**4/6**

*(Group) What would Mumford say about your project; how would you reply? (3 paragraphs)*

Mumford might be initially skeptical of our project. He would probably point out that our project sacrifices some quality of writing and nuance for quantity of engagement. After all, we’re encouraging people to submit short button-clicks rather than writing long, well-thought-out essays about political opinions. In our view, though, this tradeoff may well be worthwhile from a fairness/equity perspective. Mumford might acknowledge that we’re not sacrificing quality in the same way that, say, Twitter or Reddit does–instead, we’re trying to extract the most actionable parts of what high-quality civic engagement looks like, and make those accessible to a much wider audience. High quality civic engagement quickly turns into authoritarian elitism when only a few people have access to those fora.

Mumford might also comment that our platform is seeking to be a centralized method of preference aggregation, which seems more in the vein of authoritarian technics. Although our platform seeks to further democratize policymaking inputs, it’s doing so through a centralized technology. We think that Mumford’s potential concern would be worrying if we were trying to build a single technological hub for all modalities of civic engagement–but we’re not. We don’t seek a totalizing outcome; we just want to build one more tool for citizens to help align leaders with their values, that they can use alongside more traditional methods of civic engagement.

Finally, Mumford might enjoy that we’re trying to promote a community conversation that highlights diverse thinking. We’re asking people to voice their agreement or disagreement not only on bills, but also on each others’ viewpoints, and to add their own viewpoint if it isn’t already represented by an existing one. This way, we’re seeking to emphasize diversity of thought and encourage people to add their own nuance to common beliefs. We think this is one of the most important features of our project–it might not be the most *majoritarian* element of our project, but it is certainly the most *democratic* in the deliberative sense that Mumford employs the term.

*(Group) Give a sample of (hypothetical or real) euphemistic writing that denies the problem you are working on, per Orwell. (2-3 paragraphs)*

From Joe Biden’s [2020 election victory speech:](https://joebiden.com/presidency-for-all-americans/)  
  
“The people of this nation have spoken. They have delivered us a clear victory. A convincing victory. A victory for “We the People.” We have won with the most votes ever cast for a presidential ticket in the history of this nation — 81 million. I am humbled by the trust and confidence you have placed in me.

I pledge to be a President who seeks not to divide, but to unify. Who doesn’t see Red and Blue states, but a United States. And who will work with all my heart to win the confidence of the whole people. For that is what America is about: The people. And that is what our Administration will be about. I sought this office to restore the soul of America. To rebuild the backbone of the nation — the middle class. To make America respected around the world again and to unite us here at home.

It is the honor of my lifetime that so many millions of Americans have voted for this vision. And now the work of making this vision real is the task of our time…It’s long overdue, and we’re reminded tonight of all those who fought so hard for so many years to make this happen. But once again, America has bent the arc of the moral universe towards justice.”  
  
**3/30**

*(Group) In the use or generation of data and data types, how do you address and/or deal with their social construction? (4 paragraphs)*

By allowing people to create their own issue pages, we risk letting people “problematize” things, which has its pros and cons (as Paullada et al. point out). This is why we’re planning to eventually implement a feature that prompts people to pay a marginal fee and meet certain “karma” criteria in order to add new issues, so as to encourage people to think more deeply about whether a certain topic should truly be “problematized” as our issue page data type.

Similarly, letting people post freeform text and labeling it as a “viewpoint” data type *legitimizes* those opinions, which could be harmful if their content is intolerant. In response, we eventually want to create a jury-based flagging and moderation system, whereby active and productive users can decide whether flagged viewpoints violate community policies (which could be determined in a collaborative process on our platform itself).

We’re also aware that there are also many factors behind each vote that an elected official makes, not just raw citizen input. Leaders must balance many individual and corporate stakeholders both inside and outside their districts, all while forwarding their own moral agenda. We won’t promote the “alignment indices” that we’ll generate as the *only* valid metric of candidate quality. Instead, we’ll be up-front about the methodological limitations of our calculation process, and we’ll be clear that these indices only measure one facet of good leadership.

Like DuBois, we want to provide data as a tool for empowerment. We will present any data we generate under this lens, and we will only collect data that will be directly useful for social good. If collecting a certain piece of data from our users (or from APIs) would not provide any traceable benefits to the public, we won’t collect it. We’re carefully thinking through how much demographic information we should collect from users, and we’ll only (eventually) reference users’ voter registration information if it proves to be a necessary step to get buy-in from elected officials.

*(Group) Situate your project in the current historical moment, building on Gandhi, King, Tufekci, Meadows, Chapman, and Diamond. (3-4 paragraphs)*

We live in a time with precipitous democratic backsliding globally, and we face the rise of many autocratic movements in previously-strong democracies which feed on declining trust in government. This phenomenon is perhaps largest in the United States, where a tangled web of government distrust and polarization continues to drag down the quality of policy and civic discussions. As Diamond points out, many of our leaders are insulated from the consequences of their decisions, and thereby face few incentives to solve problems that might affect large swaths of the public, like climate change.

But we also live in a moment of tremendous hope. Despite broad dissatisfaction with government and politics, there is perhaps more energy behind positive civic engagement in the US than at any point in history–as evidenced by multiple mass protests and high voter turnout. In Tufecki’s language, a powerful civic engagement movement has been quietly building capacity, and has recently begun to show its deep strength. There is currently lots of polarization, but also lots of hope.

Our project borrows Gandhi’s vision to reimagine the public as a community organized around collective conversations and constructive decision-making, rather than competition or coercion. We want to help people see civic engagement as part of a wider, non-zero-sum public dialogue, rather than an attempt to force their worldview onto others. Like King, we recognize the importance of grassroots movements that change people’s values. With our project, we’d like to make it easier for these low-level changes in values to be reflected in high-level policy.

In the image of Meadows, we’re trying to intervene in the *systems* that determine policy, rather than pushing for particular object-level policies. We aren’t proposing an entire paradigm shift, but we want to improve the relationships between different actors in the policymaking process. And finally, in the vein of Chapman, we don’t presuppose that we know how citizens or leaders will use the indices we produce. We’re merely seeking to provide people another tool in their accountability arsenal, rather than a single, grandiose platform for all their civic activity.

**3/22**

*(Group) Model the systems involved in your problem domain and project using Loopy or another similar systems tool described by Case.*

We used Loopy to model the civic systems we’re dealing with. We don’t think a stock-and-flow model is ideal for our project, but we decided to try it anyway. The node we’re tweaking with our project is “incentives for leader alignment,” and the end goal that we’d like to increase is “social cohesion,” which we’re using as a catch-all term for community health, happiness, and well-being. The ultimate feedback loops on “incentives for leader alignment” are positive in both directions: increasing those incentives results in a further increase in incentives for alignment, while decreasing them results in further decreases. Social cohesion follows the same pattern, and is ultimately higher when incentives are higher, and lower when incentives are lower.

We tried to start our simulation with the stocks that we think reflect current American political culture:

[https://ncase.me/loopy/v1.1/?data=[[[6,413,161,0,%22Aligned%2520policy%22,4],[7,568,162,0.66,%22Unaligned%2520policy%22,4],[8,416,296,0,%22Trust%2520in%2520government%22,3],[9,573,297,0.83,%22Polarization%22,1],[10,204,87,0,%22Incentives%2520for%2520leader%2520alignment%22,5],[11,750,445,0,%22Social%2520cohesion%22,5],[12,315,465,0.16,%22Citizen%2520engagement%22,3],[13,497,450,0.5,%22Leader%2520engagement%22,3]],[[10,6,20,1,0],[10,7,-17,-1,0],[6,8,-6,1,0],[7,8,-28,-1,0],[6,9,12,-1,0],[7,9,10,1,0],[8,11,-15,1,0],[9,11,21,-1,0],[9,8,-8,-1,0],[8,10,203,1,0],[9,10,-166,-1,0],[8,12,16,1,0],[8,13,-43,1,0],[12,11,22,1,0],[12,9,-35,-1,0],[13,9,18,-1,0],[13,8,-46,1,0],[12,10,36,1,0]],[],13%5D](https://ncase.me/loopy/v1.1/?data=%5B%5B%5B6,413,161,0,%22Aligned%2520policy%22,4%5D,%5B7,568,162,0.66,%22Unaligned%2520policy%22,4%5D,%5B8,416,296,0,%22Trust%2520in%2520government%22,3%5D,%5B9,573,297,0.83,%22Polarization%22,1%5D,%5B10,204,87,0,%22Incentives%2520for%2520leader%2520alignment%22,5%5D,%5B11,750,445,0,%22Social%2520cohesion%22,5%5D,%5B12,315,465,0.16,%22Citizen%2520engagement%22,3%5D,%5B13,497,450,0.5,%22Leader%2520engagement%22,3%5D%5D,%5B%5B10,6,20,1,0%5D,%5B10,7,-17,-1,0%5D,%5B6,8,-6,1,0%5D,%5B7,8,-28,-1,0%5D,%5B6,9,12,-1,0%5D,%5B7,9,10,1,0%5D,%5B8,11,-15,1,0%5D,%5B9,11,21,-1,0%5D,%5B9,8,-8,-1,0%5D,%5B8,10,203,1,0%5D,%5B9,10,-166,-1,0%5D,%5B8,12,16,1,0%5D,%5B8,13,-43,1,0%5D,%5B12,11,22,1,0%5D,%5B12,9,-35,-1,0%5D,%5B13,9,18,-1,0%5D,%5B13,8,-46,1,0%5D,%5B12,10,36,1,0%5D%5D,%5B%5D,13%5D)

**3/7**

*(Group) For the problem you are working on, how are you making the underlying reality more legible for your own sake and what are the impacts of that legibilization? (3 paragraphs)*

Politics is an incredibly complex and illegible realm–every single human has unique values, beliefs, and preferences, and often people hold multiple conflicting values/beliefs/preferences at the same time, so aggregating these into a collective “public opinion” as an input to public decision-making processes is extremely difficult. We’re asking people to summarize their thoughts on public issues (or bills) in just a few sentences, in order to help facilitate an easily navigable and *legible* conversation. But this approach doesn’t allow for very much nuance, since people with detailed views won’t be able to express all the conditionals or uncertainties associated with their opinion.

We’re also asking people to “agree” with other people’s decisions, in a binary all-or-none manner. People probably agree/disagree with bills or others’ opinions to certain *degrees*, rather than being either 100% or 0% in agreement. But asking people to express this much detail about their views would take up lots of time, and prevent our platform from being accessible and convenient for most people.

On the leader side, we’re also equating all their representation with binary yes/no votes on legislation. Our method doesn’t consider well-calculated compromises, party dynamics, opinions expressed in committee sessions, or back-room deals. We consider representation in its most constrained form, which certainly ignores much of the less-visible activities that representatives undertake. This might eventually incentivize leaders to do less back-room dealing, which could ultimately result in worse outcomes than if cross-party trades were allowed. We also summarize representativeness as a single metric, which glosses over many subtleties in how representatives pander to subgroups, and fluidly switch between the subgroups they pander to. This might cause us to unintentionally label some politicians as more or less representative than they truly are, thereby giving slightly misleading data to voters.

**2/28**

*(Group) What would Mickens say about your project; how would you reply? (3 paragraphs)*

Mickens’ prime goal is to call for computer scientists to be hyper-aware of the *consequences* of what we create. He wants us to stop pretending that we’re creating products in a vacuum, and that the downstream usage of our product is not our ethical concern.

Mickens would urge us to consider all the ways in which our platform could be used and misused, and to be explicitly aware of the potential ramifications of our technology. He would prompt us to envision how bad actors might leverage our potential to wreak havoc, and how the product could result in bad outcomes with even well-intentioned users. He’d warn us to have a solid plan for avoiding these outcomes.

Our project is mildly techno-optimistic, since we’re hoping that equitable sharing of opinions could help improve communication between leaders and citizens. Mickens might warn us against this techno-optimism, and recognize that (all things considered) we can’t unconditionally expect technology to change human institutions for the better.

**2/9**

*(Group) Describe your next three project milestones (3 paragraphs each, one for goal, one for deliverable, and one for metrics/evaluation)*

**Milestone 2: Student Elections Pilot**

**Goal:** We want to engage users to make sure our idea seems valuable to people who aren’t just us. We’d like to test the basic principles of our idea in a low-stakes scenario that replicates many of the issues we might run into in real elections, and we think USC student government is a great testing ground.

**Deliverable:** We plan to set up a table on Trousdale a few days before USC’s undergraduate government election period (2/23-2/25). At this table, we’ll be polling people about their opinions on USC-specific issues, and we’ll use that data to manually calculate representativeness indices for each candidate for student senate based on their written platforms. We will then provide these indices to the Daily Trojan for publication, and to candidates for use in their campaigns.

**Metrics/Evaluation:** We’ll ask everyone who participates at our table, and everyone we distribute our calculated indices to, for feedback on our idea and what they were thinking while engaging with us. We’ll also track the sheer number of people who engage with us–if it doesn’t reach a high enough level for us to have a 95% confidence interval within +/- 5%, we won’t publish our indices.

**Milestone 3: UI/UX**

**Goal:** We want to have UX and UI mapped out for our software implementation. We want to work out all the kinks we discovered in milestone 2, and have a robust plan for what we’ll be coding and why. We expect to make some adjustments to our plan as we code, but we want to anticipate any glaring conceptual issues before we run into them during software development.

**Deliverable:** We would like to have the following materials prepared, so we’re ready to jump into coding: journey maps, UI designs for every screen, and a detailed feature list (which components will do what things). In other words, we want our whole MVP planned out, so we know what features we’re implementing, and why we’re including those features and excluding others.

**Metrics/Evaluation:** If we don’t meet the criterion that we could confidently code our app based on our Milestone 1 diagram and Milestone 3 UI/UX materials, we won’t have met our goals. We will also trade our Milestone 1 and Milestone 3 materials with another team, and ask them if they clearly understand our intentions and mechanisms, and whether they could confidently develop an app based on those materials. If they don’t think so, we’ll go back to the drawing board to flesh out what’s missing.

**Milestone 4: Development**

**Goal:** By this point, we want to have our MVP coded. We want software development to be complete, to the point where we’d be comfortable deploying this application to the internet. This forces us to scale back the number of features we put into our MVP, but to also output production-ready code. In the long run, we think this will help us iterate faster, since we’ll be able to get our platform out in the real world sooner than later.

**Deliverable:** Our MVP web app is the main deliverable here. We don’t yet know what this will look like (since we won’t be completely defining it until Milestone 3), but we want to have development completed on a product that’s ready to be released into the world.

**Metrics/Evaluation:** We’ll ask ourselves to answer a checklist of several questions, in order to make sure we meet our goals: 1) Did we follow our Milestone 1 and 3 plans fully? If not, were our deviations justified? 2) Are we ready to deploy this web app to the internet? 3) Do we know how we can scale up usage of this MVP, and run another pilot test? 4) Do we have any major bugs that degrade the usability of our product? 5) Are we missing any crucial features that are necessary for this product to be valuable to users?

*(Group) For each of Meadows's 12 leverage points, describe a possible "change" responsive to the problem you are working on (2-3 sentences per leverage point "change")*

**12. Constants, parameters, numbers (such as subsidies, taxes, standards)**

We could change the sheer rate/amount of communication between citizens and their representatives. This could be implemented, perhaps, by hosting more town halls or encouraging more people to call or email their representatives.

**11. The sizes of buffers and other stabilizing stocks, relative to their flows.**

In the context of democracy, public preferences are the “materials” flowing, and so the main buffer here is the public itself. Public opinion can take a long time to change, which stabilizes the common political viewpoints being discussed in the mainstream. The rise of social media and the faster pace of news has now shortened the amount of time it takes public opinion to change (but the buffer is still quite large). It’s hard to tell, though, what an appropriate “public opinion” buffer is.

**10. The structure of material stocks and flows (such as transport networks, population age structures)**

Changing the structure of public preference flows would mean reconfiguring the ways that citizens share their preferences with their representatives. This might mean a reshaping of our voting system with, e.g., approval voting, or potentially the creation of new ways for citizens to share their preferences with leaders.

**9. The lengths of delays, relative to the rate of system change**

A relevant delay is the preference lock-in caused by voting cycles. In terms of sheer party representation, the House (for example) has a delay period of two years, in which different public preferences accumulate but aren’t represented. Changing the time between voting cycles is one way to impact this delay, but it’s unclear whether shorter or longer times would actually be beneficial.

**8. The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against**

Elections foster two main negative feedback loops that maintain a status-quo minimum level of representation in government: 1) unrepresentative incumbents are voted out and replaced with representative ones, and 2) incumbents who pass this minimum representativeness threshold enjoy an incumbent advantage. These two loops keep the level of citizen representation in government largely the same, preventing unrepresentative leaders from staying in office, but also stymying leaders who might be more representative. To improve this phenomenon, we might want to increase the strength of feedback loop 1 while decreasing the strength of feedback loop 2 by making it even clearer when an elected official is not representing their constituents, and when a challenger candidate is more representative than an incumbent (perhaps with our index idea).

**7. The gain around driving positive feedback loops**

We also see two main positive feedback loops: 3) unsatisfactory representation in government leads to a lack of public trust in government, which leads to polarization, which in turn leads to even less representative leaders; 4) strong representation in government leads to more public trust in government, which leads to higher-quality political discourse, and in turn higher-quality candidates. We could increase the gain around feedback loop 4 by making strong representation obvious, which would provide more concrete reasons for the public to trust its elected officials. To address feedback loop 3, we could use feedback loop 1 to help nip unrepresentative elected officials in the bud during elections by making their flaws well-known and enabling the public to replace them.

**6. The structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to what kinds of information)**

Most citizens do not have much information about whether their beliefs, values, and preferences are truly being represented by their elected officials. By providing concrete metrics of representativeness, we could allow citizens to incorporate this information into their voting decisions, giving them the power to demand higher-quality governance from their leaders.

**5. The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishments, constraints)**

Currently, election codes define most of the incentive structures surrounding public representation. Election codes determine what tools candidates have to get elected, and what punishments they face if they break these constraints–so changing these tools to focus more on public engagement rather than corporate finance might give citizens more control over how much representation they can demand from leaders.

In most cases, there also *are* no firm rules about how a leader must engage with their public once elected. Adding in rules specifying minimum levels of public engagement might also ensure better representation.

**4. The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure**

Legislatures have the power to change their own structure, so they technically have the capacity to be self-improving institutions. But this power can easily be abused for partisan motives (examples include gerrymandering, voting restrictions, talk of ending the filibuster, etc.), and it’s difficult to imagine how to preserve self-improvement without enabling backsliding. One way to do so might be to give citizens the ability to appeal legislative bylaws or bureaucratic decisions, in an amplified version of the ballot initiative.

**3. The goals of the system**

Currently, there isn’t a singular goal of our election system, although voters and candidates might have their own goals for participating in it. However, changing the perceived role of legislatures from “making decisions on behalf of the public/leading the public” to “carrying out the public’s will/following the public” might help reframe elected leaders in a humbler, more engaging light.

**2. The mindset or paradigm out of which the system—its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters—arises**

As with the goals of legislatures, there isn’t one universally-accepted paradigm from which our conception of government arises. That said, there does seem to be a pervading sense of “government as a tool to manage the public” which focuses on the role of the government in conflict management and mediation. We might want to change this paradigm to “government as a way for us to set collective priorities,” which instead focuses on the role of government in helping us interact with each other to build something positive, rather than simply correct something negative.

**1. The power to transcend paradigms**

Taking a pluralist view of government itself seems to be the best way to transcend paradigms in this space. Governments, elections, and representatives have far more than a single purpose, and we should be treating them accordingly. We should recognize how proposed changes might improve or degrade government quality or performance according to each of these paradigms, and involve many stakeholders when considering any structural changes.

*(Group) Describe 3 possible economic arrangements for your project. (1 paragraph each)*

**Economic arrangement 1: “Premium” data analytics**

We could include "premium" features and data analytics in later versions of our product, requiring payment or a paid subscription to view/export. These features may include public opinion forecasts, direct polling capacity, and extra data insights, which are all likely to be valuable to political campaigns, lobbyists, corporations, and government offices that are interested in a deeper analysis of the information contributed on our platform. These categories of organizations already pay lots of money to private pollsters to gather data about public opinion, and we could provide them the same data for cheaper (because citizens would voluntarily contribute their viewpoints to our platform). The revenues from this “premium” data would be used to cover the costs of running this project as a nonprofit.

**Economic arrangement 2:**

Alternatively, we could have this project be completely funded through external grants. There are many funders who are excited about civic tech projects (especially in the wake of recent political turmoil), although some of these funding opportunities are quite competitive. If we provide a strong proof-of-concept or MVP, however, we could apply for grants from foundations to cover operational/infrastructure costs.

**Economic arrangement 3:**

This arrangement is riskier, but we could have citizens pay a very small amount of money (in the cents range) to submit or upvote viewpoints. This arrangement would reduce people’s incentives to troll (since there’s now a cost to it), make the public opinion data more relevant to leaders (because they now know that respondents were serious enough to pay), and produce higher-quality public input (since citizens are now prompted to think more deeply about their opinions). This arrangement would preserve the ability of passionate people to share their thoughts (since the cost is so low), while discouraging people who don’t care very much from submitting their opinions.

**2/7**

*(Group) Describe how you are planning to follow Graham's advice from (1) Do Things that Don't Scale, (2) Schlep Blindness, (3) Pattern 7 (Lots of Little Things), (4) Pattern 8 (Start with Something Minimal), and (5) Pattern 9 (Engage Users) from this week's essay (one paragraph each)*

To follow Graham’s advice from (1), we plan to focus initially on USC’s Undergraduate Student Government. This allows us to cultivate our product in a very small subset of our whole market (which, in theory, could expand to be all city, state, and federal governments in the US). We might get a table on Trousdale during student election season (end of Feb.) to *manually* gather data for our indices, rather than building a web app, API queries, and a data processing pipeline upfront. We can also directly reach out to students, student activist clubs, civic engagement clubs, and student leaders to establish lines of communication with key stakeholders.

Graham’s advice in (2) is more applicable to founders who devote all their time to their ventures, but we will budget the amount of time we expect to be able to spend on this project, and consider all ideas that would fall within that time budget. If we need to do repetitive, unglamorous work, we will do so up to the limits of our time budget. We will also repeatedly ask ourselves Graham’s main question: "what problem do I wish someone else would solve for me?" If we’re not working on a problem that we would like someone else to deal with, we’ll reconsider what we’re doing.

For (3), we will continuously spitball lots of ideas for how we could be going about our project better. Since we don’t want to get caught up in the trap of spending too much time building an elaborate featureset, we’ll focus on possibilities that we could cut out parts of our plan without losing much. Could we replace complicated feature X with a simple set of buttons Y and Z? Is it better to write a web-scraping script instead of using an API?

For (4), we’re not going to build out a whole viewpoint-aggregating system immediately. We’ll instead start with a simple poll-to-index pipeline that asks people pre-structured questions about their views on particular bills, which is much easier to deal with than free-text response and unstructured data. We won’t try to deal with additional features like voter-registration verification, social media sharing, push notifications, or anything of that sort.

Once we initially engage USC students during the USG election, we will collect their email addresses to keep them in the loop with the development of our project, to follow the lessons in (5). We will also ask our initial users for feedback, suggestions, and ideas, so we can make sure that we’re actually providing something useful for student voters. We might try individual user interviews, and we can ask initial users what other spheres they think our project could be valuable to.

**2/2**

*(Group) What would Palmer say about the future your project would be situated in? (2 paragraphs)*

Our project deals with the political present and future, and Palmer’s view on that is likely not positive. Like most people, Palmer would probably realize the large flaws in the present US policymaking process, and would also probably recognize that these flaws are likely to deepen without intervention. Palmer advocates for “slogging on” in the face of issues like climate change without succumbing to naive optimism or unproductive pessimism, and her response to the challenges our governance system faces would probably be the same: we need to accept that each individual attempt at improvement is likely to fail, but we should remain hopeful enough to continue making slow progress, and inspire more people to take up arms.

In theory, our project would help enable the kind of individual-level personal action hopepunk promotes. By sharing their opinions on our platform, we're enabling citizens to think globally but act locally, to add their voice to hold their elected leaders accountable. Importantly, we also don’t deal with ideas of purity about democracy, but deal with it from largely a practical standpoint. We recognize that the value of our platform isn't to pursue the grand ideals of democracy, but merely to provide a simple index that voters can use while making electoral decisions.

*(Group) What would Chapman say about the modes of meaning your project would be situated in? (2 paragraphs)*

Our project draws from elements of each mode of meaning that Chapman outlines, constructing a broad appeal interpretable by people who subscribe to each mode. We draw from the choiceless mode of meaning by default: currently, many of us already don’t have much of a say in political matters. A large chunk of the American population feels alienated from their governments, and it’s not hard to find bipartisan camaraderie in frustration with this widespread voicelessness. In a similar manner, our project also draws from the counterculture mode of meaning: our goal is to help unify people to work *against* the common foe of inaccessible politics.

Despite this unity, our platform will also encourage diversity in a way similar to subcultures. Since we’re letting people share their viewpoints on issues, we’re encouraging people to add their two cents to the *distribution* of public opinion. Finally, our project relies on the systematic mode of meaning for a foundation: we begin with the axioms that more public input and more responsive leaders are valuable, and we’re structuring our entire project around these two principles.

*(Group) How would you taxonimize and find solidarity among those impacted by your project akin to McGregor? (2 paragraphs)*

It’s hard to generalize voter profiles, but the people impacted by our project (on both the leader and citizen sides) fall into roughly three categories: 1) the Democracy Enthusiasts, 2) the Activists, and 3) the Everyday Pragmatists. The Democracy Enthusiasts believe strongly in democratic ideals, and have grown in the wake of radicalism on both the left and right. This group includes civic and public interest tech communities, as well as the large number of organizations working to fight polarization, provide neutral journalism and bridge ideological divides. The Activists are highly politically-engaged (from all ideologies), but care more about furthering a particular political agenda than about broad principles about democracy. This group has strong opinions on political issues, and is willing to sacrifice their time to make sure their voices are heard by elected leaders. The Everyday Pragmatists are the large majority of the American public who care about promoting democracy and have opinions on public issues, but are too busy to spend much time dealing with them. They want the best for their country, states, and cities, but they have other priorities in their lives besides politics.

Despite their vastly different approaches to civic engagement, all of these groups want the same thing at the end of the day: a governance system that is responsive to and representative of voters. The Activists and Everyday Pragmatists can learn from the Democracy Enthusiasts that our governance system has a large effect on our lives, and that it’s worth putting effort behind improving it. The Democracy Enthusiasts and Activists, in turn, can learn from the Everyday Pragmatists that policymaking is not the *only* important part of life, and the Activists can teach the Democracy Enthusiasts and Everyday Pragmatists that cultivating passion is important for prompting change.

*(Group) Describe your first project milestone (3 paragraphs, one for goal, one for deliverable, and one for metrics/evaluation)*

For our first milestone, our goal is to clearly define the flow of information through our platform. We want to have a very clear idea of where (and from who) we’ll get data, how exactly we’ll integrate and transform that data, and what we will be outputting to who. Having this pipeline laid out will help us clarify our theory of change and plan the technical work we’ll need to do, and it will help us find any potential flaws or points of failure with our plan.

Our deliverable (due by 2/14) will be a visual diagram that lists the exact sources of information we plan to draw from (including existing APIs and points of entry that we manually create), the different data processing steps we will implement, and the list of outputs we intend to produce. We may also write a short “premortem” accompaniment to this diagram that addresses any uncertainties we have, or potential changes to the information flow that we’ll need to experiment with.

To evaluate our progress on this milestone, we will ask ourselves a series of questions:

* Can we clearly identify who will provide us with what data, and why they would do so?
* Can we clearly identify who we will be providing data to, what data we will be providing them with, and why they would care about that data?
* Can we describe how that outputted data will help solve a concrete problem, beyond merely being materially useful to the people we provide it to?
* Can we trace the exact sequence of steps between the entry/retrieval of information into our system, and points of output?
* Do we know the most likely risks facing our plan, and have we identified how we’ll address or mitigate them?

**1/31**

*Describe your proposed project in detail (2 paragraphs on problem, 2 paragraphs on project idea, 2 paragraphs on technology, 2 paragraphs on societal impact).*

**Problem**

Traditional methods of civic engagement are inaccessible, inexpressive, and skewed. Most people, especially those from underserved communities, don’t have the time or resources to engage in protests, send emails, or attend town halls--so leaders end up hearing only the loudest, wealthiest, and angriest voices repeatedly. This phenomenon leads to unaccountable governance, poor civic health, and often policies that don’t reflect broad public agreement.

Many organizations have tried to solve this problem with the promise of technology, but they have all fallen into common traps. Some attempted solutions only give citizens input tools when their governments ask for it, and some present users with an indigestible amount of text to scroll through. But most crucially, current attempts don’t have teeth: they don’t give leaders a reason to pay attention, so citizen concerns lose weight.

**Project Idea**

We plan to provide leaders the incentive and ability to listen to citizen opinion, which will give citizens a greater ability to have their ideas and concerns addressed by elected officials, thereby building more confidence in governments. To do so, we plan to create an index that summarizes the discrepancy between each elected leader’s legislative votes and the opinion of the district they represent. The indices we create can then be used by journalists, and they could be used by candidates as a campaigning tool, fostering competition to be the “most representative” or “most accountable.”

We plan to allow citizens to contribute their opinions in a system where people can post short summaries of their ideas, suggestions, and concerns on particular public issues and share those viewpoints like a petition. The people who receive that petition can then see all the viewpoints on that issue, and upvote each viewpoint they agree with. If they don’t agree with any viewpoints, they can write their own new one. The distribution of public support for each viewpoint, supplemented by statistical adjustments to correct for skewed demographics of people posting/voting on viewpoints, will then be compared with how elected leaders for that district voted on relevant bills.

**Technology**

We plan to implement this on a web/mobile platform. We’ll have a front-end interface where people can create, view, and vote on viewpoints, as well as see the index ratings for elected leaders. On the back-end, we’ll draw legislative data from existing public APIs, and run our index calculations. We can also set up regular email digests or notifications to remind citizens of upcoming issues to share their opinions on, and to provide elected leaders a quick-and-dirty summary of what their constituents think about issues that’s more representative of true public opinion than the emails or phone calls they receive.

We imagine the process looking something like this: If someone in downtown LA is frustrated by broken sidewalks and thinks that more of the city budget should go to sidewalk repair, they can post their viewpoint on our platform and share it to friends, family, and neighbors, just like a petition. Other members of the community who might have an alternative or improved suggestion can add their own viewpoint, and nonprofits, think tanks, and subject matter experts can endorse viewpoints they support. As it gains momentum, city councilmembers will see the distribution of support for different viewpoints on that issue, and will have a clear source of data that they can use to make legislative decisions. If that politician rejects the public consensus, voters will see that reflected in the politician’s index, and have the knowledge they need to vote the politician out in the next election.

**Societal Impact**

If successful, this project would increase communication between citizens and leaders, and help issues be solved in a way that more closely reflects public values. It would build trust in political processes and increase people’s confidence that politicians are truly representing them. It could also help people identify nuanced perspectives that are currently driven out by polarizing forces, and find common ground with people who would otherwise be political opponents–thereby also building people’s trust in their fellow citizens.

From an equity perspective, it would also empower people without many resources to share their opinions with leaders in a more meaningful way. It would reduce inequalities in access to the ears of elected officials, and help people participate in the decision-making process even if they don’t have much time.