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The Praxis of Realizing Election Imperatives in Trump's America

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Abstract

American democracy and higher education were not developed under—nor are they guided by—the principle of equality for all. However, the sociopolitical history of the United States does not negate the responsibility to equality and equity that educators, university administrators, and policymakers have today. As a means of advancing the praxis of civic engagement within higher education vis-à-vis the *Election Imperatives* call to action, this ethnographic action research study set out to (a) establish a nonpartisan higher education coalition in the state of Tennessee and (b) institutionalize student political learning and engagement at Vanderbilt University, Tennessee's premier research university. Tennessee is a voting-restrictive state with poor educational outcomes for historically marginalized populations, and this current reality reflects longstanding civil rights violations and educational inequities that are especially prevalent in the American South. Given the sociopolitical context in which this work developed, the action research study informs best student political learning and engagement policies and practices for voting-restrictive and hyper-partisan states.

Keywords: civic engagement, civic education, higher education, action research, election imperatives

For the last two centuries, American society has understood a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” to represent the foundation of its democracy (Schwartz, 2000; Wilentz, 2006). In this spirit, four key elements must take place to materialize a democratic government: a political system that enables people to choose their representatives through free and fair elections; the active participation of people in political and civic life; the protection of human rights; and equal rule of law (Diamond, 1997, 2016). Active participation in civic life and the protection of human rights are central components of American democracy. Tied inextricably to these components are the mission and purpose of higher education—teaching, research, and service—which by definition establish the preparation of a civically engaged student body as a public good (Domonkos, 1977; Ehrlich, 2000; Scott, 2006). Student political learning¹ and democratic participation² serve democracy and help actualize higher education learning outcomes (Kimball, 1986; Thomas, 2000; Westbrook, 2015). These concepts are neither partisan nor part of a hubristic liberal agenda.

However, to understand the role of higher education within a democracy, one must examine critically the consequences of sociopolitical histories that have engendered prohibitive governing systems and processes. This critical examination informs how democracy is compromised and highlights the roles and responsibilities that today’s educators, university administrators, and policymakers must espouse. Canonically, the ecology of higher education must recognize that the U.S. government and higher education were not conceptualized or developed for the participation of all members of society. The genocide of native peoples, the institutionalization of enslaved peoples, and imposed voting barriers were formative sociopolitical events that defined American notions of “citizenship,” “free and fair elections,” “equal rule of law,” and the “protection of human rights” (Du Bois, 1935/2014; Hunt, 2008; Mills, 2014; Tillet, 2012; Wunder & Hu-DeHart, 1992). This history also reflects who was allowed to receive a postsecondary education, what was taught, and how racial and social hierarchies became more deeply embedded in society and impeded American democracy (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Solomon, 1985; Wilder, 2014).

While American democracy and higher education were not developed under the principles of equality for all, the sociopolitical history of higher education does not negate the responsibility that higher education actors have today. When these actors fail to uphold the foundations of democracy, they fail the principles of shared humanity. If society is to achieve democracy and champion commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion, then educators and policymakers need to reimagine their participation in civic education³ and actively interrogate voting barriers within and beyond higher education (Crittenden & Levine, 2018; Thomas & Brower, 2017b). The ability to facilitate civic education and engagement⁴ is situated at the

¹ *Political learning* represents the student’s experience of understanding systems of power that shape society. This learning experience occurs within and outside the classroom and affirms a student’s agency in shaping systems of power, particularly in regard to political and economic power structures (Thomas & Brower, 2017b).

² *Political participation* in a democracy refers to engagement with government systems and processes and includes a broad range of activities such as engagement in the electoral process, community organizing for the betterment of society, advocating for causes, convening as a community to discuss shared concerns, etc. (Thomas & Brower, 2017b).

³ *Civic education* refers to the learning process that impacts people’s beliefs, actions, and capabilities as members of society and within their communities. Civic education includes the theoretical, political, and practical meaning making of citizenship and democracy (Crittenden & Levine, 2018; Thomas & Brower, 2017b).

⁴ *Civic engagement* refers to the individual and collective ability to support the quality of life in a community by identifying societal problems and generating solutions for the betterment of society. Advancing the quality of life in

intersection of shared human dignity, rights, and citizenship regardless of legal status (Ehrlich, 2000).

Perhaps there is no more poignant time in history to do this work. The Trump Administration bred bold, overt, and violent forms of racism, and its predestination ideology further cast away historically excluded populations (Giroux, 2017; Parker, 2013). While the administration was particularly defined by its human rights violations (Human Rights Watch, 2018), it also illustrated the current state of democracy and the pressing need to interrogate structures and systems that prohibit equitable democratic participation. What emerged were restated commitments among higher education stakeholders to support historically excluded populations and promote, within their respective institutions, inclusive and supportive learning environments (DeRosa, 2016; Lynch, 2017). However, the praxis of student political learning and democratic participation was absent from dominant narratives in higher education.

Guided by the Institute of Democracy and Higher Education's *Election Imperatives* call for action, this ethnographic action research⁵ study set out to (a) establish a nonpartisan higher education coalition in the state of Tennessee and (b) institutionalize student political learning and engagement at Vanderbilt University, Tennessee's premier research university. Presently, Tennessee is the third most voting-restrictive state in the United States and ranks in the bottom half of the nation regarding education access and achievement⁶ (U.S. News & World Report, 2018). Disparate voting rights and educational opportunities reflect longstanding civil rights violations that perpetuate educational inequities (Li et al., 2018; Underhill, 2019). Given the state's sociopolitical history and the political climate in which this work was developed, the outcomes of the action research help inform best student political learning and engagement policies and practices in voting-restrictive and hyper-partisan states.

a community can occur in numerous ways (e.g., volunteering, participating in elections, raising awareness), and these forms of engagement can be political and nonpolitical processes for change (Ehrlich, 2000).

⁵ As developed by Tacchi et al. (2003), an ethnographic approach informs generative actions as a result of understanding sociopolitical contexts and systemic inequality. The standpoint or on-the-scene learning (ethnography) regarding civic engagement is linked to *Election Imperatives*, and findings are generative from action research.

⁶ The U.S. News & World Report's (2019) education scoring measures higher education attainment, graduation rates, college debt, and tuition costs as well as pre-K–12 enrollment, standardized test scores, and graduation rates.

Literature Review

The Democratization of Higher Education

The mission and purpose of higher education have transformed since the institutionalization of the modern university. However, the concept of *service* interlocks the role of higher education throughout its history, as colleges and universities have always been social institutions designed to provide service to various organizations and members of society (Domonkos, 1977; Scott, 2006). Whether services were for government, the church, or the broader public, postsecondary institutions were designed to support teaching and research. For example, the formation of U.S. colleges and universities during the early 19th century was regarded as a service to the nation-state (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Domonkos, 1977; Scott, 2006; Thelin, 2011).

Educators have heralded democratic engagement as higher education's service to a democratic society (Jacoby, 2009). This point of reference is philosophized within a humanistic school of thought and implicitly ascribes the principles of democracy; concepts such as equality, liberty, and human agency both define the democratization of higher education and regard its service as a public good (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2010; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Stephens, 2003; Crittenden & Levine, 2018; Westbrook, 2015). Yet, the role of higher education in U.S. democracy has transformed over time, aligning with the nation's sociopolitical history and debates about the status of American democracy (Thomas & Benenson, 2017). For instance, students' civic agency has at times been understood as their ability to think critically and respond to societal challenges and at other times as their capacity to participate in national political discourse and the election of political candidates (Thomas & Benenson, 2017).

The preparation of an informed citizenry is a goal articulated in many university mission and vision statements. These statements further assert the importance of civic engagement and often declare the significance of student political learning and social engagement (Campus Compact, 2019; Harward, 2012, 2013; Jacoby, 2009). In addition, the 1998 reauthorization of the U.S. Higher Education Act of 1965 required postsecondary institutions to provide students with voter registration forms before local registration deadlines (Bennion & Nickerson, 2016). However, beyond university mission statements and student voting outcomes, if postsecondary institutions seek to educate for a better democratic society, student political learning and engagement must be embedded in curricular and co-curricular systems and processes 365 days a year (Morgan & Orphan, 2016; Thomas, 2004). Research has indicated that best practices require institutions to foster comprehensive and integrated approaches so that civic engagement and education occur within various capacities (e.g., service learning, global and multicultural studies, deliberative dialogue, etc.) and throughout students' postsecondary education (Morgan & Orphan, 2016; Thomas, 2004; Thomas & Brower, 2017b). Educators and policymakers need to spearhead civic engagement efforts to institutionalize a culture reflecting the importance of preparing citizens for society (Harward, 2012, 2013; Jacoby, 2009; Lewis, 2014; Thomas & Brower, 2017a). Colleges and universities that institutionalize civic engagement policies and practices intentionally develop a campus climate that fosters civic responsibility (Thomas et al., 2018; Thomas & Brower, 2017a, 2017b).

Campus climate reflects attitudes, behaviors, and standards the academic community demonstrates toward individuals, and individuals toward other individuals (Rankin & Reason, 2008). Embedded within the campus climate experience is the extent to which attitudes,

behaviors, and standards support student political learning and engagement (Thomas et al., 2018; Thomas & Brower, 2017a, 2017b). Therefore, the work of establishing a civically engaged campus climate is not solely confined to providing civic learning and democratic engagement but calls upon campuses to actively advance equity, diversity, and inclusion (Thomas et al., 2018; Thomas & Brower, 2017a, 2017b). Ultimately, understanding the role of democracy within higher education first necessitates an understanding of how higher education institutions and their campus climates are a microcosm of the sociopolitical state of America (Goldberg, 2016).

Any consideration of the history of higher education and the sociopolitical nature of campus climate, equity, diversity, and inclusion for student political learning and engagement must entail a critical examination of sociopolitical inequities *and* a responsive academic community that interrogates prohibitive systems and processes, both within the institution and beyond. For example, identified student voting barriers—location of polling sites, restrictive voter ID laws, changing voter registration requirements, lack of information for first-time voters, etc.—are potentially disenfranchising experiences associated with race, socioeconomic status, and place of residence (Goldberg, 2016; Hallmark & Martinez, 2017; Neri et al., 2016). Similarly, institutionalizing a campus climate that fosters shared responsibility in democracy demands recognition of personhood, belonging, and equality for historically excluded populations that have been disenfranchised by either higher education and/or American democracy. Academic excellence necessitates that diversity and democracy assume equitable participation.

Research has established the numerous ways civic engagement advances the mission and vision of higher education. Student political learning and engagement translate to promoting inclusive learning environments, improving curricula and learning outcomes, and advancing institutional commitments to diversity (Harward, 2012, 2013; Jacoby, 2009; Thomas & Brower, 2017a, 2017b). Civic engagement within higher education is invaluable. Thus, student political learning and engagement should be bound to and justified by learning outcomes, as civic engagement itself is central to the mission and purpose of higher education.

Election Imperatives

The Institute of Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE)⁷ is a leading nonpartisan organization centering on student political learning and engagement. Informed by research on college student voting and the campus climates of highly political institutions, IDHE released *Election Imperatives* (2018) as a call to action for college and university leaders. The *Election Imperatives* report outlines succinctly how postsecondary institutions can elevate democracy while strengthening a culture of discourse, inclusion, agency, and participation. The report offers 10 recommendations for increasing college student voting and improving political learning and engagement in democracy:

- Reflect on past elections and reimagine 2018 by convening a small group of institutional faculty and student leaders to examine the institution's NSLVE [i.e., National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement] report, consider previous effort, and recalibrate election goals.

⁷ The Institute of Democracy and Higher Education is part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University and serves as a leading venue for research, resources, and advocacy on college student political learning and engagement in democratic practice (IDHE, 2019).

- Remove barriers to student voting by making voter registration easy and addressing statutory and non-statutory obstacles.
- Develop informed voters by teaching the history and the current state of voting rights in the U.S., voting basics, and information literacy.
- Establish a permanent and inclusive coalition charged with ... improv[ing] campus climate for student political learning discourse, equity, agency, and participation in democracy.
- Invest in the right kind of training for coalition members and student volunteers to engage in discussions and work collaboratively across differences of social identity, political perspective, and lived experiences; strategically cluster trained volunteers.
- Talk politics across campus and discuss policy issues, social conflicts, and campus concerns with students to increase and improve skills, intergroup dialogue, and deliberation, and to advance norms of shared responsibility, equity and inclusion, and free expression.
- Involve faculty across disciplines in elections in the classroom and beyond by encouraging them to participate in activities connected to political participation more broadly.
- Increase and improve classroom issue discussion of politics and policy across disciplines, especially controversial issues.
- Encourage and support student activism and leadership on public issues and campus concerns.
- Empower students to create a buzz around the election, cultivating student agency and charging students with motivating voters by creating excitement. (Thomas et al., 2018)

These nonpartisan recommendations institutionalize political learning and rightfully address postsecondary institutions' responsibility for advancing the health and future of American democracy. The recommendations are also guided by the aforementioned best civic engagement practices and represent a timely response to the extreme partisanship in the current American political arena (Thomas et al., 2018). Per the *Election Imperatives* report, the process of reimagining and realizing highly politically engaged postsecondary institutions constitutes a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach that challenges educators and policymakers to think beyond student voting outcomes. This ethnographic action research study extends this discourse by demonstrating the praxis of actualizing *Election Imperatives* in Tennessee, a voter-restrictive state.

The National Conference of State Legislatures⁸ has identified Tennessee as a strict voting state, indicating that its voting laws and practices make it difficult for people who are eligible to vote to exercise their right to vote (Underhill, 2019). The Cost of Voting Index, a quantified measure of the "time and effort" to vote, places Tennessee as the third most voting-restrictive state (Li et al., 2018). Perpetuating its voter-restrictive status and arguably in violation of the

⁸ The National Conference of State Legislatures is a bipartisan organization that monitors, tracks, and researchers state and state-federal legislation that impacts state politics.

Fourteenth Amendment, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee recently signed a measure that fines voter registration groups for incomplete or inaccurate voter registration forms (Lockhart, 2019). The law requires voter registration groups to adhere to a list of strict requirements when registering people to vote, with non-compliance resulting potentially in civil fines or criminal punishment. Put plainly, voter registration errors are now being criminalized. Given that the praxis of realizing *Election Imperatives* assumes the current state of democracy at local, state, and federal levels *is* an inherent component of the student political learning and engagement process, this ethnographic action research study also examines how the implications of disparate voting laws were contextualized while engaging in this work.

Realizing Election Imperatives

This ethnographic action research study details how the work of realizing *Election Imperatives* was conducted during the 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 academic years in Tennessee. Specifically, it highlights how a civic engagement strategy was developed to accomplish the following: (a) bringing to fruition the first and second annual Tennessee Civic Campus Summit, a convening of colleges and universities in the state to develop institutional plans to increase student political learning and democratic engagement; (b) establishing a statewide civic engagement coalition to support Tennessee colleges and universities; (c) supporting civic engagement policy work with state legislators; and (d) ensuring that Vanderbilt University was engaged in the process in a manner that exemplified best practices and utilized its academic capital to strengthen democratic processes in the state.

It is important to note that while this study focuses on the 2017–2019 academic years, various organizations and higher education institutions in Tennessee have been engaged in this work for decades, and their hard-won efforts ultimately established a foundation from which the statewide civic engagement coalition could be realized. For example, the American Democracy Project, directed by Dr. Mary Evins at Middle Tennessee State University, provides meaningful opportunities for students to understand citizenship and democracy. Similarly, the Eastern Tennessee State University Leadership and Civic Engagement Program has been nationally recognized for implementing civic engagement practices and exponentially increasing student voting participation in the state of Tennessee. With these preceding efforts serving as a foundation for best practices in the state, educators and policymakers must first and foremost understand the civic engagement landscape to effectively bridge and build upon past and current efforts.

The opportunity for the Tennessee Scholars Strategy Network (TN-SSN) chapter to advance civic engagement efforts began when TN-SSN established a relationship with CivicTN, a nonpartisan organization that supports coalition building to increase civic participation in Tennessee. This relationship emerged from a review of The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)⁹ report for Vanderbilt University to understand how Tennessee's premier research institution was and was not leading political learning and engagement per the best practices. During this process, we¹⁰ learned that CivicTN was conceptualizing the first

⁹ The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement offers colleges and universities an opportunity to learn their student registration and voting rates and, for interested campuses, to more closely examine their campus climate for political learning and engagement and correlations between specific student learning experiences and voting (IDHE, 2016).

¹⁰ I am a former postdoctoral fellow for the Scholars Strategy Network; in this role, I worked with the Vanderbilt Office of Academic Citizenship and Service (OACS) to promote civic engagement and co-developed the first and

annual Tennessee Civic Campus Summit to support students, faculty, and staff in developing institutional plans to increase student political learning and democratic engagement at their respective institutions. Subsequently, as the TN-SSN chapter and in conversation with key stakeholders, we decided that in addition to bolstering student political learning and engagement at Vanderbilt University, we would help develop the Tennessee Civic Campus Summit and use this as an opportunity to elevate relationships with state legislators who supported civic engagement for the state of Tennessee.

Statewide Convening and Coalition Building

The ability to imagine a statewide coalition in service to student political learning and engagement requires nonpartisan leadership to first understand how local, state, and federal politics implicates civic education. From the outset, CivicTN—more specifically, Statewide Civic Engagement Director Kelley Elliott—utilized the U.S. Higher Education Act of 1965 as a tool to convene stakeholders and develop the first annual Tennessee Civic Campus Summit. The Higher Education Act requires postsecondary institutions to facilitate voter registration on their campuses, a mandate that was expanded upon to critically examine the needs of Tennessee educators and how those needs were in conversation with Tennessee’s lowest voter turnout in the 2014 national elections.

This standpoint recognizes the positioning of higher education institutions at the forefront of civic learning and citizenship and assumes that colleges and universities in Tennessee are in fact embracing their civic engagement responsibility. This frame of reference also served to guide the summit’s overarching objectives and united an interdisciplinary and diverse committee to support the inaugural summit for the state of Tennessee. Collectively, we regarded the summit as an opportunity to provide Tennessee administrators, faculty, staff, and students with skills and resources for developing institutional plans to increase student political learning and democratic engagement that addresses misunderstandings and myths about student voting, as well as for identifying which voting barriers were especially prohibitive for students in the state of Tennessee.

The inaugural Campus Civic Summit was held on April 20, 2018, at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, with 13 participating Tennessee colleges and universities developing student voting plans. The success of the first summit was largely due to the intentional bridging of the Tennessee higher education community with nonpartisan civic engagement organizations. This collaboration facilitated comprehensive training workshops for summit participants which offered local, state, and national resources, and demystified the process of developing institutional plans to increase student political learning and democratic engagement. For

second Civic TN Campus Summit—which convened 18 colleges and universities to draft campus voting plans and support youth voter access and engagement. I utilized policies and practices to author a campus voting plan for Vanderbilt University and establish coalition-based support from local, state, and national organizations, including: OACS, Division of Public Affairs, Faculty Senate, Campus Election Engagement, Civic Tennessee, Tennessee Civic Engagement Task Force, Think Tennessee, and the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. As a result of this effort, the VandyVotes Committee hosted the second annual Civic TN Campus Summit at Vanderbilt University. I use the word “we” here to establish the community nature of the work and mitigate power dynamics between self and coalition-building. This effort was also supported and facilitated by Tennessee SSN leaders Drs. Carolyn Heinrich and Nathan J. Kelly.

example, initiatives and organizations such as the American Democracy Project,¹¹ Voting is Social Work,¹² The Democracy Commitment,¹³ the Campus Vote Project,¹⁴ the ALL IN Challenge,¹⁵ the Students Learn Students Vote Coalition,¹⁶ and the Andrew Goodman Foundation¹⁷ exemplified to participants the strategies they have implemented to increase student political engagement and the various tools at their disposal. Perhaps just as importantly, the summit provided a nonpartisan space for participants to speak frankly about the challenges they encountered—conversations that cultivated a shared sense of statewide responsibility and solidarity. As the summit organizing committee, we understood that the latter was an especially significant outcome if we were going to utilize the summit as a platform for establishing a statewide civic engagement coalition and building out committee work. All too often, and particularly in hyper-partisan states, addressing longstanding voting barriers can lead to organizing burnout and feelings of isolation. We preemptively addressed these concerns by announcing our willingness to institute annual retreats to support civic engagement work and to demonstrate that rather than working in isolated silos, our collective efforts were components of a renewed state democracy in Tennessee.

On March 29, 2019, we hosted the second annual Civic Campus Summit concurrently at two different locations—the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and Vanderbilt University—with 18 colleges and universities participating. In addition to including a second location for the summit, we sought to ground institutional plans to increase student political learning and democratic engagement with the sociopolitical history of the state of Tennessee while remaining a nonpartisan space for university administrators, faculty, and students. Thus, the second annual summit at Vanderbilt University was an opportunity for participants to learn about the history of the university and the ways the summit host site had disenfranchised historically excluded

¹¹ The American Democracy Project is a network of more than 250 state colleges and universities focused on public higher education's role in preparing the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for democracy (Bowman, 2018).

¹² The Voting is Social Work campaign is grounded in the idea that nonpartisan voter engagement is legal, ethical, and professional, and central to social work values and mission. In addition, communities with high voter turnout report greater well-being and more resources and attention from elected officials.

¹³ The Democracy Commitment is a nonpartisan national organization dedicated to advancing democracy (Bowman, 2018).

¹⁴ The Campus Vote Project helps colleges and universities institutionalize reforms that empower students with the information they need to register and vote. The project provides resources and information that administrators and students can use to work together to overcome challenges students often face when voting (Campus Vote Project, 2019).

¹⁵ The ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge believes that more young people need to participate in the electoral process. By recognizing colleges and universities for their commitment to increasing student voting rates, this national awards program encourages institutions to help students form the habits of active and informed citizenship. Hundreds of colleges and universities have joined the challenge and have committed to making democratic participation a core value on their campuses. Together, they are cultivating generations of engaged citizens who are essential to a healthy democracy (Stockman, 2018).

¹⁶ The Students Learn Students Vote Coalition promotes civic learning and engagement on campuses across the United States by providing a series of key steps and information on best practices that institutions can use to create a more voter-friendly campus (Coalition Partners, 2018).

¹⁷ The Andrew Goodman Foundation (AGF) works to make young voices and votes a powerful force in democracy. The foundation partners with colleges and universities to cultivate civic leaders, remove voting barriers, and mobilize student voters to act by creating a more civic-minded campus culture. The foundation seeks to inspire more young people to pursue social change work, activate the important lessons of the past, and sustain effective social action (AGF, 2018).

populations from voting. Led by Dr. Sekou Franklin, this was a particularly powerful testament for summit participants, as it affirmed diverse sociopolitical histories and the profound meaning of participants' collective civic engagement efforts. Another noteworthy addition to the summit was a panel that allowed participants to engage with state legislators who were also committed to advancing Tennessee voter access and participation. The panel further connected student political learning and engagement with the current sociopolitical climate and the agency that participants assume in defining democracy for the state of Tennessee (see the section titled, "Political Learning and Engagement with State Policymakers").

Our ability to recognize the work accomplished by summit participants during the 2017–2018 academic year, expand upon our organizing efforts by critically examining how the summit could be a more inclusive space, and continue to cultivate relationships with nonpartisan civic engagement advocacy organizations renewed commitments to our statewide higher education coalition. What initially were aspirational commitments to increasing student political learning and engagements have become hard-earned moments to reimagine a democratic and inclusive Tennessee. The following is an excerpt from the summit objectives document which consistently reminded the organizing committee what we were working toward:

When TN's institutions of higher education make civic learning and civic engagement central, not peripheral, on their campuses, they not only help students better understand their own impacts on neighbors, society, the nation, and the world, schools also advance students' civic competencies that enrich Tennessee communities all across our state. Incorporating democratic engagement into campus life creates structures and stability for students as they explore their political beliefs and their responsibilities in our participatory democracy. Increasing student voting embeds habits of citizenship that last far beyond the collegiate experience.

The summit will continue to promote civic learning and engagement on campuses throughout TN by providing workshops and panels of local and national experts in student voting, campus organizing, and civic education. Together at the summit, we will reexamine, reaffirm, reenergize, and recommit to the best practices that build civic capacity in our students and a Tennessee Civic Campus at our home institutions.

Political Learning and Engagement With State Policymakers

Tennessee's voting-restrictive status also calls upon educators and policymakers to engage meaningfully in local and state political processes to model *and* facilitate authentic political learning and engagement for student communities. Therefore, the TN-SSN chapter developed a nonpartisan political strategy to work with state legislators who had worked toward increasing voting rights and access. Specifically, we identified state legislators, across political lines, who had proposed legislation that would increase voting participation and access. This process helped us better understand the political landscape and the nuances of voting laws that prohibited equitable voting participation, especially among disenfranchised students.

We then reached out to these state legislators via email to communicate our nonpartisan and enthusiastic support for their legislative efforts, and to invite them to participate in the 2019 summit. We used subsequent meetings with state legislators as opportunities to better understand their proposed legislation, bridge scholarly expertise with their policymaking process, and inform them about how the Civic Campus Summit could serve as a platform for them to engage students, faculty, and staff in their advocacy efforts.

At the 2019 summit, there were three state legislators in attendance— Representative Harold Love, Representative Bo Mitchell, and Senator Brenda Gilmore—as well as two legislative staff persons representing Congressman Jim Cooper and Representative London Lamar, respectively. The state legislators and staff engaged in a panel discussion on the topic of voter engagement and access which allowed students, faculty, and staff to better understand the policymaking process in the state of Tennessee and critically reflect upon their role within local and state politics. In addition, the workshops following the panel provided opportunities for participants to build upon the conversation with legislators and understand the local and state policymaking process.

Perhaps most importantly, the legislators' participation in the Civic Campus Summit demonstrated to students that they were accessible and cared about advancing civic engagement. From this experience, students were able to imagine collaborating with state legislators. Similarly, we regarded the collaboration with state legislators as the inroads to establishing a nonpartisan coalition to address voting barriers and advance democracy for Tennessee.

Political Learning and Engagement at Vanderbilt University

To realize *Election Imperatives* at Vanderbilt University, it was first necessary to understand how the university had implemented student political learning and engagement, which departments had been supportive, and how student organizations, student leaders, faculty, and staff had engaged in civic engagement efforts. Central to this process was our ability to understand what challenges Vanderbilt University students, faculty, and staff had experienced that impacted their ability to sustain and build upon this work. The TN-SSN chapter wanted to ensure that our identified process for advancing this work addressed institutional challenges.

With the help of the Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP),¹⁸ we drafted a civic engagement action plan for Vanderbilt University which sought to: increase student education and awareness; shift institutional culture so that student political education and engagement were experienced as interdisciplinary efforts and part of the Vanderbilt campus climate; institutionalize previous and newly proposed civic engagement efforts; and identify and establish a working group of faculty, students, and staff to further develop and implement a campus voting plan. As we engaged with various department and university stakeholders to discuss our proposed civic engagement action plan, it was evident that the Vanderbilt Office of Active Citizenship and Service (OACS) and the Vanderbilt Office for Public Affairs—liaison to the Vanderbilt Division of Government and Community Relations—had the ability to bottom-line aspects of this work. An important component of our approach was to first demonstrate that we understood how OACS had championed these issues in the past.¹⁹ Our proposed civic engagement action plan needed to be perceived and experienced as an effort to build capacity for

¹⁸ The Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP) is a national nonpartisan project that helps administrators, faculty, staff, and student leaders at U.S. colleges and universities engage students in federal, state, and local elections (CEEP, 2018).

¹⁹ More than 6,800 undergraduate students attend Vanderbilt University, and approximately 92% are out-of-state students. Per the NSLVE report, 31.9% of students voted by absentee ballot in the 2016 presidential election. During this time, OACS received a number of inquiries seeking clarification and resources about the voting process. To facilitate this process, OACS hosted two Absentee Ballot Request Parties and one Absentee Ballot Preparation Party during the 2018 mid-term election year. The goals of the Absentee Ballot Request and Prep parties were to: (1) increase student awareness of absentee ballot processes and deadlines, (2) simplify the vote by absentee ballot process for students, and (3) provide space for students to articulate commitment to the democratic process.

already-existing campus efforts and establish key partnerships within and beyond Vanderbilt University. Shortly after establishing a collaborative working relationship with OACS and the Vanderbilt Office for Public Affairs, we decided collectively that Vanderbilt would participate in the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge and use this as an opportunity to constitute a Vanderbilt civic engagement working group (VandyVotes), inviting the broader Vanderbilt community and state legislators to participate in the working group.

From the outset, the VandyVotes committee members sought to establish authentic relationships with one another and provide ongoing opportunities for participating students, staff, and faculty to critically reflect upon their role as they took ownership of the civic engagement plan. Two experiences were particularly formative in shaping the collective solidarity and commitment toward realizing *Election Imperatives* at Vanderbilt University. The first was a one-day retreat that gave VandyVotes committee members the opportunity to share their personal reasons and values that inspired their political learning and engagement. This discussion led to a broader examination of systems and processes that prohibited historically excluded populations from participating in the democratic process and of the role and responsibility of a premier research institution such as Vanderbilt University. The VandyVotes committee members then had the ability to engage in nonpartisan critical reflexivity throughout the academic year; the discussions were characteristically inclusive of diverse experiences that ultimately sought to interrogate voting barriers. In this spirit, the VandyVotes committee developed the VandyVotes mission and vision statement, both of which became points of reference for examining how their space was in conversation with the broader Tennessee community and for guiding political learning and engagement objectives for the 2018–2019 academic year.

As an example of the tremendous work accomplished in one academic year, the VandyVotes committee drafted a Faculty Senate resolution to ensure that student absences would not be penalized on Election Day and to encourage faculty to provide civic learning and democratic engagement opportunities in the classroom. This faculty resolution resembled similar efforts at Central Michigan and Rutgers University informed by Adam Bonica's *A Day Off for Democracy* (2018) and the *National Higher Education Pledge* (Gonzales, 2021). In addition to working with the Vanderbilt Faculty Senate, the VandyVotes committee hosted the second annual Civic Campus Summit to facilitate summit participation for middle and west Tennessee colleges and universities. Based on the outcomes of the summit, the VandyVotes committee had the opportunity to strengthen relationships with local, state, and national organizations, further modeling its civic engagement service to the broader Tennessee community. Toward the end of the 2018–2019 academic year, the VandyVotes committee was in the process of formalizing its status as a formal Vanderbilt organization and developed a recruitment strategy for increasing participation from historically excluded populations and diverse political orientations.

This work was possible because, as a change agent, I could make a case for why OACS and the Vanderbilt Public Affairs Office were already working in service to civic engagement and how collaborative efforts could be amplified. Respectively, the vision and leadership of the Office of Active Citizenship and Service—Assistant Director Meagan Smith and Vice Chancellor for Public Affairs Nathan Green—allowed for meaningful and profound engagement with the proposed civic engagement action plan. Our collaboration ultimately shifted institutional culture so that civic engagement was at the intersection of Vanderbilt's intellectual life, work ecology, and the broader Tennessee community.

The Implications of Realizing Election Imperatives

Several significant outcomes and newly established objectives emerged from the work conducted while realizing the *Election Imperatives* recommendations. First and foremost, the statewide coalition committed to expanding the 2018 and 2019 Tennessee Civic Campus Summits by developing content for a 2020 summit intended to be especially responsive to local state policies and practices. The primary objective is to instill a sense of statewide solidarity while combating voting barriers. We envision a 2020 summit that offers participants additional opportunities to learn from one another and foster cross-campus relationship building.

Through the SSN platform, the organizing collective is also establishing a faculty working group to ensure that faculty allies remain involved and continue to utilize their academic platforms to advance civic engagement. As a best practice, faculty work will not be limited to shifting institutional climates within their respective institutions; rather, collective efforts will be in conversation with local and statewide legislation. For example, the faculty group has identified the need to establish support for House Bill 554 (HB 554), which would mandate that public universities serve as polling locations. Though Vanderbilt is a private university and not directly affected by the outcome of HB 554, the university's vice chancellor for public affairs has committed to working with university leaders to advance the proposed bill. He also expressed interest in spearheading efforts with the Election Committee to start the process of establishing a polling location at Vanderbilt University. This example showcases a multidimensional approach to advancing civic engagement as well as the power that university leaders have to actualize profound changes within and beyond their institutions.

The praxis of realizing *Election Imperatives* calls upon educators and policymakers to improve campus conditions for political learning. However, the experience of doing this work from an emancipatory perspective depends upon a full participation of self. This process entails critical and intentional reflexivity (Camacho, 2019) grounded in structural humility (Camacho & Rivera-Salgado, 2020). My ability to understand how advancing student political learning and engagement is in conversation with state policies and practices and the sociopolitical history of Tennessee meant that I had to consider the following when I operationalized broad civic engagement objectives: (1) Among our established organizing coalition, who experiences additional political inequities and/or is not present to define civic engagement aspirations? (2) How has the dominant civic engagement discourse within higher education disenfranchised marginalized perspectives, and how do educational inequities prohibit political participation and engagement? (2) In what ways do postsecondary institutions in Tennessee perpetuate power dynamics and maintain a status quo? (3) Beyond discussing the sociopolitical history of Tennessee, as it relates to the experiences of disenfranchised populations, what does political equity and engagement mean for historically excluded populations? The ability to undergird *Election Imperatives* with a critical reflection process that recognizes systemic inequality allowed us to recognize our collective academic capital and project a democratic future that observed everyone's personhood.

Previous research has demonstrated that there are various reasons why educators do not feel empowered to cultivate political learning and engagement within their classrooms, and salient among those reasons is fear—that they are not sufficiently politically informed to lead classroom discussions, maintain nonpartisanship, and/or cultivate respectful learning environments (Thomas & Gismondi, 2017). While fear is certainly a reasonable response, especially during a hyper-partisan era, fear breeds ignorance. Fear also does not absolve educators from educating. A discussion about a state's sociopolitical history and its relationship

to current voting barriers is *not* partisan. A willingness to support state policies and legislation that facilitate student civic engagement is *not* partisan. The ability of educators and policymakers to shift institutional culture so student political learning and engagement advances commitments of equity, diversity, and inclusion is *not* partisan. In fact, these and other civic engagement efforts signal that those educators and policymakers understand how higher education can preserve democracy and strengthen society.

Similarly, educators and policymakers cannot champion democracy without upholding an emancipatory perspective. Recognition of personhood and equity is central to understanding and actualizing democracy. There cannot be free and fair elections if people are not free. There cannot be active participation of the people if there are systems and processes that prohibit participation. Human rights cannot be protected if racial and social hierarchies remain. There cannot be an equal rule of law if people are not treated equally. Though the sociopolitical history of the United States would have us believe that social inequities exist and will continue to exist, to accept this would be to cast away the foundation we claim to uphold as educators and be complicit in realizing Trump's America.

Conclusion

As we grapple with Tennessee's voter-restrictive status and new legislation that will make registering people to vote more difficult, the sociopolitical climate allowed us to develop an *Election Imperatives* approach that was responsive to local and state policies. The ability to meaningfully engage with one another and establish a statewide coalition, during a hyper-partisan era, demonstrates how the literal definition of democracy served to bring us all together and understand common goals formulated by the Higher Education Act of 1965. Certainly, if we can accomplish this in Tennessee, educators and policymakers can expect to accomplish much more in less voter-restrictive states. As a best practice, educators and policymakers need to ground *Election Imperatives* within local and statewide politics while examining the consequence of sociopolitical histories and present-day inequities that prohibit democratic participation. The work of realizing *Election Imperatives* for a democratic society assumes a recognition of personhood, shared democracy, and atonement for previous and current sociopolitical inequities that prohibit systemic equity.

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