# Democratic Professionals

Democratic professionals are those who see their work as contributing to a larger public good, but they recognize that to do this they must learn how to be responsive to the concerns, the know-how, and the capabilities of ordinary citizens, to co-produce knowledge with communities so that professional expertise can be fruitfully combined with local insight, and to collaborate with them to solve public problems.

Since virtually all institutional systems in our complex society today depend upon high levels of expertise, democratic professionals are essential to a robust civic democracy. Those whose expertise directly bears upon challenges of sustainable and resilient communities, disaster resilience and public health, and environmental and climate justice, are especially critical as partners for engaged communities.

In an era when anti-scientific and anti-professional forms of populism threaten our public health and our capacities to respond effectively to the many challenges of climate change, nurturing the ethos and practices of democratic professionals, and of their professional associations and professional schools, is a vital task.

**CivicGreen** profiles engaged and collaborative professionals and explores how professional associations and schools can further embed and diffuse the norms and practices of democratic professionalism. Likewise, policy and funding at the federal level can further enable them to do so far more ambitiously. On the latter, see Carmen Sirianni, "The Civics of Federal Climate Policy: Designing and Investing for Community Empowerment and Public Participation," especially the section on grants to professional associations and schools.

## Models of Professionalism

There have been a variety of models of professional practice over the course of American history and scholarly studies have examined these in great depth. Here we follow the analytic framework of Albert Dzur, whose books *Democratic Professionalism* and *Democracy Inside* classify three major perspectives on professionalism in the social sciences that have influenced institutional practice and training as well as reform discourse and activism.

Democratic professionalism builds upon some of the core insights of these first two models, but addresses some of their limits.

### *Social trustee professionalism*

This has been the major way of thinking about professions as groups of well-trained experts whose ethical norms orient them to serve as trustees of public good, be it the health of their patients for doctors or the livability of cities for urban planners. Major figures in the history of sociology, such as Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, have propounded some version of social trusteeship.

Because they are trustees of public good, professions can largely be trusted to control training, licensing, and discipline in a disinterested manner. Regulation by the state should therefore be relatively limited and input from clients and citizens should be significantly circumscribed. Citizens are lay people whose views are too often uninformed or self-serving, and possibly dangerous to themselves and others in their community. Professions may work *for* the public, but they do not work *with* the public. Doctor knows best.

While there is certainly much truth in the claims of professions to serve public interests in ways that are informed, effective, and socially responsible, these claims are also vulnerable to a range of criticisms that can undermine professional legitimacy. Among the key criticisms by contemporary social theorists have been:

- *organized selfishness:* professions are concerned primarily with their own interests, privileges, and authority, especially relative to the claims of other occupations and paraprofessions. They organize to ensure that elites and state agencies protect their autonomy and direct public payments to themselves (Freidson).

- *dominance and ideology:* professional formation is primarily a struggle for market and ideological dominance among competing groups (Larson).

- *permanent struggle:* rather than an exchange of service for trust as imagined by social trustee theorists or monopolistic hegemony by critics such as Freidson and Larson, struggle is permanent and achieves only temporary settlement. Rhetorical claims, as well as the demands of clients and payers (government, corporations) can shift the balance away from powerful professions (Abbott).

References:


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## *Radical critique of professionals as disabling democracy*

Some of the criticisms of the social trustee model outlined above open the door for a much richer approach to the professions. This is likewise the case with the second influential model of professionalism, the radical critique, which focuses on the following:

- *technocratic authority:* professions tend to claim privilege for technical models of understanding and solving public problems over conventional pluralist processes of political deliberation and bargaining or innovative attempts at engaging publics directly in deliberative processes, policy framing, and problem solving. Technocratic elites tend to ignore community values and relationships and serve corporate and political elites. Technique preempts deliberation about values (Fischer).

- *disabling practice:* professionals disable ordinary citizen competence and lay publics by telling people what they need and claiming prescriptive power. States back this up by granting exclusive licenses to perform certain tasks. Responsibilities once shouldered by laypeople are assigned to medical professionals, social workers, case managers, and public administrators. In the process, “citizens” are replaced by “clients” caught up in ever more pervasive “disciplines” of power and control. In the process, citizen confidence in their own and their neighbors’ capacities for public judgment and practical action erodes (Illich, Foucault).

  Some who offer this critique, especially Foucault, see the solution as sweeping deprofessionalization.

- *feminist critique:* the women’s movement challenged the mantra that “doctor knows best” when it came to women’s health. In 1970, the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective published the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves,* which provided detailed knowledge and practice to enable women to gain control over their bodies and their sexuality. The book became a classic, with regularly updated editions, and has helped to transform the profession of medicine and the practice of care and healing.

References:

Boston Women's Health Book Collective, Our Bodies, Ourselves (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011).

Frank Fischer, *Technocracy and the Politics of Expertise* (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE 1989).

Frank Fischer, *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

Ivan Illich, *Disabling Professions* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1977).

Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

## Democratic Professionalism

This third approach avoids throwing out the baby with the bathwater. It has deep respect for professional knowledge and practice, especially in a society that has become ever more complex, but searches for ways to combine the best of professional expertise with the lay knowledge and capabilities of ordinary citizens and communities, as well as reserving for them a major role in public judgment, problem solving practice, and coproduction.

Democratic professionalism recognizes that professionals are vulnerable to legitimacy deficits. Without public input and civic partners, they are open to criticism that they are imposing abstract or technical models that do not recognize and respect local knowledge and the voices and abilities of ordinary citizens, and that do not adequately consider unintended consequences. Worse still, they may be opening themselves up to virulent partisan attack.

Democratic professionalism aims to secure greater professional as well as democratic legitimacy through more dynamic and reciprocal patterns of interaction among highly trained professionals from various disciplines and diverse communities that can generate lay knowledge, challenge and adjust professional frameworks, prompt institutional reflexivity and responsiveness, build social trust, and develop problem solving capacities that can help ensure effective and co-productive public work not just sporadically and ad hoc, but as a matter of routine practice.

In some of the professions we will profile, there are numerous ways that professional knowledge and practice can be combined with local knowledge, community practice, and social movement challenges, while being guided by informed, engaged, and responsible publics that one finds in democratic theory, such as in the classic works of John Dewey, as well as in contemporary versions of deliberative democracy and pragmatic democracy.

Here we summarize several:

- *enable relevant knowledge:* professionals can share their expertise, provide more accessible language and usable toolkits, such as visualization and scenario planning, in a process that aims to respect and build capacities of lay actors and communities.

- *facilitate deliberation:* professionals can help facilitate public forums and workshops that aim to surface and clarify problems, alternative solutions, points of conflict and consensus, potential tradeoffs, relative costs and distributive impacts.

- *incorporate local knowledge*: professionals can respond creatively to grassroots resistance and protest, listen carefully to local experience and perception of problems,

and incorporate local knowledge in ways that fruitfully meld with professional knowledge in the form of "street science" (Corburn).

- *rethink institutional logics and policy frames:* professionals can reflect deeply about the institutional logics at work in specific fields that may be constraining citizen action, distorting public choices, limiting their own practices, and framing policy in ways that deceive and disable.

- *share professionalized tasks and powers*: professionals can reshape the agencies, organizations, and institutions in which they play leading roles to utilize existing citizen capabilities, share power, grant authority, divide responsibility, and build civic capacity.

- *educate professionals as democratic partners:* professional schools and college majors, especially any that have direct relevance to sustainability and resilience in public systems, private businesses, or civic associations, can incorporate norms and practices of democratic partnership and task sharing.

References:

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## Profiles in civic and green

**CivicGreen** will develop increasingly rich profiles of democratic professional practices and challenges across a broad range of professions that are central to sustainable, resilient, and just communities in an age of climate crisis. We will examine such professionals in specific communities and across major issues such as sustainability and resilience planning. We will, of course, focus on how communities, civic associations, and broad publics can play a part with professionals in designing greener buildings and neighborhoods, preparing and responding to disasters, and developing informed, legitimate, and socially just forms of retreat from the shore.

As we enlist additional partners from the relevant professions, we will expand and refine our resources, case studies, profiles, and toolkits.

### Architects

While traditional conceptions of design reflect individualistic notions of self-expression and creativity, democratic professionals understand that the design process occurs within context of community. Within this construct people are central to the design process, and the role of the architect centers on fulfilling a democratic purpose in facilitating the contributions of the community they mean to serve.

Architects are dedicated to the enfranchisement of citizens as participants in the design process and recognize the valuable role citizens play by informing the creation of place. The collective values inherent in American identity are implicit in the design process and the places we build seek to represent democratic values and nourish civic life in our communities. This effort will seek to explore and illustrate the democratic practices of architects, their motivating values, and the evolving impact their work has on society as well as its contributions to our understanding of democratic professionalism.

We will examine and profile various forms of design charrettes for sustainable communities, multidisciplinary teams working with nonprofessional staff, teachers, and students in green building, and more. We will also profile initiatives within major professional associations, such as the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA).

### Planners

The planning profession has had a long and imaginative history of "beautiful cities," but only with the urban revolts of the 1960s did planners more systematically begin to incorporate community participation directly into planning processes. This included advocacy and equity planning for and with inner-city communities and through federal requirements for citizen participation in Model Cities.

With advances in related fields, such as "design with nature" in landscape architecture, planners began to more fully incorporate concerns with sustainability. Reports from the American Planning Association in recent years have emphasized "planning for sustainability as the

defining challenge of the 21st century," linked closely with equity, participation, and healthy communities. Professional training now includes such core norms, but with elaborate visual, digital, and geographic information toolkits to enable participatory and collaborative work.

We will also profile initiatives within major professional associations, such as the American Planning Association (APA).

## Transportation engineers and planners

Transportation projects, especially planned highways cutting across cities and disrupting white ethnic as well as Black and Latino neighborhoods, triggered substantial protest in cities across the country during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In response, requirements for citizen participation were institutionalized and many projects were redesigned or outright defeated. With the emergence of vibrant bicycle and pedestrian associations in the 1990s, as well as national transportation bills that funded transportation alternatives, local departments of transportation (DOTs) began to plan more collaboratively with civic and community groups.

In 1995, many of these departments formed the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO), which has grown to more than 80 cities and transit agencies. The association actively enables bicycle and pedestrian associations. Some cities, such as New York's DOT, utilize a network of "street ambassadors" to engage residents in one-on-ones and online tools and public forums. They develop fun-filled games and design tools for adults and kids. Before the coronavirus pandemic, they also convened discussions at libraries, shopping centers, religious institutions, and senior centers. NACTO is helping to think through equitable forms of participation and planning during the pandemic, and has placed social and racial justice at the core of its work.

## Public health professionals

The healthy cities movement, as well as many community health centers and other institutions, have brought increasing attention to the role that engaged communities can play in coproducing health. Academic and practitioner networks have emphasized that health improvements often depend on environmental factors, such as housing, street design, open space, and food access, as well as protection from specific forms of environmental pollutants and toxics.

Many of these, of course, require strong and effective regulation as well as substantial public investment, but others depend as well on enhancing community capacities to generate and share local knowledge and to develop multi-stakeholder partnerships at the neighborhood level. Public health and related professions have been developing a range of strategies and toolkits that engage communities in research, enlist civic, ethnic, and other associations in health promotion, and foreground systemic inequalities and racial injustice that impact community health.

Climate change is a threat multiplier that exacerbates challenges due to heat waves and heat islands; wildfires, droughts, hurricanes, and floods; vector-borne diseases; relocation in the face of disasters, and more. As the "Call to Action on Climate, Health, and Equity: A Policy Action Agenda," endorsed by major public health and related organizations across the country, has put

it, “Climate and health action will be most effective when those most impacted have the voice, power, and capacity to be full partners in building a healthy, equitable, and climate resilient future.”

This call includes “deeply engaging communities most impacted by climate change and poor health outcomes in planning, policy development and budgeting, offering meaningful roles and power in decision-making processes, and respecting history, traditional ecological knowledge, and community-directed solutions.”

We will profile efforts by the American Public Health Association (APHA), local health departments, schools of public health, nurse and physician associations, and other institutions that take a multifaceted approach to healthy communities, energy justice, sustainable food, active transportation, and green cities.

## Forest professionals

The profession of forestry emerged in the early 20th century tied largely to a utilitarian ethos and practice of scientific management of forest resources, which generally placed a high premium on timber yields. This emphasis was further heightened in the post-WWII boom in housing construction and suburbanization. It was challenged by the environmental movement, which brought ecological goals more directly into questions of forest management, as well as claims for public participation, reflected in public policy through the National Forest Management Act of 1976. Participation during these years was extensive but generally disappointing because it did not alter an essentially adversarial paradigm. By the late 1990s, a philosophy of “collaborative stewardship” became official within the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) under Chief Michael Dombeck, with greater focus on ecology as well as innovative forms of multi-stakeholder collaboration. Climate change challenges professional foresters to manage for sustainability at ever-higher levels of effectiveness and to engage communities and related natural resource and disaster management professionals in collaborative work.

Urban and community foresters manage well over one million acres in cities and towns across the U.S. Trees are essential to carbon capture, reducing heat island effects, protecting species, and stormwater management. Urban parks and forests also provide opportunities for social life, recreation, exercise, and reduced crime. Many urban and community foresters work collaboratively with environmental groups, nonprofits, and volunteer stewards, and cities such as New York have completed successful One Million Trees campaigns in collaboration among city agencies, the USFS, and nonprofits that raise money and engage volunteers. Environmental justice and social equity have become key goals in recent campaigns.

We will profile cases, toolkits, and other resources in our urban and community forestry section. For now, see the full review of Lindsay Campbell, *City of Forests, City of Farms,* in our **CivicGreen Bookshelf**.

## Disaster management professionals

As hurricanes, floods, heat waves, and wildfires increase with climate change, disaster professionals must manage across complex institutional systems, as well as at the community

level. Research and practice have come to stress the importance of social capital, community competence, and other community indicators in developing adaptive capacities and "disaster resilience," so that communities can not only resist disaster but also "bounce back" and indeed "bounce forward" in recovery. Stakeholder involvement and collaboration in resilience and recovery planning, including participation among the most vulnerable communities, are essential, as are trustworthy public information and communication platforms. Horizontal coordination, nonhierarchical organizational relationships, and improvisation are more appropriate than centralized command. Government has many key roles, to be sure, but one essential one is to restore and enable community ties and problem solving capacities.

In 2011, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) introduced a "whole community" approach to guide its learning from professionals and communities. We will profile democratic practice among a range of disaster management professionals and other frontline responders, as well as professional schools, public agencies, and nonprofit institutions.

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