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PART 1: ARTICLE

Civic engagement: an antidote to desperation?

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In the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville (1969) cautioned about the omnipotence of the majority and the potential negative effects of individualism on American democracy. Later Putnam (2001) echoed that warning, suggesting that individualism could lead to community disengagement and the decline of our democracy.

Although the warning from Tocqueville was two centuries ago, the dangers of radical individualism and the tendency to put self-interest ahead of the greater good can be witnessed today in the proliferation of gun violence and mass shootings, attitudes toward climate change, and a variety of public policies. Is civic engagement the antidote? It is easy to lose sight of the benefit of the collective in the face of pervasive self-interest, but the power of community to use democracy to create change offers hope.

According to Longley (2022), "civic engagement means participating in activities intended to improve the quality of life in one's community by addressing issues of public concern, such as homelessness, pollution, or food insecurity, and developing the knowledge and skills needed to address those issues. Civic engagement can involve a wide range of political and nonpolitical activities including voting, volunteering, and participating in group activities like community gardens and food banks." The benefits of engaging civically have been widely researched. Civic engagement has been linked to good citizenry as measured by voting, protecting the environment and advancing public health (Wike et al., 2022) and to healthier societies (Healthy People 2030 n.d.; Salinsky, 2022). ***(Topic Sentence 1)*** Putnam linked the importance of civic engagement and social connectedness to "school performance, public health, crime rates, clinical depression, tax compliance, philanthropy, race relations, community development, census returns, teen suicide, economic productivity, campaign finance, even simple human happiness – all are demonstrably affected by how (and whether) we connect with our family and friends and neighbours and coworkers" (Stossel, 2000). ***(Major Detail A)*** Ballard et al. (2019) found civic engagement in later adolescence/early adulthood to be positively associated with increased income, educational achievement, and mental health outcomes. ***(Major Detail B)*** Sanders (2001) found psychological benefits to political participation. ***(Major Detail C)***

Formal and institutional civic engagement has been declining for years (McCann, 2022), but Fine and Harrington (2004) provide an alternative perspective. ***(Topic Sentence 2)*** Their research showed that in the face of declining institutional civil engagement, small groups can make a big difference. They suggested that "instead of indicating a decline in civil society, a proliferation of small groups represents a healthy development in democratic societies, creating cross-cutting networks of affiliation" (pg. 341). ***(Major Detail A)***

For us, these narratives turn to the potential power of communities and the agency that every member possesses to use their voice to bring to the forefront issues of concern and plans to unite for change. The narratives around the engagement of young people tend to be pessimistic. ***(Topic Sentence 3)*** Young people are "commonly assumed to be disengaged, disillusioned, and uninterested in civic life" although recent research from the Brennan Center for Justice (Hope, 2022) suggests otherwise as do several of the articles in this issue. While civic engagement has been declining for years a recent study suggests that political engagement has been increasing (Leonhardt, 2023; McCann, 2022). ***(Major Detail A)*** Perhaps engaging in the political process counteracts the sense of powerlessness and provides an opportunity for action in the face of harmful legislation. The voices of the youth in the articles that follow were present and focused. They conveyed anxiety about the current state of our world and the future. They seem to desire a path forward that is informed by the past and that is on a different course. There are indications that political action is part of that future course. Like the voices of the youth in the articles in this issue, voters – many young first-time voters – turned out in Kansas last August to use their voices. Kansas was the first state to vote on abortion rights since the Supreme Court ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson's Women's Health Organization*. Voters cast their votes in record numbers to protect women's right to choose (Hanna & Stafford, 2022). This act of civic engagement was further supported by the Governor of Kansas who in April vetoed two additional anti-abortion bills approved by the Kansas legislature (Hanna, 2023).

This issue invites us to think about how we conceptualize civic engagement and the power of community. There is an undercurrent of desperation in the manuscripts. Desperation about the environment and our world, and some deep exploring relative to how engaging civically impacts our communities. Many of the voices are those of youth, and some of the research was conducted and published by early career scholars bringing new voices and perspectives. Both the youth in the studies and the emerging scholars/authors are using their voices to engage others to harness the power of community.

The issue opens with a qualitative study by Larocque (2023) that explores the concept of "social-ecological transition" (Laurent & Pochet, 2015) from the perspectives of young eco-activists using their own voices***. (Topic Sentence 4)*** We hear the passion in their narratives and their concern for the earth. We also hear their frustration with "adults" who did this to the environment but who lack a sense of urgency because they won't be around to witness the ultimate devastation. They also convey their disillusionment with historical efforts to address climate

change as described by one youth activist who shared that taking the land from indigenous communities to install wind turbines to save the environment further preys on already vulnerable communities. ***(Major Detail A)*** Their command of the complexities of civic engagement outpaces the general opinions about the contributions of youth. Similarly, Angela Malorni et al. (2023) elevate the voices of gender diverse youth and youth workers. Malorni et al. (2023) and colleagues challenge the traditional narratives and organization of youth development efforts by exploring their own positionality and lifting youth voices to combat the "White-dominant, damaging, and deficit-based narratives about marginalized youth (that) still inform youth development measures." They offer suggestions for a more empowering evaluation model that incorporates the voices of both the youth and the workers. ***(Major Detail B)*** Monique Gill et al. (2023) investigate the relationship between community power building and civic engagement as part of a large-scale comprehensive community building initiative. They sought to understand the impact of investments in community organizing on voter turnout as part of a 10-year Building Healthy Communities initiative. They found that investing in community power building in historically marginalized or underserved communities can lead to greater civic engagement as measured by voter turnout and as a strategy for combatting restrictive electoral reforms.

Danielle Littman et al. (2023) look to the power of community through the concept of mutual aid in the early months of the COVID−19 pandemic. They investigate the understanding of mutual aid as a collective care practice from the community perspective considering social identities. According to Littman et al. (2023), mutual aid is a longstanding practice among socially marginalized communities but will the concept which grew during the crisis hold after the worst of the crisis passes? It depends on who you ask.

Megan Meyer et al. (2023), and Ohiro Oni-Eseleh et al. (2023) remind us of the importance of partnerships between universities and communities and the synergy that can develop between academics/scholars, students, and community leaders.***(Topic Sentence 5)*** Another reminder of the power of community and partnerships. Meyer et al. (2023) suggest that the very nature of partnering with universities can academize the relationship and possibly create unrealistic expectations when evaluating the success of community building initiatives. In a five-year, community-based participatory research (CBPR) study of a community building initiative, they explore the question of meaningful data relative to the effort and cost to collect those data. ***(Major Detail A)*** They posit that perhaps the types of data collected, and indicators of success could be more meaningfully derived with a clear understanding of the constraints and mutually agreed upon meaningful outcomes. They also found that some "costs" are value added and that "engaging residents in community change efforts help them develop a greater sense of connection with others and sense of efficacy in their ability to control and improve neighbourhood conditions" (pg. 16). Lastly, Oni-Eseleh et al. (2023) and colleagues explore the impact of university/community partnerships using a nontraditional approach (for this university) to practicum by deploying macro interested MSW students to community-based agencies to identify and document community needs and gaps in services.

In each of the articles in this issue, the power of community can readily be seen. The authors explore the concepts of voting, organizing, advocating, partnering with, and engaging with communities/the environment, and experiential learning to address social problems, improve service delivery systems, and empower the often powerless. The individual as a person is certainly at the forefront, but in community with others and with the community at the centre. Individualism becomes secondary and is replaced with the collective power of the community. This seems to match Longley's (2022) thinking that actions of these types which are designed to improve the quality of life in one's community represent active civic engagement.

(1483 words)

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PART 2: INFOGRAPHICS