

COMMUNITY THROUGH VOTING

Let's start with some foundational questions!

Why not just do everything yourself?

As far as historians can tell, humans have organized themselves into groups as long as they have existed. Why? In addition to cooperation in getting food and shelter, it just feels good to be taken care of and to take care of others. Being a part of a community can provide:

1. **Membership:** a feeling of belonging or that you are related to others.
2. **Influence:** a feeling like you matter to the group and that the group matters to you.
3. **Reinforcement:** knowing that the group supports you and helps fulfill your needs.
4. **Emotional Connection:** a (usually) positive emotional association with the other people in the group.

Belonging to a community makes us feel safe and powerful. Many people can do what one person cannot.

What is a community?

A community is a group of at least three people with a unified interest. They might be organized around any of the following:

- **Location:** your hometown, the DMV, East Coast/West Coast, your state, your country, your ancestors' country, Earthlings, etc.
- **Identity:** your friend group, skater boys, Ed Sheeran fans, Asian Americans, Christians, etc.
- **Organization:** the members of the basketball team, people who work at that one Wendy's, a church congregation, the Girl Scouts, Tumblr users, the Democratic Party, Americans, etc.

Every community's origins are different. The process of creating and maintaining communities is as complicated as people are. As you can see from the examples above, communities can range from the hyperlocal to the whole planet. Everyone has overlapping communities they belong to at any given time.

How do communities shape their members?

Learning to adopt the behavior patterns of a community is called *socialization*. This usually begins in the early stages of life, during which individuals develop the skills and knowledge and learn the necessary roles to function within their culture and social environment. Socialization in communities is influenced primarily by one's family, through which children first learn community norms and behavior. Other important influences include schools, peer groups, people, mass media, the workplace and government. Examples of socialization are your parents explaining what good table manners look

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like, or your school impressing American values by teaching you the Pledge of Allegiance. Socialization also includes moving into a significantly different environment, where you must learn a new set of behaviors. Think about all the new norms and information you had to learn when you first started high school; that process applies to every community we join.

How can members shape their communities?

Belonging to a community means you have power and responsibility within it. When you join the basketball team, you become a person who has an impact on what the basketball team is, how it operates in relationship to other teams, and how others perceive your community. That's true of your membership in the student body of your school. It's true of your membership in the community of the American nation. While communities can change through external factors, including the influence of other communities like the government or adults or another ethnic group, change from within a community can be among the most powerful.

Community building can use a wide variety of practices, ranging from simple events (potlucks, book clubs) to larger-scale efforts (mass festivals, construction projects that involve local participants rather than outside contractors). Community development practitioners must understand both how to work with individuals and how to affect communities' positions within the context of larger social institutions.

Community building that is geared toward citizen action is usually called *community organizing*. In these cases, organized community groups seek accountability from elected officials and increased direct representation within decision-making bodies. Where good-faith negotiations fail, these constituency-led organizations seek to pressure the decision-makers through a variety of means, including picketing, boycotting, sit-ins, petitioning and electoral politics.

Community organizing can focus on more than just resolving specific issues. Organizing often means building a widely accessible power structure, often with the end goal of distributing power equally throughout the community. Community organizers generally seek to build groups that are open and democratic in governance.

How do communities make decisions?

This group decision making process is an imperfect process. Groups of people often think they know the key "thing" needed to create utopian societies and yet, human nature is complicated. Some groups make decisions using extended discussion, some use review by community leadership, and many use voting to determine how individuals within a group want the group to move forward.

Despite the vote's power to represent the people, American citizens have exercised their right to vote in low numbers for several years now. According to the National Census, only 46.1% of American citizens aged 18 to 29 voted in the 2016 presidential election. Your vote is a mechanism of exercising your power within your community. Here is how your vote helps influence the future and why it is important:

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1. Voting helps express the interests and needs of community members.
2. Voting empowers elected officials to act in your name to meet those needs and promote those interests.
3. Voting keeps elected officials accountable to their constituents.
4. Increased participation in voting means officials who win elections more fully represent the communities they serve.

Regardless of who you support when you vote, your vote matters. The criteria to vote in the United States is simple.

- Are you a U.S. citizen?
- Do you meet your state's residency requirements?
- Are you at least 18 years old on or before Election Day? In Virginia, as well as some other states, you can register to vote before you turn 18 if you will be 18 by Election Day.
- Are you registered to vote by your state's voter registration deadline?

If you meet the criteria listed above, you can exercise your right to vote in the U.S. Congratulations!

You can register to vote in Virginia at: <https://vote.elections.virginia.gov/VoterInformation>.

You can impact all of the communities you're a part of, however large or small they are.