

California on the Ballot
White Paper 2020-21
Written by Chelsea Davis

In the political experiment that is the American republic, California may be the most visible laboratory. What does the electoral history of a state often considered to be the seat of the nation's social, technological, and cultural innovation have to tell us about the future of American democracy, and its complex past?

California Humanities set out to spark ongoing conversations on these topics through its California on the Ballot program, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's "Why it Matters: Civic and Electoral Participation" initiative, administered by the Federation of State Humanities Councils.

Taking place from October 2020 to April 2021, California on the Ballot overlapped with both a tumultuous presidential election and a controversial national census. The seven events of the series—all of them made free, public, and online due to the global COVID pandemic—invited audiences and expert guests to reflect on what civic engagement currently looks like in California, and what changes might soon be in store. Scholars, artists, journalists, civil servants, and archivists offered their perspectives through Zoom panel discussions, interviews, displays of historical artifacts, film clips, and Q&A sessions with viewers. The conversations tackled subjects ranging in geographical scope from the national (the [Electoral College](#)) to the regionally specific (the 22 acres of Alcatraz Island, whose nineteen-month occupation by Indians of All Tribes was the topic of [California Dreamin'](#)); from the centuries-long history of voting in California ([Show and Tell](#); [What's the Deal with Direct Democracy?](#)) to the future of the electorate ([Youth and the Ballot](#)); from the role that demographics play in our elections ([Voter Turnout](#)) to the proper place of the media in them ([The Fourth Branch](#)). Ultimately, California on the Ballot sought to give Californians the tools to participate in our democracy in a way informed by our state's electoral past but not bound by it.

What's the Deal with Direct Democracy?

California Humanities' California on the Ballot event series kicked off, fittingly, with a discussion of one of the more distinctive—and controversial—dimensions of the Golden State's electoral character: its ballot initiative system. Although 25 other states and 115 other countries make use of initiative or referendum processes, few deploy them as often or as inflexibly as does California. In an October 28, 2020 discussion, moderator Rachael Myrow, a Senior Editor with KQED, asked a panel of three experts to guide the audience through the history, structure, and repercussions of the state's initiatives process.

California's version of direct democracy was born over a century ago as part of a West Coast "rebellion" against the political machines that plagued the Eastern states, explained Dr. Raphael J. Sonenshein, the Executive Director of the Pat Brown Institute for Public Affairs at CSU Los Angeles. In part due to the rampant graft among San Francisco's officials, Californians already distrusted political authorities in the early twentieth century, noted Joe Mathews, the author of *California Crackup: How Reform Broke the Golden State and How We Can Fix It*. After the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire left many Bay Area residents homeless—and even more fed up with greedy elites—a lawyer named Hiram Johnson successfully ran for governor in 1911 on a platform of putting power back into the hands of the everyman through direct democracy. His proposed ballot initiatives process, he promised, would serve as a "gun in a man's hand" against wealthy, bribe-taking legislators.

But despite this supposed allegiance to the downtrodden, observed Mathews, Johnson's Progressive agenda was also fundamentally white and middle-class. Little wonder that racism has bubbled up in the initiatives system ever since, manifesting in Propositions such as 187 (which would have deprived undocumented immigrants of social services; see **Voter Turnout** for more details), 14 (which repealed the Rumsford Fair Housing Act) and 13 (which puts a cap on Californians' property tax increases to this day), stated panelist Jason Cohn, whose recent film *First Angry Man* focuses on Prop 13's champion, Howard Jarvis.

In this regard, although "California prides itself on its liberalism ... propositions often give us an opportunity to see where [Californians] hold deeply conservative viewpoints, viewpoints that aren't mirrored by our largely democratic representatives," said Myrow. As the **Show and Tell** and **Voter Turnout** events established, California's somewhat surprising moments of electoral conservatism also include its nearly century-long refusal to ratify the 15th amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which implemented protections for the civil rights of American citizens of all races.

So, too, does the very structure of our initiatives system encourage a kind of conservatism in the sense that measures passed into law by proposition tend to stick around. Because in California an approved ballot measure can be reversed only by passing *another* ballot measure (unless the provisions of the ballot explicitly allow legislators to intervene), propositions "can be a way to lock in yesterday's preferences and bind future generations," said Mathews. (The long shadow cast by potentially outdated civic processes also surfaced as a theme of the California on the Ballot conversation about the **Electoral College**.)

The initiatives system's tendency towards inertia might be partially solved, Sonenshein suggested, by adding sunset clauses to propositions. Mathews proposed that we might also benefit from shifting instead towards a referendum model, whereby legislators pass a measure and voters merely have the right to reject or approve it. This generates a more continual back-and-forth between the people and their representatives, "a conversation that never ends. And *that's* more [of a democracy]: there's no final word, there's just that [election's] results."

Many contend that the initiatives system could be made more democratic by giving money a smaller role in getting initiatives onto the ballot and passed into law. So, too, should voter guides contain more succinct and transparent information about proposed initiatives, added Sonenshein. More broadly, he emphasized, we must improve the civics education and information availability throughout our country. "Civics has to be an *action* agenda," he said—but this is at odds with public education's current imperative to teach for the test. "To me, civics is breathing. So the question is: how do you learn to breathe in a democracy?"

The Electoral College: What Were the Founders Thinking?

"For a country that was revolutionary and thinks of itself as [being] at the forefront of innovation in so many ways," said Karthik Ramakrishnan, Professor of Public Policy and Political Science at University of California Riverside, "when it comes to our political systems and processes, we like innovation in small doses." The target of Ramakrishnan's critique, and the subject of the second California on the Ballot event, was that increasingly hot-button issue, America's Electoral College. The panel discussion was held on January 19, 2021—a day before President Joseph R. Biden's inauguration. A group of experts including Ramakrishnan, Sonja Diaz (Founding Executive Director of the University of California Los Angeles Latino Policy and Politics Initiative), Mindy Romero (Founder and Director of USC's Center for Inclusive Democracy), and moderator Dan Schnur (Professor at USC and University of California Berkeley) discussed the origins, evolution, and possible future of the Electoral College.

Why was the Electoral College created in the first place? After all, the institution was unprecedented at the time of its inception in the eighteenth century, and has remained unique to the U.S. ever since. According to Schnur, participants in the 1787 Constitutional Convention, fresh off the overthrow of what they considered to be a corrupt political ruler (King George III), sought “a compromise that gives the voters a role in the process, but not an all-encompassing role.” The resulting balancing act of the Electoral College is part of what makes America a *republic* rather than a democracy—or an “indirect democracy,” as Schnur put it.

This institution has, in the eyes of some, yielded several benefits over the years since its creation. America essentially owes its two-party system—a “stable [system that] gives us a stable democracy,” Romero noted—to the Electoral College. The latter was also, as many are aware, intended to ensure that low-population states do not receive less attention from political candidates and legislators than do high-population states.

But the nation’s population, and the distribution of that population, have changed dramatically since 1787. As a result, some now feel that certain rural states hold outsized electoral influence compared to their higher-density counterparts. This imbalance might explain the odd results of elections—two since 1999—in which presidential candidates have won the Electoral College while losing the popular vote. Such outcomes have long-lasting repercussions, said Ramakrishnan, meaning that “particular kinds of populations in particular states [are] receiving a lion’s share of attention by incumbent administrations as well as campaigns that relegate millions ... of people to the sidelines.”

And the demographics of those neglected populations, observed Diaz, are suspiciously predictable. “Many have argued that the Black vote has been diluted by the Electoral College,” said Diaz, because the system “gives an outsized role [to] very small states that tend to be whiter in comparison to jurisdictions ... that have large constituencies of black electorates.” Latinx and Asian-American communities tend to attract less of legislators’ attention, too, due to the College.

Nor is it surprising that today’s system expresses these racial inequities, the panelists agreed: the Electoral College was profoundly shaped by slavery from day 1. Because legal voters (read: white males) in Northern, free states outnumbered those in slaveholding states in the eighteenth century, Southern slaveowners balked at the prospect of allowing national elections to be determined only by the popular vote. So, to entice Southern states to join the Union, the Constitution’s drafters allowed slaves to be counted as three-fifths of a person in the calculation of a given state’s Electoral College votes, even though slaves were barred from casting ballots in the popular vote. (American governmental structures’ deep roots in white supremacy were also remarked upon in **California Youth and the Ballot**, a subsequent event in this series.)

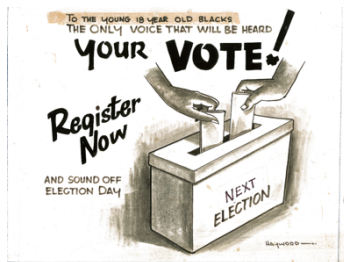
Given the flawed history—and, to some minds, the flawed present—of the Electoral College, how do we go about fixing it? For Diaz, the answer is straightforward but daunting: amend the Constitution. Romero disagreed, arguing that “going through Congress is still not a viable pathway ... because politicians with vested interests in the Electoral College will block it.” She is more optimistic about the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, in which participating states (sixteen so far) agree to always allocate their Electoral College votes to the candidate that wins the popular vote.

Though intimidating, this—and Electoral College reforms—are not lost causes. Schnur views the U.S. capitol building, which was physically damaged during the January 6 riot, “as a metaphor for our democracy. It’s a lot more vulnerable than we thought it was, and it’s been badly damaged—but it survived. And ... we have to fully understand the extent of the damage we have done to its infrastructure before we can move forward and repair it.”

Show and Tell: What Can We Learn from Artifacts of California Elections?

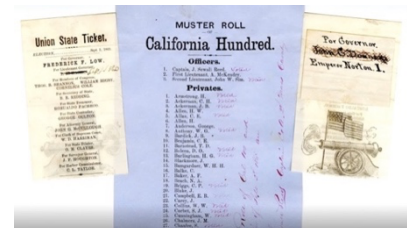
The third California on the Ballot event took a tour of the state's many archives, using historical artifacts to unlock the complexities of California's electoral past. On February 25, a group of five archivists digitally shared objects from their respective collections that shed light on Californians' fights for voting and other civil rights from the nineteenth century to our own day.

Tamara Martin, State Archivist at the California State Archives, spotlighted three documents: two ballot tickets and a muster roll (used to mark who had voted) from the 1863 federal election. Designated for use by the "California Hundred," a group of calvary troops that served in the Eastern states during the Civil War, these items underscore the fact that California's Vote by Mail system owes its existence to that war. As more than 16,000 Californians "fought on battlefields stretching from Virginia to Arizona," said Martin, "another struggle was being waged in California

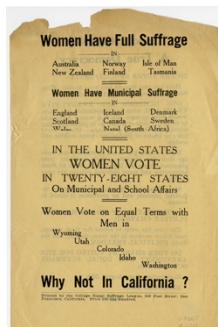


in the legislature and the courts to secure and protect the rights of these soldiers to vote while they were deployed." The legislation permitting these combatants to vote from afar was signed into law in 1863; the next year, Californian soldiers played a key role in reelecting Abraham Lincoln, who won the state by less than 20,000 votes.

The event's second artifact also spoke to the near-misses of voting rights history. Francis Kaplan, reference and outreach librarian at the California Historical Society, showed the audience a broadside from 1911 urging Californians to give women the vote. Though suffrage would be passed by only a narrow margin in California, the state's large population meant that this win instantly doubled the number of women with full suffrage in the U.S.—and other states took notice. "Suffragists around the country ... created what they called the 'California Model' and they emulated the collaboration with [college-educated women,] working-class men and women, and ethnic groups, and the bold PR strategies" of the 1911 California campaign, commented Anderson. (Nor is this the only instance in which California has acted as an electoral trailblazer, as the series' events on **Ballot Initiatives**, **California Dreamin'**, and **Voter Turnout** also noted.)



Minorities' gains in political representation were also the subject of the item selected by Xaviera Flores, librarian and archivist at UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center. Flores displayed an election-night photograph of Edward R. Roybal, who in 1949 became the first person of Mexican heritage to win a seat on a Californian city council since the late 1850s. Just as women secured the vote in 1911 by recruiting a diverse coalition of activists to their cause, Roybal's historic victory hinged on his genuine investment in many of California's racial minority communities—not just Latinx, but also Jewish-, Asian-, and African-American.

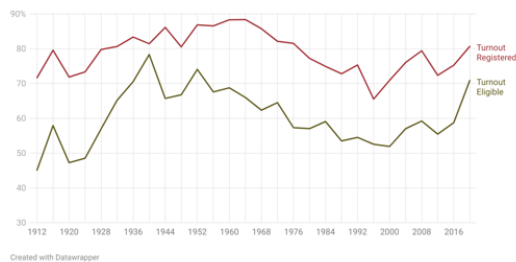


Two other historical objects featured during the event also told the stories of California's racial minorities organizing around the franchise and other civil rights. Susan D. Anderson, the event's moderator and History Curator and Program Manager at the California African American Museum, displayed a mid-twentieth century illustration by L.A. artist Charles Haywood encouraging Black youth to vote. Haywood's poster makes clear that "the politics of citizenship and voting are deeply ingrained in African-American culture," commented Anderson. Further demonstrating this point, the Show and Tell event also played a clip narrated by Anderson from *Unladylike*, a documentary series (funded by California Humanities) about little-known female trailblazers, including

Charlotta Spears Bass, a California resident, lifelong civil rights activist, and the first African-American woman to run for Vice President.

Just as many might not guess that supposedly progressive California has a “very strong” history of suppressing the Black vote, in Anderson’s words, it might come as a surprise that the Bay Area was rife with housing and hiring discrimination in the 1950s and ‘60s. A 1961 flier shared by Sean Dickerson, Archives Assistant at the African American Museum and Archive at Oakland, calls for the (eventually successful) boycott of Hink’s department store because it had never employed a Black person. CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality), some chapters of which were predominantly African-American, also worked towards fair housing legislation, and

California Turnout History in Presidential Election Years



epitomizes the robust Civil Rights-era activism of the Bay Area.

LGBTQ advocacy movements also took up the case of electoral rights, as evidenced by the event’s final show and tell item, a 1982 cover from the Berkeley-based radical feminist and lesbian magazine Broomstick. The page is saturated with the repeated abbreviation “ERA,” for Equal Rights Amendment, a still-unpassed U.S. constitutional amendment that

would make it illegal to discriminate against an American citizen on the basis of sex. “Lesbians usually had a rough road” in mainstream feminist movements for civil rights, explained Angela Brinskele, Director of Communications at the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives, noting that in the National Organization for Women, “there was a lot of homophobia” early on. Alternative organizations and magazines like Broomstick and gave queer women a safe haven to work towards the civil rights they wanted for all women, regardless of sexuality.

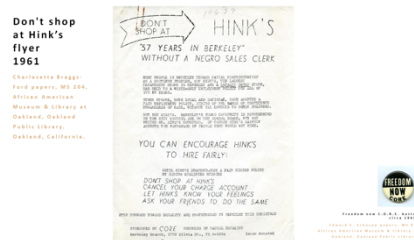
Reflecting more broadly on the social importance of using archival work to understand the past, the archivists emphasized their discipline’s ability to actively engage a wide variety of Californians in their own electoral history. There is a perception that “archives and museums [exist only] for a particular group of people,” said Flores. Widening access to

these materials helps us “break that concept” and “provid[e] agency to the community and have them be in control of their stories.”

The 70.8%: What Explains California’s Voter Turnout?

Historically, California’s voter turnout has been relatively low compared to the rest of the U.S. Why is this? And why has that trend been reversing in recent years? In collaboration with KALW, California Humanities assembled a group of researchers to tackle these questions on March 10, 2021, with KALW journalist Sonia Narang facilitating the conversation.

Eric McGhee of the Public Policy Institute of California opened the discussion with the insight that California’s past problems with voter turnout were largely connected to voter registration. The passage of several reforms in recent years that made both registration and voting itself easier (Election Day and automatic DMV registration; early voting; etc.) yielded stunning results in 2020: 70.8% of eligible Californians cast a ballot in that election. However, the major asterisk to this triumph, Narang observed, is that that increased turnout was not proportionately reflected in traditionally underrepresented demographics of voters—California’s growing Latinx, Asian-American, and youth populations.



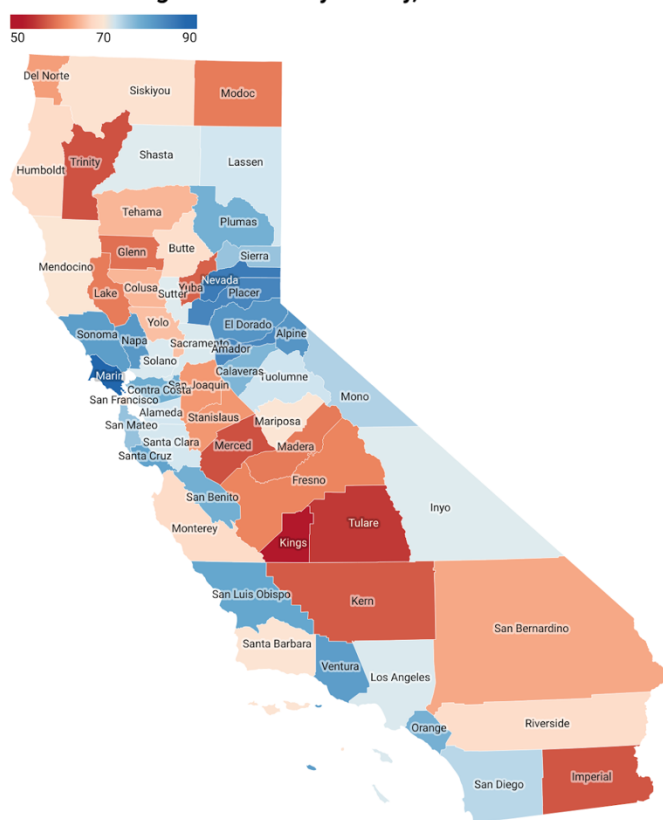
This participation gap is long in the making. California in particular and the U.S. in general share a grim legacy of repressing racial minorities' votes, such as the Supreme Court's 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*. This legislation invalidated a crucial section of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, said Jane Junn, Professor of Political Science at University of Southern California. These race-based barriers to voting also often intersect with material ones. Shakirah Simley, Director of the San Francisco City and County's Office of Racial Equity, noted that in order to successfully vote, a given Californian needs access to a stable mailing address, a polling site within reasonable distance, and adequate childcare and time away from work to inform themselves and cast their ballot.

Unfortunately, these barriers to electoral participation are not just daunting to address; they can also perpetuate a vicious cycle of political apathy, said Francisco Pedraza, a Political Scientist at UC Riverside. Because governmental candidates usually campaign where they're "going to get the most bang for their buck" in terms of securing votes, they tend to visit and pay most of their attention to regions with historically high voter turnout. This, in turn, makes voters in low-turnout areas (e.g. the reddish areas in the map at right, most of which represent California's agricultural and rural regions) feel less invested in a political system that demonstrates little concern for them.

But these problems are not without solutions. Regarding the issue of self-perpetuating political disinterest, Pedraza points to the voter advocacy work already being done by grassroots organizers in low-turnout areas, and suggests that foundations should think about how to support or sponsor the work these groups are doing. The government can and must also invest in making voting more materially accessible, whether it's making sure that voting documents are multilingual or placing polls and voter registration in locations "where people already are—neighborhood or community hubs."

As for the future of voting in California, "immigration policy will tell you everything about what your electorate is going to look like in twenty or thirty years," said Junn. (This event series' discussions of **Ballot Initiatives** and **Youth and the Ballot** also underscored the extent to which California's substantial immigrant population has intimately shaped the state's electoral politics.) The California to come also, of course, belong to the state's young voters writ large. Although turnout was still lower in the 2020 election than some had hoped, these numbers have been on the rise recently. This is in part due to the state's decision to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to pre-register, noted Veronica Terriquez, Associate Professor of Sociology at UC Santa Cruz. (To learn more about how young Californians think about voting and political engagement today, read below about the **Youth and the Ballot** panel, check out this [audioreel](#) of young people's views on voting, and listen to [this interview on the subject](#) between Terriquez and KALW's Hana Baba.) But research has shown that the most powerful part of this process, in terms of keeping

Percent of Eligible Turnout by County, 2020 Election



Created with Datavrapper

1: Data: Public Policy Institute of California

teens invested in voting, is “the act of *going into* high schools and engaging kids” about registration and civic engagement in general, added McGhee. It’s clearly “important to create that sense of connection” to politics in between elections.

California Dreamin’: How Do Social Movements Reimagine California?

“Civic engagement” can mean far more than just voting or running for office, particularly for groups traditionally excluded from political representation in the U.S. The fifth event in the California on the Ballot series explored the manifold ways in which indigenous peoples have stood up for their civil rights throughout California’s history. On March 25, 2021, Dr. William Deverell (Director of the Huntington-USC Institute on California of the West) interviewed Dr. Kent Blansett (Associate Professor at the University of Kansas College of Liberal Arts and Sciences) about this legacy, with a particular focus on the 1969-1971 occupation of Alcatraz Island by the group Indians of All Tribes.

Blansett noted that “indigenous peoples throughout California have always been actively resisting,” whether it was in fighting the abuse they suffered in Father Junipero Serra’s Catholic missions, or in using the Ghost Dance to oppose the “genocide and environmental ecocide” wrought by the Gold Rush. But it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that a specifically intertribal protest movement would take root here. (For more on the power of interethnic political organizing throughout California’s history, see the **Show and Tell** event’s discussion of Edward R. Roybal.)

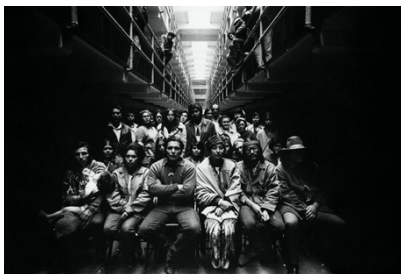
From the 1940s to the ‘60s, San Francisco was a crucible of indigenous anger and hope alike. Dual federal government policies passed in 1953—known as Termination and Relocation—legislatively disbanded over 100 Native tribes, and moved about 15% of their members off of

Figure 1 Photo of Alcatraz Island Occupation, taken by Art Kane. Among those pictured are John Trudell, Richard Oakes, Stella Leach and Ray Sprang [Photo courtesy: Art Kane Archive]

reservations and into distant urban areas. Indigenous people were shipped to cities like San Francisco and, despite the government’s prior promises of job, housing, and financial assistance, left to fend for themselves. But by the ‘60s, San Francisco was also a hotbed of political and cultural protest and reimagination. This was the state “that was open to people of color, supposedly, that was

open in the sense of ideas, that was experimental,” said Blansett. (This sentiment echoes other instances in which California has acted as civic innovator, like the “California Model” of suffrage activism mentioned in the **Show and Tell** event.)

This mixture of indigenous anger and hope in the Bay Area birthed the Red Power movement. Organizers advocated for the creation of Indian Centers and Native American studies programs, and a charismatic Mohawk man named Richard Oakes began working with other indigenous activists throughout California to agitate for Native rights, including the cessation of the Termination and Relocation policies, under the banner of Indians of All Tribes (IOAT).



The apogee of IOAT’s efforts on this front was their occupation of Alcatraz Island, previously used as a federal penitentiary but decommissioned by the ‘60s. Oakes and about eighty other people set up camp on the island, where they’d remain for nineteen months. The idea was to triumphantly demonstrate the possibility of “a liberated indigenous

community,” said Blansett, while simultaneously calling attention to the irony that “the only free land in Native North America was a former prison.” Like the barren island itself, the protestors pointed out, America offered Natives no jobs, no electricity, no healthcare, no running water. So,

too, did IOAT stage potent works of protest theater there, like a mock trial in which the U.S. government (played by Oakes himself) was taken to task for its crimes against indigenous people.

Although the occupation initially met with enormous popular support and political tolerance, the media's attention eventually turned to other, fresher subjects, and Federal Marshalls arrested those remaining on the island in June 1971. Despite this ending, Blansett considers the protest a massive success. The activists' demands led President Richard Nixon to overturn Relocation and Termination, a watershed decision that inspired twenty-nine subsequent pieces of similar legislation throughout the country. And the demonstration spurred similar island occupations by indigenous peoples across the globe, from Seattle to Hawaii to Australia. So, too, is the story of Oakes and IOAT still told to the more than five million people who visit Alcatraz every year. Blansett recalled first glimpsing, as a visitor to the island in the '90s, the "INDIANS WELCOME" message that the protestors had graffitied above the prison's plaque three decades ago. "I had chills and goosebumps ... because I realized that, as a Native person, this was the first welcome sign in my own home country I had ever seen."

Figure 2 Richard Oakes returns to Alcatraz Island. [Photo courtesy: Dr. Kent Blansett.]

The Fourth Branch: Media and Democracy

The news media is sometimes called the unofficial "fourth branch" of the U.S. government because of its role as information provider to, and watchdog over, our democracy. Indeed, the notion of "a free press ... is enshrined in our constitution," said Tasneem Raja, Editor-in-Chief of The Oaklandside, in an April 8 forum on Media and Democracy. The discussion, moderated by Ray Briggs (Professor of Philosophy at Stanford University), probed this connection between civics and journalism, focusing in particular on the roles that non-traditional forms of reporting—non-profit and citizen journalism—might play in a functioning democracy.



Local non-profit news providers have proliferated over the past decade, filling a void left by small and mid-sized metropolitan newspapers. Many of the latter have collapsed as paper advertising- and subscription-based profit models have lost ground to the internet. The resultant "decline of local media in our community has been detrimental to the health, the safety, the welfare, and the civic engagement of our community members," said Sarah Stierch, an independent journalist based in Sonoma.

But so, too, has that decline provided news outlets an opportunity to rethink their relationships to their respective audiences/neighbors. Independent publishers are "reinvent[ing] what it means to be a news story, get[ting] away from the kind of systems of coverage that have left a lot of ... communities alienated or uncovered," said Megan Garvey, Executive Editor of KPCC and LAist at Southern California Public Radio. One such community is Kern County, in California's Central Valley. "Our mainstream media outlets tend to stay in the center of Bakersfield," the county's largest city, said Reyna Olaguez, Executive Director of the South Kern Sol. This geographical overfocus "create[s] media deserts in our rural communities." Olaguez's grassroots newspaper has been working to fill that gap by training young people outside Bakersfield to report on their own neighborhoods. (This point about the power of local media might be seen as the journalistic version of **Voter Turnout** and **Youth and the Ballot's** emphasis on the importance of local political organizing.)

So, too, have these burgeoning news organizations been experimenting with novel formats for relaying information to locals. Several of the panelists' publications have found Facebook and

text messaging to be crucial tools in engaging community members less and less interested in getting their information from TV, radio, or print. Many local news providers have also redrawn the contours of the traditional news cycle itself, sharing story ideas with the public as they develop and building more audience feedback into the early stages of the reporting process. KPCC, the radio station where Garvey works, created a “[Human Voter Guide](#)” to the 2017 Los Angeles general election, consulting community members beforehand as to what details they wanted covered. The resulting insight that listeners were mostly hungry for fundamental voting information rather than deep dives into legislative issues reinforced the point raised in **Direct Democracy, Electoral College, Show and Tell, and Voter Turnout** that Californians often feel they lack basic civics know-how. Using outreach to ensure the finished story reaches the communities most impacted by it is key, too. “What if publishing the story is not the end point of our work but it’s the midpoint or it’s just the starting point?” asked Raja.

Of course, these groundbreaking news forms introduce unprecedented challenges and existential questions to the field. For instance, Stierch often collaborates with citizen journalists—community members without formal journalism training who provide on-the-ground documentation of events as they unfold—as she covers wildfire season in Northern California. While these collaborators’ posts on Twitter and Facebook are often highly valuable, she said, “there are some folks I trust more than others because of where they get their information and how they interpret information.” Even seasoned editors, though, find themselves subject to criticisms of unjournalistic “advocacy” when they choose, for instance, to encourage readers to vote. To these kinds of complaints, Garvey said, she would respond, “We are ‘advocates’ for the truth I’m very comfortable with the idea that as a journalist I am here to improve the quality of life for the people in my community.”

California Youth and the Ballot: What Will 2040 Look Like?

After contemplating the state’s electoral past and present through the diverse lenses of its first six events, the California on the Ballot program concluded with a look towards our political future. On April 29, moderator Joaquin Alvarado, founder of creative media agency StudioToBe, asked four teenaged journalists and artists from California for their perspectives on the civic society they already inhabit and will soon inherit.

Generation Z’s political coming-of-age has been indelibly shaped by the internet. The information overload of the web has given today’s teenagers unprecedented opportunities to educate themselves about issues that matter to them—but can also make society seem hopelessly doomed to young scrollers. “For the first time in human history, [we] constantly know about every crisis that is going on all over the world all at once,” said Samuel Getachew, a writer who was the 2019 Oakland Youth Poet Laureate. “So naturally our reaction is to think to ourselves, ‘the world has never been this bad before.’”

For Getachew, simply keeping this context in mind is a useful corrective to the temptation of political nihilism. Other panelists emphasized another crucial weapon in the battle against youth apathy: direct electoral involvement. Ja’Nell Gore, a reporter for the South Kern Sol newspaper in Bakersfield, [wrote an OpEd](#) in April 2020 that outlined the history of voter suppression to encourage her peers, particularly those of color, to vote in the upcoming election. “I hear a lot of people say ‘Why vote? What are [elected officials] going to do for me?’” said Gore. To this, her response is, “*Nothing*, if you don’t vote! ... Vote people who actually care about us into office!” Maritza Camacho, an editor and reporter for Santa Rosa Junior College’s Oak Leaf News, expressed a similarly personal frustration with some of her classmates’ disinterest in voting. “My parents are both immigrants. When I first voted was their first time voting as well,” Camacho said. Because voting in American elections is a right unavailable to

undocumented people and other non-citizens, when others around her don't want to vote, she thinks of it as a failure to use a "privilege that not many other people [have]."

Danielle Thompson, a Teaching Assistant with Youth Beath, a media arts program in Oakland, agreed with Gore and Camacho's assessments, with one caveat. "Our votes do have an impact, but that's not necessarily the end-all-be-all" of what civic engagement can look like for young Californians, she argued. For Thompson and the other panelists, journalism and the arts can also provide the tools to change society for the better. Echoing prior events' emphasis on the central role that the press plays in shaping American democracy (see **Media and Democracy** and **California Dreamin'**), Gore related that although early teachers encouraged her to work in government because of her political acumen, she feels she can have a broader social impact through her current work reporting on politics, holding those in power accountable.

Getachew also affirmed that "the most valuable way to show up as a member of my community ... is through my writing." For him, art is inherently political. But there are challenges aplenty facing young people who engage in political art and journalism. For instance, Getachew has faced online backlash for his poetry about gun control. Moderator Alvarado also brought up the psychological toll it takes on one's mental health to report on topics that hit close to home for Californians, such as fire season.

But the endgame of bringing public attention to the issues that matter to their communities makes these challenges worth the effort, Getachew, Camacho and Thompson agreed. The latter recently made [DISPLACED](#), short documentary on gentrification in Oakland with the help of a California Humanities grant. The goal was to "show a new perspective" on the controversial subject, said Thompson. "We've already got the city's perspective [and a sense of] what the mayor and all of those folks are doing But what about the kids, what about the families?" A similar desire motivated Camacho to work on a piece about the COVID experiences of day laborers in Sonoma County. "Because a lot of them are undocumented, they can't use their voices as easily as a lot of [us] can," she said. "As a journalist, we are really giving a voice [to] the voiceless"—an ideal at the heart of American democracy itself.

Chelsea Davis is a writer and radio producer based in San Francisco. Her essays and poetry have appeared in the Los Angeles Review of Books, Literary Hub, Electric Literature, and the Public Domain Review, among other venues.

Her radio stories have been featured on podcasts such as 99 Percent Invisible, BackStory, and Out There, and have aired on stations including KALW 91.7 FM and KZYS 90.7. She currently co-produces Pseudopod, a weekly horror fiction podcast.

When Chelsea isn't busy making stories, she studies them. She holds a PhD in English literature from Stanford University, where she also earned her Masters in English in 2014. While at Stanford, she received the Centennial Teaching Award and the Ric Weiland Graduate Fellowship.