

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 schools, one of the most pervasive and intensive state institutions, shapes political behavior. While existing work has examined the impact of civic education on the acquisition of political knowledge, levels of political interest, and the development of political attitudes, few have studied the ways in which education shapes political behavior beyond traditional measures such as voting and volunteerism or whether the benefits of these courses are experienced equitably across racial and ethnic groups. This is a critical lacuna, particularly as the United States becomes increasingly diverse, navigates contentious debates over voting rights and racial justice, 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: preparing young people for active participation in public life. Or, instead of serving as cradles of democracy, do schools exacerbate existing inequalities and constrain participation, especially among marginalized groups?

These questions comprise the core of my book manuscript. 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, including schools and neighborhoods act as microcosms of democracy. I find that these institutions can serve as sites that exacerbate existing inequalities yet also have the potential to foster agency and equal political voice. I investigate these roles and their effects on democratic outcomes by leveraging multiple methodological approaches, including lab-in-the-field experiments, survey data, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and content analyses. Moreover, because my research occurs *within* and *in partnership* with these local institutions, my findings can be used in real-time by organizations and community stakeholders to forge more equitable spaces for the people that they serve.

BOOK MANUSCRIPT

My completed book manuscript, *Democracy in the Schoolhouse: Empowering Civic Education for a Multiracial America*—under review at Princeton University Press and Oxford University Press—explores how to forge more empowering and equitable spaces for civic learning by centering the agency and lived experiences of marginalized groups. The book not only reimagines the role of education in preparing all kids for democratic participation but offers a novel perspective on an understudied but crucial point of political socialization and provides actionable advice for policymakers hoping to equalize democratic opportunities. The book grew out of my dissertation, which received the American Political Science Association's best Dissertation Award in both Political Psychology and Education Politics and Policy. Segments of the book are published within *Political Behavior*, the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*, and the *Washington Post*.

In the book, I make four primary claims. First, I argue that traditional civic education courses have not lived up to their promise to foster democratic capacity, especially for marginalized students. In response, I present a new approach to civic education that aims to foster political empowerment by centering critical categories of knowledge—those that center the agency and grassroots political action of marginalized groups— and historically grounded conversations about current events. Second, I demonstrate that such an approach to civic education increases rates of intended participation among young people of color and heightens political

empathy among white youth. Third, I highlight the agency of teachers in processes of socialization, exploring how their attitudes and lived experiences drive the creation and implementation of more empowering civic learning environments. Fourth, I argue that the insights of teachers and students—those who spend the most time in social studies classrooms—should drive initiatives to revitalize civic education. Too often education policy is developed and implemented without considering the perspectives of those who will feel the most immediate effects. The profound insights provided by the young Chicagoans and educators included in the book should inform the work of policymakers looking to make civic education more empowering for young people throughout the United States, and particularly those in marginalized communities.

The book contributes to multiple academic literatures but is also a testament to my ability to create effective partnerships with community organizations and my commitment to delivering research that is relevant to people's lives. To conduct this research, I spent hundreds of hours observing classrooms, talking to students and teachers, observing neighborhoods, and traversing the city on public transportation. Conducting research with minors and within schools is extremely difficult due to the various institutional review hurdles put in place by individual school districts. Yet nearly every chapter of the 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 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.

APPLICATION OF RESEARCH TO PUBLIC POLICY

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 my book possible were provided with summaries of my findings to ensure that the knowledge produced by this project could be used to improve the educational experiences of young people in Chicago. While grassroots research of this kind is time consuming, I believe that it is the most powerful approach for addressing the kinds of questions I pose in the book and reflects my own commitment to conducting scholarship that makes an impact in people's lives.

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.

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 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. My involvement with these projects speaks to my ability to make information and insights from my research expertise accessible and useful to consultants, policymakers, and nonprofits.

In addition to my work addressing the intersection of civic learning and racial equity, my research with the GenForward Survey has contributed to policy conversations in Chicago. Between 2017 and 2019, I worked with Cathy Cohen and a team of graduate researchers at The University of Chicago on a public-facing report

entitled *Race & Place: Young Adults and The Future of Chicago*. Drawing from 200 in-depth interviews with a 18-29-year-olds throughout the city, the report highlights the ways in which young people experience Chicago differently across racial and geographical lines. I conducted and coded 50 of the 200 interviews utilized in this report and was the sole author on two sections. The report gained a great deal of publicity during Chicago's 2019 Mayoral Race, becoming a source of information frequently used by debate moderators to pose questions to candidates about the policy preferences of young voters.

RACE AND PLACE

Beyond my policy-oriented and public-facing scholarship, I am committed to using innovative methods and grassroots style research to study the ways in which race and place shape political behavior. One project, entitled "Race and White Rural Consciousness," is forthcoming in *Perspectives on Politics*. 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, the study revealed that participants living in rural parts of Wisconsin—unlike those living in urban parts—tended to think of city dwellers as possessing more negative attributes. In addition, the study revealed that rural participants thought of Milwaukeeans, specifically, as possessing stereotypically Black attributes. Moreover, this tendency was starker among those who scored higher on a measure of rural consciousness, suggesting that rural consciousness is related to racial stereotyping. Thus, we provide empirical answer for those who have questioned whether race is a component of place-based social identities such as rural consciousness and reaffirm the centrality of race and racism in America's rural-urban divides. As it relates to policy, the paper suggests that organizations and political parties that seek to rebuild relationships and make in-roads with rural America will have to make addressing racial prejudice a central part of their work.

I am currently working on three additional projects that sit at the intersection of race and place: the first addresses racial prejudice within progressive "gayborhoods" in Chicago; the second examines how the political preferences of gentrifiers differ from long-time residents of the city's neighborhoods; the third considers the democratic potential of non-citizen voting initiatives in citywide elections. Though these studies are based in Chicago, the city's unique racial socioeconomic landscape provides an ideal laboratory for exploring questions that are central to the broader study of American politics.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In the future, I hope to continue to utilize mixed-methodological approaches to examine the persistence of inequality and racism within local contexts. In particular, I am interested in exploring how socioeconomically advantaged—and predominantly white—parents in Chicago leverage their financial resources, social capital, and knowledge of the city's policy loopholes to secure educational opportunities for their own children at the expense of others. Such a project helps to highlight the ways in which privilege is leveraged and maintained in seemingly progressive spaces. As reflected in my published work to date, the long-term goal of my research agenda is to identify sources of inequality at the local level, translate the findings in a way that is both compelling and accessible to multiple audiences, and, most importantly, to contribute to conversations that make spaces that are central to democratic life—schools, neighborhoods, and community organizations—more equitable, accessible, and responsive to the everyday concerns of people, and especially those who exist at the margins.