

Civic and Green Innovation in Democratic Theory: Core Concepts

CivicGreen is premised on enabling civic innovations that enhance our capacities for sustainable, resilient, and just communities and that enrich core democratic values and institutions. In this essay, we clarify relevant concepts within democratic theory, broadly defined, that help to shape innovations on the ground and that remain open to continual refinement and feedback from community and institutional practice.

Our aim here is a relatively succinct and straightforward presentation of some key concepts and how they might be combined fruitfully. Thus, we simplify ideas that have very complex arguments among proponents and critics; we do not try to settle these in any definitive sense. Some concepts are represented by full-blown schools of thought or sub-disciplines within an academic field. Each one-page topic heading thus has only a few core references, with additional ones for further reading at the end of the essay. References and further discussion can also be found in our **Bookshelf, Toolbox, Glossary**, and other sections.

Climate change presents a momentous challenge to our democratic values and institutions, and we cannot protect them without refining and deepening them. We need better forms of deliberation on policy and planning among communities and stakeholders, and across regions and ecosystems. We need to enhance relational trust and social capital appropriate to the specific problems of climate resilience and climate justice. We need professionals who share expert knowledge with communities and, in turn, learn from them in the process of developing solutions. We need policy designs at every level of the federal system that incentivize productive civic engagement and collaboration, and yet also align fruitfully with other policy tools.

Of course, we may very well need many other democratic reforms that make our formal legislatures more deliberative and representative, our voting systems more secure from partisan interference, our political process less subject to big donors and dark money, and our communication platforms less vulnerable to distortion and outright denial of truth. There are many other worthy analytic and normative concepts, as well as specific proposals for reform in these and still other areas of our politics. They are not our direct focus in **CivicGreen**, though democratic politics seeks multiple and feasible combinations across civic and institutional domains.

The core concepts discussed below, which overlap in some instances and have many ways of being combined and sequenced, are the following:

- deliberative democracy
- social capital
- assets-based community development
- coproduction and public work
- democratic professionalism
- policy for democracy
- collaborative governance
- social movements

Deliberative democracy

Deliberative democratic theory stresses that citizens can and should become engaged in reasoned dialogue about policy choices and problem solving strategies. Deliberation is not only for elected legislatures. Nor should policy simply be determined by aggregating interests and counting votes, or by ratifying polarized political perspectives and identities. Citizens can and should reason about common interests and public goods. They can listen deeply, generate new insights, and change their minds if deliberative designs provide the appropriate guidelines and incentives.

Deliberative theory argues for a substantial role for ordinary citizens in clarifying public values and envisioning a shared future, for evaluating evidence and weighing options, and for considering potential costs, benefits, and tradeoffs.

After some early criticism, deliberative theory has made considerable room for speech that is emotional and contentious and that is expressive of styles of rhetoric and challenge from marginalized members of the polity. Speech that does not closely track rational debate can add nuance, context, and motive, so that deliberative forums become richer and more inclusive.

While agreement and consensus are aims of many deliberative forums, full consensus is very rare; clarifying disagreement and conflict can also be valuable. Often, a limited consensus can motivate common work on some of those things around which there is agreement, while leaving disagreements to other forums or to a later date when enough trust and mutual understanding emerge. In fact, many deliberative designs presume that agreement will only emerge in stages, sometimes over years, and only through some complementary processes, such as relationship building outside the deliberative forum or collaborative work on ecosystem restoration between formal meetings. To the extent that sustainable and resilient work on climate within communities, and across cities, regions, and large landscapes, will take decades, deliberative designs can accommodate imperfect process and enable iterative learning and correction.

Deliberative theorists recognize that many different types of forums and “minipublics” can enable productive dialogue based on mutual recognition and respect: study circles, planning workshops, design charrettes, and more. A systemic approach considers the complementarities and tensions among them, in conjunction with other democratic institutional processes.

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Social capital

The concept of social capital focuses on those norms, networks, and trust that communities possess and might further accumulate (as a form of capital) to help solve common problems. While the concept became important from the 1990s onwards in various community building and community development strategies around the world, as well as serving as a measure of democratic vitality in the U.S., its relevance has increased substantially as a way of understanding broad capacities for sustainable, healthy, and resilient communities.

Social capital is often understood in several forms:

- *Bonding* social capital draws upon relatively tight-knit relationships, such as a religious congregation, ethnic club, or neighborhood organization. Its potential downside is that it can be quite exclusive of other groups and foster ethnic, religious, and others forms of social conflict, resource hoarding, and power hierarchies.
- *Bridging* social capital generates reciprocity, information, and mutual aid across bonded groupings, such as in an interfaith and multi-racial community organizing project.
- *Linking* social capital is focused less on horizontal ties, as in the first two forms, and more on how these forms can leverage vertical ties to networks and institutions with authority and resources upwards in institutional fields and political power structures. Thus, community empowerment draws upon bonding and bridging social capital, but also seeks to cultivate networks and collaboration upwards with mayors and city councils, planning and regulatory agencies, local businesses and universities.

Strategies for sustainable, healthy, and resilient communities, as well as environmental and climate justice, often seek some combination of all three types of social capital, along with other policy tools (such as green infrastructure as physical and natural capital, social movement mobilization to enhance political capital).

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CivicGreen Glossary: [social capital](#), [healthy cities and communities](#).

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Assets-based community development

ABCD for short, this approach focuses a lens on the assets and strengths that communities already possess and that they can build upon to engage residents and partners. ABCD does not deny that there are significant needs and systemic injustices within communities, as well as rightful and appropriate claims on outside resources. But it resists a “deficits” lens that tends to view communities as bundles of problems in need of fixing by outside professionals. Such professionals can be important partners if they approach their work as developing community assets and capacities for solving problems.

Mapping unrecognized and underutilized assets is a key tool of ABCD, in effect its core “epistemic” stance for enriching knowledge capable of sustained and empowered practice. ABCD practitioners seek to map the full range of neighborhood groups, such as faith-based groups, sports clubs, neighborhood and ethnic associations, land trusts, block clubs, garden associations, LGBT and youth groups. They also map local institutions with assets, such as libraries, museums, schools, and hospitals. Such institutions may have space for community meetings, leadership training, educational exhibits on local watersheds and foodsheds.

Some ABCD approaches (e.g. Green and Haines, below) theorize their work in terms of multiple forms of community capital: social capital (norms, trust, and networks), human capital (knowledge and skills), physical capital (buildings, tools, land), financial capital (banks and community foundations), environmental capital (rivers and watersheds, forested land and urban greenspace), political capital (community and youth organizing and advocacy), and cultural capital (stories, arts, festivals, theater, dance).

Robust community development strategies – often led by a community development corporation (CDC), but not necessarily – seek to mobilize and align a wide array of assets and forms of community capital. Such strategies can be initiated and guided by a variety of deliberative and participatory processes: community visioning, neighborhood and comprehensive planning, sustainability and resilience planning, design charrettes, community-based participatory research, faith-based relational organizing and advocacy, and environmental justice partnerships.

ABCD has become relatively well integrated into community and sustainable development, including some of the leading intermediaries that for many years placed primary stress on housing and tended to neglect engaging ordinary residents in broader processes of mobilizing assets. Professional training in schools of social work and public health also utilize ABC.

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Coproduction and public work

Coproduction emerged as a way understand how public goods and social services can engage ordinary people, including but not limited to the recipients of services, in contributing to the production and delivery of such goods. While some forms of coproduction seem to be motivated primarily by cost reduction, others aim to enhance quality, provide a broader sense of ownership, and encourage creativity. The “co” in coproduction can include individuals, civic groups, and collaboration among lay citizens and professionals, many in the public and nonprofit agencies that typically have seen themselves as simply delivering “services” to “clients.”

Harry Boyte has been the theorist who has argued most persistently that a robust concept of “public work” captures the best American historical traditions of citizens who roll up their sleeves to produce visible things of public value and to solve public problems. They do not just deliberate, build relationships, or protest – as important as these are to a vital democracy. They are co-creators of the “commonwealth,” possessing valuable skills that they can use in community settings, but also in formal workplace and institutional settings. Democratic politics can be revitalized as a politics of production, not merely one of distribution or grievance.

As parents, for instance, citizens can work directly with teachers to improve schools, and students can design projects to improve communities and ecosystems. As residents, everyday citizens deliberate with community policing officers in beat meetings, but then go out to monitor street corners with illegal activities or to create safe routes for kids to get to and from school.

Community groups and watershed associations likewise work with professionals to co-create citizen science, monitor water quality, restore urban streams, and develop kayak and canoe programs to help embed a sense of ownership deep within their civic ethos. Collaborative conservation projects across the West work with ranchers and loggers to restore ecosystems, but also to shift their everyday work and market practices towards sustainability. Multiple trades among green builders design and develop energy-efficient buildings, including for affordable and public housing and school systems, to reduce carbon emissions, water and other waste.

In short, sustainable and resilient neighborhoods, watersheds, and built environments can be envisioned as the public work of democratic citizens. This is the *homo faber* of some classical social theory, but one suitable to a more gender equitable and diverse society, and with complex forms of manufacturing, service, care, intellectual, and ecological work to anchor mutual respect.

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Democratic professionalism

Democratic professionals practice in ways that enhance the capacities of ordinary people to deliberate as citizens, build social capital and community assets, co-produce relevant expertise for solving public problems, and collaborate in producing public goods. In short, they play necessary roles as experts and professionals, but to strengthen and refine civic capacities rather than to deplete or marginalize them.

For much of the 20th century, professional knowledge became embedded in virtually all our institutions, from urban planning and environmental regulation to health care and family services. While much of this represented indispensable knowledge, it tended to marginalize the insights and skills of ordinary people and elicit deference, often overlain with gender, class, ethnic, and racial subordination. Movements among women, urban ethnics and minorities, and other groups in the 1960s and 1970s, and then gay and lesbian activists during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, resisted professional domination and laid effective claim to participate actively, generate knowledge, craft community and policy responses, and hold professionals accountable.

In the past several decades, democratic practice has emerged in various professions that are critical to sustainable, resilient, and just communities. Architects have developed a wide range of community design and public interest design practices. Planners have engaged communities in transportation and community health planning, and increasingly in citywide sustainability and climate planning. Urban and community forestry researchers and staff have developed toolkits to map civic networks and institutional partners for major tree planting and stewardship initiatives.

In each case, professional associations and professional schools have formulated clearer democratic missions, practices, curricula, and strategic initiatives. Professionals in disaster management, water resources, and other areas on the frontline of climate impact have also begun to engage communities and civic associations as partners.

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Policy for democracy

The fundamental claim of this approach is that policy can be designed to “empower, enlighten, and engage citizens in the process of self-government.” The purpose of policy in a robust democracy is not simply to produce public goods and services for citizens, but to produce citizens with democratic skills, values, resources, and incentives that enable and encourage them to coproduce in the broadest sense.

Policy for democracy is thus an approach that reprises many of the insights of the previous concepts. It asks how we can design policy at all levels of the federal system to encourage inclusive and effective deliberative practice, build social capital and community assets, develop civic skills for problem solving, encourage an ethos of civic dignity and mutual respect, and enable collaborative and co-productive work among diverse stakeholders and across lay and professional boundaries. Policy design should not demean, nor foster helplessness and dependency, nor deceive publics about relative costs, benefits, and potential tradeoffs.

Some examples of policy for democracy:

- *neighborhood planning in Seattle*: in response to citizen protest, the City provided funds and tools to help local groups develop plans within the 20-year comprehensive plan, *Towards a Sustainable Seattle* (1994). The city council oversaw the process to help ensure open and inclusive deliberation, as well as to align neighborhood proposals with technical and fiscal feasibility. Local plans had to list those who would help implement plans, such as specific public agencies but also neighborhood and nonprofit partners. The perceived democratic and professional legitimacy of the process helped to secure citywide referenda (direct democracy) on bonds and levies to fund most of the items in the neighborhood plans. The policy design for local deliberation reverberated outward.
- *Community Action for a Renewed Environment (CARE)*: this program at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has funded local multi-stakeholder partnerships that engage environmental justice (EJ) and other community groups in sustainability, resilience, and community health. It requires that funded projects have an inclusive and collaborative process and engage with other grantees in training and lesson sharing. It makes staff across the agency available to help align collaborative local action with regulatory and technical tools. See [“EJ Collaborative Problem Solving and CARE.”](#)

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Collaborative governance

In the public sector, this term signals that state institutions work in some form of collaboration with nonprofit and/or market actors, as well as across various public agencies and bureaucratic silos. Collaborative governance can enhance democracy to the extent that ordinary citizens, community groups, civic associations, trade unions, and nonprofits responsive to public demands and client input are consequential actors within governance networks and partnerships. Collaborative designs and regimes vary, with multiple dynamics and mixes.

Collaborative governance has emerged in response to the increasing complexity and “wickedness” of problems, as well as to the diversity of types of stakeholders needed to develop and implement viable solutions. Thus, command-and-control regulatory tools, while necessary for many ecological and watershed challenges, are often insufficient on their own. Public agencies must rely on watershed associations and other civic groups to contribute data, to do hands-on restoration work, to monitor progress, and to develop plans and practices that engage stakeholders such as farmers, ranchers, and developers.

As climate change introduces further shocks and uncertainties, adaptation and resilience will require ever more collaborative governance processes and regimes that are workable and that generate sufficient democratic legitimacy to limit policy backlash. Since climate and ecological crises tend to exacerbate existing inequalities in power and resources, collaborative governance will also need to actively engage frontline communities that already experience environmental racism and injustice, or that face acute risks of being left behind in the transition to greener energy and resource use.

See **CivicGreen Glossary:** [collaborative community conservation](#), [sustainable cities](#).

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Social movements

Typically more contentious than other forms of civic action, social movements mobilize participants to challenge and transform social norms and power arrangements, sometimes in quite fundamental ways. Historically, labor movements challenged the unchecked power of employers to control the work process or to determine wages and benefits. The women's movement contested male dominance across a broad array of spheres, including work, family, and sexuality, as well as power within political, civic, and social movement spheres. The civil rights movement transformed subordinate identities and helped to institutionalize rights among African Americans, with spillover effects for other minority groups.

Social movement theory has been steadily enriched over several generations to include a wide array of perspectives on mobilizing resources, reframing public problems, developing repertoires of contention, narrating agency, transforming identities and cultures, engaging emotions, inventing participatory practices, linking networks, and changing public policy.

Environmental movements in the post-WWII period have taken many forms. Some have become highly professionalized within policy fields, others have contested primarily through grassroots mobilization, as in recent fracking and pipeline protests. Some, such as watershed and bicycle movements, have mixed protest with collaboration among various stakeholders and public agencies. The environmental justice movement has operated on many fronts, including grassroots protest, regulatory policy, and community collaboration.

The climate movement in the U.S. is also quite varied. It includes environmental organizations institutionalized in the policy system, sustainable city coalitions and projects, religious congregations for creation care and stewardship, newer climate justice groups, and organizations mobilizing primarily among youth. Movement groups have organized mass climate marches, sit-ins, and hunger strikes, as well as campaigns for divestment from fossil fuels.

Contentious protest action remains essential in the climate movement and, while its repertoire is distinct from most forms of collaborative, deliberative, and relational civic action, activists often combine and sequence multiple forms of engagement, especially over the life course. Fruitful mixes are possible and indeed necessary for effective, democratic, and sustainable change.

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Conclusion

Civic innovation in the U.S. is rich and varied, as is green innovation within diverse civic, institutional, policy, and governance settings. The twin crises of democracy and climate warrant much more robust capacity building and policy support for innovative action that fruitfully configures multiple democratic theories. No one theoretical or analytical approach is sufficient.

Thus, theorists and practitioners have generally tended towards a democratic pragmatism, broadly conceived – one that is principled and socially just, yet appropriate to and well aligned with specific types of communities and ecosystems, institutional logics and policy challenges, and complementary tools of governance (green energy and infrastructure investment, regulatory controls and incentives, technological innovation, global agreements). Democratic pragmatism can help design for complex social and policy learning amid the uncertainties, conundrums, and disruptions of climate change over the coming decades. It can help secure deep but viable hope.

As noted in the introduction, there are many other types of democratic institutional reform that may very well be needed in the coming years. Likewise, major reforms in corporate governance, finance systems, and business school education are much needed and can be realistically imagined within reconfigured dynamics of civil society, state, and market. Democratic theory must continue to stretch to include all the civic and institutional arenas that shape ecological and climate crises and that can open up further possibilities for robust civic action and collaborative governance.

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