

Democracy Laboratory
Grand Challenges White Paper
Quality of Democracy and Equality Theme

Abstract

We propose to build a Democracy Laboratory (DL) at the University of Wyoming. The project of building a multiracial democracy in America, where liberty and justice for all is a fact of life, rather than a distant dream, is perhaps our grandest challenge, and has been so since the country's founding.

As a dynamic, interdisciplinary, intergenerational space, the Democracy Lab will incubate research projects, germinate new capacities, and initiate collaboration. The Democracy Lab will support research production and programs in a collaborative functional physical space to engage our communities in the work of improving the quality of democracy and equality.

Research Team

Scott Henkel, PI, director, Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research and departments of English and African American and Diaspora Studies

Adam Blackler, History, College of Arts and Sciences

Cathy Connolly, Gender and Women's Studies, School of Culture Gender, and Social Justice, and member of the Wyoming House of Representatives

Sara Flitner, Flitner Strategies, former mayor of Jackson, WY, and Lead Facilitator of the ENDOW initiative

Jennifer Harmon, Family and Consumer Sciences, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources

Melissa Morris, History, College of Arts and Sciences

Shawn Reese, executive director, Wyoming Humanities Council and former Policy Director to Wyoming Governor Matt Mead

Samantha Vandermeade, Gender and Women's Studies, College of Arts and Sciences

Nature of the Challenge

The Wyoming Territorial motto was *Cedant Arma Togae*, which translates: let arms yield to civil power. On January 6th, 2021, people around the world watched an insurrection at the United States Capitol building, as civil power yielded to arms. In our historical context, when armed insurrectionists attempt to subvert the rule of law and overthrow the results of a democratic election, the need to understand democracy in our state, the United States, and the world, the nature of civil power, the principles of the public good, is particularly keen.

When Wyoming's early leaders changed the motto to The Equality State, in recognition of the state's leading role to recognize a woman's right to vote, they gave us an aspiration that remains unfulfilled. We draw inspiration from Wyoming's mottos, which remind us that civil society requires citizen engagement, and that the problems of democracy are ever-present.

Researchers in the humanities and social sciences tracking the quality of democracy have been warning of the dangers of increasing inequality, racial injustice, and gender discrimination. In the wake of the 2008 global economic crash, nativist and fascist movements have gained momentum throughout the world. The growing popularity of extreme-right populism and white nationalist

groups, in particular, represent central threats to the foundational tenets of liberal democracy. Historians of fascism have increasingly raised alarms about this trend.¹

Democratic institutions in the United States have existed for over two centuries, a condition that assures a base level of public support and civil authority for the rule of law. An overwhelming majority of citizens, moreover, believe in the promise of liberal democracy and the juridical structures that have helped navigate the country forward politically and socially. Critical evaluation of past events provides an essential means to learn about the destructive capabilities of nationalism, racism, and centralized oppression of citizens. In the language of *The Federalist Papers*, without an engaged citizenry, laws and institutions risk becoming mere “parchment barriers.” *We need a durable infrastructure in which people learn about ethics, empathy, perspective, context, and critical, creative, and analytical thinking, and how the history of race, class, and gender have shaped our systems and institutions.*

Researchers working in the Democracy Lab will advance collaborative and multidisciplinary humanistic and social scientific inquiry toward the Grand Challenges we face: Are our current civic institutions adequate to the task of maintaining democracy and equality, especially in the face of political polarization and incivility nationally and in the state? Do University of Wyoming graduates have the civic and cultural skills necessary to contribute to Wyoming’s future in a world becoming ever more intercultural, diverse, and interconnected? Is the University doing the important work of facilitating difficult conversations and imagining future possibilities in communities across the state?

Design of the Democracy Laboratory

A laboratory is an incubator: in the Democracy Lab, researchers can recognize problems, form collaborative and intergenerational teams, hypothesize and test solutions, design research plans to meet shared goals, and produce assessments and reports necessary to progress. A laboratory promises to reanimate traditional humanistic sources, methodologies, and theories, raise their potential to build new areas of distinction at our university, and redirect them toward developing workable solutions to our grandest challenges and most difficult dilemmas. When designed with humanistic inquiry in mind, a DL showcases the best and most robust sort of scholarship: generative, outcome-producing, relevant, and vital. We seek to build a laboratory space wherein:

- Interdisciplinary and intergenerational teams of scholars and students debate, discuss, and build an engine for producing cutting-edge and relevant research on the quality of democracy, in a space where scholarly practices mix with design thinking
- Teams of scholars analyze the history of how race, class, gender, and other social categories impact (in)equality and imagine alternative, more equitable, futures
- Academic, non-profit, and community leaders convene and partner to shape and strengthen more democratic, diverse communities

Peer Centers and Institutes

While there is no organization at the University of Wyoming to do this work, there are several institutes at other universities from which we take inspiration, including the Arizona State University [Humanities Laboratory](#); The [Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy](#) at UPenn; the [Democracy Initiative](#) at the University of Virginia; the [Agora Institute](#) at Johns Hopkins;

¹ Democracy Lab team member Adam Blackler was among dozens of historians who signed a letter warning that democracy “is either withering or in full-scale collapse globally” and urging ordinary people to take action. See “Scholars warn of collapse of democracy as Trump v Biden election looms,” *The Guardian* 1 November 2020.

and the Harvard University [Democratic Knowledge Project](#). Arizona State University's [Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory](#) is an excellent example of what our proposed Democracy lab can accomplish over time. Ranked highest in the nation for innovation, ASU's Global Futures Laboratory offers the tools and expertise of transdisciplinary research institutes, centers and facilities across ASU to generate new ideas and solve problems.²

University of Wyoming's Role in the Solution

The effort to improve the quality of democracy and equality in the United States has always been a central part of the Land Grant University mission. Many of the early architects of the system, including Jonathan Baldwin Turner and Justin Morrill, were participants in the 19th century movements to abolish slavery, to recognize a woman's right to vote, and to win labor rights. In our time, the need to reinvigorate the civic mission of the Land Grant University is clear. Last year, the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, a project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) released a report titled "Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century." They write:

[A] healthy constitutional democracy depends on a virtuous cycle in which responsive political institutions foster a healthy civic culture of participation and responsibility, while a healthy civic culture [...] keeps our political institutions responsive and inclusive. Institutions and culture intersect in the realm of civil society: the ecosystem of associations and groups in which people practice habits of participation and self-rule and reinforce norms of mutual obligation.³

The Democracy Lab will be an anchor institution in this civic ecosystem in the Rocky Mountain Region. The AAAS report makes several recommendations that resonate with our work, including:

- Activate a range of funders to invest in the leadership capacity of the so-called civic one million: the catalytic leaders who drive civic renewal in communities around the country.
- Invest in civic educators and education for all ages and in all communities through curricula, ongoing program evaluations, professional development for teachers, and a federal award program that recognizes civic-learning achievements. These measures should encompass lifelong (K–12 and adult) civic-learning experiences with the full community in mind.

Relevance to Wyoming

America is at a crossroads, and so is Wyoming. Wyoming's challenges are large and complex—a pandemic, an economic and fiscal crisis, significant social changes. To address these problems, Wyoming's communities must be able to come together, work through differences of

² The quality of democracy and equality cannot be separated from economic and cultural systems. As one example of the type of research the Democracy Lab may produce, ASU's Global Futures Laboratory houses the Global Institute of Sustainability and Innovation, which provides workshops in partnership with the Fabric and Business Resource Innovation Center to provide resources for small businesses to produce products sustainably. The clothing and textile industry is a global economic engine that is intertwined with a number of current social issues facing our democracy. As mass production became normalized during the Industrial Revolution, marginalized women and children operated the machinery, often in dangerous conditions. In addition, the adoption of cotton fiber processing technology incentivized the practice of slavery in the Southern United States. The legacy of these racial, class and gender divisions in the beginning of what we know of as the modern fashion industry echo in the imagery representations of the industry today, where racial minorities and those of lower social class are seldom included.

³ See <<https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report>>.

opinion, and find innovative solutions. This is not easy, but a healthy democracy requires an engaged and civil citizenry. Although there are many bright spots in Wyoming's civic engagement, recently there have been troubling incidents. On November 2nd a Natrona County Commissioners health outreach session was interrupted and eventually ended by a cabal of loud hecklers. Several weeks ago, sheriffs in Teton County were harassed for trying to encourage mask wearing. Black Lives Matter parades have pitted placard-wielding protesters against weapons-wielding people not just in Seattle and Portland, but in Sheridan, Laramie, and Jackson.

The Democracy Lab will be a venue for research, teaching, and public engagement about our state's most pressing political issues, including:

- The need to move from an extractive based economy both in terms of jobs and revenue
- Attention to issues of disparity: gender wage gap, housing crisis, poverty, food insecurity
- Attention to sovereignty of indigenous nations within state borders
- The myth of individualism and cowboy-up as the 'solution' to problems
- Relationships among governmental units: federal, state and local control

Correspondence to Presidential Priorities

This proposal to build a Democracy Lab supports President Seidel's pillar to make the University of Wyoming a more inclusive institution.

As the American Academy of Arts and Sciences report notes,

constitutional democracy in the United States experienced a "second founding" in the years immediately following the Civil War with the adoption of the Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution that abolished slavery, guaranteed equal protection of the laws, and made black male citizens eligible to vote. The civil rights movement is, in turn, sometimes described as a "third founding."

The Democracy Lab team agrees with the AAAS report when it speculates that conditions may currently exist for a "fourth founding," rooted in the Constitution and in our expanded national creed of liberty and justice for all; not only in the actions of government, but also in the commitments of citizens, federal and state policy, and in research and analysis. Such realignments do not arrive on their own--this vision of a more inclusive future depends on people in their communities working to make such a vision a reality. Most importantly, assuring that these values are reflected in our policies and legislation takes diligence.

Work plan

A Planning Grant from the Grand Challenges initiative will allow the Democracy Lab team during spring and summer 2021 to:

1. Support faculty work to design the Democracy Lab's core programs
2. Host a virtual mini-conference in summer 2021, with keynote speakers from our peer centers and institutes⁴

⁴ As we look toward the research outputs that are possible as the Democracy Laboratory grows, it is essential to keep in mind the need for flexibility in the current environment, as well as accessibility to the communities in the state of Wyoming that we serve. With these considerations, the committee plans to coordinate a summer virtual conference through ipostersessions.com. The platform allows for posting of virtual presentation posters and session zoom presentations. Through this conference, presenters can educate attendees on current, ongoing research, recently finished

3. Write proposals for the following federal/national grant competitions:
 - National Endowment for the Humanities Capacity and Infrastructure Grant (750k, due May 18th)
 - National Endowment for the Humanities Public Programs Grant (250K, due mid-June, TBA)
 - National Endowment for the Humanities Collaborative Research Grant (250K, due December 1st)
 - Teagle Foundation Education for American Civic Life Grant (up to 300k, rolling deadline)
4. Write proposal for a private gift from the Hughes Foundation of Jackson, WY
5. In partnership with the UW Foundation, write small donor and major gift solicitations

Outcomes and Core Programs

The Democracy Lab will bring under one umbrella established programs, recently-launched initiatives, and new research projects.

Existing programs, to be housed in the Democracy Lab:

- The University of Wyoming Press (funded by UW Libraries; publishing in areas including a book series titled “Democracy and the United States.”)
- The Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research “Think & Drink” series of public discussions: live/in-person conversations, subsequently broadcast on YouTube Channel and as a new podcast (NEH Public Programs grant to support T&D currently under review)

Existing programs, to partner with the Democracy Lab:

- Wyoming Humanities “Democracy and the Informed Citizen” Project (Initial funding for this initiative is provided by the Mellon Foundation and the Federation of State Humanities Councils) This initiative has produced the book *Democracy Under Construction: A Reader from Wyoming Humanities*, currently being distributed to every public library and public school library in Wyoming. This initiative also includes a citizen journalism project, which provides funding to small Wyoming newspapers to write articles about civic participation.

New Capacities:

- An inter-generational space for research production, bringing together researchers across career stages, from distinguished scholars, mid-career and junior faculty, postdocs, and graduate students, in order to build a pipeline for research on the quality of democracy
- In partnership with the Wyoming Humanities Council, design and launch a Civic Engagement Assessment, a long-term, longitudinal study of Wyoming Citizen’s views on, and practices of, community engagement
- Support new undergraduate concurrent major and minor in the Public Humanities
- Contract with a speaker’s bureau such as the [Lyceum Agency](#) to build an inter/national network for the Democracy Lab’s researchers and programs

research and special topics. The virtual platform will be important in the near future and will also allow for maximum reach to the UW community and the state of Wyoming.