordinary citizens feel emboldened to take on tough challenges.³⁶ KLC runs leadership workshops that train Kansans in strategies to build trust with those with whom they disagree. KLC brings together citizens, local officials, and subject-matter experts to share information and brainstorm solutions to local challenges.

While GenUnity and KLC focus on building the individual skills needed for codesign, program design can also expand civic agency through mechanisms like citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting.

invited to deliberate on America's fiscal future. Their recommendations were submitted to the Senate and House budget committees and were critical to the work of the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, a bipartisan presidential commission on deficit reduction.

With participatory budgeting, volunteers brainstorm ideas for possible funding projects and vote on the best proposal, which is then funded by a government or other institution. Over three thousand cities around the world have allocated some portion of their budget through participatory budgeting. In the United States, nearly five hundred thousand participants have allocated \$280 million through this method.³⁷ Some, like the programs organized by the Center for the Future of Arizona, started small and have since expanded (see page 31).³⁸

In a *CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY*, people come together to deliberate about a given issue. For example: Should our town invest in a new recreation center?

In a citizens' assembly, people come together to deliberate about a given issue. For example: Should our town invest in a new recreation center? What guidelines can we adopt to reduce our community's carbon footprint? After deliberating, citizens provide recommendations or a collective decision to the convening body. These gatherings can be national in scale. In 2010, AmericaSpeaks organized a citizens' assembly on debt and the national deficit. Linked by video, three thousand five hundred Americans in fifty-seven locations were

Codesign processes are about more than short-term policy impact. They are about alerting citizens to their power to shape their communities. This awakening leads to a greater likelihood of sustained civic engagement. Codesign also reinforces social cohesion: taking action with fellow community members builds relationships that can become the foundation for community health. Finally, participatory processes facilitate communication between elected officials, community leaders, and constituents. Communication builds

trust, an essential building block for a healthy civic culture.

Principles for engaging people in codesign and decision-making

- Identify target stakeholders. Who will be most affected by a project, program, or policy? Remove barriers to participation for those stakeholders.
- Emphasize people's agency and efficacy. People will be more enthusiastic about participating if they see the results of their actions.
- Make participatory processes time bound. People are busy. They need to know what their time investment will be. These processes should be quick sprints rather than long-winded marathons. Invitations to participate should clarify what the commitment will be: how many sessions, how many hours, any work between the sessions?
- Enable participants to stay in touch. Give participants a chance to continue engaging even after the formal end of the participatory process.
- Identify project leadership. Cocreation still needs leadership. Who will facilitate the process? Who will take the ambiguous pieces after each session and try to integrate them into the next draft?
- Many municipalities and organizations have hired directors of public or civic engagement to build meaningful opportunities for civic voices to be heard and to foster government responsiveness.

Questions to spark codesign and decision-making

- How might you integrate the principles of codesign into your daily environment, such as your workplace, school, or community?
- The next time you are developing a program or policy in your workplace or community, pause and consider: Who will this decision impact? Do they have a voice in the decision-making process? How can I encourage greater participation among those who will be directly impacted?

Practice Mutualism and Mutual Aid

In times of division and disconnection, mutual aid offers a way to reconnect. Mutual aid starts with the idea that everyone has something to offer and everyone could benefit from some help. It is not community-based giving, crowd-sourced from within a particular neighborhood or group. Neither is it charity, in which one party gives and the other receives. Instead, mutual aid allows all participants to both give and receive resources, ranging from material goods to ideas to moral support. Practices of mutual aid represent bold ways to knit communities together and remind people that we are all in this together.

Mutual aid has gained prominence in recent years, particularly in response to natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic. This aid takes various forms, such as neighborhood care networks in which neighbors assist one another by running errands, providing transportation, or sharing meals. For instance, TimeBanks USA facilitates the exchange of services and skills for time credits instead of money.³⁹ In this system, each hour of service earns one time credit, which can be redeemed for an hour of service from someone else

within the network. Another initiative, Eldera, connects seniors with younger individuals to foster meaningful intergenerational connections through a mentorship program.⁴⁰ This program encourages sustained relationships through regular communication and provides social opportunities for participants. Such programs not only combat isolation and loneliness among seniors, but also allow young people to gain wisdom from elders.

make commitments to support other members' projects and initiatives. Such a dynamic cultivates a culture of trust, mutuality, and accountability, in which members commit to their promises and circulate resources to drive societal transformation. For instance, the Atlanta Civic Collaboratory brings together more than one hundred civic leaders quarterly. At a recent gathering, the group discussed strategies to address homelessness.

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Principles of mutual aid can also be applied on the individual level. Some teachers organize informal tutoring for students outside class time. They provide academic support while also gaining insight into the challenges their students face. Some students later tutor younger children, extending the cycle of mutual aid. Accountability also factors in: all participants are responsible for following through on their commitments.

One example of mutual aid in a network format is the Civic Collaboratory.⁴¹ This model, developed by Citizen University, helps community organizations gather individuals from various sectors to build relationships. Civic Collaboratory gatherings are structured to build bonds of trust and affection among members. Those bonds are foundational to the ongoing circulation of mutual aid. Members

Members committed resources like volunteer hours, fundraising support, and collaboration on policy proposals. This mutual aid approach fosters cooperation between nonprofits, businesses, and government.

For details on an example of a local Civic Collaboratory in action, see page 33.

Principles for practicing mutualism and mutual aid

- Create opportunities for building reciprocity.
- Establish accountability measures. A healthy civic culture requires accountability from its members. This principle involves taking responsibility for our actions, being transparent in our dealings, and holding ourselves and others to high standards.

- Promote mentorship and guidance as pathways for mutual inspiration and personal growth. Encourage individuals to share their knowledge, skills, and experiences with others while remaining eager to learn new things themselves.

Questions to spark mutualism and mutual aid

- Consider a recent time when you mentored or offered guidance to someone in your community (neighbor, friend, coworker). How did you offer your guidance (for example, informal conversation, a class, an email)? What prompted you to offer this mentorship? How, if at all, was it reciprocated?
- Do you have opportunities to provide more support and mentorship in your community or workplace?
- How can you promote mutual aid in your community with an emphasis on building solidarity rather than charity?

Spread Narratives of Common Purpose

As a creedal nation, the United States is founded on storytelling. At the heart of our constitutional democracy is not a single language, ethnic origin, or religion but a sense that all Americans are part of a set of shared stories. What these stories look like, and who gets to tell them, has changed over time. Yet one of the constants in American civic life is the belief that each of us has the chance to add to a narrative that began centuries ago.

Today, a single, unifying American story seems largely out of reach. Stories are supposed to be complicated, to make room for nuance, the kind of nuance that, in times of

polarization, is hard to come by. Modern tellings of the American story tend to focus either solely on our tragedies—enslavement, Native American genocide, Japanese internment—or on our triumphs—pioneering rights-based constitutionalism, creating a high standard of living, military victory over fascism.

It is vital that American civic culture create both metaphorical space for contested narratives and literal space to contest them. Doing so will allow Americans to find narratives that both celebrate our nation's accomplishments and reckon with the shortcomings of the American story.

Uncovering the narratives that invite Americans in is an integral aspect of a healthy civic culture. Such narratives bind people together. Whether bridging the gap between longtime residents and newcomers in a town, rallying support for a local cause, or creating a new national holiday, the “story of us” is a potent tool for building consensus toward a common purpose. In America's ongoing debate over identity, these stories can help citizens shift from inaction to common action.

The opinion research organization More in Common seeks to understand societal fragmentation, find common ground, and bridge divides. Their research reveals that most Americans value narratives that acknowledge both the triumphs and shortcomings of our nation. According to More in Common's 2022 report *Defusing the History Wars*, a striking 92 percent of Democrats agree that students should learn about the contributions of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to freedom and equality. However, only 45 percent of Republicans and 51 percent of unaffiliated voters believe that Democrats hold this belief. Conversely, 93 percent of Republicans affirm the

duty to learn from and correct past mistakes, yet merely 35 percent of Democrats and 53 percent of unaffiliated voters acknowledge this Republican perspective.⁴² These findings suggest that partisan biases distort the public's perception of shared values. Americans agree on a lot more than they think they do—and a lot more than the media tells us we do.

stereotypes and affirm immigrants' roles in American entertainment. In 2022, in collaboration with the University of Southern California's Norman Lear Center, Define American published *Change the Narrative, Change the World: The Power of Immigrant Representation on Television*.⁴⁵ The report analyzes 167 characters across 169 episodes of 79 scripted shows

Whether **bridging the gap** between longtime residents and newcomers in a town, rallying support for a local cause, or creating a new national holiday, the “story of us” is a potent tool for building consensus toward a common purpose.

Other organizations use narrative tools more directly. Founded by Matt Kibbe and Terry Kibbe, Free the People champions individual liberty, economic freedom, and peace through the power of storytelling.⁴³ Through original documentaries about everyday Americans, educational videos, and other digital content, Free the People articulates the virtues of a free society and the benefits of voluntary cooperation over government intervention. Through these stories, Free the People engages citizens in thoughtful dialogue about libertarian ideas on the right and the left alike, inspires civic action, and builds a foundation of mutual respect and collaboration amid difference.

A culture change organization founded in 2011 by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jose Antonio Vargas, Define American is rethinking the portrayal of immigrants in the American narrative.⁴⁴ Its mission is to reshape immigrant stories and integrate them authentically into the national conversation. One strategy entails monitoring media representations to counter

aired from 2020 to 2022. A key finding is that 40 percent of the immigrant characters were linked to crime, a significant increase from the 2020 report. Surveys conducted by Define American reveal that viewers exposed to nuanced immigrant storylines tend to recognize the value of diversity, gain a deeper understanding of immigration issues, and are more likely to take supportive actions for immigrants. Because Hollywood has historically influenced the American story, Define American's work is crucial to ensuring that immigrant narratives are conveyed with accuracy and empathy.

The Field Museum in Chicago embarked on a transformative journey with the creation of the “Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories” exhibit. This collaborative project involved more than 130 Native community members, educators, tribal curators, and museum curators, representing more than 105 tribes. The aim was to link museum artifacts with contemporary themes and artists, thereby reminding visitors that Native communities are not merely historical relics

but continue to flourish in today's context. The initiative also served as a platform for the museum to acknowledge its problematic past, specifically its unscrupulous collection practices in Indian Country and its exploitative portrayals of Native people. This admission marked the beginning of a healing process to mend its strained relationship with the 574 sovereign Native nations in the United States. The project has been a resounding success, and the Field Museum is now applying this approach of honest dialogue and community involvement to all its exhibits.⁴⁶

Organizations like Free the People, Define American, More in Common, and the Field Museum demonstrate how narratives can shape culture, unite people, and invite them to become part of a collective journey. These narratives are not just about who leads but about who we are as citizens and who is included in the effort to define the nation's narratives.

Principles for spreading narratives of common purpose

- Personalization is a powerful on-ramp. Meet people where they are, with entry points that matter at that moment.
- Acknowledge our differences while articulating an identity that unites us. Identify our “why”—our common ground and the way we stitch together a sense of “us-ness.”
- State that we are a creedal nation. Embedded in our creed are the concepts of life, liberty, and happiness. It may be necessary to incorporate new terms—equality, equity, and inclusiveness—that foster a broader civic culture that can be embraced by more people.
- Encourage *pluribus*. Local organizations know their communities and have a record of trust. Decentralize the narrative-writing effort to invite broad participation.

Questions to spark narratives of common purpose

- In your workplace, community, or school, how do you talk about America and what it means to be American? How do you address both the extraordinary aspects of our inheritance and our shortcomings?
- How might you integrate the principles encoded in narratives of common purpose into your daily environment, such as your workplace, school, or community?
- Does a particular holiday, place, or event make you reflect on what it means to be American? What is special about that occasion? How do you celebrate it? (Do you gather with others? Do you participate in rituals on this occasion?)

Root Activity in Shared Place

Civic culture is about how we live together, so the places where that togetherness happens are a crucial part of that culture. Communities with places to come together will not automatically boast healthy civic cultures, but it can be almost assured that communities *without* such places will not have a healthy civic culture.

What do places that foster togetherness look like? How can places be made or remade to nurture civic culture?

Civic places are sites where people can come together. What they do when they are together is up to them, but a place is “civic” when it offers chances for people to participate in activities, tell stories, and bond with one another. Libraries, parks, community centers, and riverfronts can all help Americans connect. Some civic places are intentionally built to foster civic life. Others are not oriented toward political

How to Fortify Healthy Civic Culture

life in any way. Still others become civic places only gradually, through acts of ritual.

What civic places look like and how they work can vary wildly. The civic-ness of a place is determined by the specific circumstances in the surrounding community. The cities of Washington, D.C., Washington, Indiana, and Washington, Utah, each boast civic places, but those places look very different from one another. In one Washington, a public park may serve as a gathering space and meeting ground. A similarly designed park in another Washington may not play this role, because residents congregate instead at a nearby community center.

In the Folded Map Project, residents from the city's North Side and South Side are paired with their "map twin," the person who has a parallel address on the opposite side of the city (for example, someone at 1000 South Main Street is map twins with the residents of 1000 North Main Street). In a city with stark disparities along neighborhood lines, Johnson brings pairs together to talk about their neighborhoods and to have tough conversations about the social, racial, and institutional investments that shaped each community. Participants are brought together not only by their interest in getting to know people from different neighborhoods, but also by Chicago's urban layout. Taking advantage of the city's design, Johnson

civic places are sites where people can come together. What they do when they are together is up to them, but a place is "civic" when it offers chances for people to participate in activities, tell stories, and bond with one another. Libraries, parks, community centers, and riverfronts can all help Americans connect.

So, while places shape their community's civic culture, how civic culture varies between communities is also important. The nation as a whole boasts a distinctive civic culture. But individual communities—neighborhoods, cities, states—do so as well. Acknowledging the differences between places is vital for tailoring efforts to improve civic culture so it can meet the needs of each community.

In Chicago, artist Tonika Lewis Johnson turns the history of race, segregation, and development on its head, using the organization of space as a way to organize new relationships.

is able to make the divisions between places a unifying feature of the Windy City landscape.

Public spaces are not necessarily designed with the public in mind. Libraries, parks, and other spaces can bring communities together, but they do not do so automatically. Sometimes, leaders need to take action to turn a community space into a space that is truly for the community.

In 2017, Shamichael Hallman became the senior manager of Cossitt Library in Memphis, the city's first public library. Hallman

recognized that the library was underutilized as a community space. During a 2020 TED Talk, he expressed a desire to transform the library's traditional quiet atmosphere into a hub of interaction and engagement. Supported by philanthropy, including contributions from The Rockefeller Foundation and others, Hallman spearheaded a multi-million-dollar renovation to reposition Cossitt Library not just as a library but as a cultural center bridging socioeconomic divides.

Completed in 2023, the renovation has redefined the library. The new space includes an open landscape with public art, a café offering fresh food, and a vibrant children's area. It also features coworking spaces, private meeting rooms with free Wi-Fi, and a performing arts space for various activities. Outdoor areas host yoga and reading sessions, enhancing the library's community role.

Hallman encourages patrons to engage actively with the revamped library. He suggests contributing to the library's community by participating in the setup for events, sharing skills, and welcoming diverse groups into the inclusive environment. This approach aims to foster a sense of ownership and community among all library users.

The kinds of changes Hallman is making in downtown Memphis are also happening in rural America in part through the support of the Trust for Civic Life.⁴⁷ The Trust is a grantmaking collaborative that bolsters place-based, local initiatives in small towns and rural communities across America. It empowers residents to address the challenges they perceive as most central for their community's prosperity. Its inaugural round of grantmaking awarded funds over a three-year period to establish rural "civic hubs." The organizations

in these civic hubs are the heart of vibrant civic ecosystems, promoting a community-wide vision, coordinating various civic efforts, and nurturing necessary community resources. Crucially, recent research has shown how they serve as incubators of social trust and daily democracy across the country.⁴⁸ Recipients include an Appalachian network of employee-owned companies and frontline workers who are reimagining the industrial economy to better serve the working class; a Mississippi town using history, culture, and food as rallying points to foster local pride, promote health equity, and support rural artistic voices; and a digital music community leveraging local radio to enhance connections among residents.

In Denver, Warm Cookies of the Revolution reimagines civic engagement by infusing it with creativity and warmth. Central to their mission are "civic health clubs," communal gatherings where community members connect and deliberate on important local issues. Since 2019, their signature series "Own This City: A Live Instruction Manual" has sparked dialogue on communal ownership, tackling themes like education, justice, and public amenities. The series, crafted by artists and locals, includes sessions like "How to Own: The Government," where political hopefuls and citizens build Lego models of their ideal city while comedians add levity to the discourse. Guided by principles that question the status quo, advocate for civic action, and emphasize fun, Warm Cookies of the Revolution transforms civic participation into an inviting and meaningful endeavor, knitting together a community that is engaged, informed, and united.

Civic Season is a place-based annual tradition, established by Made by Us in 2021, that spans Juneteenth and the Fourth of July. From local cultural institutions to ordinary citizens,

everyone is welcome to engage in this tradition in ways meaningful to them. By encompassing America's oldest and newest federal holidays, Civic Season underscores how civic participation enables us to continually work toward the democratic ideals that America aspires to. Ultimately, it demonstrates that, by learning America's shared history and uplifting one another's voices, everyday Americans can collaborate to guide the nation's unfolding story.

Civic Season was celebrated for a second year in Cheyenne, Wyoming, in 2024.⁴⁹ The event provided community members with an opportunity to deepen their engagement with their collective history. The activities began with a lively festival featuring local musicians, speakers, and information booths from civic organizations. This marked the start of two weeks of Civic Season events, sponsored by Wyoming Humanities, designed to make civic engagement accessible and enjoyable for all.

Events fostered meaningful dialogue around important issues and offered constructive ways for community members to get involved. A "community conversation" organized by the local chapter of Braver Angels brought together diverse perspectives to productively discuss solutions to homelessness. Other activities, such as playing Jenga and debating state politics, demonstrated that democracy is a work in progress and that we all have a role in shaping it. The grand finale featured a talk by a historian on "The Wyoming State Flag and the Women Who Made It Fly," accompanied by trivia games and free pizza.⁵⁰ All these events took place at local institutions like the Wyoming State Museum, highlighting how civic participation is intertwined with our local culture and identity.

If civic culture is a meal, places are the pots or pans we use to make it. The choice of cookware matters immensely for some dishes. For others, just about any pot or pan will do. But knowledge of the recipe and the ingredients is crucial for determining the cookware. Civic culture practitioners should pay attention to place—their specific context—and ensure it helps rather than hinders their efforts. Where people live, what that community looks like, and where they convene shapes their ability to live together. Those spaces might look very different between communities. And they should. Civic places should be built—or rebuilt if need be—with the goal of fostering togetherness.

Principles for rooting activity in shared place

- **Accessibility:** Places should be open, inclusive, and accessible.
- **Purpose:** Places should be sites that bring people together for a common purpose.
- **Proximity:** Spaces should bring together people who might not otherwise find each other. While purpose helps people forge relationships, proximity gives them the first step of coming together to do so.

Questions to spark rooting activity in shared place

- What are the civic and cultural spaces in your local context: your hometown, your neighborhood, or your block? How are they set up? How are these spaces emblematic of your local context? How do they relate to the civic culture in your specific context?
- How could you integrate the principles of shared place into your daily environment?

Building Communities of Practice:

case studies

Earlier in this publication, we introduced the essential pillars of healthy civic culture: norms, values, narratives, habits, and rituals—each vital to the health of our civic life. Like a chef who combines flavors, this publication offers recipes to blend these ingredients in various proportions, tailored to the unique needs of each community. Whether you are looking to spice up local governance, stir a sense of shared purpose, or cool down social tensions, our recipes can help. Two additional, detailed recipes—one from Arizona and one from Atlanta—offer case studies for building robust civic ecosystems.

Arizona

In one of the most purple states in America, fortifying civic culture is a year-round effort—and not only during presidential election cycles. This is thanks to several organizations that have taken it upon themselves to find ways to bring people together and to create opportunities for Arizonans to get involved in their community. Among these organizations is the Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA), which is at the cutting edge of both civic culture programming and the development of metrics to measure how change is unfolding.⁵¹

Below are descriptions of five projects within the state, many organized by the CFA, that put into practice many of the ideas about building healthy civic culture outlined in this publication.

1. Develop narratives of shared purpose

Can Americans agree on anything anymore? Thanks to the Gallup Arizona Project,

residents of the Grand Canyon State know that the answer is yes. A partnership between the CFA and the Gallup organization, the Gallup Arizona Project is a decennial survey of policies and priorities. The 2020 survey report, *The Arizona We Want*, reveals a broad set of policy priorities that a supermajority (70 percent or more) of Arizonans agree on. Issue areas range from immigration reform to workforce development. In a time of polarization and too-close-to-call elections, *The Arizona We Want* provides evidence for finding common ground for broadly supported policies.⁵²

2. Evaluate and measure results

A closely related project is the CFA's Arizona Progress Meters. Based on priorities established by the Gallup Arizona Project, the meters use data from a range of sources to track changes in activities and outcomes over time.

Of particular relevance is the Arizona Civic Participation Progress Meter. While measuring civic health is notoriously challenging, the

CFA pulls together data in partnership with the National Conference on Citizenship to gauge the progress, pitfalls, and challenges of building a healthy civic culture. The meter provides a picture of what is and is not working for the public, offering unique insights to help leaders across the state fine-tune their approach.

3. Bringing partners together to use data to strengthen civic culture

In 2021, the CFA and the Arizona Center for Civic Leadership at the Flinn Foundation came together to create the Arizona Civic Life Partnership.⁵³ The two organizations are working together to activate Civic Health Progress Meters by

- bringing together partner organizations from across the state in data-driven dialogue about civic life today in Arizona;
- generating public discussion about the importance civic participation and connected communities have for effective civic leadership—and quality of life;
- sharing best practices and identifying opportunities for action to ensure more Arizonans are engaged in creating solutions for their communities and are stepping forward to become leaders for the state; and
- fostering agency and decision-making.

Participatory budgeting for schools in Arizona began in the Phoenix Union High School District in 2013 and has since expanded to more than seventy elementary, middle, and high schools across the state. Through this process, students make decisions about how to invest a portion of their school budget to improve their school community—typically ranging from \$2,000 to \$10,000—following nominations, deliberations, and voting. School administrators then follow through on those choices, providing

concrete evidence to students of the ways their voice can shape civic decision-making.

4. Free exchange of ideas

Founded in 1962, Arizona Town Hall tackles toxic polarization by organizing meetings dedicated to finding middle ground.⁵⁴ Topics are chosen in advance, and the organization develops a research document to frame the conversation. During the discussions, facilitators employ a method that emphasizes respectful conversation, appreciates a variety of viewpoints, cultivates connections, and encourages the growth of leadership skills. Some town halls are run in partnership with municipal governments or other organizations. In 2021, Arizona Town Hall partnered with Vitalyst Health Foundation to run five convenings focused on how to spend the one-time influx of money from the CARES Act and American Rescue Plan.⁵⁵

5. Foster civic love and joy

Named for a public servant who lost his life in 2011 while working at a constituency service event, the CFA's Gabe Zimmerman Public Service Awards recognize the contributions of nonelected public servants who make Arizona better. Some recent winners include Dr. Sophina Manheimer Calderon, an HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention subspecialist in the Western Navajo Nation; Sherri Collins, whose work seeks to expand access to state services for the deaf and hard of hearing; and Joy Rich, who implemented both an ombudsman program to quicken permitting responsiveness and a 24/7 childcare center for frontline municipal employees. All three hold vital but out-of-the-spotlight jobs. The Zimmerman Awards offer a chance to recognize and celebrate the people whose work makes our society work.⁵⁶

historical models for the Collaboratory include lending circles used by ethnic immigrant communities and mutual-aid networks established by communities of recently emancipated African Americans. The groups also echo the experiences of small-town farmers.

In one sense, these efforts to strengthen civic culture are unique to the state of Arizona. Place plays a formative role in shaping civic culture, after all, and local circumstances can make it more or less difficult to improve that culture. Arizona's political diversity may present a challenge, but the state's assets include committed organizations like the CFA, Flinn Foundation, Vitalyst Health Foundation, and other long-standing community foundations. No state should expect to achieve results similar to those in Arizona overnight. Much of what is happening there was built over time. And while some initiatives emerged only over the last few years, previous work in the state created the fertile soil necessary to help them thrive. Taken together, the programs underway in Arizona show how catalysts can cultivate civic culture in ways both large and small.

Atlanta

"I commit to offering my video production services to help disseminate information." "I commit to advising on communications to ensure the messaging resonates with the community." These types of commitments can be heard regularly during Civic Collaboratory gatherings—and by design and by ritual these pledges of help always begin with the words "I commit."

A Local Civic Collaboratory is a mutual-aid club of civic leaders, innovators, and entrepreneurs from the nonprofit, business, arts,

education, government, and philanthropy sectors—who cross ideology, race, generation, and other divides. As part of a Collaboratory, members invest in building trusting relationships that form the basis for circulating resources, all in the service of strengthening community investments and revitalizing democratic citizenship. Unlike other coalitions, the point of the Collaboratory is not to work together toward specific shared outcomes but to create civic infrastructure for members to grow their own projects.

Developed by Citizen University in 2011, the Civic Collaboratory approach is an antidote to a culture of competition and zero-sum individual achievement. While cities are often rich in civic assets—innovative problem solvers, passionate organizers, willing volunteers—a growing feeling of resource scarcity is turning collaborators into competitors. Polarization and distrust are poisoning the relationships that sustained strong communities in the past. Historical models for the Collaboratory include lending circles used by ethnic immigrant communities and mutual-aid networks established by communities of recently emancipated African Americans. The groups also echo the experiences of small-town farmers who, lacking access to both financial capital and social capital, have long pooled seeds, skills, tools, and other resources.

The heart of this modern-day cooperative model is the Rotating Credit Club. A few

Building Communities of Practice: Case Studies

participants take turns presenting projects they are working on and identifying areas where they need support. The group then provides specific and firm commitments of help rather than feedback or critique.

This form of circulating mutual aid is most effective when bolstered by the structure, habits, and norms that come with regular gatherings. At the heart of this spirit of mutuality lies civic love: the understanding that caring for our fellow citizens constitutes the foundation of a robust constitutional democracy. This principle urges participants to act with generosity, compassion, and empathy, fostering a civic culture that values connection.

Citizen University maintains a National Civic Collaboratory, and organizations across the country are adapting this model to their local communities. One example is the ATL Civic Collab in Atlanta, convened by the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, the Atlanta History Center, and the National Center for Civil and Human Rights.⁵⁷ The ATL Civic Collab was established as a citywide initiative to foster mutual aid among civic leaders and to reduce polarization, disconnection, and competition.

ATL Civic Collab meetings occur every four months. They have all the markings of a ritual, beginning with a welcome dinner followed by a day-long meeting. During group discussions, participants are encouraged to share their perspectives on significant issues facing Atlanta. The sharing of ideas—and the sharing of a meal—strengthens the fabric of local partnerships, enabling a more effective response to community needs.

As always, the centerpiece of the gathering is the Rotating Credit Club. At one meeting, Saba Long from the Atlanta Civic Circle,

Maria Saporta and Ann Cramer from Atlanta Way 2.0, and Liz Lapidus from Root Local presented their respective projects.

Going first, Long outlined her organization's goal to address the communication breakdown between Metro Atlanta residents, stakeholders, and elected officials. She detailed Atlanta Civic Circle's objective to create a data-driven community engagement platform, powered by a ten-thousand-person regional panel, to serve as a real-time sounding board. Then, Saporta and Cramer from Atlanta Way 2.0 introduced their concept of uniting diverse stakeholders to enhance community relationships, share resources, and strengthen the civic fabric of their city through strategic meetings. Finally, Lapidus from Root Local shared her organization's aim to expand the sustainability movement in Metro Atlanta by growing their established Pollinator Network to 250 individuals and doubling their public programming. All three organizations requested support from the entire group, and commitments of aid rolled in. These commitments are just the beginning. The Collaboratory not only circulates resources, expertise, funding, and connections but also builds a "pay it forward" culture that ripples out into communities at large.

The Civic Collaboratory embodies a dynamic approach. By creating a space for collaboration and mutual support, the Collaboratory model bolsters individual initiatives while also deepening connections, trust, and collaborations within the community. In the process, its impact is felt beyond the member network. Participants bring the connections gained from the Collaboratory back to their communities, where this social capital can catalyze civic improvement and democratic renewal.

Measuring **civic culture**

Because civic culture touches so many parts of American life and looks different in different places, it can be difficult to measure. This makes it challenging to understand whether programs designed to improve civic culture are having their intended effect and how they could be improved. Measurement is also important for engaging philanthropic funders and other stakeholders who might support the expansion of successful initiatives. Finally, measurement can help direct civic catalysts toward areas of potential growth and unmet needs.

Measures can be sorted into four main groups. First are measures that focus on *supply and demand*: the availability of opportunities to participate in activities that foster a healthy civic culture and ways to measure people's desire for these opportunities. Second, measures can look at the *outcomes* of such participation in terms of changes in attitudes or behaviors among individuals. Third, measures can track community-level changes in attitudes or behaviors. Finally, these same changes can be tracked at the national level.

Given the numerous ways to measure civic culture, this section offers questions that can serve as a framework for civic catalysts.

Measuring Change at the Programmatic and Individual Level

Measures can aim to answer questions about whether organizations are increasing the supply of healthy civic culture opportunities and whether demand for such opportunities manifests in participation. They may include questions such as:

- How many people participated in an activity?
- Which people participated? Were new people brought in?
- How actively did participants engage? Did they engage with other people? Were those people like or unlike them?

Measurement can also focus on the attitudes of people who took part in a particular program that relates to building a healthy civic culture. These can mostly be captured in evaluation surveys sent to participants, such as the Belonging Barometer (see page 37). Some surveys can be sent both before and after an event, allowing for the assessment of change in views based on participation. Such surveys might ask the following questions:

- Did people like the experience?
- Did they feel welcome?
- Did they feel a sense of connection to others?
- Did they feel agency in their participation?

Measuring Civic Culture

Measuring Change at the Community Level

Many measures—for example, the RAYSE Index at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, the CFA's Progress Meters, AmeriCorps' Volunteering and Civic Life in America research, the National Conference on Citizenship Civic Health Index, and the index produced by the U.S. Senate's Joint Economic Committee's social capital project—capture aggregate responses to individual surveys across a particular community or geographic region. Still others focus on the supply of healthy civic opportunities, such as the Mapping the Modern Agora study produced by the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University. Assessing opportunity, access, and change in each community might be addressed by asking questions such as:

- How many organizations are offering opportunities to participate in a healthy civic culture?
- How many people, across all programs and activities, are participating in civic life? Is this rate of participation increasing or decreasing?
- What is the total investment—from public, private, and philanthropic sources—in civic culture in a given community?

Measurements can also focus on questions about the beliefs individuals have about their community. These measures are most useful for thinking about the community as a whole rather than just those who participate in specific programs. Measures can focus on the attitudes and beliefs of community members, as well as disparities within a community, such as:

- Do community members feel more, less, or the same levels of connection or social trust toward others in their community?
- Which community members feel more, less, or the same levels of connection or trust toward others in their community?
- Do those who participate in civic opportunity programs and those who do not participate hold different views?
- Do community members report more, less, or the same views about their ability to make changes in their community?
- Have organizations that are not primarily focused on civic culture adopted elements that would foster it, even if a healthy civic culture is not the primary focus?

Measuring Change at the National Level

Changes to national civic culture may be captured through representative survey data or other studies that address questions such as:

- Is social and political trust increasing or decreasing over time? For whom is trust increasing or decreasing?
- Are participation rates in civil society increasing or decreasing? Are rates of participation concentrated among some groups but not others?
- Do people report more, less, or the same beliefs about their ability to make changes in their community?

The Belonging Barometer

Over Zero and the Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council partnered on a research project to examine the state of belonging in American society.⁵⁸ The project's final report, *The Belonging Barometer*, is a survey tool that provides a nuanced, quantifiable measure of belonging.⁵⁹

The barometer measures ten aspects of an individual's experience in a particular environment or community. Taken together, these elements encompass what the researchers behind the barometer deem to be the three key components of belonging: social connection, psychological safety, and cocreation.

Belonging Barometer

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
(1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree)

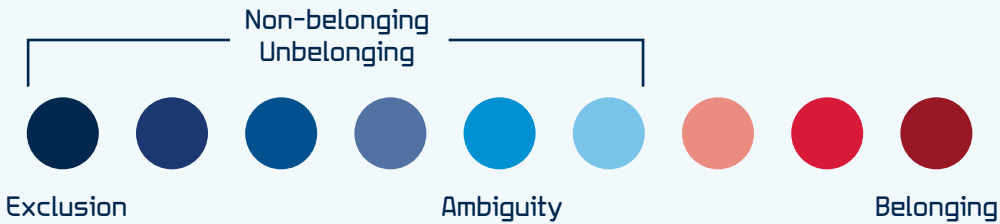
1. I feel **emotionally connected** to [name of respondent's local community].
2. People in [name of respondent's local community] **welcome and include me** in activities.
3. I am **unable to influence decision-making** in [name of respondent's local community].*
4. I feel **unable to be my whole and authentic self** with people in [name of respondent's local community].*
5. People in [name of respondent's local community] **value me and my contributions**.
6. My relationships with others in [name of respondent's local community] are **as satisfying as I want them to be**.
7. **I feel like an "insider"** who understands how [name of respondent's local community] works.
8. I am **comfortable expressing my opinions** in [name of respondent's local community].
9. I am treated **as "less than" other residents** in [name of respondent's local community].*
10. When interacting with people in [name of respondent's local community], **I feel like I truly belong**.

* For this analysis and preliminary report, we used very basic controls. It is our hope that scholars with thematic expertise will examine these data further, controlling for factors known to be theoretically supported in their field.

Source: Reprinted with permission of Over Zero and the Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council.

Respondents rate each of the ten factors on a scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). After responses are collected, each individual’s level of belonging can be measured on a sliding scale from 1 (“Strong exclusion”) to 5 (“Strong belonging”).

Belonging as a Scale



A variety of stakeholders can use the Belonging Barometer to measure belonging in their respective institutions or settings. Examples include schools, universities, or hospitals looking to devise support services and report on student or patient well-being; workplaces wishing to track belonging within teams or across the workforce; and municipalities or government agencies that wish to track citizen well-being. In all these contexts, the barometer can inform the design of programs while allowing for tracking over time.

Event Evaluation Questions at the Lincoln Center

Lincoln Center administers voluntary post-program surveys to gather feedback about visitors’ experiences. Each survey contains several questions, some multiple choice and some open-ended. In addition, a section of the survey displays a wide-ranging list of words, some positive and some negative. The survey asks participants to select which word(s) best describe the experience they just had. In the summer of 2023, Lincoln Center found that *welcome* was the word selected most often. By tracking which words participants choose to describe their experience, Lincoln Center is able to measure subjective feelings of belonging, participation, power, agency, and identity over time and can adjust their programming accordingly in response to participant feedback.

CONCLUSION

If you have read this far, you are likely persuaded that a healthy civic culture is crucial for a vibrant democracy. What unites America is neither language nor religion nor, given the nation's vast size, even geography. Instead, the nation is united by Americans who believe in the idea of America and who balance their self-interest with the well-being of their community and country. Today, it has become all too common for individuals to act selfishly, to evade their responsibility to one another, and to vilify those who seem different. We risk losing our capacity to live together in a pluralistic society, without which the very existence of America as both an ideal and a nation is threatened.

This publication presents a collection of dishes to satiate a nation hungry for unity, idealism, and common purpose. It is grounded in case studies—meticulously crafted recipes—successfully implemented by civic catalysts nationwide. If a formula for building a healthy civic culture proves successful in Portland, Maine, it stands to reason that, with appropriate adjustments, it could also flourish in Portland, Oregon. While each community is unique, the underlying principles for success can be universally applied. Yet journalists and lawmakers all too commonly express skepticism about America's capacity to unite. Our case studies show that unity is already being achieved, in both significant and subtle ways. Americans are actively defining what a healthy civic culture should look like. The path to a healthier democracy lies in nurturing civic culture within individual communities, and then letting that healthy civic culture emanate from these communities until it encompasses the entire nation. Beyond providing guidance, we hope to inspire civic catalysts with these communities' achievements—which demonstrate that the endeavor is not only feasible but crucial and already gaining momentum.

The title of this publication echoes Alexis de Tocqueville's insights on "habits of the heart" as foundational to the American character. Tocqueville observed the importance of these habits for fostering informed participation at the ballot box and engagement with civic institutions. American democracy hinges on our collective faith in its efficacy. The effort to build a culture of greater civic spirit is in many ways an act of faith, an optimism that things can and will get better, and that people in a self-governing community can effect positive change.

Committing ourselves to constitutional democracy requires that we first commit ourselves to our fellow citizens and that we find within ourselves ways to have faith in them. This civic faith is magical yet fragile, unnoticed in stable times but starkly apparent when societal consensus falters. The faith in our self-governance does not come from the top down; it emerges from within, from the habits of heart and mind. We the people are responsible for rekindling these from within, recommitting to the norms, values, narratives, habits, and rituals that sustain American constitutional democracy through collective acts of civic faith.

Appendix A: key terms

Citizenship

Citizenship can be understood broadly in two ways. One is a formal status within a state that affords political participation, including the vote, and implies certain obligations of engagement or participation in state activities. Over the course of U.S. history, the formal status of *citizen* has sometimes attached to membership in particular cities, sometimes to states, and sometimes to the nation as a whole; the different categories of formal membership have not always aligned. The second, broader conception of citizenship is an ethical notion of being a prosocial contributor to a self-governing community. This notion pertains regardless of legal documentation status. It centers on participation in common life, contribution to the common good, and a spirit of obligation to interests greater than one's own. The colloquialism "a good citizen" captures this meaning. The efforts of the working group are intended to include the first way of thinking about citizenship and extend to the second. This is contested territory. Not everyone thinks that the ethical category of citizenship should apply to those who do not have the formal status of citizens. In our work, however, we take the fact that anyone *can* contribute positively to their community as foundational to the development of all formal institutions of citizenship. We protect the idea of self-government for free and equal citizens by cultivating the values and practices of self-government in all members of a community.⁶⁰

Civic Catalysts

Civic catalysts empower others to realize their potential for change, fostering a sense of responsibility and power. They mobilize their communities to build grassroots influence, shaping their own futures and the world. Despite challenges, they envision America's promise and collaborate with others to bring it to fruition.

Civic Culture

American *civic culture* is the set of norms, values, narratives, habits, and rituals that shapes how we live together and govern ourselves in our diverse democratic society. It is shaped by a market economy, civic creed, place, race, and religion. It is embodied in how we join, participate, express ourselves, argue the meaning of our ideals, remember the past, and create common purpose and new folkways across identities.

Pluralism

Pluralism champions the recognition and validation of our differences, fostering not just peaceful coexistence but active collaboration among diverse cultures and perspectives. It transcends liberalism and libertarianism, weaving in their ethos of openness while advocating for a dynamic equilibrium of varied truths and values. More than mere tolerance, pluralism is a living practice, a perpetual negotiation that reflects the nation's evolving identity and the shifting mosaic of its citizenry. It is an active commitment, manifesting through continuous, principled action.⁶¹

Appendix B:

Description of the Civic Culture

landscape survey

To support the efforts of the Defining Civic Culture Working Group, the Aspen Institute's Citizenship and American Identity Program (CAI) and Citizen University (CU) partnered with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to conduct research on how practitioners in the field define the term *civic culture*, how they implement their definition of *civic culture* through their programs, and what is and is not working in building a healthy civic culture. As part of this research, in March 2023, CAI and CU surveyed sixty-two practitioners on the topic of civic culture. This research was supported by the New Pluralists.

Selected Questions

- How do you define civic culture? If your organization does work with a single definition of civic culture, please share this definition.
- In your own words, what is a healthy civic culture (as opposed to an unhealthy civic culture)?
- Is building a healthy civic culture a key goal of your work?
- What is broken, unhealthy, and/or maladaptive about the civic culture of the United States and of your part of the country right now?
- What are some barriers to building a healthy civic culture (either nationally, or in your part of the country)?
- What are some best practices to promote healthy civic culture?
- To what extent does your work support the types of best practices that you named above?
- When you think of organizations or practitioners who are successful in their work to promote/strengthen civic culture, who comes to mind? Please specify names below.
- Do you think there are important differences between efforts targeting civic culture and efforts targeting political culture?
- To what extent do you believe that pluralism is part of a healthy civic culture?
- When you measure the impact of your work, do you specifically assess your impact on civic culture?
- What tools do you or might you use to measure your impact on civic culture?

Appendix C: Members of the **working group** on Defining Civic Culture

Working Group Chair

Eric Liu

Cofounder and Chief Executive Officer, Citizen University; Cochair, Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, American Academy of Arts and Sciences

Working Group Members

Kristen Cambell

Chief Executive Officer, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE)

Sybil Francis

President and Chief Executive Officer, Center for the Future of Arizona

David French

Opinion Columnist, *The New York Times*

Sam Gill

President and Chief Executive Officer, The Doris Duke Foundation

Ted Johnson

Senior Advisor, Executive Office, New America

Ben Klutsey

Director of Academic Outreach, Director of the Program on Pluralism and Civil Exchange, Mercatus Center, George Mason University

Mathieu Lefevre

Cofounder and Chief Executive Officer, More in Common

Peter Levine

Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Jonathan Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University

Patty Loew

Professor, Medill School of Journalism (retired); former Director, Center for Native American and Indigenous Research, Northwestern University

Eunice Lin Nichols

Co-Chief Executive Officer, CoGenerate

Suzanne Nossel

Chief Executive Officer, PEN America

David Oxtoby

President, American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2019–2024)

Eboo Patel

President, Interfaith America

John Spann

Program and Outreach Officer, Mississippi Humanities Council

Shanta Thake

Ehrenkranz Chief Artistic Officer, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts

Natalie Tran

Executive Director, CAA Foundation

Jose Antonio Vargas

Founder and Key Strategic Consultant, Define American

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