

Shared Myths and the Symbolic Infrastructure of Democracy

A Search for Cultural Points of Reference that Inspire and Unite Democratic Life in America

A Report of Findings to the Democracy Fund

January 8, 2018

By Lars Hasselblad Torres

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American democratic life is under stress – from plummeting public trust in government to a polarized and what can appear to be an uncompromising public. By some measures, we have begun a downward trend in the performance of key institutions and the stewardship of central concepts not seen since the mid-1970s.¹

To understand how these trends stack up against the democratic aspirations of Americans, and to get a sense of the core imagery and narrative within which those aspirations reside, the author carried out an independent research investigation with support from the Democracy Fund. This report summarizes findings from 45 interviews with American citizens in 21 states conducted between October 10, 2017 and January 8, 2018.

This report is divided into five parts. Section One offers a brief summary of the background and methodology used to develop the findings and recommendations, including a review of a change in methodology, the switch from “kitchen table” dialogues to one-on-one interviews.

Section Two provides findings two parts: the first presents evidence of concepts that shape our contemporary ideas of democracy. The second offers a summary of the images and narratives that appear to underlay our democratic imagination.

Section Three is a brief reflection on both what is uncovered in the research as well as what is not found in the research. The section concludes with a brief introduction to some of the remarkable cultural assets that served as personal compass points along the journey.

The fourth section is a collection of recommended next steps to deepen this research and expand its relevance to efforts to “revitalize” or strengthen democratic and civic engagement in the United States. It also catalogues a few “one off” projects that could provide momentum to longer-term efforts to further explore this territory.

The fifth and final section is a collection of references and resources that the author found useful in preparing for, and undertaking a Search for America.

The author wishes to extend deep gratitude to Joe Goldman and Donata Seconde of the Democracy Fund for their early support for this “fishing expedition,” without which A Search for America would not have been possible. Furthermore, it is only for the generosity and openness with which participants approached the subject and the process that there is anything to write about. It is to everyone who contributed and participated in some way to whom the author owes a deep debt of gratitude. The author also wishes to express fond appreciation to Karen Cornish for support of this project from the beginning – from the loan of a vehicle to logistics, outreach and editing. There aren’t enough T’s and Y’s in Scrabble to express sufficient “Thank You’s”!

¹ From, “Is American Democracy Really Under Threat?”

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/06/american-democracy-trump/530454/>

INTRODUCTION



Yamaha, Las Cruces NM

This research project proposed an investigation into the role of artists and the cultural products that animate our communities and our collective conscience.² Specifically, to develop an understanding of the cultural inspiration of democracy today, the “symbolic and mythological wells” from which a shared democratic aspiration might arise. The quest was to develop a preliminary answer to the question of whether a unified or unifying national or democratic mythology – and its accompanying archetypes and symbols – exists in America today, and if so, to attempt a description of the elements that comprise our unifying narrative.

Amidst the competition to assert the necessary values of inclusion, diversity and multicultural heritage into our cultural discourse, we should ask, “For what?” I propose that the danger in leaving this question off the table is that if we only expand the idea-set represented across the American population without investing in the connections between ideas and their integration into larger concepts of common purpose, our capacity to work together will further erode. We descend further into a contest of all against all, at best interest-group against interest group. We risk finding ourselves in what the eminent scholar Jane Jacobs has characterized as, “unwinding vicious spirals.”³

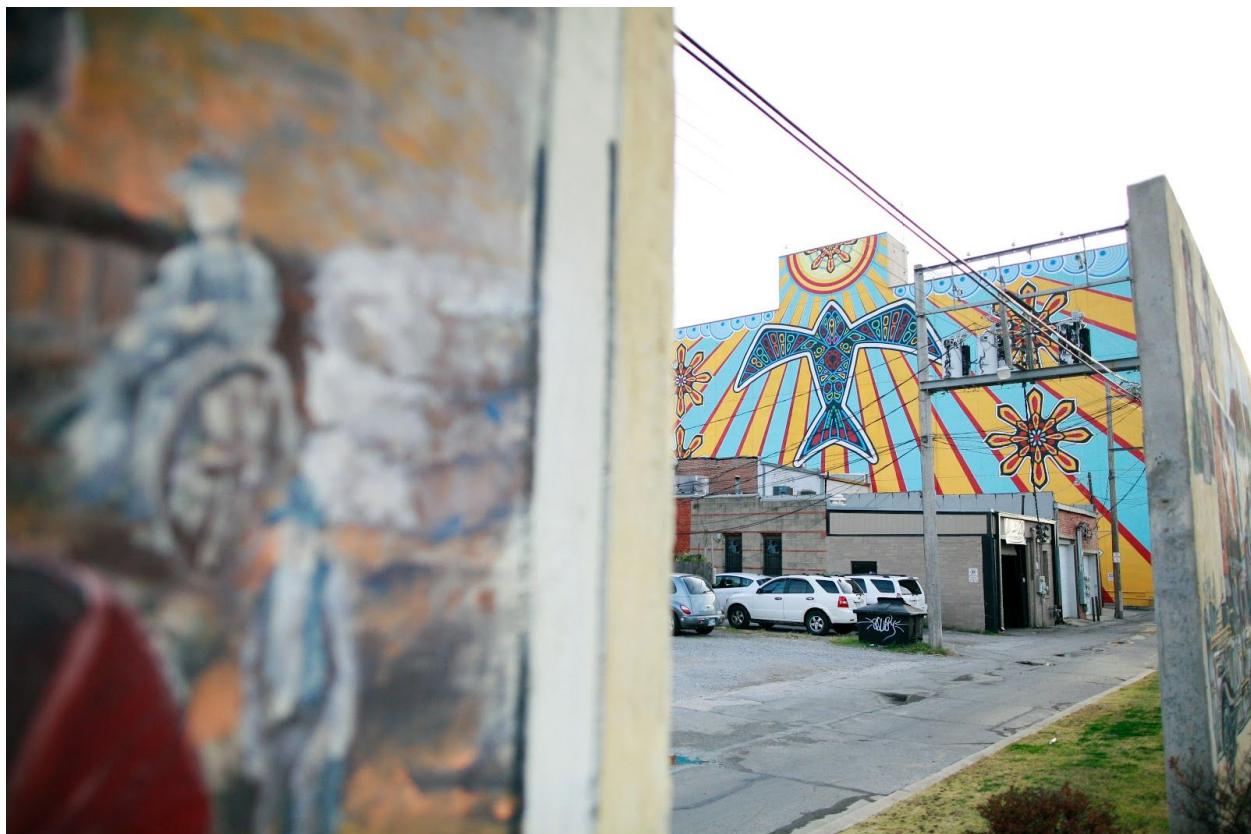
² Crozier, Michel, Samuel Huntington and Joji Watanuki (1975). “The Crisis of Democracy.” Trilateral Commission.

³ Jacobs, Jane. *Dark Ages Ahead*. New York: Random House, 2004.

The driving question has been whether there exists an unconscious social narrative we are weaving through the stories we tell, and do they comprise a contemporary symbolic domain, a landscape of myth and imagery that informs a common democratic culture?

From that narrative, is there a discernible national aspiration or purpose that gives form to our collective experience and binds us into this shared framework for action we call American democracy? If so what is it, and how is this common aspiration represented, if at all, through the symbols and mythologies that animate our democratic imaginations?

I. BACKGROUND



Mural, Norman OK

To begin to answer these questions I proposed that President Trump had defined the national purpose of our political moment, to “make America great again.” Without challenging the assertion, I proposed to dig into contemporary ideas of American greatness with the aim of uncovering common myths, archetypes and symbols of “greatness” that might give shape to a deeper, broader and more enduring national purpose.

It was Friedrich Nietzsche in “The Birth of Tragedy” who proposed that only a civilization whose cultural horizons are rimmed with myths and symbols has the capacity for survival. Thus, coming out of the particularly divisive 2016 elections and subsequent contests over civil war monuments, “fake

news" narratives, the nature of truth and the core meaning of our nation's founding documents, Nietzsche's words hold urgency.

So this project has not been about making an assessment about the *state or condition* of American democracy; what has been proposed is an inquiry or assessment into the *state of our concepts* of democracy – the condition of our democratic mythos and the symbols and archetypes that have carried those myths forward in our collective, dare one say "national" imagination.

The purpose of this research has been to uncover *living vernacular* symbols and narratives about who we are, and where we have come from, that retain any power as unifying forces. Out of this research it has been my goal to offer thoughts about both the prospects for invigorating these myths and symbols, and ways they might be leveraged to enliven *democratic* (versus *political*) aspiration.

METHODOLOGY



Tire Cake, Marfa TX

Three research questions formed the driving center of this inquiry, which are:

- 1) What ideas or concepts of nationhood are shared by Americans today?
- 2) What symbols, archetypes and myths are used to embody or reflect these concepts?
- 3) To what degree are these concepts and symbols shared among our people?

Insight into each area was developed through a six-question interview protocol used with participants. The pair of three question sets used are:

- 1) Ideas and concepts
 - a. What is your definition of democracy?
 - b. By that definition or standard, how are we doing today?
 - c. What levers do we have to strengthen our democracy?
- 2) Symbols, archetypes, myths
 - d. What was your earliest experience in participation?
 - e. What imagery do you associate with democracy in America?
 - f. Is there a narrative from our history that captures your democratic aspiration?

Findings from these interviews were developed using a very general approach to code and interpret key words and concepts. Some license has been taken to interpret these findings into the author's own ideas for opportunities to strengthen democratic aspiration through arts and culture programming.

Early in the project an important methodological shift was made to focus on one-on-one interviews versus the group or "kitchen table" format. There were three principal reasons for this: participant signaling, duration, and recording accuracy.

First, it was found in an early group interview that participants quickly shifted into a dialogue format in which responses - sometimes rebuttals - were directed toward one another instead of addressing the questions posed by the interviewer. This produced a "muddling" of direct participant input - probing for their specific insights and experiences - as well as a challenge to the desired effect of an open-ended, "no wrong answers" interview. While the ability of participants to build on one another's ideas was encouraging, it did not produce as direct and original responses.

Second, it was far more challenging to balance multiple participants' time and input within a compressed timescale. Early experience suggested that a full interview with an individual could last from 1.5 to 2 hours; achieving this kind of depth in a group interview of three or more participants would be nearly impossible.

Third, due to the chosen method of recording participant responses in writing, it became obvious that the interviewer's requirements for recording responses was in competition with the need to facilitate conversation and probe responses through follow-up questions.

For these reasons, the bulk of interviews - 80 percent - were carried out in a one-on-one setting.

Signup Cohort

The project proposed to conduct 60 one-on-one and group "kitchen table" interviews with diverse groups of Americans across the country, in at least 12 states representative of eight key regions.

Fifty-three Americans in 24 states signed up to participate in interviews throughout the country. Regional interest was largely balanced across the New England (7), Mideast (10), Great Lakes (8), Southwest (8), Rocky Mountain (9), and Far West (7). The project secured no interest in participation from the Plains region, and more modest participation in the Southeast (5).

The original intent of the project was to leverage social media and institutional connections to spread the word, generating a significant enough sample of participants that a “representative” interview cohort could be selected. In reality, every signup mattered, and efforts were made to include nearly all respondents – 85 percent – in the study.

Interview Cohort

At the completion of the project, 45 Americans have been interviewed, 75 percent of the intended target. A partial explanation for this shortcoming can be described as the limited success of the “kitchen table” format and the increased coordination and travel requirements of accommodating more interviews in a greater number of states.

Interview participants overwhelmingly voted Democratic in the last election (80 percent), with far fewer (12 percent) having voted for the Republican candidate. Three respondents expressed an unwilling “forced choice” to vote for the Democratic candidate. The remaining participants either did not vote (3) or voted for a Third Party candidate (1).

Fully 85 percent of interview participants are White/Caucasian, 6 percent are African American, and the rest of the cohort representing a mix of Asian, Hispanic and Native ancestry. Slightly more than half (56 percent) of respondents are male, and the balance (42 percent) female; one respondent identifies as queer. The age distribution of participants was predominantly split between middle aged with 45-54 years (42 percent) and older Americans 55-74 (31 percent). The rest are 35-44 (14 percent) and 25-34 (9 percent). One participant is between 18 and 24 and another single respondent is older than 75 years.

Respondents tended to reflect well-educated, employed, and higher income Americans. Significantly, all respondents reported some form of post-secondary, continuing education. More than half (51 percent) report holding a bachelor’s degree, nearly a quarter (22 percent) hold a master’s degree and a substantial share (16 percent) hold a doctorate. Nearly half of respondents (48 percent) have full-time employment; more than a quarter (26 percent) are either self-employed or hold multiple positions. Nearly one in ten respondents (8 percent) report being retired; the rest are students or described an alternative vocation such as “serial entrepreneur.”

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A selection of portraits of Americans encountered during the project

Nearly half (48 percent) of respondents reported household incomes above \$100,000 per year. Less than one in ten respondents (8 percent) reported household incomes lower than the national average of \$60,000 per year. Respondents were equally split (17 percent) across household incomes of \$75,000-99,000 and \$50,000 to 75,000. One respondent reported living below the federal poverty level of \$20,000 for a household of two.

Promotion and Communication

It is worth adding a footnote about the approach to communication used for this project. Primary recruitment of participants took place through email, Facebook, Twitter and word-of-mouth channels; additional efforts were taken to plan, coordinate and share the trip using a range of online tools. These include:

- 1) searchforamerica.org
A website where participants could easily sign up to participate in an interview or share the project with others they know.
- 2) facebook.com/asearchforamerica
A Facebook page for easy promotion and communication from the road. This included a modest investment in Facebook Ads that generated 2,500 views.
- 3) Roadtrippers
An online app that makes it easy to create and share trip routes using the website and through social channels. Recorded a trip of 12,962 miles to 35 destinations.

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https://roadtrippers.com/map?a2=t!19471883&lat=38.370797920524865&lng=-109.23058118556719&utm_campaign=trip&utm_medium=share&utm_source=copy&z=3.465994069698615



Interview route, mapped by RoadTrippers.com

In addition, the author's personal Twitter and Instagram accounts (both @lhtorres) were used to promote the project and foster engagement. Among the most commonly shared content were:

- 1) Blog posts written from the road at <https://www.searchforamerica.org/blog>
- 2) Interviewee portraits shared at: <http://searchforamerica.org/gallery>
- 3) A collection of democratic imagery at: <http://searchforamerica.org/imagery>

By the end of the research effort, 116 people had signed up to receive email updates about the project and 217 people follow Search for America's Facebook page.

A summary of "dashboard" stats from the Search for America project is:

- Interview word count - 29,970
- Miles traveled - 12,962 miles
- Hours of interviews - 70
- Interviews held - 45
- States visited - 21

II. A SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



A bronze casting pour in Oakland CA

It would be unfair to fail to preface the following pages with an acknowledgement of how generous, forthcoming and truly supportive participants were for this project. While motivations and interests varied greatly, everyone who participated in “A Search for America” made an average commitment of 1.5 to 2 hours for the conversation. And whether the interview took place over a glass of water or home cooked dinner, a studio tour or walk through a national park, everyone who contributed to this report did so by making time within busy schedules and enduring excessive correspondence and coordination. Everyone offered a spirit of open dialogue and encouragement that was truly humbling and thoroughly exciting. I am grateful and full of admiration for everyone who stepped up; as an experiment in “throwing myself over the social media wall,” I could not have been more kindly received.

Findings are presented in three sections. The first (“Democratic Concepts”) provides an overview of shared concepts of democracy and offers an assessment of participants’ disposition toward barriers to the exercise of these concepts. The second section (“Formative Experience, Imagery and Narrative”) introduces the primary images and narratives participants use to communicate democratic aspiration, including a look at their earliest and strongest memories of participation. And the third section (“Reflection”) provides an introduction to ways arts and culture organizations can build on these findings to strengthen democratic aspiration in America.

Each question generated varied – but overall fairly balanced – levels of engagement as measured by word count⁴, which looks as follows:

- 1) Definition of democracy - 4,976 (16 percent)
- 2) Performance assessment - 6,153 (21 percent)
- 3) Earliest participation - 5,482 (18 percent)
- 4) Democratic imagery - 4,183 (14 percent)
- 5) Democratic narrative - 4,811 (16 percent)
- 6) Opportunities to strengthen - 4,385 (15 percent)

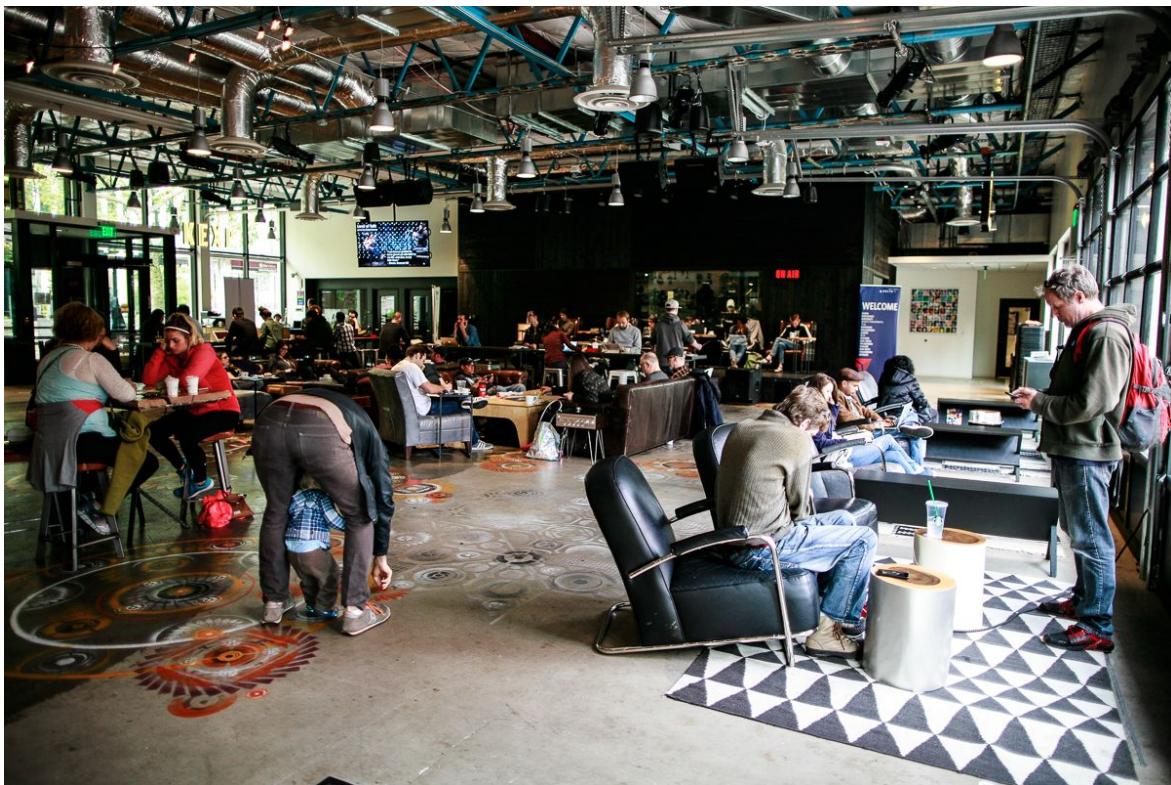
A. Democratic Concepts

Americans interviewed for this project are able to offer clear and broadly familiar definitions of democracy with discerning descriptions of the mechanisms that facilitate its exercise in government. Key concepts of an “ideal” democracy cluster into seven dominant themes which come close to framing a “social contract” that a few participants felt was missing from American life. What comes as a surprise is how well these trace back to the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, who in 1840 wrote “Democracy in America.” De Tocqueville’s central observations about the centrality of the individual and individual liberty in American life, about our pragmatism and entrepreneurial spirit, his critique of slavery and the treatment of indigenous peoples – these appear no weaker today for the years that have passed.

The themes reflected are:

- 1) **Of, for, and by the people.** Overwhelmingly respondents root individual citizens at the center of democratic life. Expressed as the mechanisms of majority rule, citizen legislatures, a jury of peers, protection of minority rights - these are the ingredients of effective democratic life. Several respondents used the word “republic” to define our body politic, making it clear that the purpose of government is not a tyranny of the majority but a greater good, the public good. It is significant that so many commented on the importance of these mechanisms at all levels of governance – local, state and national. For a much more limited number of respondents there is a connection between citizenship and “a say” in crafting actual policy.
- 2) **A voice and a say.** Voice, as the expression of will at the individual and collective levels, is a very strong theme across responses. Most of the time the idea of voice was discussed with the accompanying ideas of either “a say,” or “being heard.” Voice appears to mean that freedom of expression is guaranteed by our constitution; “a say” means that we are able to direct that voice into decision-making through explicit input channels – our representatives, public meetings, and polls for example; and “to be heard” means that there is a receipt of the content and some form of acknowledgment by the receiving party. While respondents

⁴ This is an imprecise measure of engagement, reflecting only the amount of notes generated during an interview. The measure assumes generally equivalent conditions and attention to each participant. Total count for interview notes is 29,970 words.



KEXP Studios, a hub of creativity, connection and community in Seattle

seemed to feel that “agency” was important to voice, an “impact” on desired outcomes was not a guarantee.

There was recognition that voice is also a part of a negotiation, and in a democracy as large as ours, agency can get watered down quickly. “A clamorous mess,” as one participant put it, “keeps so many ideas in contest all the time.”⁵ The most common response to this dilemma was expressed as local engagement, to become more active in city and state politics, where the distance and competition for voice is lessened. A significant share of respondents also expressed confidence in the idea of “the power to delegate power,”⁶ which can be interpreted as faith in the idea of representation – we elect leaders who most closely approximate our own values and ideas, and delegate to them the powers of our voice and agency to develop and pass laws negotiated among peers.

- 3) **One person, one vote.** The ideas of equality and equity underpin our understanding that a “fair” system levels power dynamics in American society, from wealth to education, status and position to geography. Equality appears to describe faith in the idea that everyone’s vote has the same weight in any system; equity acknowledges that a system imposes barriers to the exercise of voting for some groups, and will adapt mediating mechanisms to empower their ability to vote and ensure fairness.

⁵ Statement by a participant in the Southwest

⁶ An expression phrased by a participant in the Southwest

- 4) **Freedom, with rules.**⁷ The concept of self-determination is the engine of democratic life for a significant share of respondents. Along with this recognition was a sense that individuals have an obligation to limit the exercise of freedom when it presents a risk or threatens the greater good. Rules are in place to mitigate against the excesses of freedom, and a few respondents emphasized an obligation to respect those rules. Free speech (“taking a knee”) was frequently cited as an example of an essential freedom that is worth protecting, to a point. Hate speech was often provided as an example of an appropriate limitation of the freedom of expression.
- 5) **Checks and balances.** Participants expressed a respect for a system of government established with the principal goals of preventing executive overreach and balancing states’ rights against a federal monopoly of power. When respondents discuss checks and balances, it is a concept rooted in the balance of rights and responsibilities, power and accountability, individuality and unity, freedom and security. These are the great tensions of American life that are so often at the core of public debate.
- 6) **Dialogue and empathy.** Across the country I sense a strong appetite for the idea of “coming together.” The ability to speak civilly across differences, to meaningfully engage one another in the contest of ideas is important to many. Without agreeing or compromising, Americans want opportunities to listen to one another, develop their own understanding of where others are coming from, and to see the best in what others have to offer brought into decision-making for consideration.
- 7) **Government and opportunity.** “Democracy,” one respondent put it, “guarantees hope.” This sentiment came up over and over again, with a clear message that democratic ideas of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” are tightly bound up with economic opportunity. Not only does a democratic system of government establish the shared (or universal) conditions for individual betterment, government has a responsibility to preserve and strengthen those conditions through its laws, institutions, and practices over time.

“It’s sad,” one participant in the Rocky Mountain West commented, “that people have to run a GoFundMe campaign to get the basic healthcare they need for their kid.”

What is perhaps remarkable about these concepts is how well they track with the central conclusions made by French observer Alexis de Tocqueville in his two-part study, “Democracy in America” from 1835. In particular de Tocqueville themes of individuality, equality, participation, rule of law and the place of capitalism are more prominent. Weakest is the inclination toward nationalism – few respondents spoke of America in terms that could be considered “nationalistic” and a handful expressed skepticism for noisy flag waving expressions of national identity. New to the discussion is the emphasis on empathy and dialogue.

Interviews made it clear that Americans will probably recognize these seven concepts as essential elements of an “ideal” system. They spoke with equal power – sometimes deep skepticism, even cynicism – to profound shortcomings that work against the fulfillment of these democratic goods.

⁷ Language expressed by multiple participants

Some expressed a concern that the United States is going backward, retreating from earlier if imperfect fulfillment of these concepts. A few spoke of our moment with disgust.

The general sentiment toward our democracy, with few exceptions, is that it “feels shaky” as a participant in the Far West region put it. Others expressed a sense of discouragement, some said we’re not “measuring up to expectations,” and another that we’re “barely hanging on.” The majority of participants felt that we are not doing well in our efforts to create a more perfect union. “What,” asked one participant in the Great Lakes region, “is the endgame of government? It seems like the goal is to fill already full pockets.”

Among the eight participants who expressed a positive sentiment for the state of our democracy, some placed that in the context of other countries’ performance and history – we’re doing better than others, and than at other times in our history; its dynamic akin to the “random walk and drift” of the stock market over time, a participant in the Southwest put it. Others expressed a similarly optimistic view, noting that while our democracy inevitably flounders at times, through collective mobilization and action, the system adapts and recovers.



Early morning bar, Yachats OR

Five barriers to the realization of our “democratic promise” stand out clearly from interviews; these countervailing forces make it profoundly difficult for many respondents to have confidence in the health of the core concepts that shape our democratic institutions and practice. They are:

- 1) **Education.** Most agreed that the single greatest obstacle to a flourishing democratic culture and practice in the United States is an informed citizenry. Participants felt that both the skills of participation are weakly distributed in society, as is the background knowledge necessary for effective participation. Participants expressed an appreciation for fact over emotion and a concern that a poorly educated population is a population that is too easily manipulated. One respondent in the Southwest went further, speaking to a deficit of philosophy and a concern that as a culture, Americans lack the tools to appreciate the question, “What is the nature of truth?” Fact checking, he suggested, is very different from cultivating a search for truth.

In a stark illustration of the education barrier at work in pitting the general public against a subgroup, participants in the Southeast seemed to feel that the impetus behind removal of Confederate statues was fueled more by a general ignorance than empathy or understanding of southern people, their communities and their history.

- 2) **Citizens United.** The influence of money in politics was an inescapable theme of conversations across the country. Participants frequently reflected on three impacts of the influence of money in democracy: its role in lowering discourse by amplifying conflict, its degradation of empathy through fear and “othering” tactics, and the skewing of agendas to benefit wealth concentrating dynamics. “Money,” a participant in the Mountain West put it, “is going to make more and more people feel like they are not being heard, the more others can spend to get their voices out.”

Money in politics is generally understood to correlate with candidates that are the most acceptable to elite and corporate interests. In other words, the more money flowing to a candidate, the more likely it is that they will favor corporate interests over the popular will. A significant number of respondents expressed that this was especially relevant in the last election, where electoral victory translated into key appointments representing a “hijacking” of federal agencies and their regulatory role. The effect, one participant in the Great Lakes region put it, is to have “drained” government of bureaucratic competence.

- 3) **Gerrymandering.** The difference between the popular vote and the electoral college returns in the last election were seen as symptomatic of a failed electoral districting process, and demand for reform is clear. A participant in the Far West perhaps stated the frustration most clearly, noting American democracy has failed as a “system that produces Citizens United or gerrymandering – literally outcomes that say people’s voices and their votes don’t matter.” A deeper sentiment is that the political establishment has “engineered”⁸ the competition for citizen voice out of the electoral process. Another participant in the Great Lakes region expressed it as having effectively and anti-democratically “gamed” the system.
- 4) **Media.** “Non-facts from poor sources,” is how one participant from the Great Lakes region described much of the information consumed by citizens today. There is a shared sense that media contributes to fear-mongering, angst and the disappearance of empathy among otherwise decent people. Respondents point to the impact of both mainstream media and

⁸ Stated by a participant in the Far West

social media in “dragging down the conversation,” creating a sense that “you have to do something” according to one participant in the Mountain West.

There is a sense that partisan voices on television are “talking over each other,” and that the discourse, a participant on the Far West observed, is flat. In his words, “There is no landscape of thought.” An appetite for television news programs to present fact-based stories over editorial and opinion reporting, and for talk shows to facilitate more of a “listening across difference”⁹ was persistent.

The theme of “listening” came up repeatedly in conversations across the country, and notably the absence of listening as a cultural trait. This was expressed as an attribute of both mainstream media and online on social media platforms, in particular Facebook. “Everybody wants to express an opinion,” a participant in the Far West stated, “but don’t want to do the work of listening.” Listening, another participant in the Rocky West observed, “is a means of understanding one another – or at least trying to – where we’ve come from and where we want to go.”

- 5) **Two-party system.** Most respondents who commented on the two-party system in America were not favorable. The strongest sentiments were that the two-party system failed to account for broadly held, competing viewpoints and ultimately led to polarization and gridlock in legislative bodies. There is a sense that a two-party system placed emphasis on party capture and preservation of power over political negotiation and compromise in the public interest. One interviewee in the Mountain West felt that the power of a national party’s apparatus produces incentives for state and local politicians to grab messages from national groups for the money and status rather than local salience, which exacerbates polarization.

Participants also recognize two polarizing dynamics implicit in American life that frustrate efforts to build a “more perfect union.” These can be expressed as tensions between geography and scale, and the libertarian and communitarian impulses.

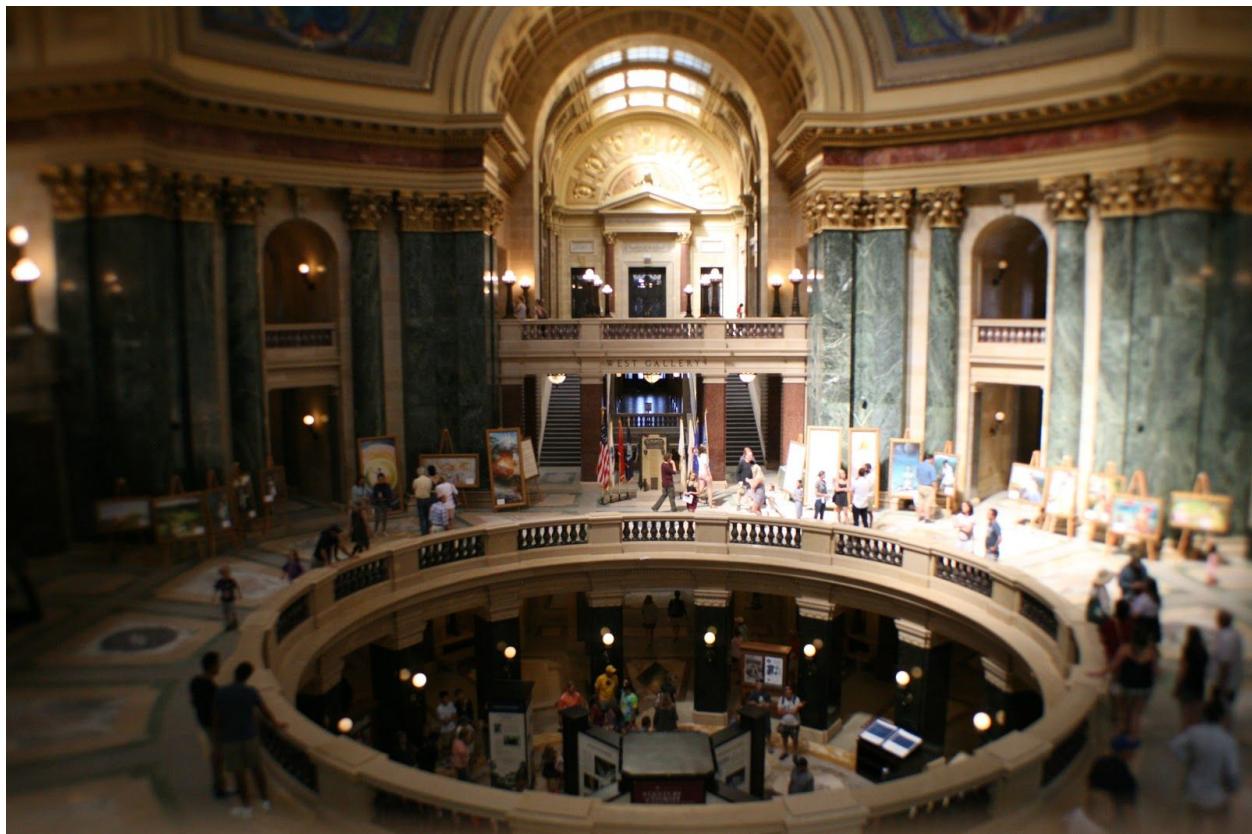
- 1) **Physical geography and numeric scale.** A significant number of participants pointed to ways geography and population inform democratic concepts and practice. Large and densely populated cities were understood to experience issues differently than thinly populated and spread out rural areas.
- 2) **The libertarian and communitarian impulse.** The tension between individual freedom and a responsibility for the whole was expressed by several participants as a “social contract.” The tension in defining mechanisms that balance the protection of individual rights with an obligation to create opportunity for all was an equal source of aspiration and frustration.

B. Formative Experience, Imagery and Narrative

Most participants could talk about their earliest experience of participation in democratic life through one of four common pathways: family, first-time voting, school and volunteering. Stories of early and direct participation offer a glimpse into nearly sixty years of democratic life in America, tracing the

⁹ Expression of a participant in Mideast

legendary political contest of Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon through Vietnam War protests, the contest between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, the emergence and power of the LGBT movement, the surge in volunteer action, and the election of Barack Obama in 2008.



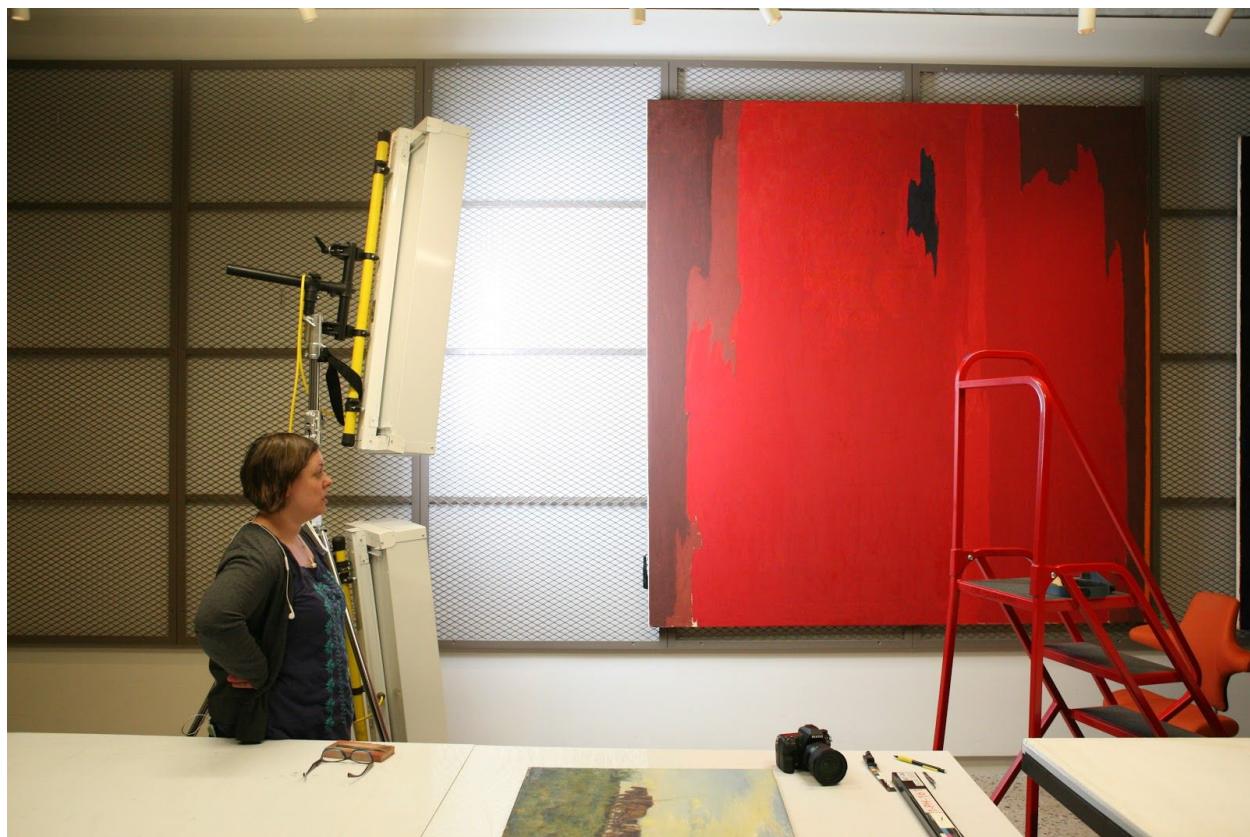
The state capitol, Madison WI

Formative Experience. Participants reflected on the power of four key pathways to early democratic participation: family, the voting booth, school, and volunteer activities.

- 1) *Family.* Parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents play a prominent role in the democratic acculturation of many Americans. These include formative reactions to a parent's own ideology to volunteer experiences in the political campaigns or organizing efforts of family members and family friends.
- 2) *Voting.* Many participants could remember very clearly their first experience voting. For most it was an experience with a paper ballot, where the choice between distinct candidates (Carter or Ford, Reagan or Mondale) loomed large. For a few in the Northeast it was the experience of discussion at town meetings and the accompanying voice, hand, or paper voting.
- 3) *School.* A substantial share of participants recalled experiences in middle and high school student government, most often standing as a candidate for class and student body offices. In fewer cases, experiences in college drove participants into democratic participation as journalists, volunteers, and student organization leadership roles.

- 4) *Volunteering.* In addition to volunteering for the campaigns of family and family friends, a few participants recollected formative experiences serving as volunteers for political campaigns, local organizations and community projects. A handful have run for, and served in, political office at the local level. For one respondent in the Southeast, volunteer service on the board of national and international membership organizations comprised the largest share of her democratic participation.

Imagery and Symbols. When participants talk about images that embody the essence of democratic life, a very different collection of ideas emerge. Notably, several respondents indicated skepticism and distrust of the use of symbols and imagery to enliven and communicate democratic aspiration; they felt that such use bordered on propaganda and false patriotism. One participant in the Far West expressed a sense of a “fatigue of imagery” produced by a daily bombardment, to the extent that imagery felt “cheap.”



Conservatory, Clifford Still Museum, Denver CO

For participants who shared imagery, the greatest number (33 percent) shared images of people. Eight respondents (18 percent) mentioned flags as important symbols; one was the Pride flag, another the Confederate flag, and the rest, the traditionally known “Stars and Stripes.” Five participants mentioned “founding documents” as important symbols of our democratic aspiration, with the Constitution of the United States being the more common. Four respondents indicated elements from American nature as symbolically meaningful to them.

Further exploration of the images recollected by participants invites at least three observations: the prominence of race consciousness, social contest – even conflict – and the value of public space in American life.

Race consciousness. Race maintains a visual space in many Americans' conscience, at least as far back as the Civil War. At least six images suggest that race – and racial equality – is understood as the basis of much 19th and 20th century struggle and transformation in American life. It is also understood as the basis for protest organizing and courageous leadership in the middle of the 20th century. Race begins to generate a narrative of social harmonization (3) with Spike Lee films in the 1990's and the election of Barack Obama as President in 2008.

In addition to the struggle for racial self-determination, imagery from two wars – World War II and the Vietnam war – were the basis of strong and very different associations. The World War II image of a Japanese soldier's skull on a tank was derived from a redemptive story about personal transformation in American life made possible through military experience, a journey from a criminal past to prominent chemical engineer through the benefits of the G.I. Bill. The image of southern Vietnamese children fleeing a bombed north Vietnamese village was used to communicate the idea that Americans undermine our self-interests, "bombing ourselves" in areas like health care.¹⁰

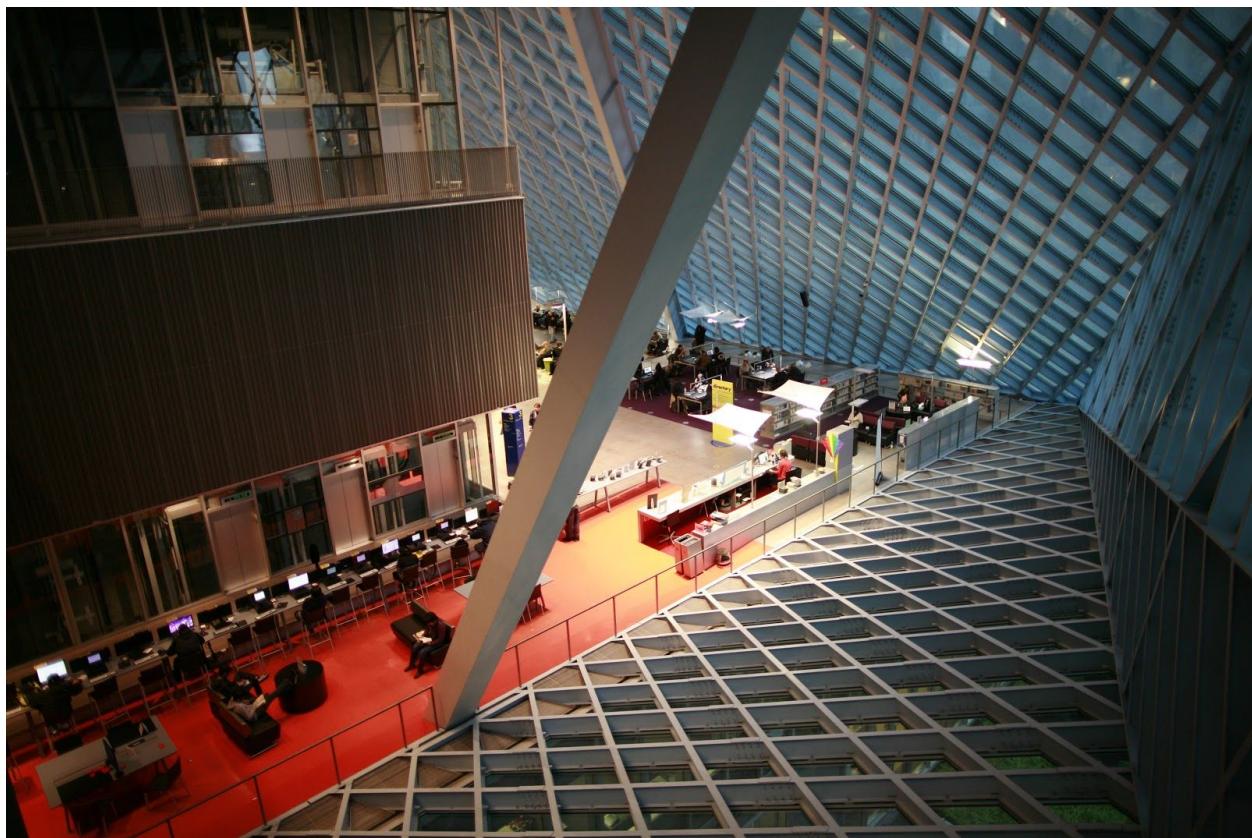


Concepts shared by participants when asked to use imagery and symbols to communicate our democratic narrative.¹¹

¹⁰ Reflection of a participant in the Southwest

¹¹ The size of the image in its use here does not correspond with frequency of occurrence of imagistic language or any other correlation

Social contest. Mass movements, organizing and protest comprise a substantial share of democratic imagery among respondents. The most consistent are images from the struggle for black equality in American life – from its early origins in the Civil War to the assertion of integration – and its backlash – through the civil rights movements. The election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 stands as an apotheosis of this movement for many. Additional imagery around civic struggle in America comes from the women’s movement beginning with the first presentation of the Equal Rights Amendment to President Warren Harding to the Women’s March in 2017. The Pride flag embodies the movement to establish the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer citizens of America.



The Seattle Public Library, an aspirational public space.

Public space. Spaces and places form a third significant share of Americans’ democratic imagery, from outdoor spaces to national and local monuments, business establishments to public infrastructure. Public spaces tended to be distant; public places closer to home.

Most broadly, America’s national parks were cited by a participant in the Far West as a symbol of the commons, spaces held publicly. In this vein, other participants cited the Rocky Mountains and the Oregon Coast as symbols of America’s inviting grandeur and public accessibility. More generally, “amber waves of grain” were invoked by a participant in the Rocky Mountain west.

Several participants spoke generally of monuments as a form of symbolic power; specific examples that were given include the Statue of Liberty as a beacon and “an invitation” from America¹², and the Lincoln Memorial, referenced twice, in one instance in the Mideast as a reminder of the struggle to create a more perfect union and the second, in the Rocky Mountain West, as a symbol of someone who stood up – an individual’s capacity to create great change in America.

Public places were businesses that also served as social gathering places. They include the gym, where diversity and physical contact across strangers in a workout setting was valued by a Great Lakes participant. Also in the Great Lakes, a participant recognized barber shops as a symbol of convivial, democratic and intact communities. Makerspaces were cited in the Southwest as spaces for democratic learning and a platform for mutual assistance, problem solving and entrepreneurship.

Personal narrative. Many of the themes reflected in participants’ telling of personally meaningful democratic narratives have been covered in earlier discussion of concepts and imagery. What is striking about much of the narrative is how immediate it is, drawn from direct and mostly informal experiences, nearly all within living memory.

A few major themes do jump out, which are: immigration and opportunity (13); civil rights struggles for recognition and rights (8); local participation and community change (6); and the spirit of rebellion (5). In addition, a significant number of narratives (7) reflected the role of indigenous peoples, or the impact of American growth upon them. A handful of narratives involve the exercise of formal democratic mechanisms to bear upon systemic change (3). Abraham Lincoln emerged as the dominant figure in the American narrative.

Immigration and opportunity. The Horatio Alger and Sinclair Lewis stories cited by participants in the Rocky Mountain West – as the “go west young man” and “bootstraps” stories by those in the Far West and Southeast – support the narrative of America as a place of opportunity and social mobility as a prominent narrative among citizens. Many respondents cited family histories of immigration, hard work, and mobility as sources of pride and optimism in American life. A few respondents criticized the effect of prejudice in defining access to the narrative along with a contemporary contraction of opportunity in the wake of the post-World War II economic boom. As one person in the Far West put it, you can’t pull yourself up by the bootstraps, “if you weren’t born with a leg to stand on.” Thus, optimism in American life is tempered by the acknowledgement of structural and social barriers to participation.

Civil Rights. The movements to expand the promise of American life continued to exert a strong influence on respondent’s narratives. In addition to the inspiration of numerous heros – Abraham Lincoln, Izetta Jewel, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders – participants cited movements in history as tests of the truth of America’s commitment to principle, and as proving grounds of our nation’s greatest heroes. Though much of their work sprang from an urgent critique of American democracy, it was also seen as completing the work of our founding fathers to build a more perfect union.

¹² From an interview in the Far West

Local Participation. A strong source of inspiration and optimism for the American democratic project among participants springs from the wells of community involvement. From community boards to arts organizations, the idea of “barn raising” on the local level to improve live, for oneself and others, is a positive and driving force in American life.



The bronze bell foundry at Arcosanti, Mayer AZ

III. REFLECTION

Traveling across the country, hearing the stories, reflection and commentary of dozens of Americans who care deeply about the state of our nation was a gift. While there was an unmistakable tone of frustration, fatigue and some fear generated by contemporary political dynamics, the undercurrent was a belief in the American project and an optimism that we have the capacity to pull together as a nation to pull through it. There did not seem to be a clear answer to the question of what would cause us to do so.

It is important to acknowledge that these conversations were being informed on the side by visits to some of the country's remarkable civic and cultural assets. From the stunning sweep of the Hoover Dam to the trapezoidal facets of the Seattle Public Library; stark galleries in the town of Marfa, Texas to the wood-warm Nordic craft school rooms in Grand Marais Michigan – America's cultural assets are stunning and humbling, vibrant and engaging. These civic spaces are suffused with the

entrepreneurial optimism for which our nation is renown, and are significant for the vision and ideas they contain.¹³ Several stand out:

- 1) **The Seattle Art Museum.** Housing one of the largest collections of Pacific Northwest Indian artwork, when I visited the museum it had just opened a stunning retrospective exhibit of more than 100 Andrew Wyeth works suffused with the American landscape and humanity.¹⁴
- 2) **Site Santa Fe, New Mexico.** *Future Shock* is an exhibit of eleven international artists curated as a response to the American futurist Alvin Toffler's 1970 book of the same name. The exhibition of work is timely as it questions technology's impact on social arrangements and relationships, with and within nature.¹⁵
- 3) **ADX Portland, Oregon.** ADX is one of the nation's most influential makerspaces. After opening in 2011 by a woman-led team of artists, designers and crafters, the 24,000 sf. space has gone on to incubate more than 100 businesses, support over 200 crowdfunding creative projects, and nurture hundreds of makers.¹⁶
- 4) **Marfa, Texas.** Home of the American artist Donald Judd from the 1970's through the 1990's, this West Texas town has become an epicenter for worldwide cultural and intellectual production. Home to numerous permanent collections, galleries, international residency programs, and performance venues, this town of 1,747 residents punches well above its culture weight.¹⁷
- 5) **The Clifford Still Museum, Colorado.** Among the first of the Abstract Expressionist painters, Clifford Still was an American artist with a formative influence on the movement. The stunning museum houses 95 percent of the artist's work, including 3,125 works produced from 1920 to 1980. The museum maintains an archive and conservation team to restore and maintain the collection.¹⁸
- 6) **Arcosanti, Arizona.** Carved out of the basalt rock between the Sonoran Desert and the Coconino Plateau, the Arcosanti Urban Laboratory is a living experiment in ecological design and living. Organized as a volunteer residential cooperative, Arcosanti is a remarkable collection of functional concrete forms designed by the architect Paolo Soleri that has been continuously evolving since 1970.

In reflecting on the heart of our democratic aspiration – to be a nation of opportunity for all, that advances its purposes without coercion and violence on its own or any other people, and that restlessly seeks to strengthen its institutions and improve its practices – I'm struck by a few observations about pragmatism, gender, history, and production.

¹³ A summary of fifteen highlights from Search for America are posted at:
<https://www.searchforamerica.org/single-post/2017/12/30/Fifteen-Things-Im-Thrilled-to-Have-Experienced-On-My-Search>

¹⁴ Andrew Wyeth at the Seattle Art Museum: <http://wyeth.site.seattleartmuseum.org>

¹⁵ SITE Santa Fe's Future Shock exhibit at: <https://sitesantafe.org/exhibition/future-shock/>

¹⁶ Artist and Design Exchange Portland at: <https://adxportland.com/facility/>

¹⁷ Marfa, Texas online at: <http://www.visitmarfa.com/>

¹⁸ Clifford Still Museum: <https://clyffordstillmuseum.org/>

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Let me preface these observations with the following thought: that for all of its genius, the resilience of De Tocqueville's "Democracy in America" comes as something of a shock. While acknowledging the need for reform, almost without exception Americans define our democratic culture by the central traits observed more than 150 years ago. It seems fair to wonder, as the world has moved toward global interconnectedness and interdependence, whether our concepts and mental model of a strong democracy haven't expired. Can the ideas that were developed out of a revolutionary impulse of *separation* and *building anew* – and the mechanisms that enshrine them – be the same that direct and give life to the aspirations of a population bound up in a complex web of global relations, from communication to supply chains to security threats?



Abandoned homestead, around Malta MT

Here are five observations about our democratic moment distilled from interview material:

First, America's myths are rooted in less than 400 years of living history. Our narratives and imagery – with few exceptions – are not the products of imagination, fiction and embellishment; by and large the stories we tell are realistic interpretations of people and their struggles to wrestle new conditions from constricted times. From the Revolutionary War to LGBTQ rights, America's democratic aspiration is charged by pragmatic figures of heroic stature whose claims to history have been powered by the contributions of countless invisible faces. Paul Bunyan is less relevant to the American narrative than Barack Obama; John Henry is a distant finisher to Abraham Lincoln.

Second, American democracy – and the stories we tell about it – remains a highly racialized project. The lens through which we perceive our history is one where race place a significant role, and it is rarely a positive role. Whether speaking on numerous occasions of the cost of the American project borne by indigenous peoples or the great toll and legacy of slavery on black Americans, much of the narrative and imagery provided by participants suggests that we have been unable to integrate our history of racial abuses into positive psychological construction. There is some evidence that President Obama represented this hope for many, accompanied by deep concern about his successor's ability to undermine that progress.

Third, the narratives we tell and the images we share are principally occupied by male figures. There is some reason to chalk this up to history, to “conditions of the times” that kept women from occupying positions of leadership in the heyday movements from which our nation sprang imperfect. Nonetheless, as the arc of history has bent us toward expanded access and inclusion, one can only wonder why male figures continue to dominate the public imagination around innovation, entrepreneurship and leadership. By and large Rosa Parks takes a back seat in the theater of our minds to the brothers who surrounded Dr. King. Hedy Lamarr is drowned by the chorus of Edison, Tesla and Ford. Rosie the Riveter remains an apprentice to the forces of social progress than the candidacy of Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern.

Fourth, the bulk of our democratic storytelling draws its inspiration from World War II to the present. Our minds are principally occupied by the people and events that have shaped us directly – family members, local organizations, social movements, presidential candidates. With the exception of suffragettes, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Ford and possibly “Bootstrap Jackson,” there is a thinly populated period of popular history from 1865 to the 1930’s; it is preceded by an equivalent narrative gap from about 1787 to 1860. By comparison, the period from around 1954 to the present is a rich trove of living insight and inspiration. Whatever the lessons of our Early Republic, Reconstruction and Gilded Age experiences are, they remain to be unlocked, retold and celebrated anew. Perhaps the lessons of western expansion can inform new narratives of space colonization; it may not be impossible to re-examine the explosive growth of American cities as we reimagine ingenuity and self-reliance in the age of DIY manufacturing and shared creativity.

Fifth, economic production and consumer goods outweigh cultural production and its output in the balance of our democratic narrative. The role of media in our democracy is defined in largely instrumental terms, as a platform for information sharing, education – even manipulation. With the notable exceptions of Trumbull’s “Declaration of Independence” and Shepard Fairey’s “Hope” works, the painters and photographers who have produced a trove of democratic imagery are nameless, their work invisible against the inevitable hustle and bustle of democratic life. Outside of Washington, DC the architects and sculptors who have crafted prized public spaces that root democracy in our communities fade against contemporary captains of industry. Daniel Burnham and Frederick Law Olmsted set the table for Google and Tesla; the works of Louise Bourgeois and Georgia O’Keefe compete with mobile phones and flat screen televisions for our eyes – and therefore access to the soul – of democracy.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS



Dusk east of Bears Tooth MT

With these observations, combined with the insights offered in interviews, here are a few tentative conclusions – working ideas about how shared democratic aspiration can be strengthened in America.

- 1) **Continue the conversation.** Participants responded positively and with encouragement to the opportunity to talk about American life using a frame that we intuitively understand and yet don't often apply in our day-to-day lives. It was not uncommon to have the uncanny sense that democratic concepts are not actively discussed past junior high or high school civic classes; political discourse has really become the envelope through which democracy is understood. It is refreshing to have that frame reversed.

The conversation can be expanded in at least two ways: the first is to take a second stab at the project, with a concentrated effort to draw in more conservatives. The goal here would be to probe for distinctly different messages from a cohort defined by different voting behavior.

The second opportunity is to encourage Americans to use these questions to interview one another and record their findings. The benefits of this approach are to foster dialogue across what are understood to be polarizing differences using an open frame that we are all invested in. Furthermore, such conversations can encourage Americans to reconsider how, and how often, we engage in democratic life; the potential is to reinvigorate aspiration across all

groups.

- 2) **Communicate findings.** While there is a risk to the incompleteness of the findings contained, members of congress and democratic actors at the state and local level would be well-served to be made aware of this project and its conclusions. In particular, politicians could be excellent ambassadors of democratic aspiration in two ways: first, by engaging their own constituents in open-ended inquiry into the health and general distribution of democratic ideas among their constituents.

Second, elected and appointed leaders would do well to imbue their talking points and public interactions with many of the aspirational concepts that resonate with Americans. One benefit would be to defuse partisan and issue-based conflict with appeals to core concepts of democratic life; another would be to tap aspiration, loyalty and creativity among citizens to “build a more perfect union.”

Communication could take place in at least two ways. First, a time-sensitive distribution of print or electronic summary materials followed by regional briefings. Second, monthly or quarterly follow-up briefings that tackle individual concepts and their regional variation more deeply, providing nuance and cultural salience for each concept.

- 3) **Engage cultural organizations.** An unfinished piece of work here is to engage cultural organizations – museums, arts-based non-profits, universities and professional associations – in discussion around their role in framing and stewarding concepts of democracy and democratic aspiration through cultural production and activity. A culture-specific version of this report, with a request for a follow-up interview, should be produced and made available to as many groups as possible. There are several ways to build on this:

First, it would be very interesting to carry out a sampling of programs and collections that explore and communicate concepts of democratic aspiration. Organizations would be asked to provide some insight into how materials they own, lease or have produced are used to support democratic life, how they are accessed and how often, and how their impact is evaluated. Included should be a request for additional points of reference – assets and institutions that they look to as exemplars.

Second, cultural organizations can be asked to engage in a deeper conversation about an expanded role in supporting democratic aspiration in America – what kinds of programming would excite them, what resources would be needed to carry them out, and how they would approach evaluating impact.

Third, there is an opportunity to bring funders in the arts and in democratic engagement together, to talk about the value of investing in democratic aspiration, in particular the themes raised in this paper among others. Funders would be asked to identify ways they can work together to strengthen the prospects for democratic life in the United States through joint investments in programming around the concepts, myths and imagery that fire our collective democratic aspiration.



Dusk over migrant settlement, eastern Washington

In addition to the immediate and perhaps pragmatic opportunities to build on this work, several more speculative efforts come to mind. These activities represent risky investments in “movement” building around central claims, with the goal of knitting together an infrastructure of goals, institutions and activities to advance a culture of democratic aspiration. A few examples:

- 1) **Convene the big thinkers.** A rich and lively debate about the future of politics is clearly taking place throughout the country. From Sarah Silverman’s “I Love You, America” series on Comedy Central to Khizr Khan, the Knight Foundation to Nick Hanauer – Americans of all backgrounds are using creative methods to engage the public in an unformed conversation about democracy.

With a focus largely on polarization, civic engagement, and party politics, the conversation is missing two potentially fruitful elements for public engagement and negotiation: what are our core democratic values, and how do we enshrine those in the mechanics of governance. It could be worth the time and effort to convene some of the most prominent voices in this area – actors of all backgrounds – to pencil out what a new kind of national conversation about democratic aspiration could be and to develop a plan for local and regional engagement.

- 2) **Invite creative production.** What is the role of artificial intelligence in a future democracy? What does democratic society look like when participation is enacted through smart phones?

What does our system look like when regions are recognized and empowered? These and many other questions could be the source of rich thought, cultural production, and public engagement. Using conventional prize models combined with self-promotion tools like Kickstarter and Indiegogo, such an effort could tip actors into the space of a cultural dialogue that leverages multiple forms of storytelling.

- 3) **Connect dots of local innovation.** The seeds of national democratic renewal are being laid at the local level – from the revitalization of Detroit through urban agriculture to the jumpstart of urban manufacturing – these broad efforts are exciting Americans’ entrepreneurial spirit, fostering new ways of working together, and restoring faith in citizen capacity for change.

What hasn’t happened is a concerted effort to study these efforts, to understand the role of regional identity in their form and norms, and to distill insights into a new archetype for democracy in America. Frances Moore-Lappé and Paul DuBois’ work, “The Quickening of America,” was probably the most significant effort to do this; Mark Sundein’s “Unsettlers” is a narrow update to this effort. A broad chronicling of the entrepreneurial, political and cultural expression of social innovation in America would likely produce welcome momentum to renewal efforts.

- 4) **Contextualize the US Moment.** Liberal democracy and capitalism are under greater scrutiny than at perhaps any other time since the Vietnam War. As labor market gains made under union organization erode, middle and working class salaries are lapped by the investment class, and as technology continues to redefine the nature of work, citizens’ anxieties around the world are causing a deep crisis of confidence in the democratic state. It may be a very good time to ask what can be learned from the European experience to inform our discourse, open a space for new ideas, and part ways with concepts that are limited in their application to a globally responsive democratic nation in the 21st century.
- 5) **Reboot civics education.** If one measure of formal and informal civics education in the U.S. is the propagation of the ideas captured by an early 19th century nobleman, then our education system is performing well. If another measure of civic reasoning and imagination is the preponderance of new ideas, America is also doing well. The challenge to contemporary civic education here is two-fold: to ground today’s young people in the concepts and experiences that give rise to democratic aspiration, and to provide new avenues for experimentation and boundary-pushing tests of new ideas.

Concern over declines in state education funding for civics education in the classroom and experiential learning through student governments may warrant a strong effort to rethink student government as a test bed of tradition and new concepts and practices.

- 6) **Jumpstart national service.** Growing differences in political and policy preferences between urban and rural cultures, and the antipathy of east and west coast populations toward the interior of the country suggests that some form of national community service program – available to Americans of all ages – could produce positive “bridging” effects. Recent

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declines in volunteerism¹⁹ could be reversed through a concerted national service effort, with a “spillover” benefit of restoring trust and good will between Americans of different regions.

¹⁹ Bureau of Labor Statistics: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm>

V. RESOURCES

Outreach

Travel journal, <http://searchforamerica.org/blog>

Facebook page, <http://facebook.com/asearchforamerica.org>

National route map, <https://goo.gl/afZoEx>

Participant portraits, <http://searchforamerica.org/gallery>

Democratic imagery, <http://searchforamerica.org/imagery>

Data

Signup questionnaire responses, <https://goo.gl/kbNDUZ>

Participant interview responses, <https://goo.gl/YWofhH>

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