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Enhancing Civic Knowledge/Inspiring Political Engagement:

The Role of Public Libraries in Civic Participation

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The most important political office is that of the private citizen.

—JUSTICE LOUIS BRANDEIS

For the past several months I have been conducting “civic education” workshops under the umbrella title: Civics for Adults—To Enhance Civic Knowledge and Inspire Political Engagement. I doubt there is anyone in the library community who is not concerned about the public’s level of civic understanding, political discourse and civic engagement. As Robert Putnam pointed out in his book *Bowling Alone*, the cohesive function of social and civic groups—as with the simple bowling league—has withered, and along with the demise of those groups a correlative decline in political activities like voting.



Unlike in the past, people live less and less frequently in close-knit, long-term communities. Ties to schools, religious institutions and other civic groups have weakened. The founders of our nation imagined continued, close-knit personal relationships shoring up our Democracy. James Madison had a clear vision of the needs of the Republic—groupings not so small as to allow special interests to dominate, nor so large as to lose the personal ties between citizens and their elected representatives. In addition, the influence of wealth on the political process was feared as were strong political parties, which could turn people against each other.

Yet, here we are with a population size beyond the wildest imaginings of the founders, the influence of wealth well beyond what they could anticipate, and political parties—well, where they exist members often become rigid in thinking, and where people remain unaffiliated they are often excluded from the political process, such as during primary elections.

We are not born knowing how to be good citizens; if that was the case the invention of Democracy would not have been necessary! The framers of the Constitution knew they were creating a political system that broke with tradition. Although we'd like to think that the design for Democracy sprung into being fully formed, in fact, the word “democracy” does not even appear in the Declaration of Independence nor in the Constitution. The concept of “democracy” was that of mob rule to the founders and the system of government they created set up an elaborate set of filters through which the “will of the people” would be screened and refined by men of higher moral and intellectual talent than the average person. They used the term “republic” for this system. This was why “the people” did not elect Senators directly until the [17th Amendment](#) in 1913 ([archives.gov](#), 2016).

The gift of the Constitution was not that it began as a fully formed architecture for a government of “the people.” It was that it laid down a blueprint which could be built upon to move toward “a more perfect union.” The Constitution, and the country, are evolving concepts. The question is—evolving in what ways?

In 2012, the City Club of Portland conducted research on civic education. Although geared to answer concerns about public education, the basic findings apply to all ages. City Club wrote that society needs citizens to have three things:

1. Basic civic knowledge. It is well documented that Americans’ civic literacy is abysmally low. Many of us probably could not pass the naturalization test given to those wanting to become citizens.
2. Critical thinking skills. Misinformation, fake news, arguments that are not logical—too many people are prey to these when critical thinking skills are lacking.
3. The inclination to act civically and the knowledge of how to be an active citizen: how to express one’s views, to whom to express one’s views, and how to become influential in civic/political life.

To the three above I would add a 4th:

4. The ability to engage in civic dialog civilly.



Once beyond high school (assuming these are taught in public school, which they often aren't) where does one accrue these attributes? Perhaps college—or not. Fact is, we—society, that is—does not make it easy to cultivate civic knowledge, critical thinking, nor rational civic action.

So, who is to pick up the mantle for civic education across the generations?

To my way of thinking there is only one institution that fits the bill when it comes to civic education lifelong learning. The public library.

Simply put, we are:

- Welcoming to all
- Oriented to learning
- Filled with an abundance of good information
- Educated, smart, and caring
- Whizzes at programming
- Located everywhere
- Free

There is no other public institution that can make these claims as a whole. Public libraries should be primary instruments for civic education in the community. It is a role that can be well filled by public libraries. Bonus—it provides a rationale for increased funding.

Public libraries can make better citizens. It's as simple as that!

From my OLA workshop “Democracy Requires Civic Engagement and Knowledge—What Libraries Can Do”:

Suggestions for Implementing Civic Engagement/Critical Thinking in your public library.

We are a very small library that cannot devote a lot of staff time or resources towards civics education and critical thinking. What can we do?

- Host discussions based on articles / books about civics, critical thinking, current events.
- Have “cheat-sheets”/resource lists on the above.
- Start a Human Library (<http://www.humanlibrary.org/>)


“The Human Library is designed to build a positive framework for conversations that can challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue.” Yes, it's real. It began in Denmark and has been replicated in over a hundred libraries. Include cross-partisan dialog.

We are a mid-sized library that can devote some staff time and resources towards civics education. Add the following:

- Bring in a local community advocate to talk about what they do but also to give general advocacy advice.
- Prepare a resource sheet about elections and campaign finance that goes beyond the mechanics of voting.
- If you are near a college, perhaps a student majoring in: Political Science, Education, History, etc. could come and speak about some topics [and even get credit for it!].
- Plan for limited but consistent programming. Perhaps rotate the topics so each year has a specific Civics focus.



We are a large public library. Include the following to the above suggestions:

- Planning around these topics should be included in programming budgets.
- Train interested, talented, instructional librarians to be your “Civics Specialists.” 

My Workshops

Civics for Adults Workshops: Enhancing Civic Knowledge/Inspiring Political Engagement Misinformation, Fake News and Political Propaganda

To distinguish truth from fiction using critical thinking strategies. The workshop uses real world examples in a “what do you see here?/what is missing?” type of format. The last part is about finding accurate information.

Citizen Activism 101—Making Change Happen

Learn about strategies for change, and more: Examples of successful advocacy; Brief historical perspective; Choosing your battles; What matters to you?; Who makes the rules?; Getting heard: tools for change; “Tracking” civic/political issues.

The Influence of the Constitution on Political Conversation

By looking back at the creation of the Constitution, we puncture some myths and develop a broader perspective on its significance—perspective that helps us evaluate current political events more thoughtfully.

Beyond Voting: Elections and Campaign Financing

This workshop cover 20 topics related to our electoral systems and presents specific ideas for bi-partisan civic/political engagement.

<http://www.facebook.com/Civics-for-Adults-1490728887922036/>

References

17th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Direct Election of U.S. Senators. (2016). Retrieved July 25, 2017, from: <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/17th-amendment>

