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## **Introductory Essay | Civic Engagement in an Era of Divisive Politics and Civil Unrest**

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On January 6, 2021, a joint session of the U.S. Congress met to certify the electoral votes from the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Some members of the House and Senate challenged the votes from several states. As the two chambers convened separately to consider the first of these challenges, an unruly mob stormed the Capitol, overwhelmed police, broke into offices, destroyed property, and threatened the lives of Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Mike Pence. The mob conducted this action in support of President Donald J. Trump, who repeatedly and erroneously claimed that there had been widespread election fraud. One week later, the House of Representatives voted to impeach President Trump for inciting an insurrection. A bipartisan Senate report found that at least seven people had lost their lives in connection with the insurrection, including at least four police officers who died by suicide in the months after they responded to the attack.

Although the culmination of years, if not decades, of priming by various actors, January 6, 2021, represents the most dramatic and violent manifestation of an increasingly divisive political climate and escalating attacks on the legitimacy of electoral outcomes. While no one should be shocked by what occurred on January 6<sup>th</sup>, the causes and consequences of an assault on a co-equal branch of government by a sitting U.S. president and his supporters raise many questions about civic engagement and civic education. Make no mistake: The insurrection poses serious threats to American democracy which must not be whitewashed or swept under the rug. “These people were minutes, seconds, feet away from hanging the Vice President. Just sit with that,” said Capitol Police Officer Harry Dunn in an interview. “People are trying to rewrite history right in front of us.... Terrorism is what they did that day. In my mind, they’re coming back.”

Recognizing the critical role of higher education in strengthening democracy and enhancing the well-being of communities, members of the [Civic Engagement Section of the American Political Science Association](https://bit.ly/apsacivic) (<https://bit.ly/apsacivic>) contributed research articles, essays, book reviews, and multimedia practice sources for this special issue of the *eJournal of Public Affairs*. I encourage readers, as they explore these contributions, to consider what the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection means for civic education and civic engagement in this era of divisive politics; what accountability and justice for the insurrection look like; and what might be done at systemic and individual levels to address the most pressing issues facing democracy.

The [public has become deeply cynical of institutions of representative democracy](#), resulting in increased isolation and extremism rather than nuanced public debate and democratic involvement (Pew Research Center, 2021). While the public has routinely been told to express their feelings, they have been blocked from meaningful engagement by procedural rules that encourage expression of outrage without deliberative discussion (e.g., open-comments period, public sentiment feedback, etc.). In this journal issue, Kevin Lorentz of Saginaw Valley State University and Kim Saks McManaway of the University of Michigan at Flint outline a theory of how democratic isolation was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, exploited by populist politicians, and ultimately led to the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection.

Despite the attempted coup and insurrection, Kevin Kosar and Elayne Allen of the American Enterprise Institute highlight the surprising development that Congress, in 2021, twice affirmed the norm that it should not overturn a state-certified election. The first time occurred on January 6<sup>th</sup> with the state electoral slates. Then, in April 2021, the House Committee on Administration refused to vote to overturn the results of the Iowa second district based both on the sheer lack of evidence of election mishandling and on the undesirable optics of unseating a

state-verified election winner. Kosar and Allen conclude that democratic norms can be upheld based upon member-level and party calculations and are not entirely dependent on moralistic actors behaving against their self-interest.

"This is our country; this is our house," one rioter told a reporter while storming the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. How does one understand the role that the securitization of space may play in the public's perception of democratic institutions? Alisa Rosenthal and Lauren Bell of Randolph-Macon College show how the U.S. Capitol complex was made less accessible to the public in response to security threats in the late 1990s and early 2000s through a series of security upgrades, including an expansion of the Capitol Police force, new visitor registration programs, and the construction and implementation of physical barriers both in and around the Capitol building itself. The increased safety for members of Congress and staff had consequences for the important symbolic representation that the Capitol building itself provides for the public. By prioritizing public displays of security over public access over an extended period, Congress has inadvertently contributed to the alienation Americans feel from their government, with implications for January 6<sup>th</sup> and beyond.

The vast majority of insurrectionists were not only White people, but White men. Karen Kedrowski of Iowa State University explores the role of gender in the Capitol riot and argues that those participating in the riot performed a type of toxic masculinity. According to its classic definition, toxic masculinity refers to men's attitudes that lead to violence against women. In this case, toxic masculinity led to violence against democracy and liberty, concepts that are often depicted as metaphorically female. In addition, very real violence was targeted against the female Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, and other women members of Congress.

With much at stake in the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, the religious right was prevalent in post-election rallies, marches, and protests leading up to January 6, 2021. How did the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection become an event of significance in the ongoing narrative of Christian nationalism? Andrea Hatcher of Sewanee: The University of the South analyzes the religious imagery and narratives used by participants and leaders during the insurrection and afterwards, comparing the language of members of Trump's evangelical advisory board with other religious elites. Hatcher finds that appeals to religion were an evident stimulus and response to the insurrection.

A student taking a course I taught at James Madison University in the fall of 2021 stated, "If the university doesn't do more [to teach diversity, equity, justice and inclusion], it will be responsible for the next January 6<sup>th</sup>." Yet, considering the risk-averse nature of higher education, this work is increasingly difficult as legislators in state houses across the country attempt to dictate curriculum. Colleges and universities have a critical responsibility to prepare students to reimagine and realize a more just and inclusive democracy as part of higher education's longstanding public mission. Even before January 6<sup>th</sup> and the responses to it, Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk (2016) [found that young people have become jaded and cynical](#) about the value of democracy as a political system. In their article, Kenneth R. Meyer, Nathan J. Carpenter, and Steve Hunt of Illinois State University propose that civic engagement education must take a critical turn, focusing on antiracism and anti-extremism as well as digital literacies. They argue that higher education must do more than it has ever done before in leading the fight to realize a truly multicultural and multiracial democracy.

I hope the contributions to this special issue will encourage readers to deliberate on the different lenses through which they might view the January 6, 2021, insurrection as a symptom of longstanding inequities in access, voice, and participation in democratic institutions, and to use it as a teachable moment for reimagining a more just and inclusive democracy.

### References

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