Civic Innovation and Creative Campaigns: How Fresh Ideas Are Compromising Local Democracy

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The trend of civic innovation in contemporary activism relies much on modern tools of communication as a quasi-corporate way to confront contemporary social issues. But, the authors explain, activism that is agnostic about outcomes reifies privilege, discourages dissent and raw emotion, and falls short of addressing the most pressing issues of our time.

Civic engagement today is different than in the past. Many contemporary activists eschew sit-ins, picket lines, and paper petitions, stalwart organizing techniques of 1960s civil rights activists. Instead, today's civic innovators push us to "like" neighborhood associations on Facebook, tweet at elected officials during city council meetings, send feedback to government agencies via new mobile apps, and donate funds through online crowdsourcing platforms. Unlike their counter-culture predecessors, they don't shun private-sector ideas but instead borrow concepts and language from the business world. Civic innovators self-identify as entrepreneurial, innovative, and efficient.

Civic innovation is bolstered by NGOs, universities, and the state. NGOs increasingly hire digital media gurus and do their development and campaign work online; a growing number of universities offer programs in social entrepreneurship; and local governments have developed online portals for citizen feedback (think digital-era suggestions boxes). According to civic innovators, new ideas and technologies encourage people who would otherwise turn away from politics to participate in local governance. But what do these new forms of civic engagement mean for democratic life? What are the potentials and the pitfalls of civic innovation?

What is civic innovation?

Civic innovation is part of a sea change in thinking about citizen–government relations in contemporary US society. In part, it is a response to broader neoliberal trends of a shrinking state and the expanding role of markets and the private sector in public life. This style of activism draws on the "new public management" reforms of the late 1970s, when Americans began applying private-sector thinking to public affairs. It also extends the late-1990s campaigns to revive citizen participation in governance (such as "Rock the Vote") and the more recent surge of city-level participatory governance processes.

Our team of three sociologists, a political scientist, and an anthropologist explored these questions by studying seven secular, non-partisan civic organizations in Providence, the capital of Rhode Island. For one year (2010/2011), we volunteered alongside activists, attended strategy meetings, participated in advocacy efforts, and interviewed both leaders and members. All of the groups aimed to make Providence a "better" place to live. Some were oriented around civic

innovation, while others more commonly used traditional organizing tactics like neighborhood meetings and public protests.[1]

The appeal of civic innovation was immediately apparent: it was fun to attend unconventional political events, and it felt productive to contribute to online conversations. Furthermore, as academics, it was easy to socialize and strategize with people who shared our privileges and experiences of education, citizenship, and a sense of opportunity. But the trade-offs were equally evident. Civic innovators unwittingly excluded traditionally marginalized groups—such as immigrants and the poor—and typically overlooked the priorities of those populations. They downplayed the digital divide while increasing reliance on smartphones and technology. In addition, they often looked down their noses at confrontational activism, missing out on opportunities to work together toward common goals.

Collaboration rather than conflict

Today's civic innovators combine novelties in original ways. First, innovators value and deploy private-sector logic towards civic reform. They believe that efficiency, innovation, and scaleability can do for democracy what these qualities do for business profits. Being entrepreneurial is key: as one Providence innovator explained, the city needs "problem-solvers" instead of politicians. In 2010, some Providence professionals decided to take a fresh approach to the mayoral election. They called themselves "hiring managers" for the role of mayor, drafted a job description, and advertised on Craigslist. The group wanted to "change the conversation in politics." According to the ad, "This position reports to the citizens of Providence. We will be watching."

Innovators also avoid organizing tactics that highlight or involve conflict. For innovators, heated debates with city officials, loud conflict between residents, and civil disobedience are impotent and often counterproductive tactics. Instead, disagreement can be effectively resolved through polite conversation and transparent collaboration. In Providence, when a firefighters' union protest resulted in Vice-President Joe Biden canceling a visit to the city, innovators criticized the union for "being unproductive." They staged an "un-protest" in which a few dozen "concerned citizens" held signs in a downtown park that read: "Firefighters, please call off your picket." As one leader explained, this "un-protest" signaled his commitment to the more effective strategy of collaboration as opposed to conflict.

Like many in the US, civic innovators are skeptical of government. But rather than stop there, they advocate citizen-led change. "People need to get over their expectations that the government is going to fix their problems," said one innovator, "It's not… At its worst, government is a barrier. At its best, an enabler. That's as far as it goes." For innovators—even those who work on electoral campaigns or happen to be government employees—the best solutions may include the state, but they rarely emerge from City Hall. In Providence, innovators leveraged a mayoral election not as an opportunity to promote a candidate but instead to make all candidates listen to their constituents, to "bring good ideas to government." Innovators hosted a "listening party" in which candidates listened to citizens, instead of talking to them.

Finally, innovators see technology as universally beneficial. They argue that most local problems are less about conflicts of interest and more about the technical problem of communication and information sharing. Just as consumers seek information to make the best purchases, citizens should demand government transparency to be able to hold their elected officials accountable. Thus, communication technologies are seen as transformative—a way to bring business-like innovation to governance. In Providence, innovators used Facebook and Twitter to provide real-time reports from city council meetings. One activist explained, "Just like the iPhone changed the way people used

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[1]   For more information on our research methods, see *The Civic Imagination: Making a Difference in American Political Life* (2014, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers), co-written by the authors of this article.

phones, we want to change the way our city government engages with its citizens and the way that we engage with our government and our city."

Who is civic innovation for?

Support for market-oriented and technological solutions; rejection of conflict-oriented tactics; skepticism of government solutions; and the belief that citizens must lead change: who is attracted to this approach? Innovators tend to be relatively privileged. In Providence, innovators are typically professionals in arts, design, information technology, or business. They are predominantly white, from middle-class or affluent backgrounds, and well educated. While innovators are not typically high-profile icons of power, they tend to be well connected to those who are. As one noted, "Everybody can be best friends with the mayor if they want to."

While civic innovators are often from a privileged class, this is not always the case. We saw local public high school students excited about the notion of citizen-led change through technology. We witnessed activists from other backgrounds applying innovation-oriented methods, such as social media outreach, alongside more traditional modes of organizing. Civic innovation's popularity goes beyond elites. And even privileged innovators do not always use this technique to pursue class-based interests. For example, elite innovators in Providence aimed to promote dialogue with all mayoral candidates rather than promote their favorites. In this way, civic innovation is distinct from the "elite social movements" that sociologists like Caroline Lee (2015) and Nina Eliasoph (2009) write about—it is not aimed at benefiting elites and institutions instead of the general public or marginalized groups. Yet it sometimes has similar effects.

The blind spots of civic innovation

Innovators' organizing has some blind spots: privileging process over outcome, marginalizing angry citizens, ignoring the digital divide, and limiting outreach to networks of similar citizens.

Civic innovators aim to reshape political processes. This differs from many activist efforts around shared visions for political outcomes—such as reducing poverty or reforming immigration policy. Innovators see enhanced communication, transparency, and efficiency as worthwhile goals in and of themselves. Unfortunately, improved processes do not automatically generate positive outcomes for everyone, and innovative practices do not necessarily lead to greater social justice or equal opportunities. In the Providence "un-protest," for example, civic innovators were not concerned that firefighters' livelihoods were at stake in union negotiations. In this way, innovators' catchy way of communicating discontent may have been a disservice to working-class activism.

Likewise, when innovators privilege politeness over moral outrage or anger, they tend to disregard voices that speak differently. The ability to engage without anger often comes from a relatively elite social position. Political theorists have shown that marginalized people, such as racial minorities, use conflict and disrupt accepted norms to claim increased recognition. In Providence, residents who were evicted from homes without warning or whose neighborhood schools were closed were justifiably angry. Yet civic innovators typically ignored these issues and critiqued "angry activists" who spoke out for greater economic and racial justice using more contentious tactics. By advocating civility and consensus above all else, innovators may restrict, not promote, democratic participation.

Another challenge for innovators is overcoming the digital divide between those who can and cannot access digital technologies. While one civic innovator recognized the limited reach of smartphone-based technologies, he also argued that technology is not inherently elitist and will reach marginalized populations if it is made "useful to them." Yet, according to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, income, race, and age remain significant determinants of

access to digital communications technologies. Innovators dismiss these inequalities, narrowing their ability to create meaningful change.

We observed an additional blind spot connected to innovators' class privilege. Though most innovator events are technically open to the public, innovators generally fail to reach beyond their social and professional networks. Events are typically held at venues such as downtown restaurants, far from most residential neighborhoods. An organizer described an event hosted at a trendy downtown bar, adding, "You have to buy your own beer." Even when there is no admission cost, not all city residents feel welcome at upscale venues.

When participants are not diverse, goals like generating "good" ideas become problematic. If only the privileged participate, decisions may reflect only their concerns. In this way, who is included is very much related to what issues are included. Providence innovators mobilized around problems such as potholes and youth engagement. As one innovator told us, "Potholes are the gateway drug to civic engagement." Yet issues like potholes are quite different from police violence or high unemployment, issues that are prioritized by organizations with more diverse memberships.

Recuperating the "civic" in "civic innovation"

Civic innovation is widely appealing. There is great enthusiasm for business-style practices, collaborative governance, and new technologies that bring people closer to government. The creation of new spaces for participation reflects the value innovators place in democratic processes, where people have a voice and make public decisions together. These trends, combined with fresh tactics and fun events, may motivate more people to become actively involved in local politics, despite today's record levels of political skepticism.

But activism that is agnostic about outcomes, reifies privilege, and discourages dissent and raw emotion falls short of addressing the most pressing issues of our time. The challenge for activists is thus to counterbalance emphasis on improved processes and technological solutions with a focus on inclusivity, a broad view of inequality, and a recognition that expressions of anger play a role in political change. If the energy around civic innovation is to be harnessed in a way that truly deepens democratic engagement, we must continually ask if and how these practices can be deployed in more diverse contexts and in ways that are attentive to social inequalities.

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