

The Right to Vote Project: Fostering Civic Participation

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Word Count: 1092

History is not archaic. Past socio-political developments have an enormous effect on our present political participation, and my state of Arizona is no different. Arizona has a history of voter suppression that reverberates into the modern day.¹ Historically, one of the most utilized and effective methods has been suppression through educational inaccessibility. Or in other words, Arizona has recognized that by accentuating educational disparities through racial segregation, barring bilingual-language access, inadequate education funding, etc, they can also restrict voting to historically marginalized groups.² Thankfully, considerable progress has been made in regards to both the quality of education and the accessibility of voting provided to all Arizonans irrespective of social class. *Brown v. Board of Education*,³ and later the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965⁴ ended racial segregation in schools, prohibited literacy tests, and gave unprecedented attention to the inequities in our education and electoral systems. I am proud of this legacy, being a resident of Pima county and a citizen of our democracy I recognize the importance of continuing to advance the legacies of our forebears and how crucial civic participation is to our democratic institutions. For that reason, I wanted to create a project that would go beyond simple voter registration and civic events, and rather

¹ Thomas, Tucker T. "Voting Rights in Arizona: 1982-2006" *USC Gould School of Law*, 17 Feb. 2008, [VOTING RIGHTS IN ARIZONA: 1982-2006 \(usc.edu\)](#). Accessed 6 Jan. 2024.

² See pages 285-295 of Thomas, Tucker T. "Voting Rights in Arizona: 1982-2006" *USC Gould School of Law*, 17 Feb. 2008, [VOTING RIGHTS IN ARIZONA: 1982-2006 \(usc.edu\)](#). Accessed 6 Jan. 2024.

³ Goddard, Terry. Ariz. Former Attorney General., "The Promise of Brown V. Board of Education: A Monograph (March. 2005)" *Arizona State Library*, [The promise of Brown v. Board of Education : a monograph | Arizona Memory Project \(azlibrary.gov\)](#). Accessed 6 Jan. 2024.

⁴ Arizona Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. "Voting Rights in Arizona" *U.S Commission on Civil Rights*, July. 2018, [07-25-AZ-Voting-Rights.pdf \(usccr.gov\)](#). Accessed 6 Jan 2024.

reform systematic obstacles to voting. As Manuel Herrera, a hispanic WWII veteran from my home of Tucson said: “If more people were involved, it could be a different community, a different town, a different state or a different world.”(Herrera, 309) This rationale guides the project focus: by improving civic engagement in my community through increasing the accessibility of voting and bolstering the quality of civics education in spaces of learning we can create a civically engaged public that can address past, present, and future problems.

To achieve this, I started multiple overlapping strategies. I began by researching the historical and political precedence behind Pima County’s current civic infrastructure and started identifying the key obstacles faced in regards to civics education and election access. Concerning civics education, I found that while there are many online resources available to civic educators, there is a lack of meaningful and accessible data on the monetary needs of civic educators at the secondary level. This lack of accessible data has made it difficult for policymakers to address issues in civics education, which is made apparent by the fact that civics education goes completely unmentioned in the current Arizona state budget.⁵ Taking this, the project works to identify the needs of civic educators throughout Pima County as my community cannot address the needs of civic educators if they don’t know what those needs are. When researching election access I found three key developments that most obstruct voting: the weakening of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 through the Shelby County V. Holder decision,⁶ the lack of compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act(ADA)⁷, and the lack of language assistance for marginalized

⁵ Hobbs, Katie. Ariz. Governor., “State of Arizona Executive Budget” *Governor’s Office of Strategic Planning and Budgeting*, Jan. 2023, [FY 2024 Summary Book.pdf \(azospb.gov\)](#). Accessed 7 Jan. 2024.

⁶ Crayton, Kareem. “Shelby County v. Holder Turns 10, and Voting Rights Continue to Suffer from It” *Brennan Center For Justice*, 20 Jun. 2023, [Shelby County v. Holder Turns 10, and Voting Rights Continue to Suffer from It | Brennan Center for Justice](#). Accessed 7 Jan. 2024.

⁷ See Page 5 of Arizona Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. “Voting Rights in Arizona” *U.S Commission on Civil Rights*, Jul 2018, [07-25-AZ-Voting-Rights.pdf \(uscrr.gov\)](#). Accessed 7 Jan 2024.

communities.⁸ To combat these obstructions to civic participation, the project will work to ensure that local institutions will comply with the recommendations of the advisory memorandum of the Arizona Advisory Committee to the U.S Commission on Civil Rights.⁹ These recommendations outlined how Arizona might improve voter participation and be in compliance with federal law, and thus are excellent guiding frameworks for fostering civic participation. Furthermore, upon the implementation of said recommendations the project will advocate for the implementation of a voter centered model¹⁰ and other election reforms such as AVR¹¹ in the state legislature in order to improve the accessibility of voting in Arizona.

Recognizing how ambitious the project is, I realized it would be impossible without massive public and political support. So I started networking with local organizations. First, I drafted questions for all the academic resources I had utilized in identifying obstacles to civic participation.¹² I recognized that I did not fully understand electoral systems in my community and needed to conduct more research if the project was going to be successful. Next, I made a visual representation¹³ of the project so I could both better understand what I am trying to achieve and also better pitch the idea to others. Finally and most crucially I spoke to my local NAACP leadership about the project. They have been exemplary in their support of the project through their networking and constructive criticism, allowing for a project that is not only ambitious but also tenable.

⁸ See Page 3 of Arizona Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. “Voting Rights in Arizona” *U.S Commission on Civil Rights*, Jul 2018, [07-25-AZ-Voting-Rights.pdf \(usccr.gov\)](#). Accessed 7 Jan 2024.

⁹ See Pages 10-12 of Arizona Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. “Voting Rights in Arizona” *U.S Commission on Civil Rights*, Jul 2018, [07-25-AZ-Voting-Rights.pdf \(usccr.gov\)](#). Accessed 7 Jan 2024.

¹⁰ McReynolds, Amber. “A Voter-Centered Approach To Elections” *MIT Election Lab*, 20 Apr 2018, [A Voter-Centered Approach to Elections | by Amber McReynolds | MIT Election Lab | Medium](#). Accessed 7 Jan 2024.

¹¹ Morris, Kevin. “AVR Impact on State Voter Registration” *Brennan Center For Justice*, 11 Apr 2019, [AVR Impact on State Voter Registration | Brennan Center for Justice](#). Accessed 7 Jan 2024.

¹² See Pages 2-4 of Akator, Anthony M. “YCIF Project: The Right to Vote Project” 7 Jan 2024, [YCIF Project - Google Docs](#). Accessed 7 Jan 2024.

¹³ See Page 4 of Akator, Anthony M. “YCIF Project: The Right to Vote Project” 7 Jan 2024, [YCIF Project - Google Docs](#). Accessed 7 Jan 2024.

The last strategy I am employing in the project is self-improvement. I recognize that while I am passionate about improving civic participation in my community, I still have a long way to go in regards to my understanding of local political systems, my leadership and communication skills, and my ability to build a successful movement. To improve myself, I joined the Youth Civic Impact Fellowship(YCIF) this past fall. YCIF has helped develop the project, think critically about my own underlying beliefs, and have helped me consider what I want to achieve with this project. Crucially, their recommendation that I find a community mentor facilitated me asking for the counsel of Dr. Homee Shroff; my former AP Government and Politics teacher and a man who has been crucial to my development as a civically engaged citizen. Dr. Shroff's counsel has made all the difference in the project, and he continues to help me improve the project and myself as a leader.

The project is still developing and thus the impact cannot fully be assessed. However, it should be noted that fostering civic participation through improving civics education and election access strengthens our democratic institutions and if successful the project would do just that. That being said, the project is certainly not beyond improvement, especially in the following ways: the project must move beyond me. History teaches us that successful social movements need community, not heroes,¹⁴ and if the project is going to be successful it must receive support and revision from my community. The project hinges on the compliance and cooperation of local leaders and organizations. If the project is to be successful I must improve my ability to clearly and concisely express the importance of the project to audiences who may be skeptical of its importance. Most importantly, the project must put the perspectives and needs of those who have primarily experienced exclusion for civics and voting at its forefront. Nevertheless, given the

¹⁴ Calderon, Geraldton. "Social change needs engaged communities, not heroes" *Tedx Talks*, 5 Nov 2014, https://youtu.be/WdHBWL4LK88?si=_BzoUrw19qa299Yh. Accessed 9 Jan 2024.

overwhelming work and support that has gone into this project, I am confident that the project can address these areas for improvement and foster civic participation in Pima County.

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