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## The State of the Field in Light of the State of our Democracy: My Democracy Anxiety Closet

Martha McCoy

*Everyday Democracy*, [mmccoy@everyday-democracy.org](mailto:mmccoy@everyday-democracy.org)

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# The State of the Field in Light of the State of our Democracy: My Democracy Anxiety Closet

## **Abstract**

There is a large and troubling gap between the promise of deliberative innovations and the most prevalent practices of our largely dysfunctional democracy. A web of factors is widening this gap and increasing the urgency of addressing it. With democracy in crisis, the deliberative civic field is engaging in more collaborative efforts and in more pointed conversations about how to have a systemic impact. To have any chance of improving the state of democracy, our field needs to: 1) envision and work toward structural change; 2) find more compelling ways to describe empowered public participation and more welcoming entry points for experiencing it; and 3) address the challenge of equity head-on. As a field, we have begun to address the first two, though we have much more to do. Our field has been more reticent to address the challenge of equity.

## **Keywords**

democracy in crisis, growing inequalities, structural change, civic infrastructure, empowered public participation, National Dialogue on Mental Health, Text Talk Act, Creating Community Solutions, equity, structural racism

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I recently saw an old friend from graduate school. He asked me how the work at Everyday Democracy was going, and then added, “The state of our democracy is actually getting worse; what is your organization doing about it?”

This question has been on my mind a lot – not just from the standpoint of leading a national civic organization, but also from my deep personal concern as a citizen. There is a huge and troubling gap between what we in the “deliberative civic field” see on a regular basis and how most people experience public life. In the course of our work, we are fortunate to see empowered public voice and action and its effects on the lives of individuals, families, and communities. And yet we also see the predominant realities: people from different backgrounds and views are often disconnected from each other and from government; people with few economic means and people of color face significant barriers to advancement; government is gridlocked; and we face serious public problems that go largely unaddressed.

There is a web of interrelated factors that is both widening this gap and making it more urgent to address. The power of money in politics creates barriers to implementing participatory processes, even for public officials who want to do so. The growing divisiveness of our politics is turning away many caring people of all views, especially young people. There is a profound lack of social trust between people with different views and few opportunities for exposure to people we may not agree with. There are large and growing disparities of opportunity and outcome that can be largely predicted by racial/ethnic identity and by economic means.

Even with growing successes in democratic innovation and practice, and with meaningful results from those practices, we haven’t even come close to affecting the daily lives of most people. It’s as though we have some knowledge about effective medicine for treating a rampant disease, but haven’t figured out a way to mass produce and distribute it.

With our democracy in crisis, our field is engaging in more collaborative efforts and in more pointed and urgent conversations about how to have a systemic impact. In this reflection, I offer a few brief suggestions about what we as a field need to do in order to have a fighting chance of improving the state of our democracy:

**1) We need to envision and work toward structural change.** I’ve noticed that talking about “structures” can seem distant from human experience, and yet structures profoundly affect our lives. A helpful short-hand way of describing structure is as a web of institutional practices and policies, cultural norms, and individual attitudes. Practices, policies, norms and attitudes shape the opportunities we have (or don’t have) to use our voice, be heard, share power and create change.

For over a decade, different configurations of people and groups in our field have been talking about what it would mean to create a “national civic infrastructure” to support empowered participatory democracy. Of course, our country has some forms of civic infrastructure – our electoral system is an example. But we haven’t yet created an

infrastructure for routine, legitimate, equitable participation that is connected to power sharing, problem solving, policy making, and governmental accountability. Without this infrastructure, other elements of civic life and practice (such as voting, media reform and civic education, to name a few) are more likely to be driven by forces impermeable to the concerns and voices of everyday people. Our field is improving its ability to analyze current structures and articulate strategies for creating democratic alternatives, but much more analysis and discussion are needed.

One current conversation about civic infrastructure is growing from a unique collaboration across our field, Creating Community Solutions. This initiative began in 2013 – led by several national organizations and coalitions in the deliberative democracy field – as part of the National Dialogue on Mental Health launched by the White House and led by the Department of Health and Human Services. The aim of Creating Community Solutions is to enable groups across our country to engage many thousands of Americans in deliberative dialogue and action on mental health. Learning from and building on each other's approaches to deliberation, we are extending the reach and impact of deliberative practice. We began this effort with an intention to use it to advance the creation of civic infrastructure at community, state and national levels. We are finding ways to bring more community and national leaders into this conversation.

**2) We need more compelling ways to describe empowered public participation and more welcoming entry points for experiencing it.** I recently heard someone say, “Our field has a branding problem.” This is true, although branding is not our entire problem. Most people think of participation as service, volunteering, voting or advocacy – all of which are important. In each of these types of participation, people can point to concrete examples, such as AmeriCorps, the electoral system, protests and boycotts. It's much harder to envision welcoming, culturally competent, politically legitimate ways for people to deliberate with one another, provide direction to public policy, and collaborate with each other and elected officials to carry out the solutions they have helped to create. Our country doesn't provide these routine opportunities, and people have trouble imagining something they haven't had a chance to experience.

It's important to note that the relatively few people (likely hundreds of thousands) across the country who *have* experienced this kind of participation often come away with a commitment to creating such opportunities. I once heard a participant say, at the end of a dialogue on poverty, “This must be what democracy feels like.” The practitioners in deliberative democracy have heard similar reactions thousands of times, from people of all ages and backgrounds, and often from people who were initially skeptical of participating.

That means that better messaging is important, but by itself it will not be enough. “Talking at” people about participation runs counter to the meaning of the message about the importance of people's own voice. It is much more powerful and consistent to provide participatory entry points. One recent and exciting innovation along these lines is “Text Talk, Act,” a process that combines text messaging, social media and face-to-face dialogue. This process was recently developed and used by Creating Community

Solutions as a way to engage more young people in the National Dialogue on Mental Health. With social media support from Lady Gaga's Born this Way Foundation, one recent day of Text, Talk, Act drew 800 distinct text-enabled dialogue groups across the country. An estimated 2,000 people took part that day; 75% of those who took part were younger than 35. While it is still early in its development, this innovation shows great potential for combining compelling messaging with participatory entry points to deliberative engagement.

**3) We need to address the challenge of equity head-on.** One of the greatest challenges to our quality of life and to democracy in the U.S. is our growing inequality. One of the most powerful and least talked about reasons for not attending to it is our country's long history of structural racism. Our field needs to address this challenge in order to make serious strides toward creating inclusive, participatory democracy.

Our country is only seven generations beyond publicly sanctioned slavery, and barely two generations beyond legally sanctioned discrimination. Thus, it is unsurprising that even as the nation rapidly diversifies, racial/ethnic identity remains a large predictor of opportunity and outcome disparities in every area of life, including civic life.

The dominant national discourse frequently portrays this as a problem of racial bigotry and discrimination that will inevitably disappear with generational attitude shifts. As with all structural phenomena, individual attitudes are part of the web of supports that form it. Yet, practices and policies that embody accumulated unfair advantage reinforce (and are reinforced by) unconscious bias and other forms of inequality. In the past two decades of our work at Everyday Democracy, we have bumped up against the color line in communities in every region of the U.S., and in communities of all sizes and demographic make-up. As we have learned from local coalitions, we have seen the connection between communities' practices to address racial/ethnic and economic equity and the capacity of those communities to organize and support empowered and productive participation. We have also learned the value of working on racial and other forms of equity inside our organization, in order to be more effective in national partnerships and in our work with communities.

While the fields of community organizing and community development have been more inclined to incorporate analyses of structural racism and other inequities into their efforts, the field of deliberative democracy has been more reticent to do so. This is partly because of concerns that our field will lose its credibility as an "honest broker" with both liberals and conservatives and with governmental authorities. But to ignore this analysis lessens our field's effectiveness in linking citizen voice to sustainable change. It also makes it less supportable to claim that deliberative democracy is about equitable voice and power sharing.

Continuing this conversation is essential to our work as a field. As we learn to uphold and practice principles of inclusion and equity, we will have a better chance of creating a vision, a strategy and an infrastructure that are powerful enough to transform our country.

## Suggested Readings

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## Author Information

Martha McCoy is Executive Director of Everyday Democracy and President of The Paul J. Aicher Foundation. Under her leadership, Everyday Democracy has become one of the leading organizations in the U.S. that supports communities in solving problems equitably and inclusively. McCoy serves on the advisory committee of the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, the executive committee of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, the national advisory board for the Center for Community Trustbuilding, and the national steering committee for Creating Community Solutions, part of the National Dialogue on Mental Health. She is an advisory editor for the community building department of the *National Civic Review*.