



THE CHICAGO
COMMUNITY TRUST

EQUITY • OPPORTUNITY • PROSPERITY

Trust Talks Episode #9: Civic Engagement Through a Racial Equity Lens

Maritza Bandera: Hi everyone. Welcome to the Trust Talks podcast, episode nine. My name is Maritza Bandera. I am program manager with The Chicago Community Trust. We are brought together today to talk about civic engagement, to explore the role that residents play in the infrastructure of civic engagement, the role of that civic engagement and infrastructure plays in the broader lens of democracy or in the broader topic of democracy, and to really also hone in on the role of government institutions, media, and philanthropy. How can we all come together to bridge the gaps and strengthen our region's civic ecosystem? This particular podcast episode really aligns with the Building Collective Power strategy at The Chicago Community Trust of, which I am a member of. The strategy's really, we like to think of it as the people's strategy, which is really focused on people, voice and action.

We fund and focus on how do we strengthen the community organizing infrastructure in the city and in the region. Thinking about leadership development, what does the network, the strength of networks of people, how does that impact their broader connectivity to the city? As we think about voice, it's really thinking about civic storytelling, about hyper-local journalism and the impact that has. When we think about the stories that are told about our communities, that is really the focus of the voice. And then action is really focused on what are the resources that we are providing to residents in order for them to take action and be active in their communities. So with that said, we are brought here together by partner organizations that are doing amazing work, because we are a funder, we cannot do this on our own. They're the ones that are doing the hard work. So I'm going to let them introduce themselves.

Iván Arenas: Hello everyone. I'm Iván Arenas, Associate Director for Community Partnerships at the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Brett Chase: I'm Brett Chase. I'm a reporter with the *Chicago Sun-Times* covering environment and public health, and I should say that's the newly nonprofit sometimes.

Sadia Sindhu: Hi everyone, my name is Sadia Sindhu, and I'm the Executive Director of the University of Chicago Center for Effective Government, where we think deeply about democracy reform.

MB: Thank you so much for agreeing to join us today on this important topic. We recently commissioned a report from the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The report was called *Changing the Frame: Civic Engagement Through a Racial Equity Lens*, which provided a broader analysis of civic life that included a range of activities. The last report that was commissioned was in 2010, and we learned that the city's civic health was on life support. Iván, if you can get us started, as we think about civic engagement that is often rooted in a framework focused on voting and volunteerism, how do we define it in a way that is more inclusive of how Black and Latinx communities participate in it?

IA: Yeah, thank you, Maritza. I mean, for the report and for this research, we really started with a kind of broader perspective under and looking at civic engagement as the collective participation of individuals in society to promote the public good and just more broadly, that's how I think a lot of people on the streets would, for example, understand civic engagement. And that kind of analysis allowed us to think about what are the capacities of individuals in our city to come together to solve the challenges that are facing our society? And that helped us to kind of broaden our analytic lens, it allowed us to expand our perspective of civic engagement beyond voting and volunteering to think about the many ways through which our Chicago communities, and especially those communities of color, are creating networks of cooperation, support and reciprocity.

And I would say that one of the central arguments in the report, and I think it's one that's clear to anyone that's been paying attention to the mobilization of communities of color in our city, is that measuring civic engagement solely through rates of volunteering and voting, which as you mentioned in previous reports, places Black and Latinx communities as failing in those measures that has a lot of racial blind spots. They tend to under-report civic activities and forms of collective organizing, and here in the report we were thinking about informal support networks, social movement organizing that are very much central to how Black and Latinx people in Chicago come together across the years to address longstanding patterns of racism and structural disinvestment.

So, if on the one hand, you think that the problem is that Black and Latinx Chicagoans aren't civically engaged because they aren't voting at the same rates as white Chicagoans, then you're likely to fund get out the vote drives on the West and South sides of the city. But I would say key finding of the report is that if you analyze the data through a racial equity lens, you come to understand not only that Black and Latinx residents express their civic engagement through collective organizing, through mutual aid networks, et cetera, but also that structural inequities in income, in employment, in education, as well as our uneven budget cuts in the city and the disinvestment, and even the ways in which communities of color are policed, are factors that explain those depressed rates of voting among Black and Latinx and working class people. And in fact, that won't be solved by get out the vote drives. It requires structural solutions.

MB: Sadia, in your work at the Center for Effective Government, as we think about some of these policy solutions, and you talked about at the Center, a lot of the work is grounded and really focused on democracy, what might be some of those policy solutions?

SS: Thank you, Maritza. Thank you for this report. I had a chance to read it when I came out and then in preparation for this podcast, got to review it again, and I think that key takeaways for me, as already described deeply in this, if we're just looking at volunteerism, that's not good enough. And I think the thing that we often think about at the center is our democracy, we talked about Chicago civic engagement, being on life support, we think about our democracy in that way.

And in order to address that, a lot of what was kind of talked about in the report is trust in government as well, and if people are not trusting their government, they're less inclined to go vote. I would say the thing that I would want to focus on is more about why is that? Why is there distrust? What we at the center believe is that our institutions are failing us. If we want a vibrant democracy, we need a vibrant ecosystem for that, and a key part of that is bringing in more voices, widening that tent. And often when you have these conversations, they're smaller groups behind closed doors typically of the same sort of racial demographic makeup, and that's not how you get policy solutions.

MB: Thank you for sharing that. Brett, I know in your work as a reporter, you are very much grounded and connected to community because you follow the stories, you follow the leads. What are some examples most recently in the city of how people have coalesced and come together to affect change?

BC: Chicago has this rich history of community activism and I, over the last two and a half years, built an environmental justice beat at the *Sun-Times*. And I find these stories really interesting and necessary. And I think what differs as an environmental reporter is I treat the environment as a daily beat rather than a project, take six months to write about some environmental problem. And frankly, there's so many in this city, whether it's General Iron on the Southeast Side, the whole fight over tearing down a coal plant in Little Village, and then the aftermath of that and the diesel trucks that are brought in by a million square foot warehouse, an asphalt plant popping up across from McKinley Park, another metal shredding operation like General Iron in Pilsen named Sims.

And there's more, I mean, I could actually tick off about half a dozen more environmental justice fights that I would like to cover. And it's getting these voices out there and not just dropping in every six months or so and doing a story that was done before and gets ignored. It's really just making the most of it. The General Iron is a good example. It was just a story that just kept giving in terms of the news. You had the head of the EPA actually stepping in asking the mayor to hold off on this permit because it was such a big environmental justice fight. Basically, the Southeast Side just quit, community folks down there just said they couldn't take anymore. I mean if you look over the decades, a ton of environmental fights and this one was just kind of the last straw.

MB: Absolutely. And it was a win for everyone to remind people that yes, this was a victory for the Southeast Side community, but this was a victory for everyone, because again, pollution does not know a neighborhood or community boundaries. That's nonexistent. Sadia, you mentioned distrust and we definitely see the level of distrust that was manifested, and using General Iron as the example, and there's, as you said, countless others. What are some of the other ways in which we can begin to rebuild that trust between citizens? And I say that with a small C or residents with government, and it's going to take time to repair, but if we don't repair it, I don't know where we're headed if we can't repair that.

SS: Yeah. No, that's such a great question, Maritza. Thank you for asking it. I think one of the things as we think about rebuilding trust is going back to why that trust... that distrust exists. Our institutions do not work. And it's okay to say that, that doesn't make you less patriotic, that doesn't mean that you care less about your community or your pride in your city or state or whatnot, but it really just means is that our institutions, many of them, are not able to solve basic public problems. And this is not a new issue, it's been building up for several decades I would say.

So, as we think about sort of that broader institutional change focus, that work is really hard, and it's really hard to train people's attention to it. It takes a fair amount of time in order to rebuild those systems. I would say one thing I'm super encouraged by here in Chicago is our media ecosystem. And I would love for by my co-panelists here to speak a little bit about that. We have Chicago Public Media and I mean that's a really exciting...and *Sun-Times* just dropped its paywall. There's a real interest in building out that civic infrastructure of the media space where in other places in the country, that's not the case. We're telling a very different story in Chicago and I'd love, Brett, if you want to say a few words about that.

BC: Yeah. Well, let me just mention that my story has never had a paywall. CCT was kind enough to fund my position and now that we are a nonprofit, it opens a lot of doors for future collaboration. It is a really exciting time to be in the media and to see what's yet to come. The merger between *WBEZ* and the *Sun-*

Times has a lot of promise. We don't know exactly what it's going to look like, but we've already done a little bit of cross newsroom collaboration and talking about even more, so I think it's... I'm biased. The nonprofit model is a pretty good one.

SS: And that space is being reimagined, it's being creatively reimagined, and that's happening here in Chicago. So I feel like when we talk about institutions, there's other institutions in Chicago that we could also devote those sort of resources to, that sort of attention to, that sort of collaboration that Chicago Public Media didn't happen overnight. There are many individuals who have been working for a long time to create something like that, and I feel like there's a real opportunity for us here in Chicago.

MB: Thank you for that. We focus on putting the content out there, which yes, let's make sure that there is no shortage of content and narrative and storytelling to cover these important topics for people. My concern is that sometimes we don't focus on how average everyday residents are digesting and taking this information, if at all they do. Because to your point, the challenges that everybody has this hierarchy of responsibilities, if I'm just trying to survive day to day and just put food on the table for my family and for my kids, the last thing I'm thinking about is the environment and pollution, even though it's impacting all of us.

But the thing is, how do we focus on that? How do we strengthen everyday people ability to discern? Because I know it's a blurry line nowadays. It's all a domino effect. We can't talk about civic infrastructure if we don't have a healthy relationship with government, if we don't have a fully funded educational system where we are training people to be critical thinkers, to be able to decipher between what's fact and what's opinion. Where do you start? Do we start with building the trust with government? Do we start making sure that we have fully funded, functioning, equitable education system? Where do we begin?

BC: I can address the media and the misinformation too. I mean, even though we have these new models and new funding streams for media, we still go back to our basics. We're critical to this democracy because we're challenging the government and the businesses and the powers. And then in terms of getting the message out, I mean we do everything we can. We have community engagement. I personally do a couple events a year. I should probably do more. I get out to the communities. We have a sister media organization, *La Voz*, which translates many of our stories, my stories in particular to Spanish. So it's sort of multi-tiered effort. The fundamental things about journalism, fairness and accuracy and being that watchdog for the people that don't have the power, and that's something that we'll continue to do.

IA: And I would add that within the kind of just the media ecosystem, the power of those stories of communities coming together to really change, not just the conditions for themselves, but obviously that would benefit all of us as we talked about earlier, that's a really powerful way in which journalism can continue to talk about how those communities of color are actively engaged in creating and thriving in sustainable communities in the face of those structural barriers. That's really important because I do think that regardless, we continue to have and see a narrative that Black and Latinx urban residents are not just disengaged from civic life, as the report points out, but also part of the problem and a real challenge for our communities. Where in fact, it is the case that these communities aren't just actively resisting, there are marginalization and policies that have harmed them for a long time, but coming up with different solutions to them and really driving that forward.

If you do something like artist and community activist Tonika Johnson, what she's done with Chicago's Folded Map project and simply contrast South and North Side neighborhoods. And so that there isn't a

first step, it's all the steps all at once, we need to continue to build that media ecosystem that tells those stories and connects what people are already doing and tells that broader narrative. And also at the same time, we need to continue to repair that civic distrust, the civic trauma that exists, as Niketa Brar talks about in our report, and think about how do we actually rebuild that connected tissue between politicians and community. And part of it starts with telling those stories, and another part is really holding those politicians to account, not just for what they haven't done, but for the forms of disinvestment that continue to actually harm communities.

SS: I've got like five different thoughts, so I'm going to try to say this succinctly. One of the things that comes to mind when you're talking about that distrust is frankly just polarization. And that's not a story unique to Chicago or the US or frankly even... This is something we're seeing across the world. And the way that that continues to exist is really around institutions not delivering for people. And then you have the politician who says, "Do not trust the institution. Here I am. I am an outsider, I will come and save you from all of your problems." And then in fact, that doesn't happen. But that has me thinking also about, we were talking about the media ecosystem. I think in Chicago, when we talk about the broader ecosystem of the civic space, there's something really vibrant and beautiful in that, and I think that's the work of CCT's the Building Collective Power as well, which is how do you bring people from academia, those who are connecting practitioners and scholars, those who are investing in media together to solve these problems and think about them expansively?

We can do hard things. We are Chicagoans and we can do this. It's slow building. And I think that to me is what sort of gives me hope about how we address these. You had asked earlier, "What do we do first? Is it education? Is it the environment?" And I think the thing that I always remind myself is to sort of resist the silver bullet. And this is actually really hard, I will say, we're going to talk about philanthropy as well, but frequently when I'm in funder spaces, this is not with CCT, but in other spaces, there's that question what is that one thing? And I don't believe that there's one thing. I think it's the whole, again, that whole ecosystem and that work is slower. It's not as easily quantifiable, but that doesn't mean it's not worth doing. And particularly when we get close to things that touch democracy, then you have people who come in, they have their pet reform, it might be ranked choice voting or something else, and everyone's sort of hopes and dreams are tied to that one thing, and I would say for us to resist that, I believe that's not the solution. I think that's also the work of our Center. We believe that it's a whole set of reforms that will come together.

BC: Thank you. You both reminded me that there's an important piece of the journalism evolution and that's solutions. We talk a lot about solutions, prescriptive, the things that we can add to our stories. And that is a very big piece of what we're doing as well, that it's not just pointing out the problem. How can we work together and solve it?

MB: Thank you. And I am curious, in terms of funders, in terms of philanthropy in the city and in the region, if you could wave your magic wand, what might philanthropy do to address some of the gaps that were revealed in the report?

IA: Yeah, I think one of the things that we see in the report, an issue that was brought up repeatedly in the interviews that we did with social movement activists and members of community-based organizations that are working on the front lines of these issues is burnout. And so the folks there pointed to the lack of an organizational infrastructure, training and leadership skills, for example, how to build long term campaigns, as some of the important factors leading to that burnout, and especially among low resourced and frontline organizations that are dealing with immediate community needs. So

certainly support from philanthropic organizations for that kind of work and to build out that aspect of the ecosystem would be great. And people there talked about then long term funding of leadership development, how to foster that management skills that people need and critical technical assistance as two important ways to do that.

And I think another important role that philanthropy can play is in bringing those members of community-based organizations and social movement organizers to those tables that they sit with policymakers, and it goes along in a similar way with the media ecosystem to tell those stories. How do we use those tables to not only hold those policymakers accountable to the needs of the community, but also to bring forward the capacity of community members to be the ones to put forth the solutions to the problems that they're facing? For example, the Treatment Not Trauma campaign, and the folks there that are talking about mental health and the resources that are needed for mental health and are putting forward a platform for how to resolve that and get further investments there and what it means... what it would mean than for the city to really take that into consideration in a serious way and really listen to not only the needs of community, but how those communities themselves are talking about the solutions to those very problems.

SS: I can chime in on that as well. I think we talked a lot about distrust of government, but there's that civic trust that is slow building and important to build across difference in Chicago. We do this through, we have a civic leadership academy that is a leadership development program that was actually has helped... it was launched with the support of CCT, has continued to be funded by CCT, and in that we bring civic leaders who represent organizations that are as small as perhaps a budget of \$50,000, the entire budget of that organization, up until your Heartland Alliance and sort of very large nonprofit agencies, including... and then on the government side, including the mayor's office and CPD and Cook County. And we're really trying to create a microcosm of the city of Chicago as we think about leadership, but also as we think about solutions to some of the challenges that our city faces.

And I think if I could wave my magic wand, it would be that in addition to what we're doing with that sort of leadership development program, that we keep that momentum going. Our fellows are 60% people of color in the last several years, they actually reflect the exact demographics of the city as they ought to when you're thinking about building up the civic infrastructure of a city. But then once the fellows go through the program, we turn to them and we say, "Now what? It's not that you just went through a program, but what are you doing in terms of an institutional reform lens for the city that you serve and for the people... or rather the communities you serve?" So it's really exciting and I think for us, it's also a challenge and how do you get nonprofit and government leaders who have such difficult jobs and they're holding so much, yet they're still seeking out this opportunity because they care deeply about the communities they serve to then say, "Okay, now in addition to all that you're already holding, how do we now continue to push forward and do harder and harder things?" Which is re-imagining and rebuilding institutions.

BC: I'll speak to the media because I'm hopeful that we're going to see another media heyday. The for-profit media model over recent decades has been just cut, cut, cut, cut. And now we have an opportunity to grow, to build these newsrooms again, to not just cover the core beats, but to really do robust coverage of the environment. I cover a lot of environmental justice issues, but there's climate, climate justice, there's environmental protection overall, health, health equity became very apparent during the pandemic. We could definitely use a health equity reporter at the *Sun-Times*. Transportation should have multiple reporters, education, I mean, I think the sky's the limit. And we need to bring the next generation of reporters up and there's a lot of energy out there. I meet a lot of young reporters and they should be given a chance to make a difference.

SS: I was just going to say, I hesitate to say this because I'm also the one who's saying just don't think only about elections, but I think we do have a real opportunity leading up to 2024. Yes, we have our mayoral elections coming up in a few months and we should certainly pay attention to that, but we have a real opportunity to build out the civic space, the public square, so to speak, as we're thinking about these challenges. So to your earlier point around media literacy and kind of seeing disinformation for what it is, I think there's also a longer runway for some of this as we're thinking about particularly as 2024 comes about. So how can the people sitting at this table and the various organizations and communities that we represent start to think about how we can better Chicagoans as we're thinking about, or those from the Midwest and the regions that we're all thinking about, leading up to 2024, so we're having better conversations, so we're asking harder questions?

IA: And I would say the other thing that kind of ties a couple threads that we've been talking about here together is telling those stories, whether it's around the environment or the ways in which people are deeply connected in changing the civic trauma in the city does require resources. And it's a very different timeline. One of the reasons in which... because of the way in which voting and volunteering are much more easily quantified, it leads to a turn to those things as the things that become, in essence, the kind of proxy for civic engagement. It really overlooks the participation by communities of color in really working in kind of more connected and slower moving forms of change that really require kind of time to come to fruition and to get those wins.

And so one of the things that in our report, Kathy Cohen of the UFC and Matt Nelson, they pointed out in a section they wrote about that while Chicagoans have lower rates of volunteering and voting than other cities, they're more likely to participate in political activities like attending a protest, contacting public officials, participating in a boycott, attending political meetings. They point out that historically, it's those forms of contentious sort of political and civic activity that have really created the kind of political mobilizing that have shifted power and policies that are supporting the needs of communities of color. And so that form of political organizing is something that also needs those resources and needs resources and telling the stories of that that requires a much longer runway than one election cycle. And so paying attention to that on the philanthropic end is also I think incredibly important.

MB: Thank you. To close us out, what are you looking forward to? As we think about the future, and you began to answer this as we look ahead into 2024, even our upcoming mayoral elections here, what are you looking for? So we end on a positive note.

IA: I think one of the things that's really encouraging is the sense that there are so many, as we look across the landscape of Chicago and communities of color, that the ways in which they're mobilized is really incredible. There are... on the one hand, it's very heartening. There's a lot of organizations, the number of nonprofits that have, and we document that in the report, that have come up since 2010 is at its peak, really. And part of that is this sense of really deep engagement in making our communities better. That's there at the grassroots level.

And the flip side of that is that we face those very great challenges, and so the efforts could use a lot more support, but I think they are bearing fruit. They are changing the kind of landscape of what policy can look like and who gets to make policy. There's a lot of young folks that are seeing both the challenges but also possibilities in that. And I think to speak to, like Brett said, changing the media landscape here is something that again, I think holds a lot of promise for being able to mobilize people further in the future. And I think that will continue to happen as we kind of go forward into these next cycle.

BC: I keep coming back to the media, but it's what I do, and we were talking yesterday about the Washington Post slogan that democracy dies in the dark. It's true. We help bring transparency, we help bring people's voices to the forefront. Don't get me wrong, there's still going to be a lot of pressure as a nonprofit organization. We need to get individuals to support us, we need certainly the foundations, but it is a relief that you're not wondering where your job's going to be in a year. A strong media ecosystem I think will be really good for the city, and we're just going to continue to ask the hard questions of the powerful people. Hopefully we'll get some answers.

SS: I think the thing that I look most forward to is continuing to think creatively and expansively about how we reimagine our institutions. These institutions are not ordained from high above and we really have an opportunity as a community to come together to reimagine that. If you go to community members, they'll tell you how to get across to that community. I did a forum not too long ago in my local mosque, the mosque that I went to growing up, about democracy reform. If you had asked me 20 years ago if I would be back in that same mosque having this conversation, I probably would've said no.

And I think it speaks so much to where we are as a society that we are finding ways to translate these very sort of... sometimes these very headache complex conversations in ways that engage with the challenges that our communities are facing every single day. It's not exactly like the hope thing, but I feel like that's a piece to what you're saying to it as well. We're talking about Chicago Public Media, but we're also talking about all the smaller newspapers that are out there and how Chicago Public Media works with those smaller newspapers and how we as organizations and organizers kind of think about how we're taking our messages and getting them into the spaces that we come from, the communities that we represent. So that also gives me a ton of hope.

MB: Thank you so much to each and every one of you for one, taking the time for your thoughts, ideas, for all the brain power that's sitting right now in this room. Thank you so much. One of the things that I will end with is that there's no shortage of ideas based on the conversation we just had, and it's not one or two, but it's many things. And I love how you framed it, Iván and you did too, Sadia, of it's not one thing, but it's the many things that we do at the same time.

And then I will end with, we all have a role to play when we think about our civic infrastructure, whether we choose to be active or passive participants, but no matter what, you're always taking a stance. So it's not just up to government, it's not just up to philanthropy, it's not just up to nonprofit organizations, we each have a role to play, and we get to choose what we want that to look like or what it should look like. Sometimes we're forced, the role that we partake on is forced on us, but no matter what, just know that we all have a role to play. Thank you.