



RESEARCH STATEMENT

Active and equitable participation is an essential component of a well-functioning democracy. For many, pathways to participation start early in life as children model their political behaviors after those of their parents and guardians. In fact, political identities form long before people are even eligible to vote; this is true when it comes to the comprehension of political information, partisan identity, and political interest. Yet, remarkably little is known about how young people come to participate in politics and how political institutions shape these processes across racial and ethnic groups. In particular, we know little about how one of the most pervasive and intensive state institutions shapes political behavior: schools. While existing work has examined the impact of civic education on the acquisition of political knowledge, levels of political interest, and the development of certain political attitudes, few have studied the ways in which education shapes political behavior beyond traditional measures such as voting and volunteerism. This is a critical lacuna, particularly as the United States becomes increasingly diverse and as technology transforms how we interact with one another and engage in politics. With these changes occurring, we must question whether schools are capable of living up to one of their primary responsibilities: forging young citizens. Or, instead of serving as cradles of democracy, do schools exacerbate existing inequalities and constrain participation, especially among young people of color?

These questions comprise the core of my current book project. However, they also cohere with my broader research agenda, which spans beyond schools and socialization to address the politics of race and place. My work examines how local-level institutions, especially schools and neighborhoods, act as microcosms of democracy. I find that these institutions can simultaneously serve as sites that exacerbate existing racial inequalities while also holding the potential to foster agency and equal political voice. I investigate these roles and their effects on political participation by leveraging multiple methodological approaches, including experiments, survey data, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and archival research. Moreover, each of the projects described in this research statement required that I collaborate with community stakeholders and institutions.

BOOK PROJECT

My book project, which is being considered by Princeton University Press, examines how schools shape the political behavior of young people along the lines of race and ethnicity. The book not only reimagines the role of education in empowering all young people for democratic participation, but it also offers a novel perspective on an understudied but crucial point of political socialization. I make four primary claims in the book. First, I show that the content of traditional civic education courses privileges the experiences of white political actors such as Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. Second, I demonstrate that this phenomenon contributes to divergent political attitudes and behaviors across racial and ethnic groups – most notably contributing to inequities across a number of outcomes, including political efficacy. Third, rather than viewing traditional civic education courses as a way to jumpstart youth political engagement, I find that other educational approaches, particularly critical pedagogy, can close racialized participation gaps by fostering greater feelings of empowerment among young people of color. This approach to civics is different in that it centers the grassroots political action of marginalized groups rather than those who hold



power within American political institutions. Finally, I highlight the agency of teachers in adopting critical pedagogy in their classrooms, exploring how they navigate institutional constraints such as state education standards and draw upon their attitudes and lived experiences to drive the creation and implementation of empowering civic learning experiences. In the end, the book emphasizes the importance of exploring new ways to ensure that schools are able to live up to their reputation as great equalizers. The educational approaches highlighted in my book lend themselves to leaning experiences that better prepare an increasingly diverse generation of young people for active participation in American democracy. Segments of my book manuscript are already published within *Political Behavior*, the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*, and the *Washington Post*.

In addition to making a unique contribution to literatures addressing race and ethnicity, political socialization, and civic education, my book project is a testament to my ability to effectively create partnerships with outside institutions, including Chicago Public Schools, the second-largest school district in the United States. Conducting research with minors and within schools is extremely difficult due the various institutional review hurdles put in place by individual school districts. Yet, nearly every chapter of my book utilizes data that was collected with the approval of multiple school districts in the Chicagoland area in addition to Northwestern University. In particular, the experiments conducted for the book required four separate institutional review processes, which speaks to my ability to effectively design and implement ambitious projects that face significant logistical challenges. Furthermore, effectively conducting research of this kind requires a commitment to building and maintaining relationships with stakeholders outside of academia. I believe that research is most powerful when it is placed into the hands of individuals who are entrusted to institute policy change. The school districts and teachers that made this research possible were provided with summaries of my findings every step of the way to ensure that the knowledge produced by this project could be used to improve the educational experiences of young people in Chicago.

APPLICATION OF RESEARCH TO POLICY

My work addressing the intersection of civic education and racial equity has gained the attention of multiple organizations committed to increasing access to the civic learning opportunities throughout the United States. Between June of 2018 and April of 2019, I served as a civic learning consultant at the Obama Foundation. In this role, I was entrusted to synthesize existing civic education research to help guide the foundation's development of community-based civic education courses that will be made accessible to young people at the Obama Presidential Library in Chicago and throughout the United States. Though this role was originally meant to be a two-month commitment, the Obama Foundation renewed my contract for an additional eight months due to their satisfaction with the work I provided.

From November 2019-June of 2020, I worked as a research consultant for iCivics on two projects under the direction Jane Kamensky, a history professor at Harvard University. For the first project, I worked with a group of historians, policymakers, and educators throughout the United States to develop a new framework for United States History standards that engages more critically with race and the institution of slavery. For the second project, I wrote a call to action and a literature review that explains the importance of centering racial equity in civic education initiatives. I also wrote an executive summary that aimed to summarize the extent to which race is adequately discussed in civic readiness frameworks in state standards



throughout the United States. My involvement with these projects speaks to my ability to translate information related to my research expertise into information that is accessible and useful to consultants, policymakers, and individuals working in nonprofits and foundations.

WHITE RURAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN WISCONSIN

Beyond my addressing the intersection of racial equity and education, I am committed to using innovative methods and grassroots style research to study the ways in which race and place shape political behavior. One of these projects, entitled “Race and White Rural Consciousness,” is currently under review at a flagship political science journal. The project complicates conceptions of rural consciousness by making race a central component of the analysis. To conduct this research, my coauthor and I travelled throughout Wisconsin to conduct a reverse correlation imaging task at community-level institutions, including libraries, public markets, and diners. This procedure allowed us to estimate what it is that participants envision in their mind’s eye when they are thinking of a particular group of people. Overall, we find that rural Wisconsinites harbor negative and more racialized attitudes towards urban Wisconsinites than residents of Madison and Milwaukee. Thus, we provide empirical justification for those who have questioned whether race plays a more prominent role within place-based social identities such as rural consciousness and reaffirm the centrality of race and racism in America’s rural-urban divides.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In the future, I hope to continue to utilize mixed-methodological approaches to examine the persistence of racial inequality at the local level. As an example, one project I am currently developing asks residents within an extremely liberal, predominantly white, Chicago “gayborhood” to react to news that a developer is seeking to turn a vacant retail space into a gay bar that caters to Black customers. Drawing from the social dominance literature, I hypothesize that residents exposed to this treatment (relative to those exposed to a control condition) will report greater feelings of white loss and more negative perceptions of neighborhood change. Using the results from this experiment, I hope to conduct an additional civic learning study that assesses whether community discussions that encourage residents to critically reflect upon the ways in which racism manifests in progressive spaces can help address *local* manifestations of racism. Ideally, the localized nature of the results should push participants to do three things: think about the ways in which subtle racial messages undermine the community’s stated commitment to progressive politics; recognize that progressive values pertaining to one identity dimension (e.g. sexual orientation) do not necessarily translate to similar values along other dimensions (e.g. race); and consider that racial progress need not be viewed in zero-sum terms. By developing projects such as those highlighted above, I hope to demonstrate that understanding the ways in which inequities manifest within local-level institutions potentially holds the key to developing policies and initiatives that contribute to a more equitable and vibrant democracy.