

PROPOSAL

Program on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship

Organization’s Mission, Vision, and Long-term Goals

Since its founding in 1780, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has served the nation as a champion of scholarship, civil dialogue, and useful knowledge. As one of the nation’s oldest learned societies and independent policy research centers, the Academy convenes leaders from the academic, business, and government sectors to address critical challenges facing our global society. Through studies, publications, and programs on the Humanities, Arts, and Education; Science, Engineering, and Technology; Global Security and International Affairs; and American Institutions and the Public Good, the Academy provides authoritative and nonpartisan policy advice to decision-makers in government, academia, and the private sector.

Project for Which We Are Requesting Funds

The coming twenty years will bring a set of important milestones related to the nation’s founding, including the 250th anniversaries of the Declaration of Independence (2026), the surrender of British troops at Yorktown (2031), and the opening of the Constitutional Convention (2037). Closely linked with these events is the 250th anniversary of the founding of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, in 2030. In preparation for this event, the Academy plans to initiate a portfolio of programs in the area of American Institutions and the Public Good. Current projects in this area focus on low-income Americans’ access to legal services, and the role of American institutions in promoting civil discourse. Other recent projects have focused on immigration policy, the independence of the judiciary, incarceration in America, the future of the media, race and inequality, and challenges to business in the twenty-first century.

These new programs will enrich the Academy’s discussion of the key civic institutions in American society. Perhaps most central among the institutions that these programs hope to examine is American democracy itself. But how do Americans engage with their democracy? What does it mean to be a “good citizen” of a democracy? Some might describe a good citizen as one who takes personal responsibility for improving her community (for instance, by donating to charity). Others might define a good citizen as someone who participates in community organizations. Yet others might define a good citizen as a person who defends her rights or those of her neighbors from encroachment by government or other institutions.¹ Fostering the virtues that feed into each of these different forms of “good citizenship” requires different approaches. Many studies have been undertaken that focus on one aspect of citizenship or the other, or on

¹ See Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, ““Educating the “Good” Citizen: Political Choices and Pedagogical Goals,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 37:2 (Apr. 2004).

education for citizenship for one particular group. The Academy, with its distinctive ability to convene broad groups of experts from all walks of life, has an opportunity to bring all of these conversations together in an effort to examine how *all* Americans—immigrants and native-born citizens, young and old, urban and rural—engage with the institutions of their democratic culture. Using the model of the Academy’s Humanities Indicators, the project described below will gather data on two fronts: How do Americans (both native-born and newly arrived) engage with the institutions of their democratic culture? And how has the social media revolution altered how people engage in their communities and what form that engagement takes? Once we have collected data to establish a baseline level of civic engagement in various areas, the project will then seek to develop recommendations on how to encourage greater levels of engagement.

Numerous Fellows have encouraged the Academy to initiate a program focused on the civic education of future generations of American citizens, an effort that returns us to the Academy’s roots. The Academy was founded to promote the creation and dissemination of knowledge—but not knowledge for its own sake. Rather, the Academy’s founders saw the pursuit of knowledge about the Arts and Sciences as being beneficial both to the new nation’s government and to the people who elected its members. The Academy’s 1780 charter states that the Arts and Sciences “*promote the honor and dignity of the government which patronizes them,*” and that they also “*advance the interest, honor, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people.*” Since 1780, projects that work to bolster American citizens’ understanding of and engagement with the institutions of their government have been a hallmark of the Academy’s work.

The charter’s invocation of both the people and their government does not address the fact that the founders had a specific vision of the practice of democratic citizenship, limited to a specific subset of citizens. The Academy’s founders could not have envisioned the expansions to the American polity that have taken place since 1780 (the extension of the franchise to African Americans and women), nor could they have imagined the technological advances that have influenced how American citizens are educated and how they interact with their government and one another. Nor would the founders have foreseen the transformation of the United States into a true nation of immigrants, well on the path to becoming a “majority minority” populace. The founders’ vision for the Academy as helping prepare Americans to be informed participants in their own government is just as powerful today as it was in the eighteenth century, and it is a vision that applies to all citizens, native and foreign born.

There is widespread concern that American schools are neglecting civics education in their focus on teaching professional skills and on preparing students to pass mandatory state tests. This is no doubt true, and is an area in which researchers have already compiled a massive amount of data (including that reflected in the Academy’s own Humanities Indicators Project). There are also numerous projects under way to bolster K-12 civics and history education, including innovative online platforms for civics education. This research on the current status of civics and history education will certainly be reflected in the discussions fostered by this project, but it will not be its primary focus. The opportunity that exists lies in the fact that most of the discussions that focus on civics and history classes in the schools neglect the much broader range of cultural practices through which Americans learn about democracy, and the larger set of institutions in

which people participate that help make up civil society—institutions including churches, schools, charitable organizations, youth groups like the Boy Scouts and 4-H.²

In his 2000 book *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, Thomas Ehrlich defines civic engagement as “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.” These practices may seem natural, but they are not. They are learned from the activities of daily life, not simply in the civics classroom, and learning these practices is a lifelong process, not simply something only young people do. “Civic engagement” is defined here as the participation of private citizens in the public sphere, conducted through direct and indirect interactions with civil society organizations and government, voluntary associations, and business establishments, to influence decision making or pursue common goals. Beyond participating in the institutions of civil society, however, civic engagement includes interacting with other members of the community to define public problems and then collaborating with fellow citizens to address those problems. In doing so, engaged citizens draw on certain virtues, such as empathy, equal respect for others, and a degree of loyalty to their communities that does not preclude critical thinking and dissent. Collaboration—actual work—is just as important as deliberation. Civic engagement is a central element of “democratic citizenship,” the process of being a citizen in a pluralistic and diverse democratic society. Democratic citizenship includes all the forms of behavior included under the rubric of civic engagement, but also includes activities that involve direct engagement with the government. It is clear that many Americans have direct experience with governmental institutions on a daily basis. They visit public libraries, their children attend public schools, they vote. But a study of civic engagement more broadly defined requires closer attention to people’s participation in the wider range of civic institutions in their communities—the non-political as well as the political. Citizens are members of voluntary organizations, they participate in the life of churches and synagogues, they coach sports teams. And they also engage with institutions virtually, through a wide range of online forums that give rise to types of community very different, but no less meaningful, than face-to-face voluntary organizations. This project will work to take into account the many forms of civic engagement in civil society other than direct political participation where American citizens learn the values of compromise, empathy, and self-sacrifice and participate in the life of their communities. This project will focus on the specific behaviors and values that people learn through engaging in the institutions of civil society, and will seek to offer concrete recommendations about how those values can be fostered. This project will also address the fact that many Americans have lost trust in their government (and in other institutions), and will seek to measure whether that loss of trust correlates in any way with a change in people’s level of engagement with those institutions.

The Academy’s “Stewarding America” project, chaired by Norman Ornstein, focused on the ways in which certain civic institutions both inspire and model effective citizenship. More generally, it highlighted the ways in which civic education takes place through a wide range of American institutions, including the military, the courts, the media, labor unions, corporations, and the non-profit sector. This project resulted in the Spring 2013 issue of the Academy’s journal

² “Civil society” is defined here as the full range of non-governmental organizations and institutions that are independent from the government that manifest the interests of citizens.

Daedalus, titled “American Democracy and the Common Good.” A new project on the practice of democratic citizenship will build on the strengths of recent projects at the Academy while bringing us back to the founders’ vision as we begin to prepare to celebrate the Academy’s 250th anniversary. While this project may not be able to provide answers to all of the questions addressed below, like all Academy projects it will develop a framework to help us think about the nature of engaged citizenship in a changing nation and world.

Planned Project Approach

Motivated by the definition of civic engagement provided above, and building on the work that went into the issue of *Daedalus* on democracy and the common good, this project will be animated by some key questions:

- What are the forms of civic engagement that are not included in traditional civics education?
- How do new arrivals to the United States learn the practices of democratic citizenship?
- Where do Americans receive their information about their democratic institutions?
- What are the primary points of interaction for most Americans with the institutions of civil society, and what is their level of participation?
- What gaps exist in citizens’ understanding of how civil society functions? What misinformation do they receive?
- What experiences encourage people to engage in civic institutions and model the behaviors needed for civic participation?
- What mechanisms exist for connecting people across demographic and ideological boundaries? What spaces are there for people to learn how to interact with those who are different from them?
- How will our needs change as the demographic makeup of the nation changes?
- How have the technological and media transformations of the past twenty years altered what civic engagement looks like in many communities?

Instead of launching a public campaign to encourage civic participation or voter turnout—efforts that many other organizations are conducting—this project will aim to change the terms of an ongoing conversation about what forms of activity constitute “civic engagement” and how those activities help people gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for a “free, independent, and virtuous people” to participate as citizens in a democracy. It will begin by collecting data that will help to identify the forms of engagement that people currently have with their civic institutions. Are we a nation of isolated individuals? Or are people engaging in their communities in new ways that do not register as civic activity? How have social media created new avenues for civic engagement? Through the collection of baseline data on these interactions, the project will identify practices that serve to both bolster and weaken democratic values, from public events to technological advances to scholarly debates, and can begin to identify educational needs. To identify practices that might foster the practice of engaged citizenship, the project survey will probe why subjects choose to become involved with some institutions and not others. What things do successful groups in civil society do that make it easier for people to

become involved? What makes that involvement more rewarding and effective? Are there changes to organization, structure, or communication that organizations can make that would foster higher levels of engagement? Similarly, we will also collect data on what individual values correlate to higher levels of civic engagement. Are there common elements in the backgrounds of people who are more actively involved in their communities? What behaviors can parents, educators, clergy, coaches, Scout leaders, mentors, and others model that will help promote the values that will lead to higher levels of civic engagement? What practices lead to enduring civic engagement, and what events can disrupt patterns of civic engagement?

Building on what was learned in the Academy’s “Stewarding America” project, which had an institutional focus, this project will emphasize the formation and actions of the individual citizen. It might also establish a set of best practices for both individuals and institutions to consider as they work together toward the project of educating citizens. The project will include:

- Organizing a planning committee of Academy Fellows to develop a project agenda and provide project guidance.
- The convening of an advisory group to compile and analyze existing quantitative and qualitative data on Americans’ current level of civic engagement. This will not be limited to voting or other interaction with government, but will include such forms of interaction as church attendance, participation in the Boy and Girl Scouts, library usage, charitable giving, service to educational institutions, and engaging in discussions about civic issues on social media.
- A particular focus will be given to research on forms of civic engagement in immigrant communities. This portion of the project will also help identify gaps—areas of civic life with low levels of engagement, as well as regional differences.
- Based on the data compiled in the first stage, a working group will assist in the development of a set of indicators for assessing civic engagement across sectors and a series of regular publications based on this data, modeled on the Humanities Indicators project.
- Ongoing collection of data on the areas identified as gaps by the advisory group, both through the Humanities Indicators platform and through a specially designed survey
- Once the existing data have been assembled, convening a series of meetings that will include scholars, leaders of civic institutions, K-12 educators, and government leaders to assess the data gathered in the first stage and to formulate a set of recommendations to address gaps in the data to identify what questions still remain open. These meetings will also feature discussion of the traits and habits—cooperation, compromise, reasoned discussion, and democratic decision-making—that are essential to the successful functioning of civic institutions in a diverse society. These meetings will include members of the Academy’s Humanities Commission and representatives of the Public Face of Science project and its Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education.
- These meetings will result in a series of reports that will assess citizens’ levels and forms of civic engagement, identify forms of engagement that have been transformed in recent decades, and recommend a set of tools for organizations to encourage the practice of democratic citizenship that could be adapted to distinct regional and community contexts. These tools might include recommendations for school curricula.
- Continued project outreach will be conducted through ongoing additions of data to the online Indicators site and through publications aimed at a broad audience.

- Launch report and full Indicators website in advance of the 2020 presidential election

The Academy's Comparative Advantage

A Program on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship will enable the Academy to further its slate of activities that continue its founding mission, and to deploy its distinctive assets—a distinguished membership, significant convening ability, and institutional independence—in the nation's service. As was mentioned above, there are a significant number of studies under way that focus on one particular aspect of the issue: young people's civic engagement, immigrants' preparation for citizenship, voting behavior. This project is well-positioned to succeed at the Academy because of the institution's ability to convene conversations that cross disciplinary lines and bring together people from academia, government, the non-profit sector, and civil society more broadly.

The Academy is also well-positioned to succeed because of the established online presence of the Humanities Indicators Project, which the Academy has sponsored since 2008, and is the Academy's most accessed online resource. The Indicators project collects quantitative descriptive statistics that chart trends over time in aspects of the humanities that are of interest to a wide audience and for which there are available data. They are selected to provide summary information related to the scope and vitality of the humanities. Indicators describe; they do not explain anything. They are factual and policy neutral. At best, they provide a "reality check" against which arguments about changes in the field can be tested. This platform is well-suited to collect data on the practice of democratic citizenship; in fact, many data that the Humanities Indicators has already collected will be of use in this project as well (e.g., data on civics and history education in K-12 schools). The existence of a staff skilled in collecting large-scale quantitative data as well as a pre-existing Web platform for its presentation gives the Academy a substantial comparative advantage in taking on a project of this scale.

Anticipated Challenges

There are two key challenges that we anticipate in this project: a surfeit of data in certain areas, and the difficulty of measuring behavior in others. Particular areas relevant to the project, such as civics education or voter behavior, have been the subject of tremendous amounts of study in the past two decades. We will rely on the expertise of the project's committee members to identify which sets of data are more useful, and which are more problematic. On the second challenge, working with partners to design a survey around identified gaps in the data will give us the ability to tailor our data collection efforts to areas where a group of experts have agreed that we need more information.

One additional challenge is more difficult to address. The results of the 2016 presidential election may well spark a renewal of civic engagement in the country. Calls for citizens to more carefully scrutinize their news sources and to engage more directly in grass-roots organizations could result in the project attempting to measure a moving target. Regardless, however,

establishing baseline data for how Americans engage with the institutions of their democratic society is a valuable effort, even if those behaviors are changing.

Evaluation

This project seeks to draw on the broadest possible expertise to raise awareness of the diverse forms that the practice of democratic citizenship takes, and to make this information publicly available both online and in print. Specific evaluation targets include:

- Engaging a geographically and institutionally diverse set of participants in the work of the project (a significant percentage of participants in the project's committees and advisory groups should be either non-Academy members or members from outside the Boston/Cambridge area)
- Publications and other media products: This project will seek to produce an online set of indicators to measure civic engagement broadly construed, as well as a set of reports that will contain recommendations for how different institutions (K-12 schools, colleges and universities, churches and synagogues, non-profit organizations) can promote civic engagement. The online set of indicators will be free to all, and will be publicized via Academy publications and social media platforms. The printed reports will be circulated to all 5000 Academy members, as well as to educators around the country and all 535 members of Congress. We will also partner with media outlets to publicize the project's recommendations.
- Meetings: the project will organize 5-7 regional meetings, two meetings of the data advisory committee, and at least two meetings of the full project committee. These meetings will be opportunities to contribute to and draw strength from other Academy projects, including the Public Face of Science and the Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education. The Public Face of Science is a three-year Academy project that addresses various aspects of the complex and evolving relationship between scientists and the public, including studies of public trust in and perception of science and scientists, an examination of science's engagement with the media, and a series of studies addressing how scientists are consulted during public decision-making processes. The Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education is a three-year Academy project to examine the state of postsecondary education in America, and to provide ideas for how to ensure that individual Americans receive the education they need to thrive in the twenty-first century. Additional Academy stated meetings or other events will also take place to help publicize the project's findings and recommendations.
- Publication of a set of specific goals for two sets of measures: factors that are accurate indicators of engaged citizenship; and actions that the committee things will help foster engaged citizenship. The latter will take the form of practical suggestions that are rooted in the data that the project has collected, so that their effectiveness can be measured against the data over time.

Sustainability

Building the data portion of this project on the same platform as the Humanities Indicators Project ensures that its findings will remain visible, and that new data can be incorporated relatively easily. The Humanities Indicators has been in existence for nearly a decade, and is the

most-visited online project ever conducted by the Academy. Adding a set of data focused on the practice of democratic citizenship will only serve to bolster the Indicators' long-term viability.