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**Disavowing Politics: Civic Engagement in an Era of Political Skepticism**  
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## Disavowing Politics: Civic Engagement in an Era of Political Skepticism

### ABSTRACT

Today, Americans are simultaneously skeptical of and engaged with political life. How does widespread cynicism affect the culture of civic participation? What are the implications for democracy? This study synthesizes data from a one-year collective ethnography of seven civic groups and theoretical work on boundary making, ambiguity, and role distancing. We find skepticism generates “disavowal of the political,” a cultural idiom that allows people to creatively constitute what they imagine to be appropriate forms of engagement. Disavowal generates taboos, and we show how disdain for conflict and special interests challenges activism around inequality. Political disavowal both facilitates and constrains civic engagement in an era of political skepticism.

### INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, American trust in government plummeted (Dionne 1991; Tolchin 1996; Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997). Simultaneously, citizens withdrew from political life and shifted the ways in which they participated in civic associations (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Putnam 2000). That moment spurred a flurry of empirical research and theoretical discussions around the relationship between trust in government, political participation, and the state of democracy: Do skepticism and withdrawal necessarily compromise democracy? How would democracy function in the midst of a skeptical populous and disengaged citizenry?

These questions remain highly relevant today. Americans are once again overwhelmingly skeptical of politics, but this time they are actively engaged in civic life. Voting, campaigning, and talking about politics on the rise, and new forms of participation—such as online activism—are emerging. Despite their skepticism, citizens are collectively re-imagining a nation in which

citizens and the state walk hand in hand.<sup>1</sup> According to extant literature, we would expect this type of “skeptical engagement” to be a perverse, selfish, or otherwise diminished form of civic participation, with negative consequences for democratic life.

While the trends of skepticism and participation have been documented and debated with broad survey data (e.g., Craig 1993; Bennett 1997; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Norris 2011), sociologists have yet to fully explain how this moment plays out on the ground, and what this means for American political life. Thus, this study takes up several unanswered questions. First, what is the culture of political engagement in a moment of skepticism? With what habits, discourses, or mechanisms do individual citizens and civic groups participate in political life while remaining distrustful of the political? In particular, how do citizens themselves understand and explain this form of engagement? Second, what are the consequences of this form of participation? What are the implications—positive and negative—for democratic life?

Our team of five researchers, from three social science disciplines, conducted ethnographic research with seven civic organizations and their members over the course of one year. The fieldsites, all located in Providence, Rhode Island, cut across demographic groups, organizational forms, political orientations, and approaches to working for change. Despite this diversity, a common theme emerged: citizens employ a cultural idiom that we call “the disavowal of politics.” They use this “political disavowal” to resolve the tensions between the polluted politics they believe actually exist, and the democratic political world they aspire to create. Disavowal sounds like a chorus of “I am not political,” but looks like political action. In this way, our study explains what survey data have observed: that skepticism and withdrawal do not necessarily go hand in hand. We also show that, contrary to expectations, disavowal can be *productive* of civic engagement. However, divorcing the concept of “politics” from the everyday

work of active citizenship involves tradeoffs, such as excluding marginalized group, and minimizing the value of conflict in democratic debate.

We begin this article by reviewing the literature on political skepticism, civic engagement and democracy. We then move to three concepts from cultural sociology that help us understand the everyday meanings of the contemporary movement: denegation, pollution, and role distancing. Next, we turn to data and methods, outlining our method of multi-sited collective ethnography, and describing our research location and fieldsites. We then describe how disavowal of the political works to resolve ambiguities presented by the context of broad skepticism. Our discussion examines the negative consequences of disavowal—that it creates challenges to activism around inequality—and the conclusion highlights questions raised by the study and suggestions for future research.

## LITERATURE

### Skepticism, Engagement, and Democracy

Today, Americans are overwhelmingly skeptical of political actors and institutions (ANES 2010; Pew Research Center 2010). Here, “skeptical” is used to capture a broad assortment of negative feelings toward politics, politicians, and the government, such as disapproval, disaffection, mistrust, and cynicism. It includes the perspective that the current political *could* work (but does not), as well as those who believe the system is more fundamentally broken.

Scholars from various perspectives worry that disaffection can corrode even the most vibrant of democracies (e.g., Goldfarb 1991; Wuthnow 1994; Calhoun 1998; Bellah et al. 1985; Wuthnow 1998; Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003). There are three lines of thinking about why this would occur. The first is that there is a direct connection between disaffection and

disengagement: citizens who feel political engagement is futile are less likely to engage at all (Offe 2006; Keane 2009; Jackson, Mondak, and Huckfeldt 2009). The second is that citizens will turn to local, community-level concerns that cannot confront the central struggles of democratic life, such as power imbalances, inequality, and belonging (Calhoun 1998; Herbert 2005). The third is that citizens will continue to engage politics, but in a way that is selfish, constricted, and confrontational (Putnam 1996; Macedo 2005; Bellah et al. 1985). An alternative to these arguments is the notion that in times of distrust, citizens feel motivated by their hopes and dreams for democracy to participate in public life (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011), and that this inspired participation can spur unconventional forms of engagement (Inglehart 1990; Cain, Dalton, and Scarrow 2003).

Analyses of survey data counter the argument that skepticism necessarily leads to withdrawal from political life, showing that Americans are—in large numbers—participating in the civic sphere (ANES 2010; Pew Research Center 2010).<sup>2</sup> These studies also document widespread civic and community participation, leaving room for the idea that citizens are also turning to community level concerns (CNCS 2006). What these data do not tell us are whether or not the contemporary culture of participation can address the principal problems of social life, if it is selfish and narrow, or if citizens are motivated to innovate in the civic sphere. These are the hypotheses examined in our study, from the approach of cultural sociology.

Cultural sociology turns the question of *whether* Americans doubt their political system into a question of what that skepticism, cynicism, or apathy *actually mean* (e.g., Lichterman 1996). This perspective allows us to move from identifying trends to understanding and explaining those trends. For example, apathy, at face value, may be understood as ambivalence toward politics. However, cultural sociologists have shown that displays of apathy actually take

significant work to produce—in this way, apathy is a mechanism that people have developed in order to *preserve* faith in democratic ideals in the face of feeling powerless (Eliasoph 1997, 1998; Norgaard 2006). In this study, we develop the concept of “political disavowal” to answer the questions of what skeptical engagement *means* for democracy.

### Theorizing Disavowal of the Political

We argue that the “disavowal of politics” is a common language of civic life—even if the meanings people attribute to “politics” and “the political” vary greatly. This concept, which emerged from our empirical analysis, integrates three theoretical building blocks: disavowal and denegation as developed in psychoanalytic and Bourdieuan scholarship; boundaries and symbolic pollution; and identity formation and role distancing.

#### *Disavowal and Denegation*

The term “disavowal” in its psychoanalytic usage refers to an ambivalent psychic distancing that is ego-preserving in the face of traumas or taboos (Freud 1959; Bass 2000). Disavowed facts are “too terrible to confront, but impossible to ignore” and are thus dealt with by a simultaneous knowing and not-knowing (Cohen 2001:25). In sociology, Bourdieu used disavowal (*dénégation*) to refer to the “cultivated disinterestedness” that defines a professional field (Bourdieu and Nice 1980; Bourdieu 1993, 1994, 1996). These fields are defined by the constant rejection of the very factors that dictate how those fields function. For example, for artists and art dealers, disavowing the economic aspect of their work is neither a real negation of the “economic” interests that always haunt the most “disinterested” practices, nor a simple concealment of the “mercenary aspects of the practice” (Bourdieu and Nice 1980:262). This concept of economic disavowal has been extended to rock climbing (Aubel and Ohl 2005), the Victorian novel (Ruth 2006), and professional economics (Lebaron 1997). In these spaces,

*symbolic* interests are set up in opposition to *economic* interests. A “disinterested interest” is produced when professionals, who depend on economic gain from their cultural products, strive for autonomy from these economic interests (Bourdieu 1994, 1996; see also Ruth 2006). Some professionals go as far as to use their disavowal of economic interests in order to get ahead in their fields, the most fundamental objective being financial gain. The disavowal of the political functions similarly, as citizens work to cultivate a disinterestedness in the political, whilst actively engaging in politics.

### *Boundaries and Symbolic Pollution*

Cultural sociologists argue that typologies and evaluative frameworks for categorizing objects, people, and practices play important roles in identity formation (Lamont 2001). In other words, by clarifying what type of person one is *not*, a definition is created of who one *is* (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]) argues that societies create categories of what is and is not acceptable in order to protect social order. She calls the facts or behaviors that fail to fit into these categories as “matter out of place.” This matter (also referred to as “dirt” or “pollution”) is confusing, uncomfortable, and a threat to community values. In her words, it creates “ambiguities.” Communities respond by creating taboos to reinforce cultural categories and thus protect social organization. This “symbolic pollution” can operate either instrumentally, to guide people to good behavior, or expressively, as analogies for communicating a vision of good social order. Our concept of disavowal follows this pattern. The simultaneous desire to have a better democracy and the concomitant disillusionment with democratic politics as they actually exist generates ambiguities. By creating a negative taboo around “politics” and “being political” citizens are not only expressing disdain for politics *as is* but also creating space for an aspired notion of what democracy *could be*. This aspirational space is often called “community”

or “civic life.” It is a place where the savory elements of the public sphere—solidarity, problem solving, community mindedness, to name a few—come to life. In this way, disavowal is a cultural mechanism for protecting commonly held democratic ideals from the ambiguities and contradictions of politics in practice. By making politics “bad,” civics can be “good.”

### *Role Distancing and (Non-) Political Identity*

The disavowal of politics is a distancing of one’s self from politics or the political, however it is defined. Goffman’s (1961) concept of *role distancing* illuminates how disavowal creates particular boundaries and identities that enable civic engagement. Role requirements are a set of expected behaviors that are geared toward maintaining patterned relationships (Cosser 1966:180). When community members perform a role that is viewed as contaminated, they engage in role distancing to foster the impression that they are not attached to the negative identity associated with that role (Snow and Anderson 1987). In our case, activists disavow politics to separate themselves from the negative taboos associated with the role of politician or other political person. We do not assert that this process is necessarily self-conscious or deliberate, as argued by Snow and Anderson (1987), but instead that it can occur consciously or unconsciously. This takes place at both the individual and group unit of analysis. Through political disavowal, civil society actors distinguish themselves from the political sphere, in order to put forth an identity that is more aligned with the savory aspects of civic life.

The concepts of denegation, pollution, and role distancing are tools that, taken together, help us to understand the intricate meanings behind blunt measures of political engagement. In the following section, we discuss how our methodology allowed us to apply sociological theory to debates about skeptical engagement and democratic health.

## METHODOLOGY

Although quantitative survey research has documented skepticism and political participation, alternative methods are required to uncover their motion, interaction, function, and consequences (Eisinger 2000). Ethnographic methods are uniquely suited for examining and explain political practices, the day-to-day expressions of political life, and the meanings that animate action in civil society (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Auyero 2006; Baiocchi and Connor 2008). Because of its attention to events as they happen and because it allows for triangulation of discourse, meaning, and practice, ethnography allows us to describe and analyze the emergence, forms, and consequences of political disavowal.

Our approach is particularly attentive to actors' self-understandings as they develop their own versions of what it means to work for the public good (Silber 2003). We are guided by pragmatists' call to *take people seriously* as moral beings who are seeking to instantiate their version of the good, and who must constantly re-adjust in the face of disagreements and of a world that does not quite measure up. Like pragmatist scholars, we are less concerned with norms and values, as might be asked in a large-scale survey, than we are with people's moral *evaluations*. Pragmatism assumes that people are primarily moral, reflexive agents who are constantly engaging with the world to bring about their version of "the good."<sup>3</sup> Importantly, this perspective allows us to accept that people have different versions of what is "good," to respect these differences, and then to interrogate how the differences matter for the ways people evaluate society and choose to engage. By closely considering what actually makes up a particular culture, the pragmatic approach helps us to unpack people's moral evaluations in order to see, in Thévenot's words, how "the good and reality are jointly engaged" (2001:68). We thus minimized, as much as is possible, the urge to indulge pre-set assumptions or comparisons. For example, we attempted to shed presuppositions such as "elites use political engagement to seek

personal power and material benefits,” or “marginalized groups are duped into forms of participation only meant to appease and silence their grievances” in our observations and analysis of how different groups engaged in civic and political life.

## Data and Methods

To gather data, we developed a new approach of *multi-sited collective ethnography*, in which multiple researchers act as co-investigators each of several fieldsites, co-writing fieldnotes, and coding, analyzing, and writing collectively (Author a). There are some cases of co-researched and co-written ethnographies (e.g., Auyero and Swistun 2008). However, collaborative ethnography more often involves multiple researchers studying the same social phenomenon across unique fieldsites, each site examined by a different researcher (e.g., Holland et al. 2007; Hirsch et al. 2009). Our methodology extends the depth, breadth, and reliability of data collected in two ways. First, whenever possible multiple researchers attended the same events and each contributed to a single fieldnote document. Conducting research in this way allowed us to observe events through multiple lenses, increasing the reliability of our data and improving our ability to capture and describe social worlds (May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000). Second, we were able to simultaneously examine how different groups reacted to the same events. Here we applied the concept of symmetry (Callon 1986), attempting to employ a uniform and agnostic analytic framework to cases that are typically not studied together. This meant selecting fieldsites with different missions and socioeconomic profiles, and individuals from different backgrounds who held disparate theories of political change. Together, our collaborative lens and symmetrical approach allowed us to examine variation and commonality between and within groups, and among their individual members.

We conducted our fieldwork in Providence, Rhode Island, which exemplifies the features of today's typical American city: racial diversity, post-industrial economic transformation, budgetary crises and social problems. It is a medium sized city (with a population of 170,000 in 2010), with historically large Italian, Eastern European, Portuguese, and Cape Verdean populations, and a growing Latino immigrant community (Itzigsohn 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). In 2010, 50 percent of the city's population was non-White (American Community Survey 2011), and voters elected their first Latino mayor. Although Providence hosted several large manufacturing companies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, shifts in manufacturing sectors, deindustrialization, and post-World War II suburbanization led to economic decline and a shrinking population. In the 1980s and 90s, government community development funding and public-private development partnerships attracted investment and invigorated growth, but today, the city's economy is tenuously dependent on five colleges and universities, an extensive hospital system, and a budding reputation as a hub for entrepreneurial innovation. After the 2008 financial decline, Rhode Island competed with Michigan for the nation's highest unemployment rates, and Providence joined the many American cities unable to balance a budget. In 2010, 26 percent of its residents lived below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau 2011b). The literature about Providence describes vibrant civic life (Perrotta 1977; Sterne 2003; Rappleye 2006); (re)development initiatives (Motte and Weil 2000; Peck 2005); and gentrification (Jerzyk 2009; Silver 2009). Providence is large enough to follow national trends, such as the Occupy movement, and host new civic innovations, such as SeeClickFix,<sup>4</sup> yet its modest size facilitates intimate knowledge of the civic landscape and its actors. In this way, Providence is an ideal "stage of action" which facilitates understanding of non-local processes (Fine 2010), allowing us to understand more general processes of social action, interaction, and boundary formation.

Our initial research identified all of the groups in Providence that explicitly aimed to “make the city a better place to live” through Internet queries, literature review, and snowball sampling. We met with the groups’ leaders to learn about their histories, missions, tactics, and funding. We asked each to describe and explain “what is wrong with Providence,” and how the problem(s) could be addressed. The field of potential sites included youth empowerment organizations, communities of faith, ethnic clubs, neighborhood associations, partisan drinking groups, and grassroots networks. We then selected fieldsites according to three criteria. First, each group was oriented toward making Providence a better city by influencing, reforming, or participating in politics. Some interfaced directly with the state (e.g., by attending meetings with officials at the statehouse), while others interacted with the state in less direct ways (e.g., by disseminating information and ideas about new legislation). Second, we eliminated partisan groups, organizations formed for the purpose of campaigning for particular candidates, religious institutions, societies based on a shared national heritage, local chapters of national associations, and unions. This allowed us to focus on locally organized groups that take their directions from the citizens of Providence, as opposed to national or international leadership. Third, we selected organizations that welcomed us to attend meetings, participate in events, interview members, volunteer our time, and build relationships with leaders. Although we abstained from accepting positions of leadership, we reciprocated some of the time and energy that groups gave us by offering volunteer services, such as distributing flyers, grant writing, recording meeting minutes, compiling survey data, and general grunt work.

In choosing from the eligible fieldsites, the principle of symmetry inspired us to select cases that were “different” along several dimensions, including demographic composition, mission, organizational form, tactics, history, and location within the city. In this way, we

selected groups that, because of their agendas, tactics, and membership, are typically not studied together. Although our sampling was not random, this selection process provided a broad and intimate knowledge of the city's civic culture: we knew key actors personally, spent time with organizations highlighted in the news, could appreciate nuanced conflicts, and often caught the meanings of inside jokes or double speak.

From spring of 2010 through summer of 2011, we attended over 150 meetings and events across these groups, ranging from political canvassing, to non-violent direct actions, to internal meetings. We supplemented this participant observation with dozens of semi-structured and informal interviews with founders, leaders, and members of the organizations. Finally, we collected organization documents and relevant media from mainstream news (e.g., *The Providence Journal*), Internet-based news (e.g., community blogs), and social media (e.g., Facebook pages). Our fieldwork generated over 500 pages of detailed notes, fliers, newspaper articles, Internet pages, and social media references. We developed both open and focused codes that reflected our field observations and theoretical explorations (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995), and at least two researchers coded each field note. Our code of "disavowal" identified moments when people disavowed politics, the political system, or political action. This code resulted in 78 separate incidents of disavowal. We systematically analyzed these incidences to identify why, when, and to what end people disavow. In addition to collective coding of fieldnotes, all other analyzing, theorizing, and writing were also done collectively. In this paper, descriptions of events and conversations come directly from our field notes unless otherwise indicated. We use pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, except when drawing upon publicly available documents such as press releases or news stories.

## Fieldsites

Here we present the seven fieldsites as they were most often discussed among citizens of Providence—by organizational form and general purpose. They include three neighborhood associations, two social justice organizations, and two groups of civic innovators.

Oceanside Neighbors, Parkside Coalition, and Neighbors Driving Change are neighborhood associations with demographically distinct neighborhoods and discrete missions. Oceanside Neighbors, founded nearly 20 years ago, seeks to enhance life in the neighborhood and to protect its historic resources, and currently works on land use and waterfront redevelopment projects. About a third of the Oceanside neighborhood population claims a Portuguese-speaking heritage. Due to its close proximity to Brown University and Rhode Island School Design, it is also home to many university students, faculty, and staff. The Parkside Coalition was founded nearly thirty years ago, and participants express pride in making the neighborhood a better place to live, their role in reducing crime and attracting successful businesses, and gaining attention of city officials. The neighborhood is racially and economically diverse, although Parkside Coalition members are predominantly White professionals with college degrees who own their homes. Neighbors Driving Change officially represents a neighborhood with a large Latino population, but in practice works to improve life for Latinos and immigrants living in any part of the city. Unlike the other neighborhood associations, the group uses contentious tactics and collaborates with immigrant rights advocates and religious groups. It could just as easily be categorized as a social justice organization.

One of Neighbors Driving Change's regular allies is FIGHT, a social justice organization established over 25 years ago when residents of an economically depressed neighborhood gathered around a kitchen table to discuss the pressing problems facing their community, such as violence and discrimination. They founded FIGHT to organize low-income families and

communities of color to work for social, economic, and political justice. Today, they are a racially diverse group of primarily lower income citizens who strive to empower marginalized persons and groups, giving those voices a central role in their organizing and outreach. Youth, Action, and Knowledge (YAK) is another social justice organization, one more loosely organized than FIGHT. A middle-aged Black man founded the group to make a difference in the lives of boys and young men of color. YAK meets with city officials, participates in processes to reform school district policy, collaborates with other organizations, and attends protest events to advocate that the Providence School System change how boys of color are educated.

Open Source and Engage are “civic innovators”—groups that create new forms of engagement in the civic sphere by borrowing values, language, and tactics from the business world (Author a). Open Source was started by a group of friends who wanted to influence the city’s 2010 mayoral election. Instead of backing a particular candidate, the friends wanted to ensure that the dialogue around the campaign—and thus the new administration—was focused on needed improvements to government transparency, efficiency, and civic accessibility. Engage was formed in 2009 when the mayor of Providence asked a citizen to form an organization that would provide a “citizen’s voice” in city politics to counter corruption, combat Providence’s “uncivil” political discourse, and go beyond the “hyper-localized, small, neighborhood association.” The group strives to increase transparency and participation in city decision-making, and uses social media to increase communication among citizens and between citizens and government.

Using the approach of multi-sited collective ethnography in seven diverse fieldsites, we generated the concept of “political disavowal.” The following section draws on ethnographic evidence to illustrate and explain this finding.

## RESULTS: DISAVOWAL OF THE POLITICAL

“I’m a non-political guy, *big time*. I don’t think it matters.” The school department official threw up his hands and raised his eyebrows at the audience at the community meeting, pausing as if to allow the statement time to sink in. His comment caught us by surprise. This was a public policy maker addressing concerned citizens at a meeting hosted by the Parkside Coalition, and he was talking about the newly elected mayor’s influence on school policy. Given the history of politically motivated school closures in this neighborhood, his claim that politics did not matter for school policy struck us as inaccurate. His statement, however, was provocative: it signaled an understanding of the “political” as something with which he did not want to be associated, despite his career in city government and his willingness to engage community members in discussing school management.

The school department official was not unique in asserting that he is not “political” in order to communicate something important to his audience. Throughout our research, we heard widely different civic groups and engaged individuals make similar statements, proclaiming their distrust of and disconnection from political processes, politicians, and government, in order to say something about their own identities as citizens and citizen groups. “People need to get over their expectations that the government is going to fix their problems. It’s not... At its worst, government is a barrier. At its best, an enabler. That’s as far as it goes.” This comment from one of the leaders of Open Source is emblematic of the skepticism that constantly surfaced in our research. “We can’t complain about what schools and government are not doing... It’s up to us to do it ourselves,” was another refrain that echoed in various ways. Mistrusting the government’s ability to solve problems often went hand in hand with the notions that citizen

engagement would bolster government capacity, or that people can and should “fix it themselves.”

Notably, the people who made these statements were some of the most active citizens in Providence’s civil society and local government, many explicitly engaging the state in their work. For example, the Open Source leader who called government “at best, an enabler,” was working to improve legislative processes, meeting with officials, attending city council meetings, and writing publicly about the importance of an educated and connected citizenry. Six months after the interview, she even became a political appointee in the new mayor’s administration. Similarly, an activist with YAK who advocated “do-it-yourself” citizenry works regularly and directly with the superintendent of schools and other government officials. Americans from different backgrounds, pursuing change in different ways, are similar in asserting they are not political. Yet this “disavowal of the political” does not necessarily signal apathy or withdrawal from political life. On the contrary, it functions as a prelude to civic participation.

When Americans claim they are not political, they are not simply defining themselves by what they are not. They are *disavowing the political*—rejecting knowledge of, connection to, or responsibility for the processes and consequences of the political—and simultaneously self-identifying with what they view as a more positive ideal of public engagement and social change. By “politics” we loosely refer to the political processes of voicing preferences (what citizens do) and creating policy (what politicians and bureaucrats do). Disavowal is intertwined with how people understand and define politics. It is an active process of defining, categorizing, and distancing from the unsavory aspects of public life. This concept is in motion at both the individual level (“I am not political”) and group level (“This is not a political organization”).

Disavowal was enacted by community organizers, public servants, and elected officials alike. It was not limited to certain demographic groups, constrained by particular political ideologies. Comments such as: “The government won’t solve our problems”; “Providence politics are corrupt”; and “Current avenues for participation aren’t going to bring about change” were heard across our fieldsites, and in a variety of contexts. Disavowal of the political is a common idiom among those who engage in civic life, and it raises the question: If citizens do not view their activities as “political,” then how do they understand their engagement?

“If you want to get people engaged, throw a party and turn the music on!” Joe explained, responding to our questions about what he does in the community. Joe is an activist and a DJ who throws parties and plays music in public parks. Fun events give people “a reason to get involved,” he said. It offer an impetus to visit new places in one’s own city, to meet new people, and to learn about other events. Joe sees what he does as building a path towards broader civic engagement. He also directs an after-school program for the city’s underprivileged teens, and is the co-leader of the civic group Engage. Joe says that Engage promotes better communication between citizens and city government—to “put the ‘public’ in public policy.” Acting on his conviction that change comes from everyday citizens, Joe understands his work as simply getting people involved.

In an interview where Joe described his values and activities, he concluded by saying, “I don’t like to think of what I do as political.” He then grinned self-consciously and added, “I’m sure you get that a lot.” Joe’s comment would have been surprising had it not become so typical, across all our fieldsites. According to Joe, he and his colleagues founded Engage in response to the mayor’s desire to “shift the power base away from the 18 hoodlums who currently have power.” This description embodies Joe’s understanding of what politics is all about—a realm co-

opted by the powerful, catering to special interests, and unconcerned with serving the broader public good. Later, in the analysis section, we show how other Providence activists defined “politics” and the “political” differently—as corruption, special interest advocacy, or bipartisan battling. In general, however, “politics” is generally understood as an obstacle to how democracy ought to function if it were to truly serve the public good. As one activist from Open Source told us, “I think there’s a negative perception of being political. I don’t know what people thought of politics 50 years ago, but today it’s definitely negative.” He continued: “Politics is a negative word. I think that’s why they [people involved with politics] don’t want to think of themselves as political. Civic engagement is *very* political—it’s the new ‘politics,’ right?”

Disavowal, as we have illustrated, is different from skepticism. Skepticism is disbelief that government reflects people’s preferences. It is discontentment about governmental processes, policies, and people. Disavowal, on the other hand, is the claim that who one is, what one does, or the group that one belongs to is separate from the political sphere. It could be the case that people and groups who disavow truly understand themselves to be outside of politics, and wish to be perceived as such. It could also be that they identify as political, yet present themselves apolitical. We do not adjudicate whether the disavowal of politics is a statement of fact or instrumental rhetoric, nor do we argue whether disavowal is constructed consciously or unconsciously. Instead, we attend to how disavowal is meaningful in allowing people to participate in politics, and shaping the ways in which they do so.

Disavowal is thus the enactment of a taboo (Douglas 2002[1966]) against those aspects of the political considered to be polluted. It provides a cultural mechanism to shelter commonly held democratic ideals from the ambiguities and contradictions of politics in practice. People must deal with the vast ambiguities that result from their desire for a better democracy, and their

concomitant disillusionment with existing political processes and structures. In stating, “I don’t like to think of what I do as political,” Joe, for example, distinguished his work from the contaminated sphere of politics. By drawing a boundary between civic life and community work, he is able to set aside the ambiguities of democracy in practice and continue to engage public life. We argue that disavowal is a cultural idiom that attempts to resolve the ambiguity that people experience when their expectations about how politics *ought* to function are contradicted by how they believe political decisions *actually* take place.

Disavowal of politics constitutes identity work: activists disavow politics to separate themselves from the negative stigma associated with the perceived nature of politicians or other political actors. In this way, disavowal is a form of role distancing, demonstrating not a real separation from politics, but instead the creation of an implicit boundary between what is political (polluted) and what is civic (good). Members of civil society draw boundaries between themselves and the political in order to establish a positive identity for themselves and gain trust and legitimacy in the eyes of others. For example, when we asked an activist about another member of his organization who vehemently disavowed politics but later accepted a job with the city, he explained, “I think that’s the ideal scenario—that we have people who did not intend to be career politicians that are able to contribute and end up in office and do it very earnestly.” The process of forging one’s identity is never complete. Disavowal is enacted repeatedly, to different audiences, and across contexts, as people establish themselves as appropriately engaged citizens. Every interpersonal interaction provides the opportunity to negotiate this identity for themselves and for others. Each time Joe takes on political roles, associates with political people, or uses political institutions, he creates a disjuncture with his identification as “non-political.” This ambiguity inspires subsequent iterations of political disavowal.

In drawing a boundary between “good” civic engagement and “bad” politics, people express shared understandings of what democracy should be. When people like Joe describe their work as non-political, they reinforce the idea that good, engaged citizens working to make Providence a better place should do so outside of politics. In the next section, we turn our attention to what, exactly, makes politics so “bad,” and how these negative associations create ambiguity.

#### ANALYSIS: DISAVOWAL RESOLVES AMBIGUITIES

When engaged citizens disavow the political, what is it that they are rejecting? What is it that pollutes, and how does this pollution conflict with other ideas, to create ambiguities? In this section, we show how disavowal emerges to resolve three areas of ambiguity. First, people disavow because they mistrust government capacity, yet wish to collaborate with the state to solve public problems. Second, people disavow because they feel politicians promote special interests, but wish to lobby those same politicians for the broader public good. And third, people disavow because they see political life as mired by conflict and contention, yet want to engage political actors in polite, rational debate. Although these ambiguities emerged strongly in our fieldwork, we caught glimpses of others, and believe this list could be extended with additional field research.

#### *Citizens Want to Influence Policy, but Doubt the Political Process*

In one of the ethnographic anecdotes above, a leader of Open Source described government as “at best, an enabler” of citizens’ actions, and emphasized that because government is not going to “fix people’s problems,” citizens need to take matters into their own hands. In a similar call for self-sufficiency from government, a leader of YAK group expressed nostalgia for a communal past when people took care of other people, rather than relying on

government services. He believes that “it’s on us”: people must hold themselves accountable for making the changes necessary to improve our community. He works with Black families and non-Black allies to address the structural racism that continues to create an unequal society. As is characteristic of disavowal, his advocacy of communitarianism and self-reliance are complemented by work to influence state policy, through actions such as testifying on a bill or collaborating with school officials.

This form of disavowal emerges in response to the ambiguity that arises when actors work within political systems while believing that those systems cannot or will not solve community problems effectively. While the people in our study may disagree on what, exactly, is broken, they nearly always agree that the government apparatus alone cannot solve the city’s problems. Yet this conflicts with the fact that they often must participate in these very government processes in order to make the change they seek.

We also observed this sentiment after the Providence mayor proposed closing several public schools in 2011 to address a budget deficit. The city sponsored a series of public hearings in which school board members were to hear public commentary about the proposed changes before arriving at an informed decision, and Providence activists and community leaders rallied forcefully to criticize the idea of closing schools. At the hearings participants charged the administration with being divisive and *political*, arguing that minority schools were targeted, the school-board was driven by special interests, and the community as a whole was being ignored. At one public hearing on the proposed school closures, a young Latino student asked why the city was not closing schools in the more affluent, White neighborhoods. Another student echoed this critique: “Why do they pick on the poor kids all the time?” One of the activists who had set up a table with flyers at the front commented to us that “they are just blowing smoke, doing these

meetings so they can check things off their list.” He paused before indignantly adding, “and then they pretend it’s been a real community meeting.” In this setting activists who were highly critical of the process, were still participating—simultaneously distancing themselves and engaging in the policy making process.

Sometimes activists disavow politics because they believe that significant structural changes are required to transform the political system. This was characteristic of many of our fieldsites. For example, members of FIGHT often make veiled references to the possibilities of revolution and socialism, implying that only massive overhauls to the political system can address entrenched race, class, and gender inequalities. Likewise, an activist with YAK said that institutionalized racism was visible in political decisions made by the city council, state legislature, and mayor. For him, the policy proposals on the table today are insufficient for addressing what he understands to be the root of society’s problems. Joe, the activist DJ who works with Engage, explained that schools inspire a lot of people to get involved, but are equally as good at shutting people out. Because he feels that the system is fundamentally broken, he works to supplement public schools with an after-school program, rather than pursuing small changes within the public schools themselves. In these examples, the political process is rejected on the basis that it unfairly excludes vulnerable segments of the populations.

Activists who disavow government responsiveness often attribute their political victories to the ingenuity of their tactics, as opposed to the responsiveness of politicians or political systems that work. For example, when Governor Lincoln Chafee was running for office in 2010, Neighbors Driving Change requested that, if elected, he rescind an Executive Order from the previous governor. The Order was related to the use of “E-Verify,” a federal program to check the immigration eligibility of potential employees. He promised to do so, and in his first days of

office held a press conference to talk about E-Verify and announce his decision on the Executive Order. But Neighbors Driving Change members were skeptical that the Governor would stick to his promise. As they gathered to walk together to the conference, one leader shouted to the group, “who’s ready to get angry?” The response was enthusiastic. At the conference, the Governor did, in fact, rescind the Executive Order, stating that the policy was divisive and had failed to reduce costs for the state, and that immigration policy was best addressed at the federal level (Tucker 2011). One of the activists credited this “success” to his group’s direct action tactics, arguing that the only reason Chafee agreed to rescind the whole Executive Order was that he saw activists in the crowd. For him, the victory was attributable to the threat of activists making a scene—not an elected official’s commitment to respond to his constituents, or a democratic process that worked. In this type of disavowal, individuals at once claim that the political system is broken, push for structural change, and attribute victories to contentious tactics, not institutionalized processes.

*Citizens Want to Work for the Common Good, but Believe Politics Serves Narrow Interest*

One evening in the spring of 2010, Oceanside Neighbors hosted a political candidate’s wife as a special guest at their monthly meeting. Sitting at the head of the room, the guest explained she was there to “say hi” on her husband’s behalf. To promote her husband’s candidacy, she said two things about herself: first, that she did not have a history of being “very political”; and second, that she was the principal of a public school. These two statements were intended to bolster her own credibility, and to convince the audience that her husband was a good person and a good candidate. For this individual, “I am not political” communicated, “I am trustworthy.” Likewise, “I am a public servant” communicated, “I am not self-interested.” Her pronouncement had the intended effect, as the facial expressions of several board members

transformed from mildly hostile to cautiously welcoming. By disavowing self-interested politics, she effectively communicated that she was an advocate for the common good.

This type of disavowal responds to a disjuncture between the perception that politics promotes self-interest or special interests, and the belief that politics *should be* about the promotion of universal, public goods. Thus a “political” agent is someone who uses the state to pursue selfish interests or lacks a commitment to the public good. This includes both illicit behavior, such as bribery, as well as legal profiteering and self-interested political activity, such as benefiting from one’s access to influential decision-makers.

People disavow a political system that benefits a small group instead of, or at the expense of, the broader community. We saw this clearly with Joe, whose organization Engage aimed to shift power from “18 hoodlums” to the people of Providence. We also heard this expressed at one of the school closure hearings, when a parent asserted that the proposal was “political” because it was based on the recommendations of “two for-profit companies” who “stand to benefit financially” from decisions to repurpose public schools. For this parent, politics meant allowing a few companies to gain profits at the expense of the education of hundreds of schoolchildren. We even heard this form of disavowal from elected officials: at another school closure hearing, the Mayor took the stage and said, “These aren’t political decisions. If I was trying to be political, do you think this is what I would be doing... Don’t think for one second that I don’t care [about the 23,000 students in the Providence school system].”

Throughout our fieldwork, we saw politics disavowed when referring to a closed system that serves narrow interests, but accepted and encouraged when it meant the opposite. The signifier “political” often referred to the people and processes that privilege special interests. To be “non-political” or to make “non-politically motivated decisions” in the political arena was to

be community minded, to work for the general good, and to embody public-spiritedness. In this way, disavowal is not only a rejection, but also an active redefinition and an aspirational rendering of the political.

Civic or community participation is put forward as the antidote to political action that favors private interests. At the school closure hearings, in the face of skepticism about this publically-sponsored process, the Mayor's office, the school board, and the school district sent a clear message to the citizens of Providence: public opinion mattered. In order to foster participation, the city government portrayed the process to all parties as non-political. The language inviting participation was unequivocal: these hearings were about "collaborative problem-solving," "common challenges," and "listening to the community." Explicitly, the hearings were "*not* about divisive special interests," or, more bluntly, as one official described, as "putting kids ahead of politics." The Mayor's office and School Board encouraged participation and testimony through an active media outreach campaign, made data available for alternate analyses, and acknowledged the tension between harming individual students and benefiting the city as a whole. These actions aimed to demonstrate that the Mayor's office and school officials focused on universal goods instead of private interests—contrary to popular opinion. To some extent, despite the skepticism described above, this strategy worked: hundreds of people attended and dozens testified at each of the six hearings, parents and activists formed new coalitions to provide input into the decision-making process, and citizens poured themselves into preparing and pitching alternative plans---all expecting (or at least hoping) to be taken seriously.

*Citizens Want to Solve Problems Politely, but Find Political Organizing Marked by Conflict*

The civic group Engage identifies the acrimony that characterizes Providence politics as one of the city's primary problems, and thus aims to promote "harmonious" relations amongst citizens and city government officials. According to one of the organization's leaders, "mutual respect for each other as neighbors and friends should determine the tone of any and all conversations." One of Engage's main tactics is to publicize city council meetings, organize residents to attend these meetings, and use social media to report what was discussed and decided. Leaders told us repeatedly that merely having Providence residents attend city council meetings would improve city government, because it would encourage councilors to be more civil and "well-behaved."

In these discourses, Engage exemplifies a commonly held aversion to political conflict among Americans of all backgrounds (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). This ambiguity results when people take political action or participate in political activities, which often involve conflict. During our fieldwork, we often saw people and groups distancing themselves from contention and confrontation. This type of disavowal was clear in an interview with a leader of Oceanside Neighbors. Describing her group's goals and strategies, she said, "I have learned that you can't start out by attacking. You have to first talk about what they have done that is good, and then go into [your goals]." She described a multi-year campaign to shut down a neighborhood business, whose noisy activities and clientele were perceived as dangerous and harmful to residents' quality of life, by talking to local officials, lobbying city offices, and fundraising to hire a lawyer. The leader did not mention any direct actions, such as protests or picketing, nor did she talk about contentious meetings between residents and city leaders or the business owners. Even surrounding such a highly charged issue that involved direct political

engagement, she said, “We try really hard to get along with people—we don’t want to be naysayers.”

In another case, a volunteer who teaches civic skills to students in public schools said his organization’s lesson plans “avoid politically charged issues.” He defined these issues as those that are too contentious for the classroom and cannot be solved by student discussion. Here, politics takes on the connotation of inciting unproductive conflict, the sort of thing that is inappropriate for young people to discuss in school. This form of disavowal sets up an aspirational definition of a different form of politics that is defined by civility, communication, and participation. To disavow politics, in this sense, is to deny the potential productivity of conflictive behaviors or processes, and to simultaneously promote norms of good civic engagement as polite and harmonious.

Some civic groups and individuals, however, go against the grain of this more general trend of distaste for conflict in political life. They imagine that society will be improved by leveling out inequalities, and that in order to work towards this goal, direct and confrontational action is sometimes necessary to disrupt the status quo. For example, as part of their campaign against the criminalization of immigration, Neighbors Driving Change held polite and rational meetings with the Police Department, and also organized confrontational protests in front of elected officials’ homes. In their own meetings, however, the group went to great lengths to avoid and smooth over conflict, and their discussions were marked by respect, order, and equal opportunities to be heard. In these types of groups, orientation toward conflict is thus more fluid across contexts—something we discuss in more depth in the next section.

## DISCUSSION: DISAVOWAL AND DEMOCRACY

This study aimed to describe the culture and sociology of skeptical engagement, and examine its consequences for democratic life. The concept of disavowal was introduced to describe and explain today's culture of political participation. Here, we turn to the consequences of disavowal for democracy. Previous studies have suggested that a context of mistrust and cynicism might discourage or pervert political participation, on one hand, or spur innovation, on the other. Do citizens participate? What is the nature of this participation? Is it selfish and narrow, as some have suggested? Is it innovative and inspired, as others have hoped? Is this form of participation able to address the principal problems of social life? We argue that citizens participate in ways that are community-minded and creative, but that widely shared negative taboos about politics limits what type of participation is acceptable, and that these constraints present challenges to citizens working to address inequality.

### Disavowal Facilitates Participation

Certainly, as survey data and our study have shown, skepticism does not preclude participation. Ethnographic evidence presented in this article illustrates how disavowal facilitates participation and innovation—showing that citizens are engaging in intellectual acrobatics to create space for their political behaviors. By signaling that one is not entangled with the contaminated sphere of politics and forging a positive identity as a civic leader, disavowal makes it possible to work for a political campaign, be a public official, or interact with government—in other words, to do political things. This creates the space for imagining alternative paths for democracy.

When a leader of Open Source professed her disbelief in government, she signaled that her path diverges from traditional politics, which have not affected the kinds of change she wishes to see. When she worked on political campaigns, and eventually in the mayor's office, it

was in the spirit of imagining that a different and better path is possible. Similarly, the activist DJ who works with Engage has a vision of himself as non-political that allows him to work for a better city government and support struggling teens, without being associated with the negative features of the political sphere. His disavowal is intertwined with the belief that bringing people together in public spaces and building community will create positive changes for his city. We argue, as other cultural sociologists have shown, that displays of apathy actually take significant work to produce, and in this way, expressed apathy is a mechanism for *preserving* faith in democratic ideals in the face of feeling powerless (Eliasoph 1997, 1998; Norgaard 2006).

### The Nature of Participation

As people disavow a negative vision of politics, they simultaneously identify the characteristics of democracy they prefer: if politics is focused on narrow interests, involves conflict, and entails broken processes, then a better democratic system is inclusive and representative, respectful of everyone, and efficient at serving and responding to citizens. Disavowal, then, includes a creative imagination of a future democracy that does not yet exist, suggesting commonalities with political philosophers' work on imagined futures (Arendt 1994; Castoriadis 1994) and an emerging "sociology of the future" (Gibson 2011; Frye 2012). In this way, our study supports the claim that skepticism ignites innovation. New, creative forms of participation marked the culture of civic engagement in Providence. For example, one group named themselves "hiring managers" for the mayoral election and recruited candidates by posting a job description on Craigslist in Providence and other "like-minded" cities. Another group hosted a "listening party" in which the typical town hall practice of the audience asking questions of political candidates was reversed: mayoral candidates asked questions of the audience about how to improve the city, and were required to remain silent as the community

discussed possible solutions. The idea was to highlight the capacity of citizens to generate new ideas, offer creative solutions, and bring fresh thinking to a tired political system.

In citizens' visions of and creative advocacy for a better future, we found no evidence that skepticism has created selfish populous or that public life has devolved into an arena for pursuing narrow interests. We do, however, question whether this form of participation can address the principal problems of social life, as some have suggested it might. Here, we turn our attention to the ways in which disavowal reinforces negative taboos, and how these notions of appropriate and inappropriate behavior constrain the form that participation can take. We show how these constraints challenge citizens working to address entrenched, structural, issues such as inequality. These are the negative consequences of political disavowal.

### The Challenges of Being Political

At times, people *did* say that what they do is political. But even then they were partaking in the contemporary idiom of political disavowal. To say "I am political," we found, boasted a willingness to promote marginalized voices, to fight a broken system, to engage contentious situations. This use of "political" reinforces the idea that "the political" is narrow, broken, and conflictual. When we asked Darnell, the leader of YAK, "do you view your activities as political?" he first responded no, his work was not about politics, but then he clarified: "I mean, yes, it is political. You know, I go to the State House." He continued to explain that engaging in "politricks" is not something he *likes* to do, it is something he *has* to do. *Even though* it is polluted, Darnell believes that he *must* engage the political sphere in order to create the social change he desires. This justification for "being political" was repeated by social justice advocates throughout our fieldsites. In the words of Dave, a member of FIGHT, "If it ain't political, then it's no justice, because there has to be a reason why we are doing these things. We need political

and social change, and that doesn't happen unless you get into the political arena." From this perspective, *explicit* political activism is not only worthwhile, but also *necessary*.

Dave, Darnell, and the other social justice activists at our fieldsites view the political system as polluted and broken, just like almost everyone else. What sets apart some of these engaged citizens is their willingness to *be political* and *do political work*. These active citizens often see themselves as the only people willing to directly confront the political system that everyone agrees is broken. This finding was clarified toward the end of our fieldwork, when we explained our preliminary results to leaders in each fieldsite. At FIGHT, as we explained our concept of disavowal of politics, saying that people disavow but still engage, a leader interjected, "Some people do [engage]." This person may have misunderstood our point, but his interjection was revealing. In emphasizing that *some* people engage, the implication was that *others* do not. Essentially, he suggested that he and his colleagues were the ones willing to roll up their sleeves and do the dirty but necessary work of engaging with politics.

Being political in the context of widespread disavowal means going against the grain. Here, we present two challenges facing the social justice activists who "do political work": advocating for marginalized groups in a moment when supporting specific interests is taboo; and confronting the issue of inequality in a moment when raising contentious issues or eliciting conflict are frowned upon.

### *Taboos Against Narrow Interests: The Challenge of Advocating for Marginalized Groups*

At a meeting about Providence's public schools, Darnell noticed that the discussion focused on what would be best for "all kids," rather than specific racial groups of kids who were more likely to be struggling. He interrupted the meeting's facilitator, demanding to know what would be done for *Black* children. Black students, he explained, drop out more often than White

students. The school official responded that the district was aware of the problem and that they are working to ensure that providence educates students in a way that is good for *all students*. Darnell responded that he is tired of the focus on “all children,” because issues related to Black youth are always moved to the back burner. The conversation moved on, and nobody returned to Darnell’s point.

Social justice activists typically aim to support populations that have been marginalized by structural injustices. Their advocacy unapologetically focuses on the most vulnerable groups, such as the urban poor, minorities, the unemployed, former prisoners, and illegal immigrants. Although they speak against politics as a vehicle for “special” interests, they typically mean elite interests. They do not see their policy engagement, which is directly targeted at alleviating the inequalities experienced by certain segments of the population, with special interest activism. However, their work is sometimes treated as such. An Open Source leader once told us that FIGHT’s advocacy was an “entitlement model,” that “they”—FIGHT’s members—feel the people they advocate for are “entitled to jobs, or whatever.” In this way, the leader was arguing that FIGHT’s advocacy for the jobless is unjustified, that it uses politics to privilege one group’s needs over another’s. These sorts of comments were common responses to social justice organizing, and at times put members of different civic groups at odds with one another, creating conflict despite taboos against contention.

### *Taboos Against Conflict: The Challenge of Confronting Inequality*

Darnell relentlessly marks his public appearances with contentious remarks. At public events, he often opens with a phrase such as, “There is a dynamic here that no one wants to talk about...” and proceeds to speak about class and race. When Blacks are absent from a public space, he says, “Look how unrepresented we are tonight.” Darnell’s comments are meant to be

contentious, because this is a way of pushing people to think and talk directly about issues they normally prefer to avoid. “People ask me if I’m angry,” he told us. “Goddamn right, I’m angry. When my people are living in this condition and I know there’s something systemic about it, what kind of face am I supposed to put on? I’m not going to smile like this...” he exclaimed, stretching an exaggerated smile across his face. Darnell has been described to us as a “strong presence” in Providence, though most people use less neutral words. The culture of overly civil discourse makes it easy to dismiss voices like Darnell’s, which stand out as confrontational against a more subdued context.

In drawing attention to unequal distributions of wealth, unequal opportunity, or unearned privilege, social justice activists ask citizens to grapple with realities in which they are deeply invested. Talk of inequality challenges the notion of America as a meritocratic nation of opportunity. As Rancière notes, in contexts of entrenched and accepted inequality, to speak of equality is a “deviation from the normal order of things,” and thus arguing for increasing equality inevitably interrupts and unsettles accepted assumptions that facilitated existing privilege (Rancière 1995:29-30). And as critics of the “post-political condition” argue, it is difficult to address inequality without conflict, because political conflict is the realm where disadvantaged populations can make claims for increased recognition (Žižek 1999).

The implied solution to inequality is redistribution of privilege, power, and resources away from those who hold them. Thus, challenging inequality is further bound up in the conflict of identifying groups as haves and the have-nots, privileged and oppressed, and asserting which groups deserve new privileges or sharpened constraints. Here, there will inevitably be differences of opinion. To deny the role of conflict in this situation would limit the scope of democratic engagement (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). As Chantal Mouffe (2000) explains, these

differences of opinion and emotional connection in the “affective dimension” of politics are actually productive and positive, even central to true democracy. In this way, it is not surprising that social justice activists find conflict and confrontational tactics as necessary components of their work—but they are still going against the grain. For these activists, “being political,” is in part a defiant stance against contemporary political culture. “Political” citizens reject the dominant discourse that appropriate engagement is polite and non-confrontational, and that politics should benefit all people equally. They argue, whether explicitly or through their actions, that equality is worth a fight.

Political disavowal, in its generation of taboos against conflict and special interests, constrains the ability of citizens to address inequality. In this way, our study supports the notion that political skepticism produces a form of participation that is limited in its ability to take on the most difficult of social problems.

## CONCLUSION: PARTICIPATION IN AN ERA OF SKEPTICISM

When citizens are skeptical of politicians, distrustful of government, and cynical about political life do they still participate in politics? National-level quantitative analyses argue that, in this moment of skepticism, they do. Our research supported this finding, showing that individual citizens and civic groups can at once be *skeptical of* and *active in* political life. The more challenging question, however, is about what form this participation takes, and what its implications are for democratic life. Thus, this study aimed to describe and explain the culture of participation in the context of widespread political skepticism.

To investigate what skepticism *means* for political engagement and democracy, the co-authors developed a new methodological approach: multi-sited collective ethnography. Five co-investigators gathered data through semi-structured interviews and participant-observation at

seven locally organized civic groups and their members in Providence, Rhode Island, each investigator working at each fieldsite. The fieldsites were diverse in many ways, including member demographics, organizational form, objectives, tactics, and history, providing a broad picture of one year of civic engagement in a mid-sized city facing typical social, economic, and political issues.

Across these groups, engaged citizens struggled with the ambiguity of feeling skeptical about politics yet wanting to engage politics to bring about positive change. This ambiguity took three forms, though we suspect others exist. First, citizens wanted to influence public policies, but doubted the efficacy of the political process. Second, they wanted to work for the common good, but believed politics would serve only narrow interests. And third, citizens wanted to solve problems through polite and rational conversation, but found political organizing to be marked by conflict. For reasons such as these—lack of efficacy, narrow interests, and conflict—people treat politics as a contaminated sphere. Subsequently, engaged citizens are loath to identify or be identified with politics, preferring to call themselves “good neighbors,” “active citizens,” or “agents for change.” Likewise, they assert that the work they do is “not political”—even if it involved meeting with public officials, lobbying policy makers, and working to change the political process.

We presented a new concept, called “disavowal of the political” to make sense of these claims. Drawing on the cultural sociology concepts of denegation, boundary making, and role distancing, we showed how disavowal resolves perceived ambiguities in the political process, allowing members of civil society to engage public life despite their skepticism. By creating and maintaining boundaries between polluted politics and appropriate engagement, Americans generate new ideas and practices regarding what it means to be a good citizen. Disavowal allows

individuals and civic groups to deepen their sense of community, and to harness that community for political activity. By avoiding the contaminated sphere of politics, activists can collectively engage with the political structure without feeling compromised. The positive effect of disavowal is that it allows people hold on to what they see as valuable in democracy. It allows citizens with ideals and identities of good citizenship and meaningful engagement needed to engage politics. By exclaiming, enacting, and promising that an activity “is not political,” citizens alter cultural notions of appropriate and desirable forms of civic engagement, and create avenues to engagement.

In disavowing politics, citizens also define and reinforce their ideas of what politics *ought not* to be. That is, disavowal also works to define certain actions, identities, and ideas as unsavory, out of touch, or just plain wrong. These negative taboos limit certain types of activism from being culturally resonant, in this way constraining political behavior. We identified two such taboos: criticizing the use of contentious tactics instead of polite ones; and advocating for the interests of specific groups instead of the universal good. The negative effect of disavowal is that these constraints present challenges to people and groups aiming to address inequality. This is because taking on inequality is both contentious and implies advocacy for less privileged groups. The social justice advocates in our study were often dismissed as “angry activists” for pushing back against these norms. Thus, while disavowal facilitates participation in public life, it also constrains this participation by narrowing the culturally appropriate channels of action.

### Limitations and Future Research

Both the limitations and findings of this study generate several questions for future research. First, scholars may wish to replicate this project in other cities. In particular, they may wish to choose cases that challenge the extent to which findings from Providence are

generalizable. Providence is overwhelmingly Democratic (Rhode Island State Board of Elections 2008) and has a deserved reputation for corrupt politics (Stanton 2003). We do not expect a partisan bias to influence findings, as today's skeptics come from both parties, and the objects of Americans' disavowal are non-partisan. Likewise, we do not expect that a history of corruption has significantly influenced the subjects of our study, as they rarely identified this as a source of pollution. However, similar research in other cities could confirm or negate these claims.

Second, this study is based on ethnographic evidence from a targeted population: citizens engaged in city-level politics through civic organizations. Disengaged citizens, state and local-level activism, and citizens who engage outside of groups were not included. Future studies could examine the disengaged population to determine how the idiom of disavowal extends to disengaged citizens, if at all. What is the object of disavowal in their population? Why does it fail to facilitate participation? Similar work could be conducted among engaged citizens who do not participate in groups. Such research could contribute to our understanding of what group dynamics bring to bear on the nature of civic participation.

Third, some scholars have argued that skepticism will lead citizens to turn away from institutional problems, complex issues, or national-level policies, instead focusing attention on issues that feel less overwhelming (see Eliasoph 1997 on problems "close to home"). However, we observed people taking on the most intractable problems: increasing accountability, addressing immigration, improving communication with politicians, and police violence, to name a few. We can imagine that, over time, constant discredit, distrust, and disillusionment with political institutions would dissuade activists from taking on institutional reform, perhaps instead creating parallel institutions or turning attention to other avenues of change, but this was beyond

the scope of our research. A longitudinal analysis following how engaged citizens reposition themselves over time would inform this discussion.

Finally, this study raised the concern that the contemporary culture of political participation presents a formidable challenge to citizens' efforts to address inequality. We hope that future research will investigate the relationship between contentious approaches to engagement and equality-oriented activism. Is embracing conflict as necessary for addressing inequality as it appeared to be in our fieldsites? If so, why is this the case? If not, why is it a prevalent approach? Was the taboo against conflict equally pronounced during the civil rights movement? If so, how was it negotiated by activists? Given this study's findings that the widespread cultural idiom of political disavowal not only *facilitates participation* but also creates taboos that *challenge activism* around inequality, how can engaged citizens address inequality in an era of skeptical engagement?

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<sup>1</sup> We use "citizen" in the broadest sense, as a member of a political community or resident of a city, not in the more restrictive sense having to do with legal status or realization of rights. Similarly, by "Americans" we mean people living in the United States or otherwise identifying as American.

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the merits and challenges of measuring participation in civic and political life, see Norris (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Here we treat pragmatism as one theoretical program, though there are meaningful distinctions between the French school (e.g., Laurent Thévenot, and colleagues at the Center for Moral and Political Sociology at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris), and contemporary English-language pragmatists (e.g., Joas 1996).

<sup>4</sup> SeeClickFix is a website that encourages people to take pictures of municipal infrastructure problems (e.g., potholes) and post their photos and descriptions on the Internet as a call for them to be “fixed” by local government. The site for Providence is available at:  
<http://seeclickfix.com/providence>.